Black public school educators in Philadelphia have grown weary, for good reason. Not Paved for Us: Black Educators and Public School Reform in Philadelphia examines the racial and cultural politics of school reform implemented on the backs of Black people in a “disguised southern city,” as Sonia Sanchez called it, engaged in constant clashes over who schools benefit. Racism and racial capitalism have obstructed public school reform in Philadelphia. So have liberal ideals and neoliberal practices, austerity tactics, insider-outsider tensions, and politics at the local, state, and federal levels. From the Common School Movement of the nineteenth century through the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, school reform has been a platform for politicians and a rallying cry of community members. In the twenty-first century, despite political demands and policy shifts, universal public school improvement remains elusive, especially for large urban school districts.

Education reforms have not revolutionized schooling processes, academic outcomes, or career opportunities for the masses. Large urban districts with high levels of poverty and majority Black students still struggle to fully implement reforms with fidelity and in ways that advance Black students academically and wholistically. While the current moment presents challenges for all schools, urban schools are especially vulnerable given their conditions and extreme needs. And in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the “reimagining” schooling narrative became empty and limp, merely reifying the inequities that existed prepandemic. Schools that struggled with asbestos removal since the 1980s and 1990s and even as recently as 2021, schools where safe drinking water was an anomaly and there was rarely soap in the restrooms, let alone hot water and paper towels, were terribly ill-equipped to
provide an in-person learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis. Historically and contemporarily, the weight of school reform has been borne by urban educators striving to meet the extensive needs of their students, families, and communities despite having the fewest material, financial, and people resources. In cities like Boston, Chicago, Milwaukee, Washington, DC, New York, and Philadelphia, the disparate impacts of school reforms have been stratified by race. No segment of educators has experienced the intersection of policy pressures, economic issues, and racialized problems like Black educators. This book focuses on Black educators and school reform in my hometown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

For me, this research is neither scientific nor neutral. I am biased, personally and professionally. At the time of this writing, I am a forty-three-year-old Black woman educator born at Chestnut Hill Hospital, reared in the Penrose section of southwest Philly. My parents both arrived in Philadelphia in the early 1960s: my dad from Person County, North Carolina, and my mom from Bronx, New York, where her Sumter, South Carolina, parents met. My parents were married at Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church on Coulter Street in 1968 and are still together. I graduated from one of the oldest public high schools in the nation, Central High, a special-admission, college preparatory magnet school, and was privileged to attend that school as part of Philadelphia’s stratified schooling system. I arrived there from Pepper Middle School, my neighborhood public school, which was closed with Philly’s mass school closings in 2013.

I was a student in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) from 1989, when I began the seventh grade, until I graduated from high school in 1995, which spans the years of Constance Clayton and David Hornbeck as superintendents. To Black public school children in Philly in the eighties and nineties, Constance Clayton was legendary. She was a household name. We spoke of her like some beloved, taskmaster auntie, especially when it snowed. Our school conversations went something like, “Do you think we gonna have school tomorrow?” And the response was always some version of, “Y’all know Constance Clayton is gonna make us go to school tomorrow!” I met her while I was dissertating, and she cheered for me when I told her I had been a student in the district under her tutelage.

I didn’t begin my education in Philly’s public schools, though. My mother had had enough. She graduated from the now-closed Germantown High
School in 1965, and there, her counselors put her in the commercial track of classes and told her she was not college material. She sent my older sister, Genyne (who is now the other Dr. Royal), to Penrose, our neighborhood public elementary school, for first grade. But when my mom questioned Genyne’s teacher about why her reading skills were only slowly progressing, the principal questioned my mother’s lack of education credentials, suggesting she was not qualified to inquire about how well her child was or was not reading. So my mother switched Genyne to private school. Thus, my early formal education (1984–1989) tracks back to a conservative, white Christian school located in suburban Brookhaven, Pennsylvania. My experiences with racist/racialized practices at that school—like having a white male second-grade classmate tell me to “get to the back of the line where all the niggers belong”—made me a critical race theorist before I knew what that was. I also began to notice the racial differences at the school—that in its academically tracked classes, Black students were overly present in the “slow” class, few were in the advanced class, and not a single Black adult was employed anywhere in the building, not teaching, not answering the phones, not serving food, and not changing light bulbs. These experiences are the foundation on which my views of race and racism have been built and have shaped how I have approached my personal life, education, and career.

Technically, I am in the first generation of my family, on both sides, to graduate from college. On my father’s side, though, my Uncle John’s wife—Aunt Barbara—joined the School District of Philadelphia as a paraprofessional in 1967, the year this volume begins with. Eventually, she earned a bachelor’s degree and became a teacher. Aunt Barbara was proud that I became a teacher when I graduated from North Carolina Central University, a historically Black institution, in 1999. I joined what I soon perceived to be an overwhelmingly white nonprofit alternative teaching organization, Teach For America (TFA). At that time, TFA was small and had only thirteen sites throughout the nation with one training institute in Houston, Texas. I wanted to teach in Philly, but TFA would not make its way there until 2003. I began teaching in a public middle school in Baltimore, a district whose student population at the time was 89 percent Black. I, however, was assigned to teach in a poor white neighborhood, where I taught seventh-grade language arts for three years to a population that was 40 percent white students from
the neighborhood and 60 percent Black students bused in from East North Avenue area. Issues of race resurfaced for me again there: white parents who made racialized comments to me and some who questioned why I allowed students to read about the execution of Amadou Diallo and torture of Abner Louima, both at the hands of police; Black students who noticed opportunity and access differences between them and some of their white peers.

I was a third-year teacher when the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) became the national policy governing public schools. But in Baltimore City, we were already under an accountability plan that required all Baltimore City teachers—and no teachers elsewhere in the state—to submit a “Demonstrated Student Achievement Portfolio” at the end of the school year and that labeled schools as “Reconstitution Eligible” if its scores on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) dropped. I taught at Robert Poole Middle School (now closed), and our school’s scores showed a slight decline in December 2001, so we became a Reconstitution Eligible school for the 2002–03 school year. It didn't matter that MSPAP was ending to make way for the NCLB-compliant Maryland State Assessment. The intervention prescribed for us was that all Robert Poole Middle School educators had to reapply for our jobs. At twenty-four-years-old, with a new masters of arts in teaching degree in hand and some unwarranted arrogance, I declined to reapply. Instead, I joined TFA’s staff in Baltimore as an instructional coach for new TFA teachers. Race was an ever-present factor when I worked for TFA, especially as I navigated relationships with school principals, many of whom were Black, and the TFA teachers I coached, most of whom were white. I noticed then that Black educators tended to share information with me that they hesitated to share with white TFA colleagues. The openness, comfort, and familiarity I realized with them played a significant role as I approached this research years later.

Black educator chronicles are essential to school-reform discourse, but our voices have traditionally been muted. Too often, Black educators themselves have been treated as passive or tangential objects, rather than agentic subjects, of school reform. Not Paved for Us takes the position that race narratives matter in education, particularly the experiential knowledge of Black educators and community members. These narratives are central to understanding the sociopolitical context of urban school systems.3 For this
book, I interviewed Black educators whose work in The School District of Philadelphia spanned at least two superintendents or chief executive officers between 1967 and 2018. To protect their identities, I refer to them in this text with a single-name pseudonym. I center Black perspectives in this book, challenging extant anglonormative discourse and neoliberal school reform. Anglonormative school-reform discourse centers whiteness in all discussion of school progress and school reform. It pedestals wealthy whiteness, all its trappings, benefits, and privileges, and measures everyone and every group that is not wealthy and/or white according the distance from the pedestal and the center. Anglonormative school-reform discourse is rooted in whiteness as the standard-bearer. It discusses the idea of the so-called achievement gap instead of the education debt. It values test scores as valid measures of student and school success, which is why I was moved to the “high performers” seventh-grade class at Pepper Middle School after my mother fought for me to take the citywide tests. But anglonormative school-reform discourse never acknowledges the ways standardized tests are used as weapons against Black people to sift, to sort, to stratify, to decide who is more or less worthy. It views Black people’s high academic achievement as exceptional, not normal. Rooted in a deficit, dangerous view of anyone or any group that is not wealthy and white, anglonormative school-reform discourse seeks to glorify white educators brave enough to work in underresourced communities while blaming veteran Black educators for public schools’ shortcomings. Neoliberal school reform has led to the shrinking of learning standards into what can be measured on high-stakes standardized tests; the decrease of traditional public schools, and increase of charter management organizations. While neoliberal school reformers claim charter schools are public schools, they gloss over the idea that public dollars should fund public schools that are accountable to the public. When public dollars fund charter schools with boards that are not accountable to the people, this creates more levels of bureaucracy and stifles public accountability, merely replicating problems that often plague traditional public schools.

When I try to think back to some of the stories I overheard Aunt Barbara telling about being a Philly teacher, all I can recall is fight in her eyes and fire coming from her mouth. I have wished many times I could sit at her feet since I began this research. Aunt Barbara passed away in 2005, before I ever
began the doctoral studies that led to this inquiry. In *Not Paved for Us*, Black educators lend their intellectual insight as sources of theory building and analysis, not just data. This text locates Black educators as active participants in school reform who provide narratives as well as theoretical considerations and implications for school reform over time. This approach represents an epistemological shift that builds on critical race theory’s use of counternarratives to offer a thicker description of the complications of race and history in general and the intersections of education policy, race, and market-based school reforms, specifically. *Not Paved for Us* deepens and widens the intellectual discourse around school reform; it goes beyond liberalism as a panacea and tacit notions of overt racist acts to name, dissect, and challenge racism in school-reform policies and practices, even when perpetuated by Black leadership. This book also critiques false notions of meritocracy, even when its purveyors are Black educators. White supremacy and structural racism have fueled education policies and practices that impede collective Black progress. Until white supremacy and its various political, social, economic, and gendered entanglements are subdued and dismantled and until liberalism and meritocracy are complicated as mythical and farcical, school reform will continue to change its clothes without ever taking a bath.

In 1937, more than a hundred years after the School District of Philadelphia was established, the Board of Education ended its racist hiring practice by merging its race-based lists of eligible teachers into a single list. Despite this policy reform, the district maintained this racist practice via preferential positions for white educators. Since then, professional obstacles and clashes between the district and Black educators remain, while pressure and stresses have increased for all urban public school districts. Philadelphia’s public schools bear the legacy, hallmarks, and consequences of being at the intersection of school reform and racism. This can be seen in the people who were appointed to leadership positions in the district, the types of reforms these leaders attempted to implement, the ways Black educators fought for themselves and their communities, and the political controversies that plagued public schools during each superintendent’s era. By examining school reform in Philadelphia from 1967 through 2017, *Not Paved for Us* examines how Black educators and community members viewed, created, and coped with school reform while advocating for their students, themselves, and their communities.
In the 1960s and 1970s, racial and ethnic politics controlled access to professional opportunities in Philly. White liberals who attempted to give opportunities to Black people were upended by white supremacist politics masked as equality. In the 1980s the first Black woman school superintendent instituted a type of meritocracy that included race-based equity efforts. But in the 1990s, quests for power determined the public schools’ sociopolitical landscape. In the new millennium, this landscape was proliferated with reforms such as the state takeover of the city’s public schools in 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act and its concomitant money and consequences, as well as corporate systems and structures. These reforms correlated with constant tension, flux, and uncertainty for Black educators, students, families, and communities across the city, especially those who needed strong schools the most. While all underresourced schools struggle with these conditions, primarily poor Black neighborhoods experience school closures and the exodus of resources most severely, demonstrating that America is far from the postracial narrative employed when President Barack Obama was elected. The years of state control did not yield less political wrangling or better fiscal management for the school district or bring about collective academic improvements for Black Philadelphians, and in 2017, Philadelphia’s state-controlled School Reform Commission voted to dissolve itself so the city could regain control of its own schools from the state.

Chapter 1 of this book details how Superintendent Mark Shedd attempted to advocate for Black students and incorporate Black professionals into the School District of Philadelphia. However, he undermined his own efforts by clinging to white liberalism. Chapter 2 explains how Mayor Frank Rizzo, the Black Board of Education president he controlled, and his superintendent appointees oversaw racial turmoil in Philadelphia’s schools. School desegregation by busing was attempted in policy but thwarted by practice. Teacher strikes and lockouts occurred almost every other year, elucidating the racial politics of strikers and alliances of strikebreakers. Chapter 3 examines the Herculean task of Philadelphia’s first Black and first woman superintendent of its public schools, Constance Clayton. This chapter points to the stability she brought to the district, as well as the racism that became evident itself when a slim budget revealed Clayton’s racial allegiance and class priorities.
Chapter 4 recounts how Superintendent David Hornbeck upset white powerbrokers who thought he would advocate for white Philadelphians instead of Black children across the city. Hornbeck fashioned himself a champion of the downtrodden, instituting Philadelphia Freedom Schools and his signature policy, Children Achieving. But his refusal to acquiesce to political gaming led to his ouster and the state takeover of Philadelphia’s public schools by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Chapter 5 shows how, after his alleged success in Chicago, Paul Vallas was the perfect candidate to be Philadelphia’s first public schools’ CEO. With the district newly taken over by the state, as No Child Left Behind urged greater high-stakes testing, market-based reforms became the modus operandi. But more money led to more accounting problems, which ultimately led to Vallas’s abrupt resignation. And Chapter 6 explores the tenures of Superintendents Arlene Ackerman and William Hite, the next two Black educators who led the school district through state control and back into mayoral control and navigated the tensions of being outsider leaders for a majority-Black school system that continues to subtract resources from Black schools and communities. All chapters in this book are named in honor of prophetic, prolific hip-hop albums from the soundtrack of my youth.

While I never worked in a Philly school or for the School District of Philadelphia, I did work around the district when I returned to Philadelphia, first to teach at Lincoln University and then to pursue a doctorate in urban education. I was a doctoral student at Temple University when Arlene Ackerman became superintendent of schools in 2008, and when I met her, she was warm and welcoming and invited me to shadow her at work for a day, which I did on November 18, 2008. As a doctoral student, I worked in the Institute for Schools and Society (which was called the Urban Education Collaborative when I was first hired as a graduate research assistant there), which was involved in school-reform work in Philadelphia in several ways. I was a graduate research assistant on an evaluation team that examined several the relationships between professional development, merit pay, and students’ test scores in several Philadelphia charter schools. While I worked there from the fall of 2008 through the spring semester of 2011, as well as when I taught for the Governor’s School in Urban Education in the summer of 2008, Heidi Ramirez, a Philly School Reform Commission member, led
the Urban Education Collaborative. I also worked for Research for Action as a graduate student summer intern in 2009. As Research for Action’s graduate intern, I spent time meeting with people from various entities concerned about education from across the city, including the Philadelphia Education Fund, the Philadelphia Student Union, the William Penn Foundation, and the Philadelphia School Partnership. I coauthored the report on teacher appraisal for the Education First Compact’s platform, “Effective Teaching for All Children: What It Will Take.” Around the time Bill Hite was becoming Philadelphia’s superintendent of schools in 2012, I facilitated groups at the church that helped to raise me regarding the Boston Consulting Group’s recommendation to close sixty schools. And when Hite was making his community rounds, I was his escort for a day at the church where I was a member. Though I moved out of Philadelphia in 2014 to be the assistant professor of urban education at Loyola University Maryland, I continued my research on schooling in my home city, as well as my advocacy for Black educators. I testified before City Council in November 2016 on the significance of Black educators for the School District of Philadelphia and why the district needed to make significant strides in retaining them, not just recruiting them.

*Not Paved for Us* explores the politics of school reform, but those politics are not limited to American political parties. Republicans have pushed defunding public schools in favor of vouchers and other forms of privatizing schooling for decades. Democrats have been no better. They have controlled Philly since the 1960s, and that control has meant little to no collective progress for anyone who is not white. Throughout the nation, Democrats have fostered and fueled corporate, neoliberal school reform while defunding and disrupting public schooling as a democratic function of American society, at the expense of Black and Brown students, families, and communities. With Democrats like these, who needs Republicans? By *politics*, I mean how people compete for, manage, and respond to scarce resources.9 Like Issa Rae, this book roots for *almost* everybody Black and still critiques Black leaders when their work positions individual achievement at the expense of collective Black progress. To make it plain, the analysis I aim to lend in this text aligns more with Reverend Jeremiah Wright than President Barack Obama. This book arises out of a left-of-the-Democratic Party stance that seeks to complicate questions and ideas regarding for whom school exists and to what extent
state-controlled schooling can be positively transformative for Black people in large cities, especially those relegated to underresourced schools in districts controlled by market-driven, neoliberal ideologies, policies, and practices. This book believes in traditional public schools but is not anticharter schools. Indeed, charter schools have offered Black students, families, and educators opportunities for small amounts of autonomy and sanctity at a time when traditional public schools have been places of violence inflicted by faculty, staff, and curriculum. However, this book questions the effectiveness of charter school chains equipped with marketing strategies that obscure the harm they sometimes cause and the destabilization they often bring with them as they are planted in various cities across the nation with few insights about local context and without mass buy-in. This book examines who benefited from the school reforms implemented over fifty years and what the politics of these reforms cost Black educators and Black communities in Philadelphia. This book seeks to challenge how school reforms advance and/or transform Black educators and Black communities. School reforms happen in the context of racial politics. Cultural and political contexts—who tells the stories, who controls the narratives of reform, and what people believe about those at the helm of reforms and behind them—matter. This book is decidedly not objective. I seek to offer critiques of school reform without demonizing or lionizing the Black educators who dealt with and, at times, implemented these reforms. I hope readers are informed and intrigued by this examination of school reform over time, and I hope readers leave with more questions about what types of schooling—and politics of school governance and leadership—will yield students, educators, communities, and society that are more just, more free, and more committed to collective improvement, not just advancement for a few. I hope this book honors Black Philly educators inside the system and on the margins, ancestors, elders, and contemporaries who fought and fight for public schooling to meet Black children at their highest aspirations, who worked and are working to disrupt and dismantle white supremacy perpetuated throughout school systems and in classrooms, who dream of the kind of schooling that centers Black strength, joy, and possibility, and then who work to create just that.