



What's in Play: The Strategic and Symbolic Use of Racial Equity Frames When Racial Politics Shift

Meghan Comstock

University of Maryland, College Park

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Abstract

Shifting racial politics place substantial pressures on organizations to navigate whether and how to sustain DEI commitments. In this study, I examine how partnerships between public school districts and private school improvement organizations (SIOs) responded to shifting environmental pressures around racial equity in their espoused goals and practice over time. I found that organizations engaged in strategic discursive responses—*inflating*, *amplifying*, and *tempering* their racial equity language—that produced distinct partnership dynamics. SIOs converged on socially palatable language—what I term a *race-evasive justice frame*. This work offers a novel framework for understanding how educational organizations *in partnership* navigate shifting environmental pressures, and details how stark political shifts can have a homogenizing effect on SIOs.

Keywords: framing; instructional reform; organizations; racial equity; politics

The last several years have brought significant shifts in mainstream conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The 2020 racial reckonings and the Covid-19 pandemic sparked a resurgence in public discourse about if and how US schooling should address racism and injustice. Intense conflict has arisen among those who promote anti-racist education, and those centering anti-Critical Race Theory and anti-DEI rhetoric (Bergner, 2022; Bertrand et al., 2024). Backlash to DEI has manifested in federal proclamations and funding threats to undermine race-conscious reforms (US Department of Education, 2025) and state policies that promote white-normative teaching and learning (Kelly, 2023; Schoorman & Gatens, 2024).

These shifts in racial politics—i.e., how race and racism are defined, contested, and strategically invoked in policy debates and policy implementation (Scott, 2011; Welton et al., 2023)—amplify pressures on organizations of all types to alter their DEI commitments and practices. Organizational scholarship suggests that organizations respond to external pressures in a variety of ways to maintain legitimacy in their environments (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018), such as espousing racial equity commitments while upholding practices that undermine them (Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Johnson & Ray, 2026; Turner, 2020) and retreating from equity commitments when politics shift (e.g., Kaul et al., 2026; Murray & Bohannon, 2025). As federal and state leaders attempt to undermine DEI initiatives, public and private organizations must navigate whether and how to uphold DEI commitments—in their espoused values, their actions, or both.

In education, these dynamics are made more complex in light of the collaborative partnerships between public school districts and private school improvement organizations (SIOs)—i.e., organizations external to the public school system that partner with districts to support education reforms (Rowan, 2002; Trinidad, 2023). While such partnerships may bolster school district capacity to effect meaningful instructional change, they also introduce tensions.

As organizations, districts and SIOs have different funding models, serve overlapping but different constituents, and often operate at different scales (Comstock, 2026; Hodge et al., 2019; Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Trinidad, 2023; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). These differences may shape how they respond to shifting racial politics. Yet, as a partnership, these organizations are tasked with navigating the shifting racial climate together. Given the growing prevalence of district-SIO partnerships for professional learning (PL) supports (Hodge et al., 2019), understanding how organizations in these partnerships navigate a shifting climate and their own unique organizational pressures is a critical, and understudied, line of inquiry. And, examinations of how such organizations navigate pressures *over time* as racial politics shift are rare.

In this study, I examine how the organizations in two district-SIO partnerships in the United States responded to shifting institutional pressures regarding racial equity work between 2019 and 2021. This time period represented a dramatically shifting sociopolitical and racial climate, given the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the racial reckonings of summer 2020 and beyond (e.g., McCambly et al., 2025). Although this period was unique in many ways—e.g., the rarity of a global pandemic and massive response to anti-Black violence—it offers opportunities for making sense of stark political shifts generally. I leverage this context to generate insights about how multiple collaborating educational organizations—facing shared and unique financial, political, and normative pressures—navigate shifts in racial politics over time. I ask:

1. How did district-SIO partnerships—and the organizations that comprise them—strategically respond to the shifting sociopolitical environment around racial equity? In particular:
 - a. How did they frame (and reframe) their equity work over time?
 - b. How did they adapt the substance of their initiatives over time?

2. What shaped the organizations' and partnerships' responses?

I found that, in response to competing environmental pressures, organizations in these partnerships engaged in strategic discursive responses that produced distinct partnership dynamics. In one partnership, conflict emerged as one organization *inflated* its emphasis on racial equity over time. In the second partnership, organizations converged around racial equity language as two organizations *amplified* their racial equity frames while another *tempered* theirs. These processes reflected a negotiation of environmental pressures on individual organizations and partnerships as collective entities. Despite these different partnership dynamics, these responses revealed a broader convergence across SIOs toward socially palatable language—what I term a *race-evasive justice frame* for describing racial equity work. With these findings, I offer a novel framework for understanding how educational organizations respond to shifts in racial politics, I extend organizational theory by accounting for how organizations *in partnership* navigate shifting and competing environmental pressures, and I detail how stark political shifts can have a homogenizing effect on SIOs in particular.

The Discourse and Tensions of Racial Equity Reforms in Education

I situate my study in empirical literature on organizations' racialized discourse and approaches to racial equity in education, especially from SIOs. This literature illuminates how language can serve as a political tool for garnering material resources and public support.

Organizations' Use of Racialized Discourse

Racial equity discourse in educational organizations conveys meaning in both explicit and subtle ways, and that discourse can mask deeper equity commitments. For instance, studies document a tendency of educational organizations and policy actors to use race-evasive and euphemistic language, even when referring to and expressing support for equity and justice

(Felix & Trinidad, 2019; Hackmann et al., 2019; Lewis-Durham, 2020; Turner & Spain, 2020).

The use of the language of “all students” and “all learners” in policy documents and among policy actors, for example, has operated as a race-evasive way to signal attention to equity concerns (e.g., Farrell et al., 2023; Hackmann et al., 2019; Lewis-Durham, 2020; Turner & Spain, 2020). The vagueness of the “all students” frame restricts nuanced discussions about racial disparities and can mask very different equity claims, such as prioritizing programming for gifted-identified students or supporting students deemed “struggling” (Turner & Spain, 2020).

Educational organizations also strategically employ racialized language to garner resources and advance their interests. For instance, Hernández (2022a) documented how “racial discourse is mobilized in day-to-day politics” (p. 219) as charter management organizations (CMOs) pursued funding. She found that CMOs strategically code switched between audiences—e.g., drawing on deficit-laden and coded racial frames for funders and race-evasive social-justice frames for families. Other work has documented how SIOs supporting teaching and learning strategically define themselves and their racial justice work, drawing on dominant cultural narratives to garner political legitimacy and funder alignment (Chang, 2019). Further, literature documents how educational organizations tend to circulate socially conscious content at strategic moments (Hernández, 2022b; McCambly et al., 2025), signaling the importance of the sociopolitical environment in shaping organizations’ racial equity discourse.

How SIOs Promote Technocratic and Neoliberal Approaches to Racial Equity in Education

Scholarship also speaks to the ways districts and SIOs can promote neoliberal and technocratic reforms in the name of equity—those that center individualistic accounts of inequity, individualistic outcomes, and technical solutions such as data-driven reforms and standardized metrics. For instance, studies have documented tendencies of equity-oriented

instructional reforms to prioritize technical skills and standardized practices like implementing curricular materials with fidelity above more adaptive, culturally responsive, and race-conscious practices (Comstock, 2026; Esboldt, 2025; Farrell et al., 2023; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). Turner (2020) offered the concept of *colorblind managerialism* to describe district reforms that draw on technical and managerial solutions to equity concerns. While such reforms may acknowledge racial disparities in outcomes like test scores, they do little to question the ways those measures themselves perpetuate racialized power structures (e.g., Au, 2016), and they center individualism, rather than orienting around structural problems. Likewise, Esboldt (2025) documented how race-explicit district PL can surface a range of racial discourses that become “absorbed” into the technocratic reforms without meaningful organizational change.

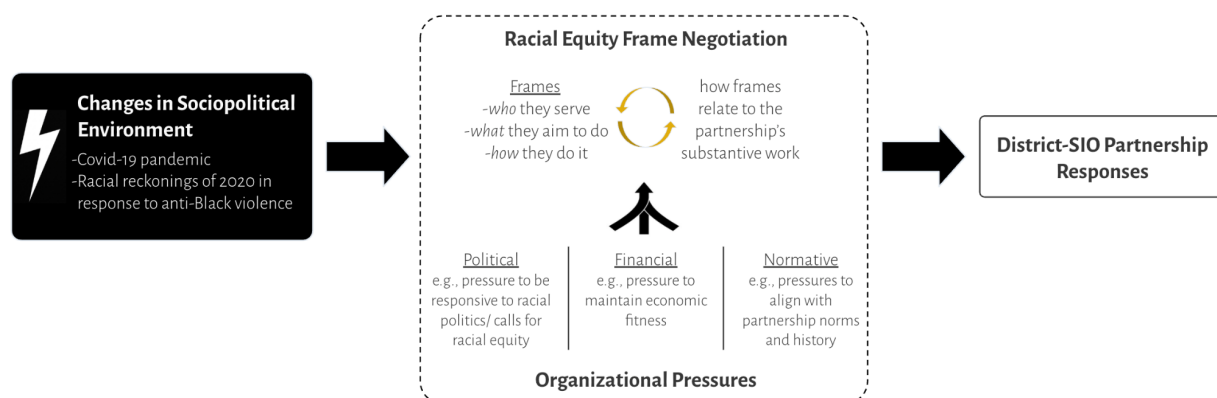
SIOs have played an important role in the promotion of technocratic and neoliberal approaches to racial equity reforms in education. This work suggests that SIOs can serve as a mechanism for ushering in and sustaining race-evasive neoliberal principles in public education. For instance, Cooley and Brantlinger (2024) detailed how TNTP—a prominent, nationally-operating SIO focused on teacher preparation and development—leveraged race-evasive racial discourses rooted in neoliberal principles of individual competitiveness in their guidebook for new teacher training. Furthermore, other work has documented how policy environments that center standardized learning and assessment generate pressures for SIOs to privilege these aims (Trujillo, 2014; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). These findings are important in light of the documented influence and advocacy of SIOs, especially philanthropies and the private education organizations they fund, on the direction of educational reforms (e.g., Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2018; Scott & Jabbar, 2014). This work invites a close examination of racial equity priorities in district-SIO partnerships, particularly over time as racial politics and

incentives for racial equity-oriented work shift.

Organizational Responses When Racial Politics Shift: An Interdisciplinary Framework

Building on this empirical basis, I bridge framing and organizational theories to conceptualize how district-SIO partnerships might respond amid shifting racial politics. I conceptualize racial politics as the ways that race and racism are defined, contested, and strategically invoked in policy debates and policy implementation (Scott, 2011; Welton et al., 2023), which have manifested in polarizing discourse surrounding Critical Race Theory and DEI in education. My interdisciplinary framework offers analytic tools to understand how and why district-SIO partnerships, and the organizations that comprise them, might respond in particular ways when confronting changes in their sociopolitical environment around racial equity. In doing so, I build on organizational theory and scholarship to focus on *partnerships of multiple* organizations, documenting how different organizations in partnership experience pressures in unique ways, and ultimately how this shapes their collaborative work. I offer a rare analysis of changes in framing over time, adding to the small body of work that has documented change amid shifting political forces (see Hernández, 2022b; Marsh et al., 2026). Figure 1 depicts my conceptual framework, which I describe in the sections that follow.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Framing Theory: How Organizations Negotiate Racial Equity Frames

I draw on framing theory to disentangle the racial equity frames that district-SIO partnership leaders employed to describe their work and how these frames shifted over time. Framing theory has been taken up across a variety of disciplines—including public policy and political science (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007; Schön & Rein, 1994; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016), sociology (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000), psychology (e.g., Flusberg et al., 2025), and communications (e.g., Entman, 1993)—to interrogate how language represents and shapes ideas in our social reality. Across these fields, scholars use framing theory to understand the ways that language cognitively structures and promotes interpretation of ideas, and how language choices signify meaning (Coburn, 2005; Goffman, 1974; Purdy et al., 2019). Entman (1993) argues: “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52). In this process, certain ideas are foregrounded, while others are backgrounded (van Hulst et al., 2025). The frames that become prominent hold credibility and salience in the broader environment (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993; Marsh et al., 2026).

Large shifts in the sociopolitical environment, such as those brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the racial reckonings of 2020 in response to anti-Black violence (*Figure 1, lefthand side*), become critical moments for framing and reframing processes (Purdy et al., 2019). Such shifts bring ambiguity and confusion (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018), prompting a frame negotiation process (*Figure 1, top middle section*). As actors and organizations grapple with newfound ambiguity, they may question preexisting frames, consider new frames, and contend with conflicting frames (Benford & Snow, 2000; Purdy et al., 2017). In response, actors may amplify certain frames and modify existing frames by extending or blending them with others (Benford & Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974; Purdy et al., 2017).

Framing can be unintentional or subconscious, or intentional and strategic (van Hulst et al., 2025). Subconscious framing processes reflect ways that taken-for-granted discursive norms shape people's perceptions and constructions of problems, such as the education field's embrace of deficit-based language for describing student and school achievement, coined as "achievement gap discourse" (Carey, 2014; see also Comstock, 2025; Quinn, 2025). Other work offers insights into intentional, strategic framing. Studies of social movements document how activists' roles and the narratives they employ can be "put into 'play' or strategically suppressed" (Mische, 2003, p. 7) and how movements intentionally amplify or extend frames to incorporate new issue areas to broaden support (Benford & Snow, 2000). Likewise, studies in education—especially those in school choice literature—document how actors and organizations strategically frame their policy positions to promote their interests (e.g., Quinn & Ogburn, 2020; Scott, 2013) and shift their framing choices for different audiences to build political support or financial resources (e.g., Hernández, 2022a, 2022b). Education scholarship also shows how policy frames can shift amid an evolving political environment. For instance, Marsh and colleagues (2026) documented the evolution of frames used to rationalize school choice policies, charting the increase in prominence of a liberty frame amid the major sociopolitical shifts between 2018 and 2023. Thus, amplification and suppression of frames is situational and temporal, dependent on local context, audience, and political shifts (Benford & Snow, 2000; Hernández, 2022b; Mische, 2003).

Informed by scholarly work on racial equity reforms in education, I posit three ways that racial frames may show up in district-SIO's framing of their work (*Figure 1, top middle section*): descriptions of *who* they serve, *what* they aim to accomplish with their PL initiatives, and *how* they aim to accomplish those goals. In describing *who* they serve, partnership leaders might name race explicitly (e.g., supporting Black and Brown students), or they might employ frames

and euphemistic language that avoids naming race, like “all students” or “marginalized” students (e.g., Felix et al., 2024; Hernández, 2022a; Turner & Spain, 2020). In describing *what* they aim to do, partnership leaders might draw on very different equity-oriented foci, such as the goal of improving access and achievement; strengthening belonging in the classroom; and promoting anti-racist practice (Farrell et al., 2023). Regarding *how* leaders might approach those foci, practitioners might emphasize a variety of approaches, including centering standardized resources and practices (e.g., using curricular tools with fidelity) (e.g., Trujillo, 2014; Turner, 2020) and/or building teachers’ critical reflection around pedagogy and race/racism through opportunities for sensemaking and co-construction (Comstock, 2026; Pak et al., 2020).

Organizational Pressures

I draw on organizational theory to conceptualize the environmental pressures that organizations in district-SIO partnerships may face and how they may respond. Organizations attempt to optimize their legitimacy by being responsive to their environments (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018; Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2008), yet they often face varied and conflicting environmental pressures, particularly in moments of ambiguity (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018; Scott, 2008). Organizations can experience coercive pressures to abide by formal rules and regulations, normative pressures to align with social norms such as those within professional networks, and mimetic pressures—pressures to emulate other organizations—to adopt taken-for-granted ideas that have particular cultural value (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018; Scott, 2008). Organizations also face pressures to maintain their social and economic fitness, to be responsive to the multiplicity of clients they serve, and to align with their internal needs and goals (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Oliver, 1991; Yurkofsky, 2022). Furthermore, an organization’s historical routines and practices can become imprinted on its functioning (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Stinchcombe, 1965), shaping

future organizational behavior even in times of change (Levitt & March, 1988).

Across the organizational and framing literatures, I synthesize three types of organizational pressures that were salient for my study (*Figure 1, lower middle section*). The organizations in the district-SIO partnerships face *political* pressures to be responsive to evolving racial politics and calls for racial equity, *financial* pressures to maintain their economic fitness as a partnership but also as individual organizations, and *normative* pressures within their partnership to align with their preexisting collaborative norms and history. These pressures may function differently based on the nature of the organizations involved. Indeed, districts and SIOs can face different sets of pressures (Burch, 2009; Comstock, 2026; Hodge et al., 2019; Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Trinidad, 2023; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014), which may have implications for how they respond to shifting racial politics. While districts may be most concerned about being responsive to local needs, SIOs are client-based and often operate nationally, which introduces normative and financial incentives to frame their work in a way that is responsive to national discourse, public demand, or funding (Chang, 2019; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014).

Organizational Responses to Competing Pressures

In light of competing pressures, organizations may respond in a variety of ways—taking up calls for new practices or routines, transforming new practices to fit within preexisting ones, or rejecting new ideas outright (Coburn, 2004; Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Yurkofsky, 2022). Organizations may also respond symbolically, wherein they decouple policies from practices “in a way that prioritizes what is visible and measurable as a way of enhancing external legitimacy over more substantive improvements” (Yurkofsky, 2020, p. 447; see also Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976). Importantly, while such moments of ambiguity offer opportunities for organizational innovation, pressures can also lead to organizational isomorphism—homogeneity

of language and practices—over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lawrence & Phillips, 2004).

Symbolic organizational responses are particularly salient in the context of racial equity work. Theory suggests that organizations decouple racial equity commitments from the substance of their work (Ray, 2019), which can take many forms (Comstock et al., 2026; McCambly & Colyvas, 2023). For instance, resonating with the notion of situational amplification and suppression from framing theory, organizations may engage in “performative wokeness” (Hernández, 2022b), wherein they espouse commitments to racial equity through formal apologies or public displays of support without materially supporting those commitments or causes in practice (Hernández, 2022b; Johnson & Ray, 2026). Conversely, organizations doing equity-centered anti-racist work may downplay this work in their language to avoid scrutiny (Comstock et al., 2026). More subtly, organizations may invoke racial equity in their rhetoric while implementing reforms broadly accepted as “equity-centered” but that do little to uproot structural racism (Turner, 2020). Thus, understanding district-SIO partnerships’ responses concerning their racial equity focus requires examining how their *frames* relate to the *substance* of their work and how this relationship shifts over time.

Methods

I used a multiple case study design to study two district-SIO partnerships (Yin, 2014). This design allowed me to examine similarities and differences between cases and to generate contextually rich, theoretical and practical insights about organizational responses to shifting environmental pressures (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Study Context

This paper is part of a larger study of 12 district-SIO partnerships that were funded by a private foundation to collaboratively design and implement equity-oriented instructional

initiatives that centered curriculum-embedded PL for secondary teachers (e.g., see Comstock et al., 2023; Comstock, 2026). The foundation funded two-year partnerships spanning 2019-2021 and required that each partnership involve schools and/or districts serving “student populations that are at least 50 percent Black, Latino, emerging multilingual or English Learner (EL)-designated, and/or low-income” (Foundation, np) and at least one SIO that would provide additional capacity related to curriculum and/or PL. Partnerships varied in their organizational composition; most were composed of a public school district and 1-2 SIOs with curricular and/or PL expertise. While the foundation required that partnerships focus on “equitable instruction,” they did not define equity or name racial equity explicitly in their call for proposals, allowing for variation in how partnerships approached equity work.

Study Sample

This analysis focuses on two partnerships from the broader study (Table 1): Evergreen and Eastwick (both pseudonyms). I selected the two cases based on two criteria: (1) the substance of their PL initiatives diverged in some key ways related to racial equity, allowing me to examine differences over time in their responses to their environment, and (2) I had consistent data from leaders across all organizations at specific time points. Both partnerships were collaborations between school districts and SIOs centered on improving middle-school mathematics instruction. In each case, the SIO partners were client-based nonprofit organizations working with districts nationwide to support teaching and learning in schools.

Table 1. District-SIO Partnerships

Partnership	District's Student Population	District's Geographic Location
Evergreen (1 district + 1 key SIO)	~75,000 students 3% Asian 8% Black 23% Hispanic/Latinx 61% White 5% Two or More Races 4% MLLs 15% students in poverty 16% SWDs	Southeast
Eastwick (1 district + 2 key SIOs)	~35,000 13% Asian 10% Black 68% Hispanic/Latinx 5% White 3% Two or More Races 23% MLLs 27% students in poverty 11% SWDs	West

Note. MLL=multilingual learner; SWD=students with dis/abilities. All partnership names are pseudonyms. All data retrieved from the Urban Institute's Education Data Explorer (educationdata.urban.org) and reflect the 2019-20 school year (representing the first year of the partnerships). Estimates, rather than precise values, are provided to preserve anonymity. The percentage of students in poverty indicator reflects the estimated population of school-age children in poverty.

Evergreen. Evergreen was a collaboration between a large school district (~80,000 students) in the southeastern US and one SIO that provides PL to teachers on curriculum implementation and standards-aligned instruction. The SIO was the prime grantholder for this partnership work. Although the grant-funded work for this partnership initiative began in 2019, the SIO and district had collaborated since 2014 around curriculum implementation and standards-based reform. Evergreen's approach to instructional reform emphasized a set of "best practices" that included implementing curricular materials in service of ensuring all students received the same opportunities to engage in rigorous, grade-level learning. Leaders led teacher training focused on aligning instruction to content standards, using curricular materials, engaging students with mathematical language routines, and analyzing student work for attention to standards-aligned, grade-level tasks. The partnership prioritized disaggregating student outcomes

data by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and multilingual learner status.

Eastwick. Eastwick was a collaboration between a somewhat smaller, yet still sizable, school district (~35,000 students) in the western US and two SIOs. The first SIO—which I refer to as the Content SIO—was the prime grantholder for the partnership and provided PL to teachers on standards alignment, content, and pedagogy. The second SIO—which I refer to as the Equity SIO—provided PL to district and school leaders and teachers on unpacking how implicit bias can shape educational experiences. Eastwick’s approach to instructional reform included a combination of reforms focused on standards alignment and PL for leaders and teachers on understanding and identifying unconscious biases, including racial bias, that may lead to lower instructional expectations for students of color. Leaders in this partnership characterized the two SIOs as bringing unique expertise to the work. The Content SIO led standards-aligned lesson development, lesson studies, and classroom observations and feedback with teachers. The Equity SIO led training sessions with educators that encouraged reflection on dispositions, lenses, and biases, especially racial biases, that may explain discrepancies between teachers’ intended and enacted classroom practices and named systemic racism explicitly in their materials.

Data Collection

Key data sources were semi-structured interviews with partnership leaders (N=23 interviews with 15 participants), free-form notes from an observation of a two-day training in Eastwick in March 2021, partnership documents (N=40), and public website data for all three SIOs (N=48) (Table 2) (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 1990). The study team purposively selected individuals for interviews who were most heavily involved in the leadership of the partnership, ensuring representation from leaders in each key partnering organization. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. We asked leaders about the

equity focus of their initiative, how they collaborated across organizations, key strategies of their initiatives, and how their initiatives evolved over time.

Interviews occurred at three time points: May/June 2020, January 2021, and June/July 2021. Given my interest in the racial reckonings of summer 2020 as a key shift in sociopolitical environment, I consolidated my interview data into two time frames: the time period before the height of the racial reckoning (“pre/early-reckoning”), which, based on protest data, occurred in June 2020 (Buchanan et al., 2020) and the time period after (“post-reckoning”). I treat this first wave of interviews, which occurred the week before and the week of George Floyd’s murder, as the “pre/early-reckoning” period given that they occurred when discussions of racial injustice had been growing amid the Covid-19 pandemic and anti-Black violence, yet before most organizations had officially responded to this violence and before the height of Black Lives Matter protests on June 6, 2020 (Buchanan et al., 2020). With the pre/early-reckoning and post-reckoning terms, I aim to demarcate what many have identified as a critical moment in Black resistance and widespread attention to anti-Black racism. However, I do not intend to indicate that these were the only racial reckonings that occurred in this time period—indeed a racial reckoning of white backlash quickly followed (Jefferson & Ray, 2022)—nor do I suggest that this reckoning came with the appropriate action to solve racial injustices.

Table 2. Data Sources

Partnership	Interviews			Artifact/Observational Data		
	Pre/Early-Reckoning (May/June 2020)	Post-Reckoning (January 2021, June/July 2021)	Total Interviews	Observations	Partnership Artifacts	Public Website Artifacts (Wayback Machine)
Evergreen (1 district + 1 key SIO)	District = 2 SIO = 2	District = 7 SIO = 3	14	0	22	16
Eastwick (1 district + 2 key SIOs)	District = 2 Content SIO = 1 Equity SIO = 1	District = 1 Content SIO = 2 Equity SIO = 2	9	1 (two-day training)	18	32 (16 for each SIO)
Totals	N=8	N=15	N=23	N=1	N=40	N=48

Note. All partnership names are pseudonyms. The interview sampling plan intentionally aimed to identify leaders in each partnership who were most involved with the ongoing partnership work throughout the duration of the two-year initiatives. This sampling plan led to unequal interview counts across partnerships. The number of public website artifacts is based on capturing the main/home page and the about us/what we do page for each of eight time points for each SIO.

I bolstered interviews with analysis of partnership documents (N=40) collected over the course of the partnerships (pre/early- and post-reckoning) and an observation in one site.

Partnership documents included initial partnership proposals to the funder, meeting notes from partnership kick-off meetings in fall 2019, recurring check-in forms that spanned October 2019–October 2020, and documents from each partnership’s initiative, such as training materials and resources. Although my access to observational data was limited, I drew on free-form notes from an observation of a two-day virtual training in March 2021 led by Eastwick’s Equity SIO.

Finally, given that much of the reframing that occurred appeared to be driven by the SIOs, I leveraged the Wayback Machine—a digital archive that captures and stores public website material—to understand how SIOs framed their work publicly over time (Arora et al., 2016). Using this archive, I collected website content from each of the three SIOs at eight time

points, saving pdfs of the *Main/Home* and *About Us/What We Do* pages (N=48). To understand frames employed during the partnership period, I pulled website data for February, June, and September 2020, and January and May/June 2021. To understand the extent to which changes endured longer-term, I pulled website data from August and October 2023, and April 2024.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data in four main stages, guided by approaches to multiple case study analysis (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018). In the first stage, I applied a priori and emergent codes aligned with constructs from my conceptual framework to interview transcripts and internal documents (Miles et al., 2014) (see Appendix A for detailed codebook). My codebook included three main code categories: equity frames, organizational/institutional pressures, and key strategies. Regarding equity frames, I included three sub-categories of codes as reflected in my conceptual framework: (1) *who* frames to document how leaders/organizations described the students they serve; (2) *what* frames to document how leaders/organizations framed what they aimed to accomplish, drawing on Farrell and colleagues' (2023) work examining racial equity research practice-partnerships to differentiate between goals aligned with access and achievement; identity, culture, and belonging; and power, justice, and anti-racism; and (3) *how* frames to document how leaders/organizations framed how they described addressing their goals, differentiating between solutions emphasizing standardization and technical skills such as curriculum fidelity, and solutions emphasizing critical reflection on bias or mindsets (Pak et al., 2020; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014; Turner, 2020). I focused on these two particular *how* frames because they resonated with prior work examining SIO teaching and learning supports (e.g., Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014) and because they emerged as central approaches to the two partnerships in this study. Regarding institutional/organizational pressures, I coded for the

pressures leaders described facing as a partnership or organization. These included references to the racial political climate, requirements for organizational sustainability like funding needs and scale of work, as well as normative pressures internal to partnerships such as collaborative norms and partnership history. Finally, regarding key strategies, I relied on data from interviews, documents, and Eastwick observational data to discern the substance of the partnerships' work, coding for key strategies and changes to the work over time.

In the second stage, building on methods of qualitative document analysis and Wayback Machine analysis (Arora et al., 2016; Bowen, 2009), I generated three analytic matrices (Averill, 2002; Miles et al., 2014)—one per SIO—to systematically document the frames employed in SIOs' public-facing website materials. In each matrix, columns indicated time frames, and rows indicated website sections (e.g., main page, supplementary blog pages). In each cell, I characterized the frames employed on each page at each time frame. These matrices allowed me to distill trends over time in how SIOs framed their work publicly.

In the third stage, I focused on understanding within-case patterns, triangulating across my data sources (Bush-Mecenas & Marsh, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). For each partnership, I reviewed coded excerpts in each code category (equity frames, institutional/organizational pressures, and key partnership strategies). I used equity frames code counts to generate visuals of the frequency of different frames employed in interviews in the pre/early- and post-reckoning time frames (see also Marsh et al., 2026). I compared the patterns in frame usage in interviews to those on public-facing SIO websites to generate takeaways about frame usage in different contexts, and I attended to framing processes across organizations within each partnership, such as frame conflicts and convergence. I memoed about each case as a whole, putting my empirical findings in conversation with my theoretical foundation.

In the fourth and final stage, I focused my attention on cross-case analysis, memoing about similarities and differences across the two cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At this stage, I developed assertions about the unique and recurring pressures that different organizations in each partnership experienced to explain nuanced differences across partnerships. I also identified a tendency for organizations to converge on similar frames over time and characterized what I term a *race-evasive justice* frame that became central to my findings. To ensure trustworthiness of my assertions, I continuously revisited my data sources and case memos to weigh my assertions against possible disconfirming evidence (Maxwell, 2013).

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, although the combination of documents, observations (in one site), and interviews allow for triangulation, I still relied heavily on partner leaders' own descriptions of their work to characterize the substance of their PL work. I may have learned different details if I had been able to observe more of the PL and partnership activities firsthand. Second, it is worth underscoring that the first wave of interviews—which I consider the “pre/early” reckoning period—did not fully represent a “pre” period. This limitation might suggest that the pre/early-reckoning frames I share here embrace racial equity even more than they would have in the months prior. Nonetheless, they represent an important point of comparison in this longitudinal analysis. Finally, although interview questions about equity were the same across time points, interviewers and participants may have been more likely to expound on equity in post-reckoning interviews given the sociopolitical environment.

Findings

In this section, I present my findings. I found that organizations navigated competing environmental pressures through strategic discursive responses that produced distinct partnership

dynamics. In one partnership, conflict emerged as its SIO *inflated* its focus on racial equity. In the other, organizations' framing converged as two *amplified* and one *tempered* their race-explicit language. Although these dynamics differed, both reflected negotiations of environmental pressures and a broader convergence, especially among SIOs, toward socially palatable language—a *race-evasive justice frame*. In what follows, I synthesize each partnership's responses to the environment over time, detailing their initial and dominant frames, reframing processes, organizational pressures, and how their rhetoric compared with the substance of their work. I then detail key cross-partnership patterns.

Evergreen: Inflating

Evergreen leaders consistently embraced race-evasive and standardization frames. Over time, the SIO increased its emphasis on race-explicit frames, which prompted conflicts with its district partners as the partnership reconciled competing organizational pressures. These patterns signaled that the Evergreen SIO *inflated* its attention to racial equity by increasing its race-explicit language without substantially altering partnership practices.

Initial and Dominant Frames

Across organizations and over time, Evergreen leaders employed similar framing when describing their work that reflected an emphasis on a race-evasive, standardization-oriented approach to PL. Leaders in both the district and SIO commonly referenced the need to ensure *all* students have access to high-quality materials and instruction to support mathematical learning and achievement, and doing so required using standards-aligned materials and resources. Three frames (those bolded in Table 3) consistently emerged as dominant in how Evergreen leadership described the substance of their work: (1) an *all-students* frame that emphasized the need to serve all students, (2) an *access + achievement* frame when describing the goal of ensuring

students’ have access to high-quality curriculum and instruction, and (3) a *standardization* frame when describing how they approach this goal—through strict adherence to use of high-quality curricular materials and PL centered around fidelity of curriculum use and standards alignment (Table 3). As a district leader explained in January 2021:

What we're working on is trying to get really high-quality math practices *across all classrooms for all students*. So, we're trying to defeat the lottery that sometimes happens with education and lock in equitable teaching practices... We want to have a solid amount of students that are receiving grade-appropriate instruction. (*emphasis added*)

The SIO echoed this narrative. For instance, as one SIO leader explained in January 2021: “I would say the primary focus of the [PL] is on *how to utilize the mathematics materials*. How teachers and how coaches can use those materials to ensure *all students* can access the mathematics and the learning” (*emphasis added*). Thus, across organizations and over time, Evergreen relied on race-evasive, standardization-oriented frames to describe their equity work.

Table 3. Evergreen Frame Patterns by Organization (Interview Data)

Frame Categories and Frames	District			SIO		
	pre/early	post	▲	pre/early	post	▲
<i>who</i>	n=17	n=78		n=20	n=28	
all students	41%	44%	2%	55%	57%	2%
dis/ability	6%	3%	-3%	0%	0%	0%
multilingual learners	18%	21%	3%	5%	11%	6%
poverty	24%	6%	-17%	15%	11%	-4%
other race-evasive (e.g., underserved, marginalized)	0%	14%	14%	10%	0%	-10%
race-explicit (e.g., Black and Brown)	12%	13%	1%	15%	21%	6%
<i>what</i>	n=18	n=86		n=25	n=46	
access + achievement	100%	97%	-3%	100%	75%	-25%
identity, culture, and belonging	0%	3%	3%	0%	6%	6%
power, justice, and anti-racism	0%	0%	0%	0%	19%	19%
<i>how</i>	n=18	n=66		n=24	n=47	
standardization	100%	100%	0%	88%	89%	2%
critical reflection	0%	0%	0%	13%	11%	-2%

Note. (1) “Pre/early” refers to pre/early-reckoning period (pre/early-June 2020); “post” refers to post-reckoning period (post-June 2020); “▲” refers to change over time between pre/early- and post-reckoning periods (post-reckoning % - pre/early-reckoning %). (2) Ns represent total instances in which a frame in a particular category within the specified time period was applied for each organization. Ns are typically higher in the post-period, given that this period combines two rounds of interviews. I use percentages to account for this variation in Ns. Percentages are calculated within each frame category for each time frame for each organization—for instance, across all instances in which a “who” frame was employed by district leaders pre/early-reckoning, 41% of those instances were emblematic of the “all students” frame. Across all instances in which a “who” frame was employed by SIO leaders pre/early-reckoning, 55% of those instances were emblematic of the “all students” frame. (3) Shading indicates change over time within each organization—green means an increase in percentage of frame usage over time; red means a decrease in percentage of frame usage over time. Bolded values indicate notable changes over time (increase or decrease) discussed in findings.

Reframing

Despite broad consistency in race-evasive frames, SIO leaders increasingly incorporated race-explicit frames in their language over time. As indicated in Table 3, SIO leaders increasingly referred to “Black and Brown students” when discussing “who” they served and using a power, justice, and anti-racism frame when discussing the “what” of their goals. At the same time, they decreased their use of access + achievement frame. For instance, in January 2021, one SIO leader used much stronger race-explicit language to explain why their largely

race-evasive approach was essential for racial equity: “We [emphasize] that if you are not using the materials, like your actions are *a disservice to Black and Brown students in your classroom, and that's not okay*. And I just think we've always been really direct about that” (*emphasis added*). Here, the SIO leader signals that standardization-oriented solutions—like fidelity to standards-based curricula—are the means to ensuring racial equity in classrooms, layering their standardization-oriented approach with race-explicit language. Another SIO leader reflected similar frame blending in January 2021, integrating the power, justice, and anti-racism frame with her use of the access + achievement frame through an explicit reference to systemic racism:

We want to make sure that kids are getting access to the curriculum... I think it's also about recognizing the systemic racism in our country and making sure that teachers have some more historical context, leaders have more historical context.

Importantly, this leader had *not* used race-explicit language in her first interview in May 2020.

The SIO's public-facing website reflected the same general pattern, though with even more limited incorporation of race-explicit language. Across time points, the SIO tended not to name race or racial equity on the main pages of their website, reflecting the dominant race-evasive frames in interviews. For instance, the website regularly referred to “all students” or “every young person” deserving a high-quality education, strong teachers, and success. In describing what they do, it emphasized ensuring that all students receive rigorous academics and effective teachers. In rare instances, supplementary website pages referenced race explicitly. For instance, a blog page included posts about the need to include robust Black history lessons in schools and the need for a racially diverse teacher workforce. Within weeks of George Floyd's murder in 2020, the SIO released a public statement that condemned systemic racism. In the few months that followed, the supplementary website pages included more justice-oriented language,

including terms like “oppression,” “justice,” and “systemic.” Yet, the main website pages, mission statement, and explanations of the organization’s work and values remained unchanged, drawing primarily on the same dominant race-evasive frames from interviews.

Thus, in the post-reckoning period, SIO leaders tended to blend race-explicit frames with race-evasive ones in interviews. Meanwhile, their public-facing website frames remained largely race-evasive with parallel webpages that embraced race-explicit frames for an acute period of time. Notably, this reframing did not represent a wholesale shift away from Evergreen's dominant race-evasive frames. Rather, SIO leaders blended race-explicit frames with their existing frames like access and achievement, while district leaders continued to rely almost exclusively on race-evasive language to describe their work (Table 3).

Organizational Pressures and Frame Conflicts

District leaders attributed the SIO's reframing to political pressures following the racial reckoning, and financial incentives may have incentivized SIO leaders to be responsive to these political shifts. As one district leader noted in January 2021: “I think that the social unrest that continues in America, but also really amplified over the summer [of 2020], created a desire for [the SIO] to be more focused on [Black and Latinx students].” Although SIO leaders themselves did not explicitly name political or financial pressures as a reason for their reframing, they spoke to aspects of their organizational models that reflected underlying financial incentives to ensure their organization could stay current in their approach to maintain a wide client base. For instance, in January 2021, an Evergreen SIO leader noted: “I work with lots of partners throughout the state or the country.” She explained that she was particularly interested in scaling findings from this partnership to other clients nationwide. Another leader corroborated this attention in the SIO to scale, emphasizing the need to “keep up.” “We're able to take the lessons

learned from this partnership and just the thinking that we've done and the research... [you have to] keep up with what's most recent.” Importantly, these data do not speak to the intentions of the SIO in adapting—or not—their approach to racial equity. However, given its nature as a nationally-operating, client-based organization, the SIO’s economic vitality was connected to its ability to sustain itself in a shifting sociopolitical environment.

Yet, these pressures encouraging the SIO to adopt racial equity frames came into tension with normative pressures in the partnership. District leaders saw the SIO’s increased emphasis on racial equity to be at odds with how they understood the partnership’s focus, signaling conflicts over how to frame their project. District leaders saw the SIO’s adoption of race-explicit frames as a departure from the origins of their partnership work, which began in 2014 as standards-based reforms *without* an explicit racial equity focus. One district leader noted in January 2021: “[An emphasis on racial equity] was not something that was as prevalent in the onset of the project and... it's now showing up everywhere.” She continued: “I care a ton about racial equity. It just wasn't the—I didn't perceive it as the root cause that created the need for this work.” Another district leader explained in January 2021: “In all honesty, it has been a challenge for [the SIO] to bring forward within this work [*pause*—a large focus on racial equity is coming from them.” This district leader’s comments convey the strength of the partnership’s history and perceived origins, reflecting tensions between political, economic, and normative organizational pressures. While the SIO faced political and economic pressures to take up racial equity, historical partnership norms stymied potential shifts to more deeply center racial equity.

Rhetoric Versus Reality

Data suggested that SIO leaders’ rhetoric may have changed more than their actual practices—signalling that SIO leaders *inflated* their emphasis on racial equity post-reckoning.

District leaders suggested that the amplified attention to racial equity did not reflect their own priorities. One leader commented:

There's now a very large focus from [the SIO] on DEI related to this project, which is fine and well and good and great... We want greater representation, but I think that the focus on Black and Latinx students for us is, yes, and students with disabilities and students in poverty for us are more—are equally, but also because they're [more of the] population in our district, they're also exceedingly important.

This district leader went on to characterize the demographics of the district, emphasizing that the percentage of students living in poverty was significantly greater than the percentage of Black and Latinx students. Notably, this leader's comments did not reflect publicly available data (see Table 1) and signaled a lack of attention to intersectionality and race-conscious reform. However, these comments also signaled a discrepancy between how district leaders understood the substance of their work and the new framing of the work from SIO leaders.

Interviews and partnership documents suggested some substantive changes in the strategies and focus of the PL over time. Referring to the substance of their partnership work in January 2021, one SIO leader emphasized the need to have “conversations, *at all levels* [of the district], explicitly about equity, explicitly about race, explicitly about the historical context of our country.” One key substantive change in partnership work reflected some movement toward this aspiration: In 2021, the SIO created a three-workshop anti-bias training for cabinet leaders in the district, in which they discussed how racial and other biases can result in students of color receiving fewer opportunities for grade-level instruction.

At the same time, other evidence sources suggested minimal changes to their racial equity approach beyond this additional training. Documents and interviews indicated that teacher

training focused on content standards, using instructional materials with fidelity, and analyzing student work to understand the extent to which teachers were providing students with content-focused, grade-level tasks. Artifacts and other interviews did not indicate that discussion about race or history was formally integrated into teacher training and materials. Moreover, signaling minimal engagement with teachers around such training, this same SIO leader reflected: “I think if I could do this work again... I would also want to think about how we are including bias training... And I would want to make sure that on the onset [our organization] is working directly with the teachers [on that].” Furthermore, other leaders noted few substantive changes in their approach over time. As a district leader explained in January 2021: “I don't think we've made a huge pivot, but we have made adjustments along the way either to content, or delivery, or strategy, pacing.” Adjustments included, for instance, district and SIO leaders adding explicit information to their curriculum and coaching tools about using mathematical language routines with multilingual learners (e.g., a coaching form included a section “Additional ELL Supports” that included tips like “explicitly pre-teach vocabulary”).

Taken together, these data suggest that Evergreen's post-reckoning response reflected *inflating* rather than substantive organizational change. SIO leaders increasingly employed race-explicit rhetoric across interviews and public communications, yet the partnership work remained largely unchanged. Rather than replacing Evergreen's dominant race-evasive, standardization-oriented approach, racial equity discourse was blended with it.

Eastwick: Amplifying, Tempering, and Converging

Eastwick partnership leaders were more fragmented in their frame usage. However, leaders across the three organizations converged over time in how they framed their collective work: while the district and Content SIO *amplified* their use of race-explicit frames, the Equity

SIO *tempered* theirs—downplaying their PL’s racial equity focus. This reframing reflected a negotiation of pressures and a convergence of racial discourse within the partnership.

Initial and Dominant Frames

Eastwick partnership leaders’ frame usage was more fragmented, especially initially, compared with Evergreen. The District and Content SIO tended to use more race-evasive frames initially, whereas the Equity SIO heavily employed race-explicit frames.

District and Content SIO: Mostly Race-Evasive. In the pre/early-reckoning period, both the district and Content SIO leaders more often used race-evasive than race-explicit language when referring to students—especially the Content SIO, which had zero instances of race-explicit descriptions of students pre/early-reckoning (Table 4). The description of the Content SIO’s work in Eastwick’s initial proposal language is reflective of the language these leaders used in interviews:

[The Content SIO] envisions a future where our public schools provide *our most underserved students* with an outstanding education. Our mission is to partner with educators to design and implement solutions to their greatest challenges in achieving *educational justice*. (*emphasis added*)

Notably, the Content SIO employed language of “justice”, yet did so in a way that did not name race explicitly. District leaders also typically used race-evasive language. For instance, a district leader explained: “the purpose [of this work] is... we have so many kids that are underserved. How do we rectify that?” Likewise, district and Content SIO leaders spoke of the need to ensure “all students” or “every student” can access curricular materials and rigorous learning.

Table 4. Eastwick Frame Patterns by Organization (Interview Data)

Frame Categories and Frames	District			Content SIO			Equity SIO		
	pre/early	post	▲	pre/early	post	▲	pre/early	post	▲
<i>who</i>	n=5	n=2		n=4	n=14		n=5	n=5	
all students	40%	50%	10%	50%	50%	0%	20%	40%	20%
dis/ability	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
multilingual learners	0%	0%	0%	0%	14%	14%	20%	0%	-20%
poverty	20%	0%	-20%	0%	7%	7%	0%	20%	20%
other race-evasive	20%	0%	-20%	50%	0%	-50%	20%	20%	0%
race-explicit	20%	50%	30%	0%	29%	29%	40%	20%	-20%
<i>what</i>	n=11	n=17		n=14	n=14		n=6	n=40	
access + achievement	55%	71%	16%	64%	43%	-21%	17%	28%	11%
identity, culture, and belonging	9%	0%	-9%	9%	7%	-2%	17%	10%	-7%
power, justice, and anti-racism	36%	29%	-7%	27%	50%	23%	67%	62%	-5%
<i>how</i>	n=11	n=13		n=7	n=29		n=6	n=21	
standardization	64%	92%	28%	86%	86%	0%	17%	86%	69%
critical reflection	36%	8%	-28%	14%	14%	0%	83%	14%	-69%

Note. (1) “Pre/early” refers to pre/early-reckoning period (pre/early-June 2020); “post” refers to post-reckoning period (post-June 2020); “▲” refers to change over time between pre/early- and post-reckoning periods (post-reckoning % - pre/early-reckoning %). (2) Ns represent total instances in which a frame in a particular category within the specified time period was applied for each organization. Ns are typically higher in the post-period, given that this period combines two rounds of interviews. I use percentages to account for this variation in Ns. Percentages are calculated within each frame category for each time frame for each organization—for instance, across all instances in which a “who” frame was employed by district leaders pre/early-reckoning, 41% of those instances were emblematic of the “all students” frame. Across all instances in which a “who” frame was employed by SIO leaders pre/early-reckoning, 55% of those instances were emblematic of the “all students” frame. (3) Shading indicates change over time within each organization—green means an increase in percentage of frame usage over time; red means a decrease in percentage of frame usage over time. Bolded values indicate notable changes over time (increase or decrease) discussed in findings.

Equity SIO: Race-Explicit Frames. The Equity SIO used noticeably different frames pre/early-reckoning compared with the other two organizations, reflecting the Equity SIO’s attention to race and racism in their work. For instance, the partnership’s initial proposal described the Equity SIO as follows:

[The Equity SIO’s] goal is to *disrupt the cycle of institutional racism* that manifests in our education system, which denies *students of color* an equal opportunity to learn and thrive in our society. [The Equity SIO] does this by *changing educators’ personal mindsets*, habits, instructional and leadership practices, and overarching school goals and policies

through *immersive learning experiences and high-quality curricular materials and resources*. (*emphasis added*)

This excerpt reflected the tendency of the Equity SIO to embrace more race-explicit frames in terms of *who* they served (“students of color”) and the *what* of their work (“disrupt the cycle of institutional racism”), while also naming the need for both technical resources (“high-quality curricular materials”) and reflective solutions (“changing educators’ personal mindsets”).

Equity SIO leaders regularly used the power, justice, and anti-racism frame to describe the what of their work both pre/early- and post-reckoning, including within partnership dynamics (Table 4). For instance, in May 2020, an Equity SIO leader referred to disrupting racial microaggressions within their partnership leadership. She commented: “We’ve had opportunities to have some courageous conversations about meetings that have had undertones of racial microaggressions, and [the other partnership leaders] were willing to hear and make some changes in their practices with working with us.” Reflecting similar frames to their proposal, one Equity SIO leader commented in January 2021: “Our focus is how to disrupt our institutionalized racist systems... so, I keep talking about race, because it’s really important that we not ignore it or think that it can be this passive side effect that happens.”

Reframing

Over time, partnership leaders across the three organizations converged in their framing through processes of *amplification* and *tempering*.

District and Content SIO—Amplifying. District and Content SIO leaders *amplified* their use of race-explicit frames over time. Notably, total coded excerpts indicating frames to describe student groups (*who* frames) were small; however, the language reflected in these excerpts signaled that from pre/early- to post-reckoning, the Content SIO’s and district’s use of

race-explicit frames to describe student groups increased (Table 4). Post-reckoning, these leaders tended to more readily employ language like “Black and Brown students” or “students of color” when discussing *who* their partnership serves. Furthermore, the Content SIO’s use of the power, justice, and anti-racism frame to describe the *what* of their work increased markedly over time (Table 4). Here, leaders became more explicit about tackling bias against students of color when describing the partnership’s work and about broader systemic factors that reproduce racial inequity in education. For instance, in January 2021, a Content SIO leader explained that she defines equity as “identifying factors that are perpetuating privilege or perpetuating oppression and really investigating that deeply and trying to shift that.” She goes on to explain that this requires attention to systemic factors, as well as individual reflexivity.

Despite reframing in interviews, the Content SIO’s website maintained a largely race-evasive framing of equity and inequality over time, with the exception of an acute moment after George Floyd’s murder, signaling a contrast between local partnership dynamics and more public-facing framing. Both pre- and post-reckoning, the Content SIO’s website primarily employed the race-evasive marginalized student frame when describing students, an access + achievement frame when describing what they aimed to accomplish, and a standardization frame when describing how they approach their goals—e.g., emphasizing the “adoption and implementation of high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials.” The exception to the generally race-evasive website language was, like for many organizations, a public statement in response to George Floyd’s murder and the racial unrest in summer 2020. The statement condemned the treatment of Black students in the education system and racist attitudes, norms, and behaviors in school systems that have become normalized, such as policing of Black student bodies and deficit labels. Although this statement represented a notable departure from the

website's dominant framing, it was removed by early 2021, after which the organization's public-facing language largely returned to its pre/early-reckoning race-evasive emphasis on educational justice through standardization-oriented reform. These trends contrasted with the local amplification of race-explicit frames in their district-SIO partnership.

Equity SIO—Tempering. Despite its greater usage of race-explicit frames, the Equity SIO fluctuated in its use of race-explicit frames over time, revealing a tendency to *temper* their language, especially when describing who they serve. For instance, from pre/early- to post-reckoning, the Equity SIO's use of race-explicit frames to describe student groups decreased and their use of the *all-students frame*—a race-evasive alternative—increased. In addition, post-reckoning, the Equity SIO embraced standardization frames when describing how they pursue their goals (e.g., ensuring standards-aligned content) and spoke significantly less frequently about the reflective nature of their work (e.g., encouraging reflection on bias).

The Equity SIO's public-facing framing followed a similar trajectory of tempering, signaling that this SIO's tempering was not specific to local partnership dynamics, yet also reflected more race-evasiveness overall than in interviews. For instance, pre-reckoning, the Equity SIO's main page describing their work emphasized their provision of standards-aligned resources and training “in pursuit of equity” and “improv[ing] educational opportunities across the country for all students.” Race-explicit frames (e.g., naming systemic bias and racism) were present but often in supplementary pages, descriptions of their training, and downloadable resources and materials—e.g., resources about disrupting implicit racial bias. Immediately post-reckoning, the Equity SIO amplified and centered their public use of race-explicit frames, including the power, justice, and anti-racism frame. For example, their tagline on their main pages evolved to name systemic racism and students of color. Still, they did not remove

race-evasive references such as references to all students—instead, race-evasive and race-explicit frames existed in parallel (Coburn, 2004). Over time, however, these race-explicit frames were tempered as the website increasingly emphasized “empowering” instruction for all students.

Together, the reframing patterns in Eastwick reflected convergence of language over the course of the partnership: district and Content SIO leaders amplified their race-explicit language in ways that reflected the Equity SIO’s language, particularly when explaining their local partnership work, whereas the Equity SIO tempered theirs both in interviews and publicly.

Organizational Pressures and Frame Convergence

The Eastwick partnership’s convergence of language reflected a negotiation between political and economic pressures for both SIOs to be responsive to evolving racial politics, and normative pressures within the partnership around expertise. The district and Content SIO leaders emphasized how the Equity SIO served as their “north star” for racial equity work—a key normative pressure informing the partnership’s equity approach. A district leader noted: “[The Equity SIO] literally is second to none when it comes to that—that intersection of equitable instruction and deep understanding of standards and instruction, and just the confronting of systemic racism and bias that happens in our classrooms.” A deferral to the Equity SIO’s expertise on matters pertaining to equity—and racial equity in particular—may explain why district and Content SIO leaders embraced more race-explicit language over time.

At the same time, there was a limit to how much leaders in this partnership might embrace race-explicit frames. For the Equity SIO, the political environment *initially* reinforced their focus on racial equity. Immediately following summer 2020, the Equity SIO saw a surge in demand for their services. An Equity SIO leader explained in February 2021:

People are just craving the equity work. It’s sad, but both the pandemic and then the

racial unrest of the past year, both those things reduced any skepticism or resistance to the work that we do and made people seek us out. So, it's an unfortunate cause. We were doing the work beforehand. So, it was a steady pace.

Yet, just a few months later, in July 2021, this same Equity SIO leader explicitly referenced emerging resistance to DEI work, and how their organization strategically tempered their language to avoid scrutiny in this evolving political climate. She explained:

Now, what's going on in the world right now around culturally responsive education and the demonization of it and demonization of Critical Race Theory... That's what's going to make [this work] become a lightning rod... People are going to demonize and pass state laws that say you can't talk about race. We're talking about what is [engaging and empowering] instruction. And we will not stop talking about race and bias. We are also not going to be clickbait for people. So we'll press onward and this too shall pass.

Thus, while the Equity SIO did not see themselves as shifting their substantive work, they intentionally reframed how they spoke about that work—by tempering how much they explicitly referred to race, racial groups, or race-conscious approaches in public-facing language.

Both SIOs' racial equity discourse was further shaped by their economic aspirations. The two Eastwick SIOs spoke directly to their intentions to bridge their organizations and develop a shared service model through this partnership. One SIO leader emphasized how the foundation funding this partnership initiative required SIOs to consider how this partnership work could support development of their own business plans: “[The funder] has really supported [business development] and asked us to create a replicable model of nonprofit partners working together.” The partnership's initial proposal named this goal explicitly: “Revenue-generating partnerships are a key element of our current strategic and business plans. Both organizations have developed

aggressive growth targets for curriculum-aligned professional learning. This grant will provide the resources necessary to build and test this partnership as a mechanism to achieve sustainable growth.” An Equity SIO leader described a convening of leaders across several organizations during the partnership period “to figure out how we can collaborate.” By the end of the partnership period, the Content and Equity SIOs had developed a shared service model to market to districts nationwide. Critically, the instances of tempering in the Equity SIO’s website frames corresponded to the development of this shared service model. Although not causally conclusive, these patterns speak to the ways that economic viability of these SIOs’ collaborative work may have had a mimetic influence on how each organization individually framed its work—encouraging a meeting in the middle of these two SIOs’ racial equity frames.

Rhetoric Versus Reality

One possible interpretation of Eastwick’s changes is that the district and Content SIO *inflated* their attention to racial equity, as in Evergreen. However, unlike Evergreen, Eastwick’s partnership did explicitly embed racial equity—in some form—into its PL model before the racial reckoning. While the partnership adapted their PL to accommodate Covid-19 restrictions (e.g., making PL virtual), the substance of this partnership’s approach to equity did not change over the course of the partnership. Leaders and teachers engaged in Equity SIO training opportunities focused on racial bias. For instance, in a session on “layers and legacies,” PL facilitators drew on Lisa Delpit’s (2006) work and situational vignettes of classroom teacher actions to prompt discussion of unconscious bias including racial bias. In addition, teachers continued to have opportunities for lesson studies and classroom observations in a virtual setting from the Content SIO. This suggested, then, that as the partnership collaborated more closely over time, the partnering organizations converged in their understanding of the expertise that

each organization brought to the work. In this way, despite strategic reframing that decoupled organizational rhetoric from practice (e.g., the Equity SIO intentionally tempering their language), we can interpret the increased use of race-explicit frames as a tighter coupling over time of these organizations' language with their *partnership's* collective work.

At the same time, it's worth noting that despite consistent attention to racial equity and systemic racism in their PL over time, the Equity SIO prioritized individualistic solutions to "addressing systemic racism" that centered disruption of biased teacher mindsets. In this way, they emphasized similar themes of grade-level rigor and standardized instruction as Evergreen, but with more race-explicit language around why students of color have systematically been denied opportunities in the classroom. Artifacts included statements from SIO leadership that situated educational opportunities today in histories of racism and anti-literacy laws for Black people, signaling some attention to broader, structural conditions that perpetuate racial inequity. However, the PL solutions centered educators' individual mindsets and practices reflective of color-blind managerialist approaches documented elsewhere (Turner, 2020).

Across Partnerships: SIOs Converging on a Race-Evasive Justice Frame

Across both cases, SIOs ultimately converged publicly on what I term *race-evasive justice*: a hybrid frame that combined justice-oriented language with race-evasive, individualistic, and standardization-oriented language. This convergence around a race-evasive justice frame was particularly evident among SIOs' public framing. Rather than explicitly naming racism, organizations increasingly emphasized concepts such as "justice," "educational inequality," and "improving outcomes for all students" without referencing race, racism, or racial inequities. For instance, in 2023 and 2024, the Evergreen SIO's website adopted language such as "achieving justice" for "every young person," "ending injustice," and disrupting "educational

inequality.” Also new was the website’s attention to race as a “predictor” of social and economic mobility, a pattern that needed disruption. Thus, while signaling a stronger justice orientation, the SIO strategically blended its race-evasive frames with justice-oriented language—to promote a slightly evolved but similarly race-evasive framing of their work. This framing was mirrored in the Eastwick Content SIO’s website, which emphasized that their pursuit of technocratic reforms allowed them to work toward “achieving educational justice.”

Even for Eastwick’s Equity SIO, which named disrupting systemic racism as a component of their approach pre/early-reckoning, its website evolved to embrace the same race-evasive justice frame that emerged in other SIOs. The website eventually emphasized the importance of rigorous, empowering instruction for all students, reflecting interviewed leaders’ descriptions of adopting new language to describe what they saw as their anti-racist focus. In 2023, the website adopted defensive language, adding a disclaimer that their work is not to blame or accuse anyone of racist behavior. Finally, by 2024, the Equity SIO’s website employed the race-evasive frame through statements like the “predictability of student outcomes by race”—language that nearly mirrored that of the Evergreen SIO.

Thus, although the two partnerships represented unique reframing processes and internal dynamics, the SIO responses functioned to bring both partnerships’ framing of their racial equity work in closer alignment. Based on SIO’s language alone, those SIOs without a strong racial equity component in their work as a starting point—in particular, the Evergreen SIO and the Content SIO in Eastwick—amplified their racial equity language post-reckoning. The organization that could be understood as starting from a place of more explicitly naming and attending to racial equity in their work—Eastwick’s Equity SIO—tempered its language. These patterns signaled a high-level convergence among SIOs around socially palatable language that

was neither race-neutral nor radically race-explicit. With the race-evasive justice frame, SIOs *signaled* a more radical orientation toward racial justice—without naming racism itself.

Discussion

The study documents how organizations and district-SIO partnerships strategically and symbolically employed racial equity frames as they navigated a shifting environment. Though primarily focused on shifts in 2019-2021, this study's findings offer language and concepts for describing how organizations may respond to acute shifts in racial politics more generally, including more recent anti-DEI politics. I highlight three key contributions to the scholarship on the racial politics of equity-oriented educational reforms. First, by bridging framing and organizational theories, I offer a framework for understanding how educational organizations respond to shifts in racial politics and I document strategic discursive responses—*tempering*, *amplifying*, and *inflating*. In doing so, I offer theoretical tools for describing patterns that continue to play out in real time within and across educational and other spaces. Second, I extend organizational scholarship by accounting for how organizations *in partnership* navigate shifting and competing environmental pressures. Third, I document how, even while each partnership represented somewhat different starting points in their focus on racial equity and experienced distinct normative pressures, political pressures and financial incentives encouraged a convergence around race-evasive justice for SIOs at a field level. This contribution suggests that a stark political environment can amplify isomorphic effects on organizations, and underscores how local norms and financial incentives for organizational sustainability, especially of private organizations, can ultimately conflict with efforts to promote racial equity in education. In what follows, I discuss these findings and contributions.

Inflating, Amplifying, and Tempering Amid Competing Environmental Pressures

The differences across these two partnerships offer important conceptual language for describing organizational and partnership responses to a shifting climate around racial equity. In this study, leaders in different organizations strategically *inflated*, *amplified*, or *tempered* how they framed their equity efforts, with minimal substantive shifts to their work. Partnerships' specific responses reflected a need to reconcile conflicts in the political, financial, and normative pressures of their specific environments. The nuanced differences in framing processes in each site offer important concepts and language for describing common patterns—within and beyond education—in times of shifting racial politics. In Evergreen, the combination of political, financial, and normative pressures—the SIO needing to be responsive to mainstream calls for racial equity for its own economic fitness, while balancing the normative pressures of their partnership's history—helps explain the symbolic response within the partnership. The SIO inflated its emphasis on racial equity through race-explicit frames, whereas the district resisted this embrace of racial equity. In this way, the partnership's origins and history served as an important normative pressure on the work of the partnership and reflected the notion of organizational “imprinting”—how historical norms and routines in organizations can persist in times of disruption (Marquis & Tiesik, 2013). While political and economic pressures encouraged the SIO to take up racial equity calls, normative pressures within the partnership challenged the potential for doing so in any meaningful way. These dynamics extend understandings of racialized decoupling (Ray, 2019) by offering insights into cross-organizational dynamics that can promote racialized decoupling.

In Eastwick, the coalescing of normative, political, and economic pressures resulted in the three organizations converging in their language: while the district and Content SIO amplified their racial equity language, the Equity SIO tempered theirs. Notably, normative

pressures operated differently in Eastwick compared with Evergreen: the district's and Content SIO's deferral to the Equity SIO on equity may have resulted in greater take-up of race-explicit frames; yet, the Equity SIO limited its own embrace of race-explicit language given political and financial pressures. Equity SIO leaders were keenly aware of evolving political pressures and strategically tempered their language to avoid scrutiny, while maintaining a focus in their PL on anti-bias and anti-racist mindsets. Simultaneously, the Content and Equity SIO's aspirations for a future shared service model served as an economic pressure reinforcing convergence around racial frames that reflected both organizations' expertise.

Notably, across partnerships, SIOs' public-facing websites broadly reflected similar reframing patterns to those in interviews—e.g., amplification of race-explicit frames following the murder of George Floyd. Still, on the whole, public-facing websites were more race-evasive than SIO leaders were in interviews. While this finding could reflect the particularities of the individuals with whom we spoke, it also likely reflects the difference between one-on-one discussions and public-facing material intentionally developed to market services to a national audience. These findings underscore that organizations tailor their language for particular *audiences* and *over time* in light of shifting environmental pressures (e.g., Hernández, 2022a).

Furthermore, despite nuanced differences in reframing among SIOs, SIOs' public-facing websites followed a predictable pattern: a tendency to be race-evasive in public-facing frames, with the exception of a very acute moment just after George Floyd's murder. Even for Eastwick's Equity SIO, which did name systemic racism and bias in its training, race-evasive language was common in the public-facing website, and this website evolved to preempt claims that it accused individuals of racism. These patterns resonate with other analyses of organizations' public mission and apology statements (Brown et al., 2022; Johnson & Ray, 2026), which show how

organizations decouple their espoused equity commitments from their material work, leveraging public expressions of racial solidarity to signal virtue and deflect critique (Brown et al., 2022; Hernández, 2022a; Johnson & Ray, 2026).

Converging on Race-evasive Justice

At a high level, the patterns across these two sites speak to the ways that particularly stark political pressures—e.g., global racial reckonings—can intensify organizational isomorphism regarding racial equity pursuits (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lawrence & Phillips, 2004). SIO leaders across both partnerships ultimately converged around a *race-evasive justice* frame to describe their work—a frame that signals some orientation toward “justice” while downplaying or avoiding explicit attention to systemic racism. This convergence is notable given nuanced differences in these partnerships’ PL emphases. Eastwick incorporated elements of anti-racism into its trainings, primarily through the Equity SIO’s work, whereas Evergreen focused primarily on curriculum implementation fidelity and technical skills.

It is worth noting, however, that these two partnerships could also be understood as having a very similar orientation to racial equity not just in framing but in substance—one that blends race-explicit language with deeply institutionalized norms around standardization-oriented reforms. While Eastwick incorporated anti-bias and anti-racist trainings, their work centered individual-level bias as the source and solution of racial (in)equity. Meanwhile, they overlooked more structural concerns and failed to question standardization-oriented instructional reforms themselves as a perpetuation of racial inequity (Au, 2016). This approach to addressing “systemic racism” reflects what Patricia Hill Collins (2009) described as, “let’s just all change our minds individually, and then everything else will change” (p. 54). Thus, despite more explicit attention to implicit racial bias, Eastwick drew on

similar approaches to Evergreen, which may explain how two seemingly different partnerships can converge on similar frames.

In this way, the findings from this study reinforce Turner's (2020) conclusions about the racial project of color-blind managerialism (see also Omi & Winant, 1994). Turner documents two different district approaches to equity-focused standards and accountability reforms—one that relied on a “back to basics” approach and another that relied on a more comprehensive strategic planning initiative. However, despite their nuanced differences, both districts reflected an uninterrogated embrace of an individualistic and managerial approach to racial equity. In the context of this broader literature, we can understand the convergence around the race-evasive justice frame among SIOs in this study as a discursive reproduction of color-blind managerialism (Turner, 2020) and a form of neoliberal multiculturalism—revealing how policies and projects grounded in neoliberal principles like individualism, competition, and meritocracy are positioned as promoting “diversity” and “equity” with limited discourse around structural and systemic racism (Melamed, 2011; see also Au, 2016; Cooley & Brantlinger, 2025; Hernández, 2022b).

Tensions in District-SIO Partnerships

Finally, my findings speak to the tensions in public-private relationships and the growing reliance of school districts on SIOs to bolster their capacity (Comstock, 2026; Hodge et al., 2019; Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Trinidad, 2023; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). For SIOs in particular, the financial and political pressures worked hand-in-hand. Given the nature of the SIOs in this study as client-based nationally-operating organizations, all three SIOs had financial incentives to ensure their work could be scaled and marketed elsewhere. This pressure was especially evident in Eastwick, where the Content and Equity SIOs were actively working towards a shared service model. For SIOs serving clients around the country, being responsive to racial politics is an

economic necessity. As Hernández (2024) argued of CMOs' racial frames in the context of their fundraising efforts, the organizations in this study “act[ed] nimbly and strategically to maintain their organization” (p. 1355). The SIOs' convergence around race-evasive frames, even while one of these SIOs aimed to distinguish itself as a disruptor of systemic racism, elevates the limitations of this model of technical support. If districts outsource equity expertise to SIOs in particular, it raises the risk of equity work being at the whim of political and fiscal pressures. While SIOs can bolster capacity for districts (e.g., Coburn, 2005), they operate under a distinct set of pressures to prioritize scalability and economic fitness, which, as documented here, are deeply entwined with racial politics and temporal political pressures (Hernández, 2022b, 2024).

Conclusions

The organizational responses documented in this study reflected a fluidity between language and practice and deep tensions in pursuing racial equity work in public education. Echoing other work (Hernández, 2022b, 2024; Marsh et al., 2026), my findings suggest that organizations framed and reframed their racial equity work amid shifting politics. The concepts of inflating, amplifying, and tempering offer language for understanding these responses across moments of racial contestation, including the contemporary backlash against DEI initiatives. These processes also highlight the complexity of district-SIO partnership work. In times of stark political shifts, partnerships navigate varied and at times competing political, normative, and economic pressures that might incentivize responses reaffirming each organization's legitimacy, rather than the partnership's work or strategies that meaningfully promote racial justice. Theoretically, the framing processes documented here elevate the importance of stark political moments on organizational behavior, and signal that organizational isomorphism can be understood not only as a response to uncertainty, but also as a political process through which

organizations collectively adapt to shifting racial climates. More broadly, this study highlights how framing and reframing may preserve organizational legitimacy while simultaneously obscuring racial equity reforms, underscoring the need for scholars to distinguish between changing organizational discourse and changing organizational practice.

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Appendix A. Codebook

Code Categories & Codes	Definition
<i>Equity Frames</i>	
<i>who</i>	<i>when discussing the students they serve...</i>
all students	references to "all students" or other terms indicating no attention to distinct social groups (e.g., "every student")
dis/ability	references to students with dis/abilities
multilingual learners	references to multilingual learners
poverty	references to low-income students (e.g., students experiencing poverty, economically disadvantaged)
marginalized students	references to marginalized groups of students using race-evasive euphemisms (e.g., marginalized, underserved)
race-explicit	explicit references to racial groups (e.g., racially minoritized, Black and Brown students, students of color)
<i>what</i>	<i>when discussing what they aim to do/accomplish...</i>
access + achievement	references to students' access (or lack of access) to resources and opportunities (e.g., could include materials, resources, curricula, teachers, class sizes, coursework) and/or attention to academic achievement (e.g., achievement outcomes, standardized assessments, achievement gaps)
identity, culture, and belonging	references to students' identity in instruction, belongingness and/or safety in schools/the classroom, cultural assets (see Farrell et al., 2023)
power, justice, and anti-racism	references to relative advantage, systems of power/oppression, justice or injustice, and/or racism/anti-racism
<i>how</i>	<i>when discussing how they aim to accomplish the 'what' of the work...</i>
standardization	emphasis on standards/standardization, curriculum/implementation fidelity, consistency, efficiency, excellence (e.g., Farrell et al 2023; Pak et al., 2020; Trujillo, 2014; Turner, 2020) references to technical skills needed for instructional improvement; comments reflecting scientific management/managerialism
critical reflection	references to more complex shifts needed for instructional improvement regarding educator mindsets, norms, or beliefs (e.g., Pak et al., 2020)—including references to cultural understanding, biases, worldviews, and/or critical reflection (Diamond & Gomez, 2023)
<i>Institutional/Organizational Pressures</i>	

<i>external to the partnership</i>	
(individual orgs) nature of org	references to the type of organization, how it's funded, or how it operates - e.g., nonprofit status, product/vendor relationships *likely double-coded with other individual org codes
(individual orgs) org priorities	references to an organization's mission and/or priorities
(individual orgs) funding/finances	references to funding model of an organization (e.g., fee-for-service)
(individual orgs) scale of work	references to the scale of the organization and/or who the organization is serving - e.g., for SIOs, their national client base
racial political climate	references to the racial climate, including references to racial reckonings, police violence, or racial outcomes of Covid-19 pandemic
education policy environment	references to K-12 policy environment, including standards and accountability climate and changes due to Covid-19
<i>internal to the partnership</i>	
partnership funding/finances	references to funding for the partnership
partnership collaborative norms	references to how they collaborate as a partnership (e.g., how key decisions are made, leadership turnover, general relational norms like trust)
partnership history	references to the history of the relationship between organizations within the partnership
partner expertise	references to specific organizations' expertise in the partnership work, including statements that suggest deferral to one partner org's expertise
Key Strategies	
key strategies	descriptions of the partnership's key strategies (e.g., PL features)
changes	descriptions of changes over time to partnership's key strategies