



THE WHITE INNOCENCE PLAYBOOK



It was 2018 and a scandal had just shaken the school district. Over the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend, a group of White students had posted a video of themselves on social media singing racist song lyrics.

This was just the latest manifestation of a long history in the district of racist treatment of Black students, who comprised about five percent of the district's 45,000 students. When the video went viral, Black parents and their supporters felt an urgency to attend school board meetings, where they pressed for better treatment of their children.

Rather than reacting to the video with horror, calling for change, or proposing solutions, school board members instead reacted with covert racism, as explained in a [study](#) by Melanie Bertrand and Carrie Sampson, published recently in the peer-refereed journal *Equity & Excellence in Education*. (Although the article does not name the school district, it appears from contextual clues that it is the [Carroll Independent School District](#) in Southlake, Texas, which received extended news media attention in the wake of racist video's release.)

The study draws upon documents, news media accounts, and more than 13 hours of school board meeting videos to analyze the response, which they found to be grounded in White innocence. "White innocence is a tool that augments white supremacy . . . by potentially justifying and obscuring it, thereby enabling its maintenance," Bertrand and Sampson write. "White innocence has deep historical roots, arising with 'new racism' and taboos against explicit racism, especially evident in education as whites have fought to retain de jure and

de facto school segregation.” (Internal citations removed.)

In their article, Bertrand, an associate professor at the University of Arizona, and Sampson, an NEPC Fellow and assistant professor at Arizona State University, also describe what they call the “white innocence playbook.” School board members and administrators used this playbook, which has the following four main strategies, to shut down and deflect calls to address racism in the school district.

1. **Denying:** Confronted with racist or inadequate responses, school officials at times suggested they did not have control over the actions (“control-denial”) or indicated that their intentions had been innocent (“intention-denial”). For example, when speakers at a public meeting told the district superintendent that she was being disrespectful by looking down and failing to speak in response to speakers’ concerns about racism in the schools, she responded that she had remained silent to avoid infringing on the school board’s authority (control-denial) and that she was looking down in order to take notes (intention denial). “Taken out of context, [these] denials could seem like general strategies to maintain a positive image, unrelated to white innocence,” Bertrand and Sampson write.

However, the context of these denials was the Black community and supporters’ advocacy to intervene in systemic anti-Blackness to a board and district that had taken almost no substantive action by this point. Confessing to being purposefully disrespectful in this case would have equated to an admission of racism. Hence, denying blame was in service of white innocence.

2. **Concealing:** School officials never directly admitted there was racism in the district (“color-evasiveness”). In fact, they rarely mentioned the video incident at all. Even when they did issue a resolution in the wake of the incident, they used the word “intolerance” rather than racism.
3. **Dodging:** School officials minimized their ability to respond to racism (“mitigating agency”). For example, rather than identifying concrete ways in which he planned to contend with racism in the district, a school board member said, “We’re going to try to change what we can in our schools.” His words implied that he did not have the authority to catalyze change.
4. **Glorifying:** School officials went out of their way to present the district in a positive light, even after the video incident made it clear that racism was a problem in its schools. For instance, reflecting on a topic of her choice at the start of the first board meeting after the incident, a White board member focused on a heartwarming story about one of the district’s elementary schools rather than addressing or condemning the racist video.

Bertrand and Sampson conclude with several recommendations for educational leaders, including flagging instances of White innocence; identifying the manifestations of racism that these responses concealed and the responsibilities that the officials had dodged; readily acknowledging this racism; taking full ownership for past policies and practices that main-

tained it; and offering praise, resources and support to students and families working to dismantle racism. “Most importantly,” they write, “district leaders must be committed to holding themselves and their colleagues accountable for addressing racism.”

NEPC Resources on School Leadership and Management

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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