As I was working on this book and contemplating the best way to help readers understand the importance of focusing on the costs of academic success for Black and Latinx students, the world literally erupted in protest against the unjust murder by police of a Black man, George Floyd, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I found myself writing in the middle of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and anti-Black racial violence. While these protests captured the attention of people across the globe, it was an incident related to these events, not even 20 minutes from me, that truly highlighted the “why” of this book.

In June 2020, hundreds of community members in a community a few towns over from me came together at a virtual school board meeting to condemn racist and victim-blaming comments made by the then-superintendent about George Floyd, who had been killed by police just a few days before. In response to another district employee’s post, the superintendent remarked, in part,

It all starts with being a law abiding [sic] citizen—had [George Floyd] not paid with counterfeit money, had he not resisted, had he not been under the influence—then there would be no contact with officers; that does not excuse the officer; it just eliminates the conflict to begin with!! It starts with being a good citizen!

At the school board meeting, current students and graduates from racially minoritized backgrounds and their families shared story after story of how they were unfairly targeted and dehumanized, not just by the superintendent but by other teachers and school leaders. It became clear that the superintendent’s comments were not isolated but represented
a longstanding culture of institutional racism in the district. The costs of academic success for Black and Latinx students in white-normed schools were on full display in my own community and encapsulated the impetus for this book and so much of what I wanted it to convey. While I will outline more of the foundation and context for racial opportunity cost in the introduction to this book, I start with the story of what happened at the school board meeting for three reasons.

A PERSONAL CONNECTION

First, the stories shared by families at the school board meeting resonated with me on a personal level. I was writing a book amid these momentous times about the challenges Black and Latinx students face that was fueled by my own experiences in school. I grew up in Minnesota, but the demographics of the school I attended were much more similar to this nearby suburban community that had protested the superintendent’s comments than Minneapolis. I had not grown up in the city where a constant police presence heightened the likelihood that my siblings or I could end up with a knee on our neck, as could have happened to my dad, who attended high school in Racine, Wisconsin. My parents moved to suburban Minnesota, where they hoped the “good” schools and “safe” community would protect their children from the anti-Black violence that fueled George Floyd’s murder. Instead, it set us up for a different, more figurative inability to breathe. Listening to these families at the school board meeting share their stories about the mistreatment they experienced, I knew we shared the certain knowledge that our pain was just as genuine as what my parents feared we might experience in the city. It was just that no one talked about it and so too many suffered in silence, thinking they were the only one experiencing the profound isolation and targeted attacks. This book represents an opportunity to change that by putting a spotlight on these stories, highlighting just how common these experiences are for students from racially minoritized backgrounds in white-normed school settings.

I grew up in a pretty typical first ring suburban community in Minnesota. From the outside, the schools I attended were fairly racially diverse. The problem was that regardless of how racially diverse the school may have been, I was almost always the only Black student in my advanced placement and honors courses. And, because most of my
schedule consisted of advanced classes, even my non-advanced classes, like gym, tended to include the same (mostly white) students from my other advanced classes. At the time, of course, I did not understand master schedules and the ways these stratifications can happen quite easily. Being the “only one” had a profound affect not only on me, but also on my white classmates. We never had teachers from racially minoritized backgrounds. The idea that Black and Latinx students did not take advanced classes was normalized to us—I felt like I was the outlier, the exception in my classes, not my Black peers in general and alternative education courses. I know that many of my white classmates saw it that way, too. When we applied to college and I got into my dream school, a friend commented that I had only gotten in because of affirmative action. On some subconscious level, I believed her, and I carried that feeling with me to the opening convocation of my first year of college. I was sitting in another room full of white students. In that moment, I was struck with the absolute certainty that a mistake had been made in the admissions office. Every day, I wrestled with feelings of stress and anxiety that continued to plague me throughout the year. On top of trying to deal with those feelings, I was ashamed for feeling that way and so I did not talk to anyone about it. After the school year ended, I withdrew from school, having earned a B average and the makings of an ulcer.

I think for many racially minoritized students with similar backgrounds, the story ends there. I know many Black and Latinx students who were absolutely capable of doing well in advanced courses and succeeding in college but did not—ending up either leaving college early, like me, or not enrolling in the high school courses that would prepare them for success in college. I know now that this is a common narrative. Luckily for me, my story did not end there. I ended up transferring to my local state university. There, I participated in a research program during the summer of my junior year that focused on providing opportunities for racially minoritized students to conduct research. My mentor, Dr. Martha Zurita, put me through her own rigorous research boot camp and rebuilt my confidence about my academic skills. She pushed me hard but also provided kind encouragement. She was my first example of the warm demander that I learned about from Vanessa Siddle Walker's work, adding color and texture to the sketched outline of the teacher I envisioned myself becoming.¹ She saw right through my façade of not wanting to go
to graduate school. She saw my resistance for the fear and doubt it was masking. She showed me that the challenges I had encountered in school reflected larger institutional problems, teaching me that I could devote my time in graduate school to better understanding those problems and then conduct research to address them.

My time in graduate school at the University of Illinois provided exactly that education and so much more. Led by Dr. James Anderson, a preeminent historian of Black education, the program at that time was probably 80 percent Black and Latinx students and faculty. I had never even dreamed something like that was possible. I soaked up every conversation I heard, every nugget of wisdom shared about the history of Black education and all of the ways in which the legacy of institutionalized racism is present in our schools today. The anxiety I had felt for so many years about not feeling good enough or smart enough evaporated and was replaced with a simmering anger. I was angry that I had never been exposed to this information, that I had never had a teacher who looked like me, and that I had been left to feel responsible when the system let me down. I was also furious on behalf of the many Black and Latinx classmates I had had who would never have this experience—many had been failed by the system before they even had an inkling of what was happening to them. The anger fueled my commitment to become a professor to teach a new generation of educators and to also be that Black teacher I wish I had had.

Listening to the nearly seven hours of community stories at the virtual board meeting that summer catapulted me back to my own educational journey and offered an opportunity to reflect. It also reminded me that so many Black and Latinx students and families remain unaware that the pain they experienced in school is something they share with so many others. Thus, an important reason for this book is to help individuals from racially minoritized backgrounds understand—in a way that I wish I had known much earlier in my own life—that the hurt and trauma they carry with them is not unique and to put a name to it: racial opportunity cost.

LISTENING TO SILENCED STORIES

The pain that I shared with those community members brought up a second reason I felt it was important to start the book with this story: these stories deserve to be told. We deserve to understand the ways in which
schools can damage racially minoritized students. I may have been reluctant to make the comparison between the murder of George Floyd and my own experiences in school had I not listened to the hours of testimony offered by these families and felt the pain in their stories. Part of my reluctance stems from my being a student of history, of knowing the explicit and brutal violence my ancestors endured in slavery and that my dad experienced growing up on a sharecropping farm in Mississippi before moving to Wisconsin—an experience about which he would never speak.

However, it is also precisely because I am a student of history that I understand that the same anti-Black racism that fueled slavery and the continuing violence against Black people also drives our mistreatment in schools. We are taught that racism is “a southern thing” in which the North did not participate. When we learn about this period of history at all, at best we are taught that people in the North were neutral observers in the atrocities. But as written about by journalists like Isabel Wilkerson and as depicted on shows like HBO’s adapted series *Lovecraft Country*, Black people in the North did not escape racism. Further, while the racism rampant in northern schools may not always have been as explicit, it was still just as pernicious. In every way that matters, Black and Latinx people have been systematically excluded from the educational opportunities in this country that were purportedly intended for everyone. Throughout the Jim Crow period of “separate but equal” that mandated racially segregated schools, Black children attended schools that did not receive the same resources afforded to white schools. However, through the powerful work of Black scholars like Vanessa Siddle Walker and James Anderson, we have learned that while these schools may not have been given the material resources to which they were entitled, they were filled with love and stood as models of academic excellence.

Further, once the courts had finally ruled that *de jure* racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional (or, when in other areas where *de facto* segregation was more common, financial circumstances necessitated the inclusion of racially minoritized students), attending the same schools with white students did not lead to equal education. Instead, Black students were tracked into lower-level classes, were labeled with racist and ableist slurs, received inappropriate disciplinary consequences, and were generally subjected to what Bettina Love calls *spirit murder*. What toll do those experiences take on a child? What is the impact of trying to survive
in a system that has only ever held you in what W. E. B. Du Bois characterized as “amused contempt and pity”? Though they did not use the term *racial opportunity cost*, the students and families who spoke at the school board meeting were naming it, outlining the acute and long-lasting impact that their time in the district had wrought. We must be ready to listen.

**RECOGNIZING OUR RESPONSIBILITY**

Finally, I start with this story of the community outpouring of grief and pain over their treatment in a predominantly white district because, as a professor in an educational leadership program who works with educators every day, I see it as our responsibility in leadership preparation programs to do things differently. I have now been teaching some version of a Leadership for Social Justice course for nearly 20 years. I have taught undergraduate students, some who aspired to become teachers, most who did not. I have taught at elite private colleges and large public universities. However, I have mainly taught at the graduate level, to students who themselves have often been working as school leaders for decades. In that time, I have found that the students who often have the least robust understanding not just of issues of race, but of the historical and institutional frameworks that influence our contemporary educational system, are the ones in leadership positions in our schools and districts. I do not say this to be critical of those leaders. In fact, if anything, it is an indictment of the training most receive in their teacher and leadership preparation programs. We have not come close to adequately helping our students understand the foundation from which many of these contemporary issues originate. If the people who are leading the district or the school are unaware of these issues, how can they be expected to ensure that the students in their care learn about them or, more importantly, to lead their schools and districts to understand, identify, and change the mechanisms to move toward more just school environments?

I want to be clear that I am not singling out this local community to make any sort of point about that district in particular. Rather, I share this story because that district is more the norm than we realize, the pain these community members shared more common than we know. One only needs to do an Internet search with keywords “racist comments about George Floyd” with “teacher,” “principal,” or “superintendent” to see that
hundreds of similar incidents occurred in the wake of the tragedy. Grand Ledge stands out because in addition to happening in my local area, school leaders there afforded an opportunity for these racially minoritized community members' stories to be heard.

It is also true that the superintendent in question received a doctorate from Michigan State University in the same educational leadership program in which I teach, but before I was on the faculty. Indeed, many of the district's teachers and administrators have earned degrees from our College of Education. Given that context, what then is our responsibility for the harm that was perpetuated by the superintendent's comments? How should we have better educated these future educators about the legacy of race and racism in our schools? Of course, it is imperative that we better understand racially minoritized students' experiences in these spaces. We also have a responsibility to help educators understand their role in cultivating environments that affirm racially minoritized students.

I have to believe that it is possible to cultivate school spaces that are more supportive of and humanizing to racially minoritized students not only because it is at the core of the research that I do, but because I am now a mother of a Black son who is attending school in a predominantly white district, very much like the one that I attended in Minnesota. I have to believe—as a scholar, teacher, and mom—that he can emerge from this experience not just having survived, but thrived. I have to believe that achieving success will not have to be as costly for him and his classmates as it was for me and so many other Black and Latinx students.