CHAPTER 2

Know Your History to Rewrite Your Future

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Antiracist school leaders do the hard work of unpacking cultural, social, and historical narratives to discover uncomfortable truths about themselves and the communities they serve.
2. Antiracist school leaders promote research into the historical attendance patterns in their school system, understand the historical patterns of influence among privileged parents and constituents, and expose enduring patterns of inequitable resource allocation within and across the schools in their community.
3. Antiracist school leaders cultivate and encourage the expression of counter-narratives in order to delegitimize racist and non-egalitarian practices and to capture the vision of the social transformations they wish to see.
4. Antiracist school leaders strive to change established routines and social structures in order to dismantle the inequities that those routines perpetuate.

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THE STORIES WE TELL—AND DON'T TELL—ABOUT OURSELVES

Everyone loves a story. Whether funny, sad, scary, or tear-jerkers, stories permeate our lives. They are how a child first learns, and stories help adults make sense of our experiences, our celebrations, our triumphs, and our defeats. Stories—and their close cousin, histories—anchor us within a social narrative in a way that connects us to others and to our past and to our possible futures. The stories and histories we tell about ourselves, our communities, our schools, and our students are not simply self-evident accounts of what has happened in the

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past. They are also justifications and rationalizations of how things became the way they are—or how things ought to be. This rationalizing part of storytelling—the moral of the story—connects the episodes of a community and a life into a coherent truth, a truth that should be more broadly known and understood. Stories tell us who we are and what we should become.

But not all stories are equal and not all histories are told. And not all stories are told to uplift and inspire. Within every group or community, there are the commonly accepted versions of history, preserved in yearbooks and newspapers, told in sermons, and recounted at city council meetings. These conventional stories we tell about our communities and their pasts define our understanding of ourselves and explain our lives to those outside the community. Sometimes, these community narratives of past events are told on a broader stage; when a tragedy strikes or when a local hero hits it big in Hollywood or in the National Football League (NFL), the local version of history is pushed out to the world. But all too often these conventional stories leave out more than important details—sometimes they omit entire swaths of people and experiences. The conventional tales and histories that form the accepted narrative of who-is-who and what-is-what do not always have room for people and events that are uncomfortable or inconvenient to some. And sometimes the powers that be do not want to remember events in ways that are outside the official versions.

In this chapter, we want to talk about histories and stories and the ways that finding, surfacing, telling, and showcasing these personal accounts of lives and power can help us understand and rethink the work that needs to be done in schools. By finding and sharing stories that have been suppressed or ignored or denied, you can begin to shape public awareness and public perception about students and parents whose educational needs have been neglected for far too long. As John Dewey wrote, "The past is a great resource for the imagination; it adds a new dimension to life, but on condition that it be seen as the past of the present, and not as another and disconnected world" (Dewey, 1923). The task of Chapter 2 is to show how schools can make the stories of a racist past, "the past of the present"—both connected to and a part of the worlds we live in. Learning, knowing, and telling your history is empowering and enlightening, and it is the first step toward equity.

The first part of the chapter lays out the power of storytelling and how stories provide frames for public policies and actions in schools. Essential for our task is the notion of "counter-narratives"—stories that unsettle the conventional narrative

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and highlight the experiences and voices of those who have not been included in official histories and official ceremonies. Counter-narratives help surface both the experiences of inequity in schools and the mechanisms by which inequity is produced and maintained. By finding, recounting, and telling counter-narratives, you will have a clearer way to present both the origins and consequences of inequity within your school or school system.

Finally, this chapter concludes with the recognition that knowing your history is not simply a pleasant trip through family photo albums or dusting off the old newspaper clippings. Knowing, telling, and ensuring that the history of all members of the community and all students is told and taught requires the decentering of traditional and conventional accounts. It moves offstage the concerns of some people and moves onstage the concerns of others. That move, simple as it may be, is provocative to some people and will, inevitably, prompt a pushback. In the final section of this chapter, we provide tips and tactics to engage that pushback and to ensure that the full story and history of students and communities of color are represented within schools. But let's begin with a story.

THE POWER OF STORIES: ALEXANDRIA'S TALES OF SEGREGATION

Thomas Chambliss Williams was in something of a box. As someone who believed, fervently, in the value and importance of racial segregation, he had fought long and hard against enrolling Black and White students in the same schools. Now, in 1959, in the wake of losing a lawsuit that fourteen Black students had filed to desegregate Alexandria's schools, the judge had informed the school district that school assignments could be based on "racially non-discriminatory" criteria—such as academic needs of the students or their maturity. This gave Williams and the school board an opening. They could use nonracial terms and categories to achieve their goal of racial segregation. Previously, the school system had simply assigned all Black students to the two Black schools, but the federal court now barred race as an official category by which to assign students to school, so the segregationists had to get creative. Williams was up to the task. He and the school board devised six criteria for evaluating whether these students could be allowed to enroll in all-White schools.

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Not surprisingly, the "racially non-discriminatory" criteria barred all fourteen Black children from enrolling. Despite their impersonal quality, the words of exclusion had a sting: For example, Superintendent Williams wrote that the admission of one Black sixth grade girl, whose test score was above the median score of the White school to which she was applying, "would be a novel and unusual situation" that would be "a disruption of established social and psychological relations between pupils in our schools. . . . The situation would be an unnatural one," not contributing to the "normal and natural progress" for her or the other pupils (Reed, 2014, 37). In Williams's view, the novelty of a Black girl who scored higher than White students her age being in class alongside them, made the whole situation untenable. As he stated it, she was not being denied admission to the White school because she was Black but because the White students would have difficulty with the psychological implications of being taught next to a Black student who would, in all likelihood, outshine them.

And so it went for all fourteen students. Without mentioning the race of the students, the school district found all fourteen Black students unsuited for transfer to a White school. But race was fundamentally the only thing that mattered. Despite the district's efforts, however, Federal District Court Judge Albert V. Bryan ruled that nine of the fourteen students must be admitted to all-White schools. As a result, those nine students desegregated Alexandria City Public Schools on February 10, 1959.

But even after that momentous day, Williams and the school board continued to prevent Black students from transferring to the previously all-White schools. Their rejections of student transfer requests—couched in the racially "non-discriminatory" language required by the courts—still reeked of racial prejudice. A seventh-grade boy did not have "either the ambition or the spirit to enable him to compete successfully with even the lowest of the seventh grade" at the White school. Another student would be "hopelessly outclassed" by the White students in the sixth grade. The transfer of another Black student would only burden "the grade at [the White school] with more problems, which tends to slow down the whole grade." And so on. Each time the school board rejected a Black transfer request, the lawyers would seek and obtain a court order requiring that the school board approve the transfer. Not until September 8, 1960—18 months after losing their court decision—did the school board approve a Black transfer request without being subject to a court order.

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STORIES CONNECT THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

This history in Alexandria is, like many civil rights histories throughout the South, simultaneously both well known and hidden. We all hear about *Brown v. Board of Education,* but we rarely hear about the deep resistance to school desegregation and integration that dragged on for decades across the United States—and continues today. Moreover, we don't see the connection between overt racist segregation and "natural" grouping and tracking based on student "ambition" or "drive." The histories of segregation and desegregation are well documented in hundreds, if not thousands, of academic books and personal memoirs. These accounts tell a rich and vivid story of systematic exclusion and denial of BIPOC students from a quality education. Other accounts tell of the dedicated and talented Black educators who, despite the constraints of unequal resources and lousy facilities, inspired generations of Black children. Yet, the fact remains that systemic injustices have plagued US education for decades upon decades, denying BIPOC students the quality education that White children and their families have grown to expect and demand from public school systems.

Despite the prevalence of these histories, the vast majority of White parents and families feel that those inequities of the past are unconnected to the inequities of today. The end of formally segregated education, they believe, renders any remaining inequalities as "natural," or the product of individual merit or failings. The point of this chapter is to show that this belief is both mistaken and holds enormous consequences for our present-day efforts to create equitable educational systems. The decisions and actions that limited the education of BIPOC students have a continuing resonance in contemporary schooling. These inequitable policies and practices laid down a foundation of behaviors, expectations, norms, and institutions that continue to deny quality education to BIPOC students. In order to determine how to move forward, school systems need to understand how their past made them what they are today. And it is the stories of people—students, parents, and teachers—within those school systems that connect policies to the lived experiences of communities.

STORIES AS WINDOWS ON POWER

In her book *Ghosts in the Schoolyard,* on school closings in Chicago, sociologist and poet Eve Ewing recounts the power of stories to explain more than just who did what to whom or to show one's proximity to injustice. As she tells it, stories are a

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way of knowing and showing; in fact, they are a kind of epistemology: the "experiential knowledge of people of color not only is a legitimate source of evidence but is in fact critical to understanding the function of racism as a fundamental American social structure" (Ewing, 2018, 7).

Let's break down Ewing's point a bit. She is saying that the experiences of people of color—who are typically left out of policy discussions—are perfectly fine sources of evidence on which to base public policy. That is, when we are debating whether to close schools in some neighborhoods, it is just as valid to examine how parents and students experience schools and the role those schools play in the community, as it is to examine test scores. Maybe even more valid. But she is also saying that those experiences do more than inform us about policy options; they are integral to understanding how racism is fundamental to the structure of American society. By telling—and letting us hear—the stories of school closure in the Bronzeville section of Chicago, Ewing enables us to see the intrinsic racism at work in Chicago schools.

Ewing's masterful book shows us that the histories and stories that emerge from the experiences of people of color are often counter to the official narratives that are frequently told to justify policies or practices. In Chicago, the official line was that the schools scheduled to be closed were "under-utilized and under-resourced." Ewing's digging into the stories of Bronzeville parents, teachers, and students showed that "under-utilization" was the result of racist housing and school segregation, and that "under-resourced" schools were the product of a school funding mechanism that robbed students of support when they stayed in their neighborhood schools rather than attend charter schools. The histories and stories of Bronzeville neighborhood schools showed that the failings in Chicago were the product of elite decisions to build a racist and unequal school system, but the community itself was being punished for those failings.

Richard Delgado writes that the status of stories is linked to the status of the storyteller. Outgroups, who lack power and influence, tell stories that are different from the stories told by the dominant group: "The stories or narratives told by the ingroup remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural" (Delgado, 1989). That "naturalness" of the ingroup's superior position is exactly what the fight for educational equity is aimed at. Fighting for equity means challenging the "normalcy" of stories traditionally told, unsettling the narrative of why the existing distribution of resources is necessary or natural. These counter-narratives disrupt the

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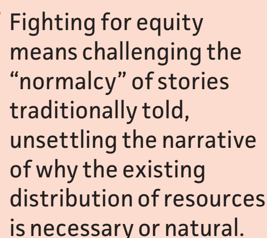
conventional narrative, positing new heroes and new villains as we seek to disconnect the discourse from the flow of resources. As Delgado puts it, "Counterstories, which challenge the received wisdom, . . . can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live" (Delgado, 1989).



Fighting for equity means challenging the "normalcy" of stories traditionally told, unsettling the narrative of why the existing distribution of resources is necessary or natural.

In so doing, we not only imagine new possibilities but also uncover the means by which power is used to hide the reality of oppression. Conventional stories, told by ingroups, have a hard time even seeing the experiences of outgroups, and it is precisely ingroups' inability to see and know the experiences of outgroups that sustains and maintains inequities. As Milner Ball writes, "Blindness to people may be of a piece with their oppression" (Ball, 1990, p. 1856). The value of stories told by outgroups is that they reveal how inequity is both built and maintained. The marginalization of some students, the determination that their needs are less important, relies on discounting the stories that they, and their families, tell.

STORYTELLING AND THE FIGHT FOR EQUITY

So, the first step in building a movement for equity is simple: tell stories of inequity. While these stories often do not make it into official histories, they can be found if you ask the right people. Start by engaging those who experienced inequity: oral histories of former students and teachers, newspaper accounts of school closings, recollections at alumni gatherings, student-led research trips into the community archives, accounts of student–counselor interactions, remembrances of school suspensions and discipline practices—all of these are rich material that can provide counter-narratives to the conventional narrative of schools as sites of opportunity. In our experience, the fight for fairness in schooling has a long, vibrant—and often unrecorded and unrecognized—history. Particularly in places where news media or local newspapers no longer cover the local beat, the memories of past practices can shed light on how current practices evolved. While many parts of the United States have changed dramatically over the past fifty to sixty years, the continuities between past and present are often staggering when we consider how little has changed in the distribution of educational opportunity.

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Another goal of counter-narratives—beyond connecting past practices to present conditions—is to honor the experiences of those who resisted inequity in the moment. These everyday acts of holding American society to its founding commitments might have been small protests or modest acts of resistance, but they preserved a tradition of Good Trouble that is, thankfully, a deep part of American culture and history. The democratic practice of making Good Trouble has many forebears and by telling their stories and sharing their visions of fundamental fairness, we honor their achievements. We also preserve and entrench the expectations that schools are the expression of a community's values, not the values of those who seek to hoard resources and build enclaves of privilege for only a select few. By telling stories and demanding action, we are not just advocating for those who have been robbed of an education. We are advocating for a system of governance that sustains our collective well-being.

WHAT KIND OF STORIES NEED TO BE TOLD?

Where do you begin? What parts of your school or community's history need to be told to understand and address the equity challenges before you? Sometimes the most straightforward stories can be the most illuminating: Who are the students at this school—and why these students? Do your school's demographics look like the demographics of the neighborhood? The school system? The community at large? The metropolitan region? If not, why not? What are the current school boundaries and how have those changed over time? If they haven't changed, has the population within the boundaries changed? What has caused that change? Has new construction of highways or housing divided the neighborhood or community? Have charter schools entered the community? Where have new neighborhood schools been built and how were those sites selected? We can ask a similar set of questions about class and poverty and how students in some parts of town are concentrated in high-poverty schools.

All of these questions aim to get at the composition of schools and how race and class play a role in who attends which school. Schools in the United States now experience more Black–White segregation than they did in 1968, the year Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. At the same time, US schools have become more multiracial and multiethnic, with increasing numbers of Latinx and Black students attending school and more Asian American students attending schools with White students.

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Activity: Tell the untold story of your school in the school newsletter or in a student-run podcast

Consider addressing some or all of the following questions.

- Who are the students in your school?
- Do your students reflect the demographics of the neighborhood? Why or why not?
- What is the history behind the drawing of your school boundaries? How were they drawn? How have the boundaries changed over time? Why?
- How have the demographics within those school boundaries changed over time? What are the reasons behind those changes?
- Who are the important decision-makers in the community? Do they reflect the demographics of the students in your school? Why or why not?
- List some local laws that have had an impact on the changing (or consistent) demographics of your school.
- What are the funding sources that support your school?
- Do your parent–teacher association (PTA) members accurately reflect the demographics of the student body?
- Interview parents and grandparents who attended the school and ask them what tracking looked like back in their day.

See "Both Substance and Symbolism Matter" section in Chapter 7 for a detailed example of how Alexandria City High School students shared the history of their school in public forums.

Overall, White students are the most racially isolated. The point is that these patterns do not emerge "naturally." They are the product of informal and formal decisions made by policy-makers, businesses, and individuals. But they have important consequences for the equity and quality of schooling that students receive.

The demographics of schools often drive the level of resources available to those schools and the responsiveness

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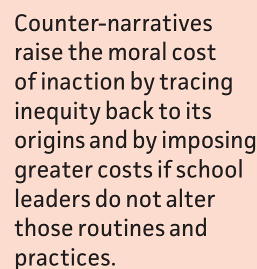
of school and school system leaders to the requests and demands of students and parents. What resources exist at your school that do not exist elsewhere—and vice versa? Where do these resources come from? Is there an active PTA raising funds to hire enrichment teachers or fund after-school programs? What sources of funding does the PTA rely upon? What kind of social and political capital do parents at this school have? Do they work with other highly influential people or do they have limited time and opportunity because of work obligations to attend PTA events? How do parents get on the PTA board in the first place? How does parent access to school and school system leaders affect the opportunities and resources available to their children?

Often these demographic and resource factors also drive larger policy issues that create even greater inequity in educational opportunity. What does the distribution of AP and Honors courses look like across schools? Or even within schools, which students find themselves in Honors pathways or AP World History? At what level do "talented and gifted" (TAG) programs begin? In middle school? In third grade? In first grade? How does enrollment in TAG affect future opportunities to take higher level courses in middle and high school? Ask parents or even grandparents who attended this school what tracking looked like back in their day. Do the racial disparities in AP course-taking look a lot like formal tracking of yesterday? Schools—and institutions more generally—often maintain policies because the cost of revising them (both political and economic) is not worth the payoff to the leader of the school or school system. Maintaining dysfunctional or inequitable systems because of the high political or economic cost of changing is known in policy circles as "path dependence."

Even if a school leader, as an individual, is committed to equity, they will be fundamentally unable to alter these practices if path dependence imposes significant costs on them for doing so. The point of counter-narratives is to change this calculus. This is done first by raising the moral cost of inaction by tracing the current inequity back to its origins, and, secondly, by imposing greater costs if school leaders *do not* alter those routines and practices. That is what making Good Trouble at school is really all about. Locating the source of inequity and then, through mobilization, imposing too great a cost on school systems if they fail to remove that source of inequity.



Counter-narratives raise the moral cost of inaction by tracing inequity back to its origins and by imposing greater costs if school leaders do not alter those routines and practices.

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BACKLASH AGAINST COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Placing BIPOC actors at the center of these narratives is unsettling to many Whites. It challenges their worldviews and asks them to directly understand and confront the way that racism and racial discrimination have been at the heart of the American experience. White resistance to this broader, more systemic view of racism and White insistence on seeing race through an individualized lens, in which White "success" and BIPOC "failure" is the result of individual effort only, lie at the heart of racial conservative efforts to deny educators the opportunity to teach the facts and truth about race, racism, and the outcomes of systemic racism in the United States.

This effort to suppress critical race theory (CRT) took off in September 2020 when President Donald Trump, at the urging of conservatives opposed to the 1619 Project (a series of *New York Times* articles conceived and introduced by the *Times* journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones), banned all federal agencies from participating or providing any cultural competency or racial sensitivity training (including the Pulitzer Prize–winning 1619 Project and anything associated with CRT). On September 17, 2020, at the White House Conference on American History in the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C., Donald Trump proclaimed, "Students in our universities are inundated with critical race theory. This is a Marxist doctrine holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression, and that our entire society must be radically transformed . . . critical race theory is being forced into our children's schools, it's being imposed into workplace trainings, and it's being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors and families" (Trump, 2020). Unfortunately, this narrative posed by the former president has further entrenched racial division in the United States and has perpetuated the ideology that discussing the truth about racism is a threat to American democracy.

As you undertake the challenge of uncovering and telling the counter-narratives of your community, your schools, and your school system, remember that truth-telling is the first step in the fight for equity. Understanding our history is key to dismantling systemic racism in our schools. If opponents of your work claim that you are simply dredging up ancient history or reigniting racial discord, you might ask them what is it that they find frightening in the effort to tell true stories of the past and present? If we are to understand our present situation, we must

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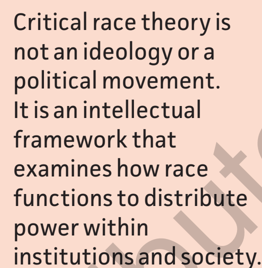
understand how it connects to our past. The recent attacks launched against CRT are an effort to prevent the telling of those stories that connect the past to our current contexts and current dilemmas.



> Critical race theory is not an ideology or a political movement. It is an intellectual framework that examines how race functions to distribute power within institutions and society.

At base, CRT is an incisive framework for understanding how race and racism are not simply attributes of individuals but are woven into the fabric of our nation. It illuminates how racism, as a structural feature, is embodied in laws, policies, and practices that continue to oppress the most marginalized populations in the United States including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. CRT has recently come into the spotlight, but it has long been used by writers and scholars to understand the experience and meaning and power of race in the United States—from the origins of slavery, through the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement, to today's inequities in policing, housing, and schooling, among other domains.

CRT is not an ideology or a political movement. It is an intellectual framework that examines how race functions to distribute power within institutions and society. The origins of CRT date to the 1980s, when a group of legal scholars met at a workshop held at the St. Benedict Center in Madison, Wisconsin. Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams, among others, met to discuss how critical legal studies (which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s) could be applied to race and racial contexts in the United States.

Though these renowned scholars may have coined the phrase critical race theory, many prominent Black civil rights leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Shirley Chisholm spoke out against systemic racism in the United States and employed a critical analysis to advance the cause of civil rights and equity in the United States. A critical stance toward race simply means questioning and challenging existing racial contexts and racial norms in US history. Counter-narratives and counter-histories are simply another way of asking how our current notions of race and current experiences racism are tied to past practices—even though those practices (like chattel slavery and Jim Crow laws) have ended.

Most students in US school systems have not learned the accurate and horrific history of race in our country, in particular how the invented categories of race were (and are) used to advance and entrench White supremacy and oppress Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in the United States. They have not learned that the creation and use of racial categories

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as a mechanism of oppression have a legacy that lives on in ways that may not be readily understood or obvious. By using a critical analysis of systemic racism, you can pull back the historical curtain within your own local community and show the ties between the past and the present. Knowing your history is essential—in part so that you will not repeat it, but also so you can develop your strategy for dismantling systemic racism in schools.

CONCLUSION

On Wednesday, January 6, 2021, when we were roughly one-third of the way through the writing of this book, supporters of Donald J. Trump amassed on The Ellipse, just south of the White House, to hear President Trump and others repeat the unwarranted and unfounded claims that Joe Biden's victory was illegitimate, the election had been stolen from "them," and the only recourse was to violently disrupt the ceremonial counting of Electoral College votes. The crowd, stirred to "fight back," turned from the Ellipse and marched a little over a mile to the Capitol, where they proceeded to fight through bike rack barricades and a thin line of Capitol Police.

Many of the police at the Capitol resisted the surge, but others waved the virtually all-White crowd of rioters through, smiling and joking with them as they physically occupied the Capitol. The rioters interrupted the counting of Electoral College votes, killing a police officer along the way, and vandalized and trashed the People's House. Waving Confederate flags, some sporting Neo-Nazi clothing, the crowd was both thuggish and celebratory, exuberant and chilling. Some participants seemed caught up in the moment, others seemed to have steeled themselves for a violent and deadly encounter with the police and elected officials. In doing so, the rioters wound up causing the deaths of four of their own supporters.

Whatever the faults of American democracy, this unprecedented frontal assault on the machinery of presidential succession marks a deadly turn in both the cause of democratic self-governance and the backlash of White supremacists, who see the preeminence of White male control of American society slipping away from them. Their efforts to suppress not only the election of Joe Biden but also Kamala Harris, the first vice president of African American and South Asian descent, reveal the deep connections between racism and efforts to suppress democracy. White mobs have killed before in US history to prevent democratic self-governance from taking root and they

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have been especially active when Black voters threaten to undo the institutions and mechanisms of White supremacy. Today is no different.

To build antiracist institutions, to build antiracist schools, is to build a better and truer and more vibrant democracy. We can no longer ignore the persistence and power of White supremacy within our nation's politics and our institutions. If we are to rebuild our democracy, our only hope lies in ensuring that it is deeply and thoroughly antiracist. That means many elements of what has previously passed as acceptable or normal or how things are done must change. Antiracism is democratic work and democratic rebuilding requires us to commit to antiracist practices and institutions. The insurrection at the Capitol has revealed both who we have been and who we are; our task now is to recognize that a living democracy, fundamentally, requires a commitment to antiracism. We wrote this book as one small step toward building that commitment and that democratic life. Telling the counter-narratives of your community and your schools is your first step along this path.

Tips for Knowing Your History to Rewrite Your Future

2

- Ask members of your community who have experienced inequity to tell you their stories.
- Set aside the time to record one or two oral histories from former students and teachers. Ask them to share stories about student–counselor interactions, remembrances of school suspensions, and their experience of discipline practices.
- During alumni gatherings, plan on interviewing one or two alumni to ask them about their K–12 experience.
- Motivate your students to engage in student-led research trips into the community archives. Ask them to find stories of students protesting inequities and fighting for justice—finding examples of students engaging in the democratic practice of making Good Trouble.

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Reflective Questions for Knowing Your History to Rewrite Your Future

1. **Personal Reflections**
   - What are the narratives that guide and inform your understanding of your own life and personal history?
   - To what extent have you developed counternarratives to those stories as you have matured and developed as a human being?
2. **Organizational Insights**
   - As you reflect upon your current school system or learning organization, what are the dominant narratives that are retold and perpetuated within its culture?
   - How do these narratives routinize and normalize the distribution of opportunity available to students?
   - To what extent do these narratives require counter-narratives to expose the truth of their origins and purpose?

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