



*Thank you*

FOR YOUR  
INTEREST IN  
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from The Race Card.

[LEARN MORE](#) about this title!

## Frontline Leadership

Having defined and conceptualized race, racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism and their relevance throughout this book, I turn now to a discussion of the leadership I hope to advance in this book, Frontline Leadership. In most of this research outside and inside of education, Frontline Leadership is not well defined as a conceptual or analytic tool.

Frontline Leadership has been seen as a locale in the practices of organizations—the structural organizational hierarchy of first responders responsible for the vitality, health, and success of an organization. In education, Goldring and Sims (2005) wrote about the location of frontline leaders and queried “what people on the frontlines were actually thinking” (p. 234). Lee et al. (2022) studied the impact of a leadership program designed to help develop early career educators. In this way, Frontline Leadership has been conceptualized based on what people think and how leaders develop over time.

Frontline Leadership as a combined construct has been written about extensively in the health sciences. In the field of nursing, Jeavons’s (2011) research focused on the role of organizations in supporting the development of next-generation nurses during times of uncertainty. Ohnmacht (2012) considered leaders and leadership in nursing and health care while Cherry (2014) stressed the necessity to learn from leadership practices on the frontlines under emergency and organizational complexities. Noordegraaf et al. (2016) examined professional and organizational logistics in developing essential tools for frontline medical leadership. In an industry study, Liu and McMurray (2004) researched the development of people working on the frontline, a shopfloor in the Australian automobile industry. Similarly, Block and Manning (2007) examined the “impact of a systemic approach to developing frontline leaders in a large Canadian healthcare organization” (p. 85). Locale—that is, frontline—was metaphorically used as the person or people in charge as well as the physical location of their work (such as the first people who interact with a person or issue).

Connecting frontline leaders to operational leaders, Noordegraaf et al. (2016) explained,

In addition to learning new methods and techniques for diagnosing and treating patients, physicians become operational leaders or frontline leaders. They develop broader perspectives upon health-care delivery, see the provision of services as a more collaborative endeavor and deal with the tensions that are part of organizing health-care work. (p. 1113)

Thus, Frontline Leadership tells us something about methods and techniques necessary for powerful practices and organizational health care. Disciplines can learn from these methods and techniques across time, need, and space. Noordegraaf et al. (2016) explained,

Becoming a frontline leader implies that (young) medical doctors develop a sense of organizing as well as organizational skills. They frame practical medical issues and problems as organizational problems that must not be ignored or reasoned away (“people above or around me will take care of it”), but coped with. This works in two ways. Some residents might discover that they are able to lead and manage health-care delivery. Other doctors might discover they have little affinity with leadership and management, but they might acknowledge the importance and difficulties of leading and managing service delivery. (p. 1131)

Conceptualizing the multidimensional aspects of the work of Frontline Leadership, Bunning (2000) wrote about four interrelated features. Bunning explained that while the four functions of Frontline Leadership may appear simplistic, actualizing these functions is extremely difficult for mostly trained clinicians without support in building organizational skills necessary for effective Frontline Leadership.

[The four practices of Frontline Leadership], easily stated but difficult to fully implement, are required in order to fully develop the front-line leadership function. The practices are: implement a well-focused system of goals and feedback; employ rigorous leadership selection processes (including the removal of ineffective leaders); maintain well-developed and evolving human resource management systems; and implement training and development as an ongoing process. (p. 99)

Across these bodies of literature in education, health sciences, and industry, I identified several important commonalities regarding Frontline Leadership: (a) research tends to focus on the organizational hierarchical spaces of people (frontline work is outwardly facing while other locales are conceptualized more as behind-the-scenes work); (b) research tends to focus on developmental processes of people to merge their clinical knowledge and expertise with their capacity to learn, build, and practice organizational leadership skills; (c) research tends to conceptually center development of practices among people during what can be classified as complexity, challenges, and uncertainty; and (d) research tends to examine disconnects of practices and capacity to organize and lead to desired outcomes and effects.

## Frontline Leadership in Education

Drawing from this established research, Frontline Leadership in education names, disrupts, addresses, and counters interconnected reality of oppression and human suffering that too many young people and adults experience in schools and society. Frontline leadership in education recognizes the backlash against the racial progress we were beginning to make in U.S. schools. This backlash is a direct reflection of the normative need for racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism to remain firmly in place to ensure a status quo citizenry where white families continue to reap economic, social, environmental, health, educational, and other privileges and benefits while others suffer.

Frontline Leadership in education requires school leaders to move beyond mindsets, attitudes, dispositions, perceptions, beliefs, policies, and practices of white normalcy, where communities of color are not considered, are viewed as inconsequential, or are seen as problems in schools and society. Frontline Leadership in education moves beyond stale, dated, predetermined, irrelevant, underresponsive, disconnected, and “racially neutral” decision making that maintains a white-centric orientation to how the world works and how the world should work. Frontline Leadership in education is a leadership paradigm—a worldview about how to co-construct an ethos of healing, hope, possibility, and transformation where school leaders aggressively, deliberately, and persistently work to end punishment and pushout practices and amplify curriculum, instructional, assessment, and relational health in classrooms, schools, and districts (Morris, 2016).

Frontline Leadership in education moves beyond stale, dated, predetermined, irrelevant, underresponsive, disconnected, and “racially neutral” decision making that maintains a white-centric orientation to how the world works and how the world should work.

## Tenets of Frontline Leadership

From my vantage point and throughout this book, eight interrelated tenets shape what I am advancing as Frontline Leadership and practices of frontline leaders:

1. Understand and Know the Research. *Frontline leaders immerse themselves in research about the intersections of teaching and learning about race, racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism in schools and classrooms to advocate for justice.* As educators work through complex challenges and unsupportive policies and practices designed to distort, mask, mute, disguise, and eradicate the truth about societal and educational racism (and other forms of discrimination) in schools through the censorship and banning of curriculum and school practices, school leaders must be

well-equipped and prepared to educate the masses about what research tells us about student learning and development and the kinds of practices educators must advance in schools to enact racial justice agendas.

2. Disrupt Color- and Race-Blindness. *Frontline leaders name, reject, call out, redirect, and disrupt color- and race-blindness in discussions, decision making, policy, and practice.* The work of race requires that leaders reject the idea that they are being fair, equitable, caring, and humanizing when they pretend to be color-blind or race-blind in their work. As frontline leaders, they facilitate the kinds of insights with educators to help them build tools to examine their own practices in a way that communicates that understanding the whole child (including the child's racial identity) complements how they will understand what is necessary to know, understand, and support student success. Moving away from stereotypes and negative preconceived notions, school leaders acknowledge systems of racial oppression and racism that students of color experience while building a school community that recognizes the many assets among these and all students. Instead, leaders help those in the community understand that adopting a color-blind orientation—where they claim to see only people and not race—contributes to inequitable and unjust practices and systems. In short, how can we co-design racially just spaces when we do not recognize the full humanity and identity of the students with whom we are working? Black students in mostly white spaces, for instance, often report that they feel invisible, not fully understood or accepted, and that their being Black is too often seen as a liability to their identity rather than an asset. Thus, to recognize racial injustice and work to disrupt it, we must “see,” recognize, honor, build on, validate, confirm, and celebrate color and race.
3. Advocate Hard Work and Know Meritocracy as a Myth. *Frontline leaders understand meritocracy is a myth and cultivate a space of hard work while simultaneously acknowledging how success and achievement are shaped by generational systems of power.* Many white people believe that they have earned their positions, material wealth, and status inside and outside of education. However, white people must understand that their perceived success and status are not solely (or even mostly) a product of their own merit or hard work but instead a function of the ways in which broader systems have operated historically to place them in positions of success. Put simply, the curriculum is geared toward white students. Instructional practices are enacted to

white students' ways of seeing, understanding, experiencing, and interacting with the world of learning. Relational practices tend to be guided by white norms and interactions. Assessment practices tend to promote competition and individual success, and do not build on the many strengths of students of color. Collectively, in schools, if young people believe their success and achievements are solely functions of their individual efforts, intellect, or capacity without understanding how educational practices are designed for white students and to maintain white norms of excellence, vis-à-vis whiteness, students of color may start to believe the lie that they are somehow inherently cognitively inferior to white students. White students benefit not only from their merit but also from structural racism and a history of oppressing minoritized communities. Their privileges are stubbornly in place and have been (and will be) passed down infinitely through the generations. Recognizing, naming, and acknowledging meritocracy is a myth does not mean that white people do not and should not work hard. To the contrary, young white people work hard and should be encouraged to put forth their best efforts at succeeding even beyond their current situations. At the same time, white people must also understand that they have a cumulative advantage over others because the playing field is far from level in districts, schools, classrooms, worlds of education, work, and life.

4. Move Beyond Abstractions of Race, Racism, Anti-Black Racism, and Whiteness. *Frontline leaders encourage and facilitate understanding and engagement of structural forms of racial oppression while documenting and showcasing how individuals make systems that (must) influence change.* Because racism and other dimensions of racial oppression are often discussed through the lenses and frames of structures, institutions, and systems, educators may believe they are fighting an impossible battle because of the abstractness of the role of individuals in these systems. White students (and their families) may be well-intentioned, have nonwhite friends, and engage in community service. However, they may not understand that racial injustice and structural discrimination are functions of how the overwhelming number of decision makers are white in, for instance, institutions, positions, and structures that are at the foundation of structural oppression, which may lead to inequitable hiring practices, lending patterns, school and district funding and zoning, as well as curriculum and assessment practices. Thus, if

Instructional practices are enacted to white students' ways of seeing, understanding, experiencing, and interacting with the world of learning.

leaders only read about, focus on, talk about, and build tools to address racism as a structural oppression, white people may fail to see how they are actors, enactors, perpetuators, contributors, and reinforcers of racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism. In this way, interrogating the role of the individual in building systems and structures of racism is essential in Frontline Leadership.

5. *Reject Racial Neutrality. Frontline leaders view neutrality as a disposition of racial injustice, and they are forthcoming, forthright, and deliberate about their commitment to racial justice and racial equity.* Leaders must not hide in the background and just hope their colleagues and young people will engage in the work of racial justice and racial equity through neutrality. Such leadership helps communities understand that their neutrality is a form of complacency, acceptance of racism, perpetuation of anti-Black racism, and support of a racist social order that will continue to marginalize racially minoritized communities. Frontline leaders help others understand how neutrality, apathy, and indifference are positions of injustice that lead to inequitable policies and practices. In short, those in a school community are working either *toward* racial (and other forms of) justice or *against* it. I have heard students of color talk about how disappointed they were when white people (teachers, families, and students) they trusted the most did not show up for them and speak out when they had

I have heard students of color talk about how disappointed they were when white people (teachers, families, and students) they trusted the most did not show up for them and speak out when they had experienced racism. Many of these white people, who had been kind and otherwise supportive of students of color, retreated to spaces of neutrality when issues of racism and racial injustice were presented and they needed to speak up and speak out. These teachers claim that they do not want to be “political” and that they do not want to create tension and separation between themselves and their colleagues, white students, or white parents and families. In order to work against psychologically damaging environments, school leaders co-create spaces where all interrogate the ways in which racial neutrality is a position of injustice.

6. *Learn and Develop Every Day. Frontline leaders recognize and embrace the reality that they are not all-knowing, and so they work in community with others in co-planning and co-designing a racially just community for scalable improvement.* Leaders examine the best of themselves, amplify their assets, try to improve areas of challenge, and co-construct a community of educators, staff, broader community members, policymakers, and young

people in the fight for racially affirming environments. In this way, leaders are increasing their capacity to improve their own practices while they simultaneously plan, design, and support the learning and development of others. School leaders must develop leadership capacity to co-construct, co-design, and co-plan an educational ethos that pulls people and communities together rather than pushing them further apart. This means that multiple perspectives, ideas, and insights can be interrogated in the best interest of those in the learning environment.

7. **Revise Punishment Practices and Decrease Pushout.** *Frontline leaders are resolute in their learning about and advancing the reality that pushout and punishment policies tend to undermine racial justice.* Leaders understand that one of the most pervasive and central issues they must constantly address is the conflation of punishment and disciplinary practices where an overwhelmingly high proportion of office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions are for students of color. School leaders work to build disciplinary practices, think outside of traditional punishment practices that exclude students, and commit to the development of curricular, instructional, relational, and assessment practices that recognize and amplify student inclusion, student assets, student potential, student needs, student identity, and student psychological and mental wellness. Such educators unapologetically disrupt individual and intersecting dimensions of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression in their classrooms, schools, districts, states, and nations and disrupt pushout practices that reify stereotypes that continue to maintain whiteness as normative behavior in classrooms and schools.
8. **Involve and Center Young People.** Perhaps most importantly, *Frontline Leadership involves voices, perspectives, insights, and recommendations of young people in racial justice work.* School leaders and educators conceptualize, plan, and execute racial justice work with young people. Racial justice and equity work—work planned and designed to disrupt racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism—cannot be well and effectively executed and enacted without involving young people. School leaders recognize that in order to cultivate humanizing, transformative, and racially just communities, young people’s insights, paradigms, commitments, and, consequently, practices must be prominently involved in the planning, designing, and enacting of racial justice work.

////////////////////////////////////  
 School leaders must develop leadership capacity to co-construct, co-design, and co-plan an educational ethos that pulls people and communities together rather than pushing them further apart.