

## **“I Don’t Really Feel Prepared for This Now That We’re Talking about it”: What is Educating for College and Career Readiness in an Urban District?**



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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand how urban high schools prepare their students of color (SoC) for “college and career readiness” through asking the following: *What does educating for “college and career readiness” look like? How are students being educated for “college and career readiness”, and How do students learn about and interpret “college and career readiness?”* With these central questions and responses from two Greenwood City School District (GCSD)\* principals and nine GCSD students, we learn the focus within the “college and career readiness” paradigm is largely dedicated to student’s college preparation and occupational exposure, but not much in the way of introducing challenging aspects of tomorrow’s occupational landscape including neoliberalism, globalization, automation, and workplace discrimination. This study concludes with recommendations that education practitioners critically deconstruct the language used to imply sufficiency of the college degree in yielding reliable, secure employment for students of color, as well as encourage more transparency with students pertaining to what likely lies ahead in the workplace of tomorrow.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

At present, there appears to be a disconnect from what students of color learn pertaining to the college degree and what it yields, from the realities most will likely experience as entrants into the workforce. The purpose of this study is to better understand how urban high schools prepare their students for college and career readiness through asking the following questions: *What does educating for “college and career readiness” look like?, How do administrators whose charge it is to ensure students are being educated for “college and career” readiness understand “college and career” readiness? and, How do students learn about and interpret “college and career readiness?”* With these guiding questions and responses from study participants, the hope is that we can begin to critically deconstruct the language used to imply sufficiency of the college degree for students of color, as well as prompt education practitioners to be more transparent with students with information about what likely lies ahead in the workplace of tomorrow...

There are seminal moments in the lives of educator-researchers like anyone else, that force us into moments of introspection. Some may be reflections of our own experience, or those we’ve witnessed in the lives of others. Three moments situate the motivation initiating this research topic. The first of which was my nearing college graduation which many assume to be a time for celebration. However, it was a time filled with frequent sleepless nights and elevated anxiety as I became increasingly aware that I had no career prospects upon completing college. I thought I did all the things Black students are told to do by family and society if we wanted to be “successful” as adults. I went to an “elite” private school (on scholarship) for high school; presumably, the right school. I graduated from college with a GPA above 3.0 and participated in extracurricular activities like playing intercollegiate sports, volunteering in local service organizations like the NAACP and Habitat for Humanities, and yet the occupational opportunities I believed would be there based on what I understood from public messaging and family, were not. Upon further reflection, I recognized that I was not an anomaly as this phenomenon seemed to be more common even within my immediate circle than I noticed before. A close family member, a Black woman, attended public schools in a suburban school district, again, presumably the “right schools”, graduated from a well-regarded university in Philadelphia with a degree in finance, and struggled to find meaningful employment for over a decade after her graduation.

There were more examples.

A younger Black guy I knew from high school resided in a neighboring city known for its violence and concentrated poverty. With a scholarship similar to the one I received, he graduated from the same “elite” private high school one year after me, then graduated with a bachelor's degree in science from a small Catholic liberal-arts college in Baltimore majoring in computer technology. His first job out of college was working for his hometown school district in the Information Technology (IT) department,

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and after a few years, experienced his entire department being abolished as the District, under state takeover, sought to privatize IT services. The company the District contracted with offered him his job back, albeit with less pay and less comparative benefits but also with more job insecurity. Conversely, his path from our “elite” private high school to the small Catholic liberal arts college is the same academic path a classmate of mine took; only her family was rich, and she was white. Not surprisingly, upon graduation, she had no problem securing employment in her family’s booming healthcare business and earning a handsome salary along with it. To reiterate: the younger Black man that I knew not only attended the “right” schools, but also graduated college with a STEM degree - still, he struggled in securing reliable employment. On the other hand, a white wealthy classmate took the same educational path, and was thriving financially and occupationally while he struggled. As I continued to reflect, I remembered two student athletes from my days teaching in city high schools. One graduated from a well-regarded university in central New Jersey with a degree in economics. Upon graduating, his first foray into the labor market was to sell Herbalife nutrition supplements. Another attended a small Catholic university in New York, and graduated with a degree in finance. Her first job out of college was working as a bank-teller, and upon leaving that job, began working in social services - neither job she obtained required a college degree. Neither job offered a salary. Neither job offered benefits. Neither job offered job security. The examples were all around me that at least some part of the messaging that a college degree results in a “good job” is incomplete. *If gaining more formal education was the answer, the “great equalizer”, what explained the divergent occupational and economic realities between the wealthy white classmate I had, and the young Black man that I know? What explained the difficulty my sister, like the recent Black college graduates that came through our school district, and many other educated Black college graduates experienced in finding adequate employment?*

As previously discussed in *Unpacking the Shortcomings of “College and Career Readiness” as an Educative Approach in Urban Schools in Preparation for Tomorrow’s Economy* (Benson & Owens, 2022) [1], Leah Z. Owens and I explored the contradictory nature of educating masses of students for “college and career readiness” in a neoliberal economy whose primary function is profit maximization by accessing cheap labor through globalization, automation, computerization and increased usage of artificial intelligence. These combined and complementary approaches serve to reduce domestic labor costs and ultimately reduce human participation in the domestic workforce, all while the American citizenry becomes more formally educated. Additionally, we attempted to convey that students of color who progress through schools that purport to educate students for “college and career readiness”, in addition to having to contend with all the burdens future jobseekers will face, students of color who (are also more formally educated than ever), will additionally have to navigate persistent occupational discrimination in hiring, and at work. We concluded our article arguing that though many of today’s high schools claim to yield “college and career” ready students, failure to present students with the realities of tomorrow’s occupational landscape leaves them unprepared for what likely awaits, and possibly leaves students of color in a heightened position of vulnerability if the topic of racial and ethnic discrimination in employment is left unexplored. Here, I attempt to pick up where Owens and I left off by inquiring how urban schools educate their primarily Black and Latino student body for “college and career readiness”.

First, I will provide a brief review of “college and career readiness” within a neoliberal economy, before shifting focus to the pervasive nature of occupational discrimination endured by Black job seekers, specifically formally educated Black jobseekers. From there, I’ll present the Greenwood City School District\* (GCSD) as the central unit of analysis for this qualitative study and standpoint theory as its theoretical grounding. Toward the article’s conclusion, I will present findings, and conclude with a discussion of the research’s shortcomings and suggestions for possible further inquiry on this topic.

### **College and Career Readiness in a Neoliberal Economy**

Voluminous research has been dedicated to defining, celebrating, and critiquing neoliberalism by economists and sociologists far more knowledgeable about its details than I can cover in this brief explainer of neoliberalism. Quickly, neoliberalism is an approach by governments, powerful corporations, and the wealthy working in coordination to: shrink the state or severely weaken government power, concentrate private wealth and corporate power, allow markets to operate with minimal government intervention, privatize public services, and placing primacy of individuals over the collective. In response to progressive gains achieved in the civil rights and environment rights movements of the 1960s, Louis Powell’s penned “Attack on the American Free Enterprise System” (1971) [2] to the United States Chamber of Commerce imploring business, among other things, to take a more active role in influencing laws in corporation’s favor and promoting citizen’s valorization of capitalism (Mayer, 2016). With Powell’s subsequent appointment to the Supreme Court in 1976, business interests have been using the apparatus of government to bend politics and policy in business’ favor for nearly five decades (Gertsle, 2022) [3]. As neoliberalism gained primacy as America’s prevailing governance and economic structure, it was Reagan during the 1980s who cemented neoliberalism as the dominant ideology in America for decades after.

In 1983, the Reagan administration issued *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) [4], a report on the state of American public education, with recommendations to apply a business-friendly approach by standardizing curriculum and initiating more standardized testing. The report concluded that America was losing out economically to foreign nations because our public education systems were woefully inadequate which, in their conclusion, constituted a national security risk. Further, at the time of ANAR’s publishing, the US was coming out of a time of high unemployment, high inflation, gasoline rationing, shrinking value of the dollar, less jobs paying

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a livable wage, widespread offshoring, domestic urban deindustrialization and automation, reduced corporate regulations and oversight, and slashed taxation of corporations and the wealthy. These collective actions resulted in exploding wealth and wage inequality, deepened job losses across sectors, and reduced union affiliation - all emblematic of neoliberalism, and yet through ANAR, American schools bore the blame for the nation’s economic condition and growing career precarity. In that NAR tied matters of national security and a precarious economy, the general public was overwhelmingly receptive of its message. This report was unique in its explicit linking of public schooling and America’s macroeconomic condition.

Since ANAR’s publishing, the landscape of American public education has been steadily shaped by corporate influence situated within a neoliberal economy. The expectations of private business are given primacy over the public responsibility of educating the collective for personal development and contribution within a democratic society. Subsequent bipartisan federal education policies like *No Child Left Behind* (2001) [5] and *Race to the Top* (2009) [6] placed great emphasis on students, regardless of race and income background, becoming “career and college ready” and employing mandatory implementation of standardized testing to prove students’ preparedness and schools’ effectiveness in doing so.

Formed in 1988, the original Commission on Skills of the American Workforce, was a consultancy charged with “formulating an agenda for American education based on an analysis of the implications of changes within the international economy and seek, wherever possible, to accomplish that agenda through policy change and development of the resources for educators who would need to carry it out.” In 2010, the New Commission on Skills of the American Workforce, following decades of globalization and offshoring, like ANAR two decades prior, lamented “the decline of education in America” warning that it would precipitate a prolonged loss of ground to international countries vying for similar jobs and industries and a correlating loss of America’s standard of living. The Commission called for:

- greater efficiency of education resources and funding
- recruit students from the upper academic echelons to college who specifically intend to become teachers
- increased standardization in curriculum and course offerings relating to the current global economy and restricting course options
- create more high performing schools in every district
- increase the availability of early childhood education
- give greater support to America’s most needy students
- re-engage adults educationally and in skills development for the new economy (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2010)

The modern call for “college and career readiness” is posited as a means to boost academic proficiency, with college attainment being the means by which students gain access to occupational opportunities. “The thrust of these reports suggests that the education sector, especially public-funded education, and the job candidates themselves should be responsible for producing skills that employers want (Cappelli, 2015, p. 252)” [7]. Calls for increased education since the 1980s ignores the reality that capitalism demands a robust underclass, regardless of one’s educational attainment, and particularly for the historically marginalized, the increase in education has not coincided with substantive advancement occupationally or in wealth. Additionally, the contention that earning a bachelor’s degree as the benchmark separating those with economic and occupational opportunities, and those without, reinforces the concept of a meritocratic America where we are all equally positioned to achieve future success based on our work ethic.

In 2012, the Educational Policy Improvement Center, defined a college and career ready student as someone who can “qualify for and succeed in entry level, credit bearing college courses leading to a bachelor’s degree or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework”. EPIC’s components of a college and career readiness curriculum included:

- building cognitive strategies including hypothesizing, analyzing, synthesizing, and problem solving;
- building students’ existing skills and techniques through goal setting, self-awareness, and motivation;
- strengthening content knowledge by focusing on core subjects and their applications within students’ desired career trajectory;
- growing transition knowledge and skills which enables students to navigate life between high school and college or their chosen career path

The Career Readiness Partner Council (CRPC), consisting of business leaders, education groups, issued *Building Blocks for Change: What it Means to be Career Ready* (2012) [8] calling for more alignment between education systems and the business community so that students can be better prepared for careers. CRPC’s report concluded that both improved communication and greater partnership between policymakers, high school staff, industry leaders, post-secondary institutions, parents, and work to increase students’ academic and technical knowledge as well as bolster employability knowledge and workplace skills and attitudes (Career Readiness Partner Council, 2012) [9].

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To the contrary, Cappelli writes, “Very little evidence is consistent with the complaints about a skills shortage, and a wide range of evidence suggests the complaints are not warranted. Indeed, a reasonable conclusion is that overeducation remains the persistent and even growing condition of the US labor force with respect to skills (Cappelli, 2015, p. 251) [10]. Additionally, Sahlberg suggests the universal “college and career readiness” in response to globalization is not only potentially harmful to America’s students. but also is antithetical to the realities of tomorrow’s economy (Sahlberg, 2011) [11]. He argues American public education, dominated by assessments, curriculum standardization, increased implementation of technology-based curriculum and personalized learning, runs counter to the emerging realities in tomorrow’s workplaces as they become more collaborative and reliant on communal problem solving. Perhaps more concerning is the critique that the “college and career readiness” approach ignores the operational reality of global capitalism that seeks to maximize profits through reducing production and labor costs. As Backer shared, “about 3.5 M students will graduate from high school during the 2016–2017 school year” with most attending at least some college after and during that same year; “1.01 M associate’s degrees, 1.9 M bachelor’s, 800,000 master’s, and 181,000 doctoral degrees will be awarded”, but continues, “having a degree will do nothing to protect against the sometimes violent and unpredictable patterns of market activity in a capitalist economy” (Backer, 2016, p. 3) [12].

According to *EducationData*, in 2020, 2.038M American college students graduated with a bachelor’s degree on top of the 1.98M and 1.92M who earned the same degree in 2018 and 2016, respectively. The 64.7% rise in earned bachelor’s degrees since 2000 and 15% rise in graduation rates in public institutions since 2010, indicates American students are adding to their human capital through degree accumulation (Hanson, 2022) [13]. Though a common assumption to explain the difficulty college graduates have in landing post-graduate employment commensurate with their education is that students majored in “soft sciences” that are not marketable, the most common major among college graduates since 1980 has been business, followed by healthcare-related majors, and STEM majors making up 18.3% of bachelor’s degrees conferred in 2020 (Hanson, 2022). With the increase in domestic automation, computerization, and growth of artificial intelligence, coupled with offshoring due to international trade agreements like NAFTA (1994), CAFTA (2004) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (2016) (Oldenski, 2012) [14], the sustained erosion of stable, good-paying domestic jobs has continued for nearly fifty years.

Corporate efforts to access cheaper labor is not confined to the blue collar sector but also is apparent in the white collar technology sector as well. Lakes points out that a tech worker in Silicon Valley earned on average \$78,000 in 2013, whereas someone in India is paid \$8000 to do similar (Lakes, 2008) [15]. Since 2013, IBM has employed more workers in India than the United States as the average pay for a worker in India is about \$17,000 compared to \$100,000 for a similarly positioned American worker. Similarly, software developers in San Francisco and Seattle are paid on average \$109,167 dollars per year, while a software developer in India is paid roughly a third of that rate at \$38,229 (Ahmed, 2020) [16]. The trend of IBM offshoring tech jobs out of America and into lower cost, less regulated nations like Mexico, the Philippines and China, like many large corporations, serves to maximize corporate profits (Goel, 2017) [17]. High-skilled workers in information technology are increasingly subject to offshoring (Mithas & Lucas, 2010) [18] with labor cost cited as the cause behind the relocation of nearly three million white-collar jobs since 2002 on top of the 5.7M jobs lost in manufacturing since 1998 - most of those jobs lost to developing nations (Scott et al., 2022) [19]. As the bulk of good-paying, white-collar jobs and their correlating benefits become less available, the occupational outlook in America is increasingly relying on the creation of low-paid service sector work for which no college degree is required. Industries like food service, health care, and maintenance are the preeminent growth industries for the next generation of American workers as such jobs are not subject to a similar threat of outsourcing (Oldenski, 2012) [20].

This is just a snapshot of the occupational future in America, again, even as more Americans accumulate more formal education and postsecondary credentials. The call for schools to educate students for “college and career readiness” for tomorrow’s economy, while ignoring the competing reality of neoliberal economics placing primacy of maximizing corporate profits through accessing cheap labor (human or computerized), while Americans garner more formal education seems, at least, problematic if not potentially catastrophic. In the next section, I will explore the discriminatory workplace realities for Black jobseekers and workers, including those who earn college degrees.

### **Racial Discrimination in Hiring**

Over the last twenty-five years, unemployment for blacks has remained roughly double that of whites (Levine, 2012) [21]. According to a 2019 report by the Economic Policy Institute, as of late 2018, black unemployment sat at 6.5%, and Latino unemployment at 4.5%, with white unemployment half that of blacks at 3.1% (Williams & Wilson, 2019) [22]. In the Fall of 2021, black men had jobless rates of 7.3% compared to 3.4% of white men (Aranti, 2021) [23]. Irrespective of education, even as America experiences moments of economic prosperity or recession, black unemployment remains consistently double that of white unemployment, and has so since 1971 (Wilson & Darity, 2022) [24]. Structural changes within the American economy during the post-industrial period transitioned urban job markets from industry-based to service-based, leading to a correlating concentration of male joblessness within urban areas. The shift from blue-collar to white-collar work coincided with the precipitous decline of unionized urban manufacturing work that required little formal education, to the modern occupational landscape where more jobs within city centers are service sector jobs that require post-secondary education. This shift in domestic work negatively impacted



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men of all racial backgrounds, but urban unemployment disproportionately impacted urban black men (D’Amico & Maxwell, 1995) [25]. As of 2010, nearly 50% of all black men of working age in urban areas were unemployed and the rolls of working black men have persistently lagged behind white men since 1980 (Levine, 2012; Kromer, 2009) [26].

Popular arguments sought to explain chronic male unemployment within the black community. The *skills-mismatch* theory asserted that the erosion of blue-collar manufacturing jobs, where higher levels of formal education was not a requirement for employment, black men who typically did not receive as many years of formal education as their white counterparts, were at a competitive disadvantage when competing for service sector jobs (Skinner, 2001) [27]. Another argument put forth regarding black male joblessness within cities is that once readily available factory jobs in urban areas relocated to residential suburbs, rural states and overseas resulting in geographic inaccessibility to potential employment (Bosworth et al., 1997) [28]. The *spatial mismatch* theory argued that the suburbanization of the manufacturing sector along with residential segregation in suburban areas, physically kept urban minorities from industry jobs, thus benefiting their white counterparts in employment availability and occupational opportunity. Skinner (1995) [29] suggests that central city Black men experience informational and transportation disadvantages preventing access to entry-level manufacturing and service sector work that has relocated to the suburbs. Brecher (1977) [30] however, argued against such theories as early as the late 1970s concluding the disparity in skills training or formal education does not account for the high levels of black male unemployment, but discrimination is the dominant factor in persistent black male joblessness.

Subsequent research suggests the lack of access through social networks is an additional barrier contributing to unemployment and underemployment among Black jobseekers. Positing that employment or access is itself a privilege, and such a privilege is often kept in white circles among other white people, with black people not being part of those networks, it follows that employment opportunities will be missed (DiTomasso, 2013) [31]. Where simply referencing a job to an acquaintance or a neighbor, ensuring submitted resumes are viewed by decision makers, or “putting in a good word” for a family member, most races have little substantive interracial interactions with one another which negatively impacts potential employment opportunities for non-whites specifically. As DiTomasso reported an estimated 70% of the jobs study participants acquired over their lifetimes came with the help of family and friends, Pedulla & Pager (2019) [32] found that roughly half of acquired jobs are discovered through informal mechanisms including friends, family, neighbors. And while black jobseekers, like other ethnicities do consult their social networks for job prospects, a positive return is comparatively less likely in that black workers are overrepresented in lower wage, entry level positions, and are often not staffed in positions that can help black job seekers in successful securing a job opportunity (Pedulla & Pager, 2019; Wingfield, 2014) [33, 34].

Additionally, black jobseekers experience “high employment disadvantage” specifically because of race compared to other racial demographics with black men experiencing the highest frequency of direct racial discrimination in the job market (Quillian et al., 2017) [35]. Black employees are perceived as “less productive”, “lazy”, “dishonest”, and “belligerent”, especially if their job application indicates they reside in a poor neighborhood (Pager et al., 2019) [36]. One study indicated that once Black men removed references to their race on their resume, they were twice as likely to be interviewed (Arantani, 2021)[37]. Indeed, Quillian, et al. (2017) [38] found that even when accounting for education, gender, and study methodologies, white jobseekers get 36% more callbacks than black applicants, and 25% more callbacks than Latino job seekers, indicating very little progress has been made in leveling the playing field in occupational attainment. Across industries and occupations, applicants with “white names” receive 50% more callbacks for interviews than names that sound black (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004) [39]. Such entrenched discrimination is consequential: fewer callbacks mean fewer job opportunities, fewer job offers, fewer job options, and less leverage in negotiations. Additionally, black employees, both men, and women, typically are the “last to be hired” and “first to be fired” from their jobs in economic downturns, further contributing to lingering rates of comparative black unemployment (Nelson & Tyrell, 2016) [40].

Where common explanations for the persistent disparity in employment rates between blacks and whites are a presumed comparative lack of formal education or higher likelihood of possessing a criminal record, a 2005 Princeton study showed that black men in New York City with a high school diploma and no criminal record, were less likely to receive a second phone call from a prospective employer than a white man who had just left prison (Pager et al., 2009) [41]. Similarly, Alexander et al. (2004) found that in western Baltimore, “at age 28, 54% of white men with a criminal record were employed full time making an average of \$20 an hour; among black men with similar records, just 33% were employed by 28, making just over \$10 an hour, or half that of their white peers”. Black and Latino women are employed at higher rates than black and Latino men, yet are also more likely to work for wages at or below minimum wage (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2022) [42]. White women earn about 82 cents for every dollar a white man makes, black men earn an average of 73 cents for every dollar a white man earns; black women earn 67 cents, and Latino men and women 69 cents and 58 cents, respectively. In hourly wages, pay disparities still exist, with white men earning \$21 per hour, as black men earn \$15, and Latino men earn \$14 per hour (Patten, 2016) [43]. Overall, in 2019 Black workers earned nearly 25% less hourly than white hourly workers, a larger disparity than existed in the late 1970s when the pay disparity was 16.4% less (Wilson and Darity, 2022).

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Contrary to the meritocratic platitude of education being the “great equalizer”, educational attainment for Black job seekers is an insufficient antidote against employment discrimination. In 2018, the Economic Policy Institute found that the legacy of employment discrimination persists at roughly the same levels as 1968 despite nearly “90 percent of younger African Americans (ages 25 to 29) graduating from high school, compared with just over half in 1968.” The Education Data Initiative (2022) [44] reported that Black college attendance increased 33% from 1976 to 2022, while white college enrollment fell by 24% over the same period. Additionally, Black college attendance and graduation rates were at all-time highs (Jones et al, 2018) [45] prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. “College graduation rates for African Americans increased 500% with 26% of African Americans over 25 possessing a college degree, where in 1972, only 5.1% possessed a college degree” (Wilson & Darity, 2022, p. 6) [46]. Paradoxically, according to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2016, experiences of workplace discrimination based on race *worsen* and are more frequent the more formally educated black people become (Anderson, 2019) [47]. Black women, the most educated subgroup in America, have increased rates of both college enrollment and graduation over the last three decades, yet black women make up only “8% of private sector jobs and 1.5% of private sector leadership positions” (Anderson, 2019, p. 1) [48].

The surge in both black men’s and women’s attendance in post-secondary institutions is not without consequence. Due to the lack of generational wealth to help fund college and a comparative lack of parental college exposure, thus navigational knowledge of the financial aid process from family members, black students finish college with the most debt, \$53,000 on average as nearly 87% of black students use loans to pay for college (Hale, 2023) [49]. The higher amount of student debt, coupled with pay disparities based on race and gender, leaves black graduates in a uniquely disadvantaged position economically following their college education. Additionally, black students who pursue college degrees not only accumulate more debt by their 30s, but also are more likely to have far less net worth and lower homeownership rates than white Americans who only possess a high school diploma (Ensign & Shifflett, 2022) [50]. For black students who graduate with a bachelor’s degree, such educational attainment neither mitigates wealth gaps nor provides the similar economic stability when compared to their white counterparts (Scott-Clayton & Li, 2018) [51]. A report conducted by the Insight Center for Community and Economic Development, conveys that households where the primary breadwinner is white and not college educated, still have more wealth than households where the primary earner is black with a bachelor’s degree (Hamilton et al, 2015) [52].

Perhaps most concerning of all, is despite black students increasingly taking steps to add to their personal human capital reasoning that it will position them to secure gainful employment and mitigate the effects of persistent racial discrimination, black college graduates, like all black jobseekers, are still twice as likely to be unemployed a year after graduation as their white counterparts (Morrison, 2020) [53]. Moreover, across every level of educational attainment, black jobseekers have a higher rate of unemployment with black degree holders having unemployment rates similar to whites who possess only a high school diploma (Wilson, 2015; Williams & Wilson, 2019) [54,55]. Finally, black college graduates who are fortunate enough to secure employment are significantly more likely to be “overeducated”; working in hourly part-time employment, or be underemployed, working in a position where a degree was not required to begin with (Jones & Schmitt, 2014) [56].

The sustained focus on “college and career readiness” isolated as a supply-side issue (the available pool of domestic jobseekers) versus a demand issue (the desire to hire eligible domestic employees) is generally risky as it ignores corporations’ profit maximization approaches including limiting labor costs by accessing cheap labor. For America’s current students of color who will be jobseekers tomorrow however, the aforementioned does not represent the only hurdle they will confront occupationally, as they will also contend with the lingering legacy of discrimination in employment. The contemporary nationwide approach of educating for “college and career readiness” does not account for the specific realities today’s students of color will face upon attempting to enter the work world. For the purpose of this study, I want to better understand how two urban schools that claim to educate for “college and career readiness” and attended exclusively by students of color, explores information pertaining to the neoliberal occupational landscape of the future and racial discrimination in work - two issue students attending these school will likely face in their near future.

### **The Greenwood (NJ) Context\***

Greenwood is a northeastern, post industrial city with a population of nearly 72,400, 30% of whom are under 18. Greenwood is nearly entirely composed of black and Latino residents, 42.9% to 52.8% respectively. (US Census, 2021) [57]. It is one of the most impoverished cities in an otherwise affluent northeastern state; and one of the poorest cities in America with a poverty rate of nearly 40% and median income of \$21,191.

#### *Greenwood City School District\**

The Greenwood City School District (GCSD) is a public school district that serves students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Due to the general low economic status of the city, the State supports over 91% of GCSD’s budget due to decades of poverty rendering the city unable to financially support its public schools. All GCSD students qualify for free breakfast and lunch.

GCSD is under state takeover resulting from 23 of 26 of its schools being deemed “failing” due to low graduation rates, poor performance on state assessments, and poor scores in the state evaluation which assesses District administrative and fiscal operations. In 2015, nearly 15,00 total students were enrolled in GCSD. Today, with about 4,500 students attending nine city charter

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schools, 5,500 attending thirteen state-imposed corporate operated charter schools, only 6,300 students attend GCSD’s seventeen schools. In 2023, with GCSD enrollment lower than it has ever been due to continuous citywide population decline amounting to nearly 3,000 residents over the past eight years, GCSD has had to contend with political machinations and budget crunches (resulting from enrollment crises and fiscal mismanagement) since 2013, forcing the District to close schools, decrease curricular services and layoff staff.

From 2016 to the present, GCSD began promoting their vision of educating students for “college and career readiness” and that District schools would produce “college and career” ready students. Such verbiage could be found on the District’s Mission Statement on their website, as well as within individual school buildings. Amidst consistent change and churn among central office staff, building administration, and educators, GCSD high schools were charged with preparing students for their futures beyond graduation, presumably going to college, or entering the workforce. But does “college and career readiness” *actually* mean functionally to administrators who are charged with yielding college and career ready students? And what does “college and career readiness” mean to students who are supposed to be prepared for both?

### *Application of Standpoint Theory*

Standpoint theory, which is the descriptive framework for this study, seeks to platform the voices, interpretations, and critiques of marginalized populations pertaining to how dominant groups exert authority upon them (Barnett, 2009; Creedon & Cramer, 2007; Collins, 1990) [58, 59, 60]. Beginning in the 1970’s standpoint theory was, primarily, exhibited in feminist studies, particularly Black feminist, and Hispanic feminist research (Harding, 2009; Hartsock, 1997) [61, 62], standpoint theory purposes to amplify the perspectives of any non-dominant group whose views are disregarded or muted, yet are grounded in the lived experiences of members of a marginalized group.

Though it is common perception among school staff and parents that principals are the decision-makers in their respective buildings due the internal school-based hierarchy, principals are, however, akin to middle managers who take directives from district administrators above and ensure such demands are implemented within their buildings. While principals do sit atop the professional hierarchy inside schools, when it comes to decision making and direction setting, they are more akin to objects than subjects. Similarly, students within school buildings are low on the school hierarchy. District and school-based policies, curriculum, staffing are among a litany of decisions that are determined above them, which they have little agency in deciding. As such, though neither constituency holds a similar station of official power within schools, neither are all-powerful either. Both are subject to the vision and decisions of others with more official power, and the authority to make decisions for which both constituencies must navigate.

Following a call to participate sent to GCPS’s six high school principals, I received two responses. For this qualitative study, I interviewed two GCPS principals and nine Black and Latino upperclassmen in their buildings. The semi-structured interviews took place between December 2022 and January 2023. During the interviews, I took and recorded notes manually, in addition to audio-recording the interview. The interviews were transcribed through and coded for analysis.

In focusing on GCSD’s principals and students, two constituencies whose perspectives and realities often go ignored by the larger public and policymakers, I seek to better understand: *How do two urban schools go about educating students for college and career readiness? What does educating for college and career readiness look like from the perspective of building principals, the schools’ leaders, and how do students experience education from a college and career readiness framework?*

### *Data Gathering*

#### **Individual Interviews**

I employed purposeful sampling for individual interviews of two GCPS principals. Each interview lasted 1 to 1.5 hours. Individual interviewing was employed to glean in-depth, and introspective interpretations of participants’ conceptions and perspectives (Creswell, 2009) [63]. Ryan et al. (2009) [64] suggest interviews provide access to subjects’ perceptions, interpretations, and experiences within a specific context. During the interview, I took and recorded notes manually, in addition to voice recording the interview which was subsequently transcribed and coded for analysis. Finally, after the coding process, I developed memos that explicitly connected common themes; then I used the collection of codes and emergent themes that addressed my initial research questions and developed conclusions based on the data set.

Mr. Shawn Johnson\*\* is a principal at Parkside High School. He’s been in current post since 2008. Johnson, Black man in his mid-40s, was a resident of Greenwood and attended GCPS from elementary school through high school. He started off as an employee in GCPS as an English teacher in 2002. Ms. Karen McNally\* is a principal at Science Arts High School. She’s been the principal at Science Arts since 2017, and prior to that a vice principal in GCPS since 2013. A white woman in her mid 40s, McNally is a resident of a neighboring town.

#### **Focus Group Interviews**

I used a purposeful sampling of nine GCSD students for a focus group interview. I employed the focus group setting to interview numerous study participants at once, retrieve more data, and with the assumption that a less rigid structure would create a more conversational atmosphere among participants and allow for the collection of a “shared understanding about a phenomena”

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(Creswell, 2009; p. 226). The duration of the focus group interview was 55 minutes. During the interview I used a semi-structured interview protocol asking a few prescribed questions of the group while taking notes and also using an audio recorder to capture the conversation accurately. Data in the form of note-taking and audio recording were collected and transcribed.

The nine students interviewed: Nadine, Manny, Jamir, Alexis, Brene’, Nikki, Juan, Cynthia, Brian are all GCPS students attending Parkside or Science Arts High Schools. They are either in the 11th or 12th grades and have varying levels of academic achievement with their GPAs ranging from 1.3 to 4.0. The students interviewed have varying aspirations following high school with some expressing a desire to attend college immediately after graduation, with others planning to begin careers in the military or in the workforce. It was intentional to select a student population that represents a cross-section of recorded academic achievement as well as postsecondary plans. Among student participants, there were four males and five females, and five Black students, three Latino students (two Puerto Rican, one Mexican-American), and one student who is both Black and Puerto Rican.

Following the coding process, I developed memos that explicitly connected common themes. I, then, used the collection of codes and emergent themes that addressed my initial research questions to develop conclusions based on the data set. The unit of analysis and data will be the views and perspectives of the two GCPS principals and nine students.

### **Findings**

Following individual interviews, coding and searching for emergent themes, applying standpoint theory for which to interpret data, the following themes emerged: for GCPS administrators, preparation of students for “college and career readiness” occurs within their school by ensuring students get a quality education; are qualified to progress beyond high school either in work, the military, or college; and providing their with students opportunities to participate in internships and “exposures” (bringing in outside presenters to discuss varying occupations).

From the student’s perspective, their understanding of being educated for “college and career readiness” in their respective schools, focused primarily on being prepared to graduate high school and go on to college or enter the military. Additionally, students roundly believed that getting a “good” education was needed in order to get a job, and believed going to college would get them a “good job”.

Finally, students recognized their principals and staff to be dedicated to their academic success and progression, but not substantively exploring matters of the modern work-world like globalization, artificial intelligence, automation, or discrimination. Students had an awareness of the terms artificial intelligence, automation and discrimination, but that was through non-school based exposure like conversation with family and friends of “seeing something on TV, as their schools did not explicitly explore such concepts pertaining to career preparation.

#### *Principal’s Perspective*

Both GCPS principals interviewed were administrators at small magnet high schools within the district, with one school enrolling 140 students from 9th to 12th grade, and the other school enrolling 130. Both principals are deeply invested in the progress of their school as an institution, and the success of their students. Additionally, both principals are well-regarded in the Greenwood community, by District administrators, and by students and parents. The reputation of these schools in providing quality education seems to be well-earned and, largely, without dispute. In that, finding out how such building leaders of schools who are instrumental in providing an atmosphere of learning within a District touting “college and career” readiness as a goal, interviewing such leaders who have proven to be skilled in their mission seemed to be the best place to go.

When asked: *How do you see your role as the principal of your building?*

Principal McNally responded: I see my role as the instructional leader as my first and foremost priority, and a problem solver so that I can clear the path for high quality instruction to take place for our students so that they can have the best quality education they can have... Also as an instructional leader, I’m in constant communication with my staff so they know my expectations, checking over lesson plans at night, over the weekends... During the week I try to do as many walkthroughs and be as visible as possible, even if it’s not an official observation, I just think it’s important to know how our staff and students are progressing... also, ensuring that staff are keeping up with the pacing guide, and keeping student learning at the forefront of my and our staff’s mission.

Principal Johnson replied: My primary responsibility is to preserve the academic integrity of the building...to make sure students here have the academic and social experience they deserve and expect and to certainly keep everybody and every student safe... where everyone whether student or adults feel safe and valued and appreciated. So to that like you saw today, I’m often all over the place... making sure that classrooms have rigorous instruction happening, making sure the hallways are clear and calm and making sure the environment is prime for learning...making sure everyone is on task... I am the school's instructional leader and with that comes many hats. I’m the instructional leader, the organizational leader, so I am responsible for ensuring they are meeting the requirements, they’ve acquired the standards, all of the objectives in order to satisfy the state’s expectation for graduation, primarily.



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In focusing on the day-to-day responsibilities of their role, both principal Johnson and McNally indicate their primary focus is dedicated to the administration of their buildings and ensuring quality education is delivered by staff and received by students. This is understandable given the expectations embedded in their job description, as well as the central metrics for principal’s effectiveness: ensuring buildings are orderly thereby yielding an environment where learning can take place; making sure teachers are teaching rigorous instruction aligned with state standards; and verifying student learning.

As I am aware that there may be some widely accepted assumptions within public education that are commonly accepted by the broader public and, likely, influential within a principal’s responsibilities, I asked: *Are there any academic edicts, accepted truths, or phraseology that you disagree with but are nonetheless influential in your practice?*”

McNally responded: I’m sure there are a lot of things out there. Like for an achievement gap, I mean we certainly have to close the achievement gap as fast as possible which is why I challenge our teachers to make sure our kids master what we’re teaching them...so by law, we have to align with the grade-level standards and the pacing guide, and then differentiate instruction which is why we have block scheduling here so teachers have time to work in small groups, work with individuals to make sure students get the attention and help that they need to be successful academically... We even provide tutoring for students after school to help the students in need... It really is important for us to close the achievement gap so students can be ready for the world.

I believe the principal is the secret sauce behind any successful school. So if you have the right person in the position, you can turn a school around. I don’t believe schools should be failing and I don’t believe we should be failing any kid...by any means. Regarding standardized tests, I do believe we should have a metric of assessing student progress comparatively, and we need some kind of metric to measure teacher effectiveness in their role. If I have a teacher working with a student for ten months, I expect to see progress that would illustrate ten months of growth. I expect kids to be moving and learning... but to your questions, I just kind of get caught up in the day to day...making sure students are learning, making sure teachers are teaching. But by no means do I ‘drink the Kool-Aid’ because I form my opinion regarding the ‘achievement gap’ and ‘failing schools’, but I keep my personal views on those things specifically to myself as I have a job to do.

Principal Johnson replied: Yeah absolutely... Like the adherence to testing. And not just this district, but the country as a whole is ensuring that students are “proficient” in quotes, in literacy and mathematics... and that’s where most of the resources are placed and, though literacy and mathematics are important, important to me and probably important to you, our children, and to the future of the country... but there’s a lot more to education than just literacy and mathematics. We live and work in a city that’s hurting, that’s broken, so we emphasize care here [in this school] because that’s what students need. I think schools have to reflect the values and needs of the particular community that they serve, not necessarily the agenda from the state or the agenda from the government. Schools should be a microcosm of the communities they’re in. So that’s why we emphasize social-emotional learning, have discussions...stress empathy, giving back, those are all things that if curated the right way, will benefit the community we’re in... As far as the “achievement gap” I don’t put much credence into it. There is a gap certainly... There, supposedly, is a disparity between suburban schools and what they supposedly have, or do, or can do, and what their students have the capacity to do compared to rural schools or urban schools... Does a gap exist? Yes. Do I know that as a school that we prioritize what I know the needs of our students are? Yes... So the country, in particular, our district, when they talk about the achievement gap, they’re talking about the literacy and mathematics rates. But that’s not accounting for the rest of the pie. They want us to focus on literacy and mathematics and ignore all those other things and I posit that making sure students feel valued, cared for, listened to, involved in their learning, really being able to explore things and learn things that they care about, those things, having an avenue toward those things closes the achievement gap...as opposed to from gate, ‘go to math class for 45 minutes...that’s not working, go to math class for 60 minutes...that’s not working let’s do two periods (90 minutes)’... time is not doing it. Like where we are right here I had a heated conversation with another administrator, the conversation was really direct... They have issues that they state, but they’re not addressing them... like say, students are disrespectful, not taking advantage of their time, whatever undesirable behaviors students sometimes exhibit, it’s our job to fill the void. To me, that’s the achievement gap. We can’t ignore the needs that are right in front of us, as those things may impede their academic progress down the line. That’s just my position, but you can see that in the way I govern this particular school and go about my day to day stuff.

As for “failing schools” my first response would be failing at what? If half the country, well over half the country, is failing at mathematics, does that mean most of the schools in the country are failing schools? Yes or no? That’s just up for debate. Our school does not...is not proficient at this current time. But keep this in mind, prior to the State switching assessments from HSPA (High School Proficiency Assessment) to PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of College and Careers) in 2014, in literacy 100% of our students were proficient. That was up from 85% and 80%... we worked our way up to that. And without changing anything in terms of the way we taught, the rigor, anything, once the state changed the assessment we went from 80, 90, 100% to 40% and 30%... same school, basically the same students, same adults... and conclusions are drawn from that. So what changed?

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At the current time, our students are not demonstrating proficiency that the District or the State would like. We’ve identified those things, we’re working on those things, we’re actively implementing strategies to get students closer to that, but we’re not doing that at the expense of the social-emotional learning and filling all the voids we know students have. Even today honestly, you were observing some of it...that student was crying, crying her eyes out because she can’t find her wallet... the key to her being happy, being a good daughter, being able to buy Christmas gifts and things, she’s distraught. She missed math class this morning. So honestly the school district would say, “put her back in class” but no, that’s not what she needs right now. She needs to know there are adults here that are gonna help calm her down first, and then help her get through the issue. Then, yes. She can get extra homework because one, she needs to know adults care and two, there’s a solution to what feels like the biggest thing in the world... So honestly, our approach is to take care of the needs of our students when they arise as opposed to, when we know all of these things are happening we’re still just gonna send them into math or to literacy for 90 minutes. We really try to exude that care throughout the day and I think it shows... For instance, I’d say off hand 90% of our students’ parents visit our school four to five times per year. That’s involvement and buy-in. I know some schools where they can get parents to come in at all.

Both Ms. McNally and Mr. Johnson identify commonly understood phrases like “achievement gap” and “failing schools”, and the correlating adherence to testing highly influences how they see their roles, and the education students receive. In Ms. McNally expressing that she hasn’t drank the “Kool-Aid” concerning the “achievement gap” and “failing schools”, she expressed an awareness that those phrases are highly impactful in urban education. And though the understanding is that certain schools and certain students are not achieving, and thus “failing”, she presents an awareness that the common takeaway is also incomplete. Nonetheless, she keeps her personal views separate from her mission as the school’s instructional leader.

Principal Johnson, on the other hand, was far more outspoken in calling out the testing regime that, in his view, ignores the reality of students’ needs. He was clear in identifying his school’s stressing of social-emotional learning for students in hopes of providing an education that addresses students’ holistic needs. To challenge the “achievement gap” and “failing schools” narrative affixed to urban schools and his school specifically, Mr. Johnson indicated how fluid and manipulatable those terms can be. When he indicated that his school went from exhibiting high rates of proficiency on one state assessment, and following a switch of state assessments, his school was deemed far below proficient, we are presented with a broader perspective of these scores that many in the general public are likely unaware of.

In moving toward the specific focus of the study, I asked: *What are your thoughts on college and career readiness, and when was the first time you heard that phrase?*

Ms. McNally responded: The first time I heard college and career readiness...it’s been a while now. I think back to when we were using the 100-Book Challenge (2009). But my thoughts on college and career and job readiness is that we have a lot of mechanisms to give our kids exposure to whatever they need to learn about. As far as college and career readiness, I wanna give our kids as much opportunities or exposures so they can make decisions that put them in the best position whether that is college or career...We have senior seminars, we have the 12+ [Program] downstairs with people who are college and career advisors, we have our own guidance counselors who work with the students, we have staff members in place to mentor, check in and meet with students about college and career readiness...we have our students apply for a “reach” school and a “match” school, we have FAFSA night coming up this week to provide our families with the tools to fill out the FAFSA because sometimes they can be difficult. We try to give our kids as much support in college and career readiness as possible so that they can make the best decisions. I remember back when I was in high school, no one gave me the opportunity to explore different ideas or different notions of what I could or even wanted to do or was interested in because I learned that from my family. I believe to be college and career ready in this day in age, is that we should give kids all college options that are right for them and in the right price range like for me, I want to a community college for three years before I went to Temple [University] to make a fiscally sound decision. We don’t have to go to the most expensive schools to get a good education. Whether it’s a two-year school or four-year school, we have CTE certifications and that where a student want to go, maybe they start off at an entry level position and then have options to work their way up because at the end of the day, you have be able to go home, to go to work for your family, put meals on the table...We have be able to meet kids where they’re at. Not everyone is gonna be able to go to Princeton. And I don’t want students to feel stressed out where they believe they need to do those kinds of things...we try to center the kids’ interests to make sure we’re providing them with the best opportunities so they’re on the best track to thrive when they leave these four walls.

Mr. Johnson replied: I think the first time I heard the phrase “college and career readiness” was probably about fifteen years ago (2007)... I started teaching in 2001 and don’t remember hearing about that phrase in 2001 and 2002. I think you have to educate for college and career readiness... you need to do it to the extent that the students you have embrace that idea if that’s what they want to do or pursue. If you’re educating students who have no interest in going to college, and you still focus on college applications, SATs or whatever, that will cause a student to drop out because we are not talking about anything they are interested in. So we have to teach or expose students to whatever possibilities that are out there... We have to figure out what student’s interests are, what they’re goals are, and teach to that.

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When asked about the first time both principals remember hearing the phrase “college and career readiness”, both put the date after 2005 and before 2010, which indicates that during this time in GCSD, there was a new focus on educating students for “college and career readiness” that was not as apparent prior to 2005. And when asked about their thoughts on “college and career” readiness, both principals identified the importance of students’ planning with their individual interest in mind, as well as how important students continuing their education, either in college or in the trades, is toward their gaining future employment. The idea that students accumulating more education, whether collegiate or vocational, led to meaningful employment was never questioned or critiqued..

To get a sense of whether students are being prepared for the occupational world that lies ahead, I asked: *Is it important, in educating for college and career readiness, that you and the school staff know today’s and tomorrow’s economic and occupational landscape? And how confident are you that you and your staff are preparing kids for what awaits them occupationally in future?*

Mr. Johnson responded: Yes. There has to be a balance. One of my responsibilities...it’s not my job to forecast where jobs and careers are going, but it is my responsibility to be aware of the trends that are coming and align our practices, structures and approaches with what’s ahead to prepare them for those. The opportunities that we’re preparing our seniors for in some way shape or form, would be different from what we expose our 9th graders to. For instance, we have quite a few labs on our campus... and we are the only school in the District that stresses and emphasizes entrepreneurship because I think that’s a trend and it seems to be the way forward... and an emphasis around the country. Students learn how to manage their time, their own businesses... We also have a “maker space” to allow students to tinker, to play, to think, to design, to figure out what their interests are and allow them to pursue that potential... but that’s a good question. I do not think I know as much as I possibly could know but, honestly I and my staff, I believe, probably do a better job than many other schools simply because of our Learning Through Interests (LTI) system where students do a great deal of interest exploration. There’s a great component to our LTI system called “exposures” so our students constantly have contact with experts in the field and you often hear the tagline: “This is what you [students] need to know five years from now.” So we are getting that kind of information from the experts. I’m not gonna sit here and say I do tons of research or subscribe to journal articles or anything like that. But I do feel ultra confident that we have a finger on the pulse of what’s out there - which is why we have the maker-space.

Ms. McNally responded: There’s so many jobs in the job market and even I’m not that well versed in the job market today and I know it’s gonna look completely different over time. If you think about the 9th graders today who will be voting for our next president, all these changes educating kids in the workforce and the jobs that are out there is important because things are changing so much... a lot of today’s jobs are gonna be eliminated. I think we have some work to do in terms of preparing kids for the work-world that lies ahead, even five to seven years out when some of them will be college graduates, I mean, we can’t even predict what that will look like in five to seven years. It’s kinda insane... I guess certainly we can do a better job... but over the summer we had a training with our Career and Technical Education Director about some of the jobs out there and turnkeying it... we just brought in CTE to our school this year so I think would probably have to tighten up on that a little bit. I’m pretty sure teachers are talking about it, but perhaps we could do a better job in that regard.

Interestingly, both principals acknowledged an awareness that much of the job landscape is going to change in the future. Additionally, both Mr. Johnson and Ms. McNally communicated the importance of knowing what occupational and economic opportunities are out there for their students, but conceded there’s not much they know about what the future holds for them occupationally or what they can do to, functionally, address that uncertainty for students. Principal Johnson communicated his school’s focus on entrepreneurship and trying to align their school’s curriculum to meet the opportunities of the future, while Principal McNally focused on her school relying on training from the CTE Department.

In trying to connect the growing disconnect between one’s formal educational attainment and its sufficiency in securing a “good job” in return, I asked: *If our District supposedly educates students for “college and career readiness”, how do you deal with the competing realities inside of our economy... for instance, when we consider that maximization of corporate profits includes employers finding cheaper labor someplace else, or that as folks are walking around with more formal education than ever before but there may not be enough good paying jobs... how do we prepare students for the idea that the relationship between formal education attainment and securing a “good paying job” is becoming increasingly tenuous? Or even is there a space to have those conversations with students?*

Mr. Johnson responded: Honestly, we don’t. Not for any reason or another we just...don’t. I think it would be worthwhile, and in fact I’m gonna write it down... to have... and I love and appreciate our LTI system because those kinds of things should be talked about formally, as a point of awareness for students as they make their transition and the choices that they make.

Ms. McNally responded: I know completely what you’re asking. There is a space but I think we can do better with all the opportunities that are out there in this country like becoming self-employed, doing something outside of your comfort zone. I went to school to be a teacher and became a teacher. I went back to school to become a principal and became a principal, but I know that’s not always the case for everyone. For instance, my husband went to school for communications, and then ended up starting a

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powerwash business, something that had nothing to do with what he went to school for. He started off with a squeegee and a bucket and grew his business and now he’s living the American Dream against all odds. But I think if we keep giving kids exposure by bringing in people from different careers and their paths to getting there... and we do a lot that here, we bring in a lot folks from the medical profession and people from other professions and those exposures are really eye opening and the students really seem to connect to the stories.

Though Mr. Johnson and Ms. McNally seemed to understand, conceptually at least, the question posed, both seemed to revert back to what their respective schools were doing to provide students with a greater awareness of what careers are available. Certainly exposing students to professions within the workworld, and mechanisms to pursue their potential professional interests has value, but there did not seem to be much of a mechanism for confronting or conveying to students a complicated and growing reality that the job market is growing increasingly harsh for American jobseekers - evenly the formally educated.

In trying to specify the mechanisms employed by corporations that threatens the availability of reliable work for future jobseekers, I asked: *As schools are tasked with preparing kids for the world and the economy of tomorrow, do your schools do a good job in conveying this reality to students: that corporations take consistent steps to find the cheapest labor (through offshoring, automation, usage of artificial intelligence, etc.) including not employing humans at all in efforts to maximize their own profits?*

Ms. McNally responded: I didn’t know that. That’s crazy. I would like to say yes, but I know that we can do a better job educating our students. I mean we do have an Allied Health program and we talk about the dynamics of healthcare and the entry-level position, but that really just started. So we really have to push kids to think outside the box and beyond their comfort zone, finding their interests and new interests...you have my mind really thinking on this. I think we’re really maybe in the beginning stages of having these conversations. But we do try to get students to the point where they are aware of the jobs that are out there... we’re bringing in opportunities for students to earn these CTE certifications where they can go right into the workforce so the conversations are starting. Could we do better, absolutely.

Principal Johnson: I’m certainly aware that it is happening but I haven’t acted upon that institutionally.

Following this question and the principal’s respective answers, I assured them my intent was not to demean the work they do as instructional leaders; only to better understand what “college and career readiness” means in their specific contexts. Ms. McNally, after acknowledging her school could do a better job in supplying students with such information, referred back to what her school is doing to prepare students for obtaining vocational certifications based on their individual interests. Mr. Johnson did respond that he is aware of corporations, motivated by profit maximization, seeking a mechanism to employ the cheapest form of labor, but that he has not formally connected that knowledge to what students are learning in his school.

In efforts to understand how Principals Johnson and McNally’s schools cover the following topics, I posed the question: *How does school staff engage or approach conversations on globalization, automation, artificial intelligence, workplace discrimination and expanding social networks?*

Mr. Johnson replied: Globalization as an isolated topic, we don’t or haven’t to be honest. I can’t say that it hasn’t happened in pockets from this educator or another but we have not, schoolwide, addressed it as an issue. I am familiar with automation and we do make students aware of things based on their interests. I am reluctant to suggest we do things on a whole-school basis in that our school is driven by students’ personal interests...so if a student says they’re interested in X,Y, or Z, it’ll happen. I can’t say whether or not students are aware of automation’s impact on the future of the workforce but everybody sees it happening... Like everyday, you just gave an example about self-checkout...but I don’t know if we talk about it in a way students understand or pay greater attention to as far as how it will impact them. Same thing for artificial intelligence. Regarding workplace discrimination, the answer is no...you just asked me about three, four, or five different things and whether they addressed certain things that are worthwhile that students should know, and I am gonna write those things down. Students need to be aware and exposed to these things now... I mean I think our school does a really good job in cultivating a child’s interest and helping support them in the direction they want to go, but these kinds of questions illustrate there’s a whole other lens that’s missing...that we really don’t deal with at all.

Ms. McNally responded: I mean regarding globalization, if it’s in the curriculum, that’s where students will get it. In terms of automation, I’m not really sure. I don’t really think we talk too much about automation here. Regarding artificial intelligence, I’d have to refer to one of our science teachers, but I would think somewhat. And for workplace discrimination, we don’t really cover that in here. Maybe we should have those conversations if they’re necessary. These are good questions. Regarding impressing upon students the need to expand their network, we do have our exposures that I was talking about earlier, and that does connect them with with professionals from around the region... and we do have the Every Child Deserves a Champion program where we connect our students with mentors, and our staff do have those conversations with students I’m sure... We also have outside organizations that engage with our students like Women of the Dream, we have affiliations with Rutgers Future Scholars and we’re trying to get a mentorship program with medical students who are willing to come in and volunteer their time and work with our kids...so we do have a lot of external partnerships to work with our kids. These were some tough questions (laughs.)



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Following that conclusion question, both Mr. Johnson and Ms. McNally presented a personal awareness of some of the terminology, and they’ve witnessed some of them themselves. They both trusted that some topics may come up in the course of curricular content, but neither could pinpoint which subject covers which topic, if at all. Additionally, both conceded that perhaps more could be done to expose their students to the occupational future they reasonably will experience.

### *Student’s Perspective*

In a focus group setting, I posed the question: *What do you believe the role of a student is?*, as a mechanism to make the students comfortable with sharing their thoughts in addressing a question everyone could answer confidently and according to their own experience.

Nadine (18/F): To get good grades...to get my degree, and eventually get a job.

Manny (17/M): I feel like in life you’re always a student because learning doesn’t just come from school. You can learn outside of school...you’re learning all the time actually...it’s something you carry on for life, you know?

Alexis (18/F): I agree... pretty much we are always learning whether in school or not...even when we’re done school... we’re trying to have our careers and level up... we’re still always gonna try to be better versions of ourselves, we’re always gonna be a student and there’s always gonna be a teacher.

Nikki (17/F): I think the same, but to add on I think being a student is doing what we’re expected to do in life, you know, accept the challenge in trying to be successful...finding ways to achieve those goals...just doing what you know you should be doing... I know some of us don’t listen to it but I feel like that’s what being a student is, trying to figure what’s right for you.

Brian (18/M): For me being a student isn’t always what it seems, like especially to parents they see and think that, “oh yall got technology, this, that, and third...yall don’t have to do all the things we did”, but they don’t see just how stressful and how challenging it can be... Like a lot of students they deal with a lot of personal issues like at home with mom, dad...maybe unhappy marriage or whatever, they deal with that and they have to come to school, get all As or maybe all As and Bs depending on how strict a parent is. And if they don’t get those good grades the parent may either abuse them mentally by saying “oh I’m disappointed in you, you not gonna be nothing in life” or they’ll physically abuse you...yeah, it ain’t all that is cracked up to be...

Juan (17/M): As Manny and Alexis stated, you’re always gonna be learning even if you’re not in the classroom... I remember my mom talking to me about bills and taxes when I was younger, but I didn’t understand money. But as I had jobs from freshman year ‘til now, she started talking to me about bills, taxes, mandatory taxes, this expense, that expense and showing me the ins and outs of paying bills, how to manage your money, your time, and invest wisely.

Here students took turns explaining what being a student meant to them. Notably, few focused on the traditionally recognized role of the title, “student”; rather, participants identified their lives and expectations outside of school as central to their roles as students. Additionally, student participants identified the misconception that being a student is easy and terminal, noting that we are all students because we are always learning, and in that, always trying to achieve greater heights.

In beginning to focus the interview, I asked students: *Where did you get the idea that getting a college degree would eventually lead to you getting a good job?*

Juan: For me the answer isn’t so much a degree will get me the things I want, but the military, I learned, would. I’m gonna do my years in the military, learn a profession, get paid along the way, have help with buying a home, and when I decide to go to college, I’ll get help through the GI Bill...and after that I’m gonna make about \$70,000 when I get out with the job I’m gonna learn in the military... so that I can do better than Greenwood City, to do better than Jersey. Coming into my senior year, I was asking myself what I’m gonna do for my life...for my career...and I was looking at college and thinking: financial aid isn’t really gonna help that much. I know college is for some people, and it’s not for others, but for me, when my teacher brought up the military, it was wit’ it.

Nadine: I guess all my prior schooling up until now... I guess the way it looked. Like if you get good grades it would reflect well on the teacher, and if a student got poor grades it would reflect poorly. So I guess we focus on getting good grades because we’re expected to from our parents and teachers, and eventually it becomes a habit to keep getting good grades and eventually a job? I dunno...

Cynthia: The way I always thought it was either get your education, or be a bum, and I didn’t wanna be a bum. I don’t wanna live paycheck to paycheck, I wanna be financially stable for my whole family, and any one that comes down the line.

Brene’ (18/F): I kinda disagree, cuz everyone is their own unique person, so school isn’t for everybody...not everyone learns in the same way...if you could find a way to productive in your life and creative, without school, and you could be successful and financially stable, then you should feel comfortable pursuing that. Some students may not seem like they’re that smart when they’re in school, but you’ll see them a few years later doing really well even if they didn’t take the normal route.

Notably, no student expressed the idea that going to college to get a degree in order to get a “good job” was explicitly initiated from the school site. Students did share their desire to be successful in the future, and seemed open about how to achieve success, but there was not a unilateral expectation that going to college and earning a degree was the only path forward toward achieving financial or occupational success.

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In bringing sharper focus to the study topic, I asked students: *Have you ever heard of the phrase “college and career readiness”? And if so, what does it mean to you? Do you remember anyone explaining what it means?*

Nikki: I think sophomore year (2020)... I don’t recall anyone really breaking it down or anything.

Jamir (18/M): I think it's an effort to get us focused on college. Every year since we were freshmen (2019), that's been the thing. College, college, college, but not really much on the career side.. not much talk about the workforce or the military until the senior year.

Cynthia: Yeah I heard of it. I guess it means get an education so you can have a career or something? At least that’s what I took from it.

Nadine: Yeah, I heard of it... I guess, like, being prepared to go to college and handle the work they give you... and eventually get a good job?

Brene (18/F): I think when I got to high school, maybe in my sophomore (2020) or junior year (2021), and again, I think it’s about preparing kids for college and the course-load they’re giving you... I think there’s more focus on the college part than the career readiness part... I guess because the thinking is we have to go to college to get a career, so they prep you for college the most.

Brian: When we heard about it, I think through my history teacher would say things like “this is gonna help you for college” and things like this, but we didn’t really start getting into college preparation until like my senior year with senior seminar.

Juan... And it was just for, like, filling out applications and you didn’t think you wanted to go to college, they help you fill out applications for like, a trade school or tech school...but no one actually explained what that term meant.

Students roundly reported being familiar with hearing the phrase “college and career readiness” beginning with their high school careers. Additionally, none shared a common understanding of what “college and career readiness” meant beyond the assumption that getting students ready for college was a mechanism toward getting them ready for careers. It was also common for student respondents to report not having much attention being paid to the career portion of “college and career readiness.”

In trying to ascertain if students believed they should be informed about the occupational outlook of the future if they are, in fact, being educated for “college and career readiness”, I asked: *If a school is saying they are educating for “college and career readiness”, do you think it is important for students to know today’s occupational and economic landscape as well as tomorrow’s? And have you learned that?*

Jamir: Yeah we should know.

Manny: Yup.

Nadine: I think it’s important and no, we didn’t learn that.

Group Agrees entirely.

Juan: I have a little brother here, and he’s a sophomore now, and I’m more fearful for his future than I am for my own. He shows tremendous promise in the sport of boxing and he can take it far and go far in life... but with my mom, as long as you stay on top of your grades and don’t ask for too much or do the wrong thing, you’re good with her... but if you don’t stay on top of your grades, she takes phones, [video game] cords, and for him even [boxing] practice, and one time she made him miss a boxing match, which as an amateur trying to make it, that’s huge...and he showing he’s not really interested in school, but trying to get through it as best he can.

Brene: I’m currently in a “college and career readiness” program now, called Women of the Dream and I really appreciate it...they’re helping me with so many things like my FAFSA application... they’re helping me with everything, my [college] essays, and whenever I tell my mom about all the things we’re doing she’s like, “why didn’t I have this when I was growing up” and without it, I’d probably be struggling trying to get through all of this on my own.

Cynthia: True. Having someone there helping me figure out things is really helpful and something I think everyone really needs and should have access to that kinda help.

Alexis: I think bottomline, people go to college so they can get a good job, but they have to know what they’re getting into. If you take out loans you’re gonna have to find a job...you have to know what’s ahead for you.

Student-participants all responded that schools should make them aware of what the occupational and economic landscape of the future has in store for them. Unfortunately, most remarked that they have not been exposed to that material, and the help that is available is appreciated, but largely directed toward guiding students through the college-entrance process.

Further, I asked students to assess their own awareness of the lies ahead for them occupationally in inquiring: *How confident are you that you are aware of what awaits you, a current student, in the workworld of the future? Has anyone had a conversation with you about what the job landscape of the future will look like even for folks who get college degrees??*

Brian: I’m not very confident... because, there’s ideas that I have that in a perfect world, that things will go like this...so like, I have hopeful ideas that when I graduate [college], this can happen but I’m not really sure what can happen... like there’s a bunch of possibilities, but I’m not, like, fully prepared for what happens after graduation... No one has spoken to me about the future work world.

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Nikki: Not very. I think some may be, but I know I’m not.

Alexis: You can think you know, but when reality hits, it may be completely different than how you planned things.

Cynthia: I do know there’s not enough jobs for everybody...sooooo...

Brene: I agree, the jobs that we do have, the jobs that are available, are jobs that don’t pay enough...I mean if you have a job that’s only paying minimum wage or close to it, which are most of the jobs available, who’s gonna choose that route... so it kinda feels like you’re stuck...And it’s happening to everyone.

Jamir: And even those jobs aren’t that easy to get... and it’s not really talked about here [in school] or anywhere else really.

Students roundly expressed apprehension and caution when asked about their level of preparedness pertaining to the availability of future occupational opportunities. Though it would seem to be common for unknowns to elicit a sense of uncertainty, students here communicated a cognizance that the occupational landscape today is unfriendly, which likely only heightens their concerns for their own futures despite their plans of continuing their education beyond high school. What demands attention was the widespread belief that this topic that concerned them, was not being addressed in a space purported to educate students for “college and career readiness.”

In trying to understand student’s conception of “college and career readiness” along with a vision of their own occupational future, I asked: *How can you be prepared for an economy where, in order to increase corporate profits and efficiency, companies are finding ways to employ less people? How can you prepare for that as someone who will be entering the workforce as a college graduate in about four to five years? How well do schools cover the following: globalization? Automation? Artificial Intelligence?*

Nadine: I don’t think you can really prepare for it but I think you can have, like, backup plans. I mean think that’s the only way... because if you are aware that companies are trying to hire less people, and if you don’t know where you stand amongst other candidates, then you don’t know how that first choice is gonna go for you so you’re gonna need to have other fall back plans.

Juan: I see it everywhere like self checkout in stores.

Jamir: Facts... those things there are replacing human beings who could’ve had that job.

Nikki: But actually, I don’t really have a better answer...partly because it’s the first time I’m hearing questions like this...I just know you can’t put all your eggs in one basket, you gotta spread everything out and whoever accepts you, thank God! (laughs)...because other places may have rejected you and now you at least have something.

Cynthia: I don’t really feel prepared for this now that we’re talking about it because it’s really never talked about. I get the focus on college and everything and I think that’s important, but this...is...just different.

Brian: In my opinion, I think they’re trying to keep us blind to it cuz it was never mentioned before, and it should be covered because this is the kinda world we’re gonna have to deal with...this is the future.

Brene: I feel like they should tell us this stuff in junior year or senior year especially because... I learned machines are, like, taking a lot of people’s jobs from my mom and my dad, but not here [school]. It can be something like a factory line, and a lot of the stuff is being built by machines...those are jobs.

Nadine: I’ve heard of globalization... not really automation, but don’t really know what it means... it’s the first time I’ve heard this question...I think I would have at least wanted to know more about it because it puts some things into perspective about why things are the way they are, and also because it can show us how much real-er life gets after you graduate.

Juan: I mean a lot of people struggle [occupationally] but don’t really understand why so you think “that can’t really happen to me”... and then you see how much bigger things are and how you see how many people are competing for the same spot you want, so then it makes sense. But there’s a lot, now that we’re talking, a lot I don’t know about globalization or automation either.

Brian: I’ve not heard anything about globalization and maybe a little about automation...but I guess it’s regarding machines and robots? ...doing things people do at work? Which I guess cuts jobs? I mean I guess we should learn about it because we need to know what’s going on...even though it sounds intimidating at least we still know what’s happening.

Cynthia: I have heard about artificial intelligence, you know I guess it’s all the Siri(s) and Alexa(s), but as far as work, I’m not aware of it... but again I guess we should know all of this stuff because it’s showing how they’re slimming down depending to the kind of career you want... slimming down on opportunities to get a job for some people...just really making it hard to find a job.

Alexis: Yeah, like Siri!... And then it gets hard because here we are spending all our time in school and college to hopefully get a job, and there’s people trying to find ways with robots and AI, to make sure we don’t have them. It kinda seems like a waste I guess... and this is the first time I was asked these questions or even thought about this.

Jamir: I guess I would have really liked to know about this in the beginning of high school I think instead of, I guess, *just* doing internships we would have had a better idea of what’s going on.

Brene: I’ve seen some of this covered on some TED Talks and Tik Tok where they were talking about people who went to college, graduated and struggled to find work because they can’t find any jobs with that degree... That led me to think about what degrees I should not major in because I don’t want that to happen to me...and so they fall into regular jobs that they didn’t need a degree in and it’s scary because - what did you go to college for if you can’t find a job?

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Nadine: Come to think of it, I only started thinking about these things since we’re all sitting here like this.

Again, students expressed apprehension with the concepts this conversation brought to their attention. Though students recognized an erosion of occupational opportunities for current jobseekers is occurring in big box retail settings and fast food restaurants, students began to express concern over what it means for them in future if such a phenomenon continued and expanded. Further, student-participants expressed concern that this material was not conveyed to them in school and feel unprepared to encounter this in the future.

Finally, in an attempt to connect the added layer of workplace discrimination to the possibility of a hostile job market for today’s jobseeker of color, I asked: *Have you learned anything at all about workplace discrimination, even among educated persons of color in school? And if so, what?*

Nadine: Yeah, I have. It’s like minorities versus white people, they [minorities] get hired less and paid less, there’s certain jobs they [minorities] don’t get...they [minorities] just get treated poorly and get put in lower positions or do more work just to get paid less.

Jamir: Nope.

Cynthia: No.

Brene: Not at all.

Brian: Not that I remember

Alexis: Actually a couple days ago, in one of my classes, we were going over financial literacy and it was talking about how in New Orleans, how one family was trying to buy a home but for certain laws weren’t able to buy it because they weren’t white... Certain laws stopped Black people from buying a house... they couldn’t own or sell homes. I think they’re called “covenant agreements”? I heard of that, but not really anything related to work.

Manny: I think all these things are important and no they weren’t really taught... I think the reason they weren’t covered is because people are scared that it might deter students from wanting to go to college or something, and a lot of schools like bragging that “we have 100% college acceptance rate” and things like this, but they’re not giving us a realistic viewpoint of what’s actually happening. Alexis: They just want to make the schools look better so that whoever’s in charge gets paid more, the school gets more funding and stuff like that... and the thing is the fear doesn’t make sense because I think we can handle this even though it may not seem like good news.

Juan: Yeah, especially if we have the right people communicating it who will say, “even though this is happening you can still find a way to do it”... you know, provide the right motivation, even though they are aware of what’s actually happening. We need to know what’s happening because we’re gonna be the ones that have to deal with it. Y’all already got your education and career...so what about us?

Some students expressed an awareness of what discrimination is conceptually, and possibly societally, but none connected how workplace discrimination could impact their own occupational aspirations in spite of their plans of pursuing more formal education. Additionally, all students indicated the topic of workplace discrimination, pertaining student’s own futures, was largely not explored within their schooling experience, though they recognized the value in learning more about such workplace topics that may seem difficult to confront.

### **DISCUSSION**

In urban schools educating for “college and career readiness”, there appears to be a need for greater focus dedicated to preparing students, at least conceptually, for realities that await them as they transition into becoming jobseekers. While there may not be much any building administrator or current student can do to alter the realities of corporations operating in a neoliberal economy, leaving students without pertinent information that could allow them to be cognizant of, and plan accordingly for, what awaits them ought not continue if we can help it. Though this specific study left elements of educating for “college and career readiness” unexplored, including a comparative analysis of how well-off, suburban districts with a majority white student body approach “college and career readiness”, or whether a formalized curriculum for schools to yield “college and career ready” students exists and what that entails operationally among other things, hopefully subsequent research can begin exploring such matters going forward. And while those questions, and likely many others, are beyond the scope of this specific study, further research is warranted so that today’s students, specifically students of color, can be better prepared for their transition from educated student to career seekers.

### **CONCLUSION**

In picking up where Leah Z. Owens and I left off, there was a recognition that a disconnect between what “college and career readiness” suggested to students, that accumulating more formal education or vocational training was sufficient to secure gainful employment, and the operating reality that within a neoliberal economy, corporations prioritize profit maximization through pursuing the cheapest labor source, irrespective of one’s educational attainment. In an era of neoliberal globalization, corporations



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purposefully opt to sidestep domestic labor in both blue collar and white collar sectors, to avail themselves to a foreign workforce that is paid less with far less regulatory oversight. At the same time, domestically, corporations employ mechanisms to secure the cheapest labor source through increased automation, and more frequent use of temporary, non-unionized labor - all while the American workforce is far more formally educated than in decades past. *In short, what is disregarded is that Americans have become more educated as corporations make secure, quality employment opportunities more difficult for Americans to obtain.*

Here, my effort was to build beyond our prior research in identifying the blindspots in educating for “college and career readiness” alone, but to find out what educating for “college and career readiness” looks like in schools that purport to educate their students for “college and career readiness”. In interviewing two GCSD principals and nine GCSD students, we are able to develop a better understanding of the “college and career readiness” paradigm in practice through the perspectives and experiences of those charged with implementing it (administrators), as well as those responsible for receiving it (students).

According to both administrators and students, educating for “college and career readiness”, functionally, seemed to focus primarily on improving students’ academic abilities in preparation for continuing their education either in college, technical schools, or in the pursuit of employment at the conclusion of their high school careers. What seemed clear was that though most participants were familiar with the phrase “college and career readiness”, there seemed to be little consensus or formalized understanding of what that meant, and what the expectations of being educated for “college and career readiness” was in the first place. The lack of codified meaning or definition, presumably, led both principals and students to continue what they were likely inclined to do anyway, albeit armed with a reinforced conception that acquiring more formal education is sufficient to secure a career in the future.

When administrators were asked how they ensure their students are being educated for “college and career readiness”, GCSD administrators stressed their commitment to student learning and increasing student’s awareness of occupational possibilities. Through the use of internships and exposures, both administrators indicated the conceptual value of making their students cognizant of the array of career paths that existed as well as, hopefully, expanding students’ social network by putting them in contact with professionals across various fields. To be sure, ensuring students are academically prepared for educational pursuits beyond high school and exposing them to a variety of workforce possibilities is better than doing nothing, but it is not clear from their perspectives, that either approach is demonstrably different than what they were inclined to do prior to the stressing of “college and career readiness” from those hierarchically above them.

Similarly, students reported a lack of clarity on what “college and career readiness” meant either definitionally, or functionally. Most recalled hearing the phrase for the first time in high school, but could only assume it meant that if students got an education, they would presumably be career ready. Some students reported their pursuit of academic success was instilled in them from family and intrinsically, but the idea that the more formal education they amassed, the better positioned they would be in entering the workforce was communicated to them through the verbiage of “college and career readiness” - which they were first exposed to in their respective high schools.

Through the study, it became apparent that the realities of tomorrow’s workplace, globalization, the implementation of automation, offshoring and artificial intelligence, all of which cost the American workforce millions of jobs over the past three decades and is continuing unabated - even in industries that required a college degree and were once deemed safe, is being ignored in schools purported to emphasize “college and career readiness”. Additionally, both students and administrators conceded they scarcely cover the topic of workplace discrimination though it has remained virtually unchanged for twenty-five years, and despite the fact the schools’ entire student body of Black and Latino students are most likely to be impacted by it in the future. In the end, both principals and students recognized the lack of attention paid to inconvenient, occupational realities that exist in today’s workforce and likely tomorrow’s, but also shared a desire to see such topics taught more in schools in the future.

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