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## HOW TO SPOT A POLICY DISTRACTION



A **discourse dominated** by discussions of bathroom and locker room access fails to account for the broader concerns and experiences of transgender students.

A focus on recruiting and retaining Black and Latinx teachers, while important, serves to draw attention away from the institutional racism that is a root cause of why educators of color are **25 percent more likely** than their white counterparts to leave the field.

And **campaigns to remove** racist statues or rename universities that memorialize slave holders, while abstractly and symbolically valuable, miss the mark when it comes to changing structural conditions that oppress people of color.

All three are examples of policy distractions, according to the **most recent issue** of the peer-refereed journal *Educational Policy*, which brings together scholars from diverse backgrounds in K-12 education policy research. The issue, which previews work included in the 2021 Politics of Education Yearbook, was guest edited by **Amy N. Farley** of the University of Cincinnati, **Bethy Leonardi** of the University of Colorado Boulder, and **Jamel K. Donnor** of William and Mary.

Here's **how to identify** policy distractions.

- **They are narrow—and problematically so.** For instance, in an **article** in the issue, Joshua Childs of the University of Texas at Austin and Richard Lofton of Johns Hopkins University examine ways in which discussions of chronic student absenteeism focus on individual behaviors and interventions, thus narrowing both the causes and solutions of a broader structural challenge involving issues of student well-being,

school environment, family dynamics, neighborhood conditions, and poverty.

- **Their names may define problems in particular and distracting ways.** An example is the term “achievement gap,” which focuses on different outcomes for different student groups, suggesting that these outcomes should be blamed on the students themselves. Other names for the same phenomena (“[opportunity gap](#)” and “[education debt](#)”) reframe the situation to demonstrate how broader, structural and historical forces such as institutional racism are the root cause of these outcomes.
- **They often reinforce the status quo.** That’s because they ignore broader inequalities, presuming that policy and law are rational and objective. In an [article in the issue](#), Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr. of the University of Wisconsin-Madison argues that charter school authorization, while often viewed as a neutral, colorblind and benign process, is more accurately seen as embedded in structural racism, as are other neo-liberal reforms.
- **They may cast some groups as normal or natural.** By contrast, other groups are then seen as different or deviant—as in [policy debates](#) that prioritize religiously based parental rights over the rights of transgender youth.

In their [concluding piece](#), Leonardi, Farley, and Donnor urge scholars to step outside their issues, theories and disciplines to continue to examine policy distractions and to ask the all-important question: “What have we been missing?”

## NEPC Resources on Education Policy

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