



## An Examination of Public Discourse about Teachers’ Collective Bargaining Rights in a Portfolio School District

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**Abstract:** Employing an institutional logics framework and critical discourse analysis, this study examines the discourse of participants in a stakeholder-feedback meeting about a proposal by the Denver Public School board to extend collective bargaining rights to teachers in the district's innovation schools. The findings provide insight into the logics that control how teacher unions and collective bargaining agreements are understood by proponents of autonomous schools and portrayed to the general public through media. The analysis explores how connections to power and status allowed some stakeholder groups to influence the board to revise the policy to one more favorable toward market-oriented school reform. In this case, the dominant narrative that emerged from the stakeholder feedback cycle was one in which the collective bargaining rights of teachers were positioned as a threat to autonomous schools’ ability to provide “what's best for kids” in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis; institutional logics; autonomous schools; collective bargaining agreements

**Un examen del discurso público sobre los derechos de negociación colectiva de los docentes en un distrito escolar**

**Resumen:** Empleando un marco de lógica institucional y un análisis crítico del discurso, este estudio examina el discurso de los participantes en una reunión de retroalimentación de las partes interesadas sobre una propuesta de la junta escolar de DPS para extender los derechos de negociación colectiva a los maestros de las escuelas de innovación del distrito. Los hallazgos brindan información sobre las lógicas que controlan cómo los defensores de las escuelas autónomas entienden los sindicatos de docentes y los convenios colectivos y los presentan al público en general a través de los medios de comunicación. El análisis explora cómo las conexiones con el poder y el estatus permitieron que algunos grupos de partes interesadas influyeran en la junta para revisar la política y adoptar una más favorable a la reforma escolar orientada al mercado. En este caso, la narrativa dominante que surgió del ciclo de retroalimentación de las partes interesadas fue aquella en la que los derechos de negociación colectiva de los docentes se posicionaron como una amenaza a la capacidad de las escuelas autónomas de ofrecer “lo mejor para los niños” en sus aulas.

**Palabras-clave:** análisis crítico del discurso; lógicas institucionales; escuelas autónomas; acuerdos colectivos de negociación

### **Um exame do discurso público sobre os direitos de negociação coletiva dos professores em um distrito escolar**

**Resumo:** Empregando um quadro lógico institucional e uma análise crítica do discurso, este estudo examina o discurso dos participantes numa reunião de feedback das partes interessadas sobre uma proposta do conselho escolar da DPS para alargar os direitos de negociação coletiva aos professores nas escolas de inovação do distrito. As conclusões fornecem informações sobre as lógicas que controlam a forma como os sindicatos de professores e os acordos de negociação coletiva são compreendidos pelos proponentes de escolas autónomas e retratados ao público em geral através dos meios de comunicação social. A análise explora como as ligações ao poder e ao estatuto permitiram que alguns grupos de partes interessadas influenciassem o conselho a rever a política para uma mais favorável à reforma escolar orientada para o mercado. Neste caso, a narrativa dominante que emergiu do ciclo de feedback das partes interessadas foi aquela em que os direitos de negociação coletiva dos professores foram posicionados como uma ameaça à capacidade das escolas autónomas de fornecerem “o que é melhor para as crianças” nas suas salas de aula.

**Palavras-chave:** análise crítica do discurso; lógicas institucionais; escolas autónomas; acordos coletivos

## **An Examination of Public Discourse about Teachers' Collective Bargaining Rights in a Portfolio School District**

Educational researchers have published several critical analyses that demonstrate how neoliberal reforms in school district management such as the portfolio management model (PMM) approach can reinforce and perpetuate inequalities in access to quality schools and resources for marginalized groups, shifting power away from democratic control (Lipman, 2011; Marsh et al., 2021, Pedroni, 2011). However, few districts have attempted to address these concerns by adapting or repealing such policies, and therefore there is a lack of critical research about the long-term sustainability of the PMM approach. This leaves open important questions about a PMM district's ability to modify its policy components once the strategy has become entrenched into the institutional norms of a district. For instance, can a given autonomy be recentralized if the board

concludes that it negatively impacts district-wide equity? What structural, political, and normative characteristics of the PMM approach present potential barriers to equity-minded recentralization initiatives?

This article reports on an in-depth mixed-method case study that seeks to answer such questions by examining recent attempts by Denver's union-endorsed school board and new superintendent to recentralize some policy components of the district's PMM approach. It focuses on one such attempt: In February 2022, a board member proposed a revision to district policy that would extend certain rights in the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) to teachers in the district's autonomous innovation schools. The board member's proposal was followed by three Town Hall events hosted by the board, where stakeholders were invited to give feedback on the proposal. This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to determine the core values and beliefs (i.e., institutional logics) behind the arguments and strategies used by stakeholders during one of these Town Hall events. The analysis aims to understand how innovation school leaders, supported by non-profit advocacy groups, leveraged their power and privilege to construct a public narrative that portrayed collective bargaining rights for teachers as at odds with "what's best for kids" in Denver's innovation schools. The findings provide insight into how logics associated with school reform have become embedded the core structures and beliefs of the district and the implications of this for teacher rights and protections.

## **Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

### **School Districts as Social Institutions**

Despite numerous attempts to reform public schooling in the US, the everyday practices, norms, and values that constitute the "grammar of schooling" are remarkably resistant to change (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Theories of institutional isomorphism predict that attempts to change the grammar of schooling are resisted by normative forces that set limits around legitimacy in the eyes of the public and control the behavior of individuals engaging with the institution (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Institutional logics theory integrates elements of sociology and psychology with technical and material components to elucidate explanations for micro-level and meso-level institutional behavior. This helps researchers understand how individuals are influenced by multiple, sometimes conflicting forces that shape their motivations, interpretations, and behaviors in engaging with institutions (Thornton et al., 2012). For example, an investigation into variations in practices and stated values across school types in Los Angeles' PMM used an institutional logics framework to demonstrate that normative pressures led to few meaningful differences across school types, despite the districts' stated intent to offer a diverse array of schooling options (Marsh et al., 2020).

Institutional logics are defined as, "Socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions, values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity, organize time, and space, and reproduce their lives and experiences" (Thornton et al., 2012). These logics differ from ideologies in that they relate to an individual's multiple social and professional identities and can vary depending on context and environmental conditions. They exist in varying degrees within and between multiple social institutions that together comprise the greater "interinstitutional system" that has both vertical (macro-, meso-, and micro-level) and horizontal interactions (Thornton et al., 2012).

Although exact terms vary, scholars have described six primary categories of institutional logics, each with distinct characteristics derived from different sources of identity, authority, and legitimacy (Friedland, 2017; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). For example, market logics prioritize competition, efficiency, and individual choice, whereas community logics prioritize collaboration, inclusion, and local control. The primary logics revealed in studies of school district change are

market logics, state (bureaucratic) logics, professional logics, and community logics, and these are the logics examined in this study (Bridwell-Mitchell & Sherer, 2017). The framework developed for analysis combines the institutional logics framework with Sonya Douglass and her colleagues' descriptions of competing views of teacher professionalism (Douglass Horsford et al., 2019, pp.148-149). A summary of the values and sources of authority, legitimacy, and identity for each of these, along with how they relate to understandings of schools and teaching, is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1***Institutional Logics in Education*

	<b>State/ Bureaucratic Logics</b>	<b>Neoliberal Market Logics</b>	<b>Professional/ Vocational Logics</b>	<b>Family/ Community Logics</b>
<b>Prioritizes</b>	Citizenship, Bureaucratic Control	Individual merit, Competition, Efficiency	Expertise, Training, Craftmanship	Identity, Relationships, Loyalty to a group
<b>Sources of Legitimacy</b>	Democratic Process	Quantifiable Results	Credentials, Experience	Relationships, Trust
<b>Sources of Authority<sup>1</sup></b>	Political Party, Elected Representatives	Market Demand, Profit Margins	Qualified Professionals	Elders, Community Leaders, Family
<b>Sources of Identity<sup>1</sup></b>	Social Class, Political Party	Personal Status and Wealth	Career, Education, Qualifications	Cultural Heritage, Group Membership
<b>Works Toward</b>	Maintaining Social Order	Accumulation of Wealth	Professional Achievements	Social Justice
<b>Works to Limit</b>	Social Unrest	Inefficiency, Regulatory Control	“Unqualified” individuals	Discrimination, Inequality
<b>View of School Leaders<sup>2</sup></b>	School principal as a hierarchical and patriarchal leader	School leader as an executive manager	School principal as a trained professional	School leader as an advocate and ally with community
<b>View of Teachers<sup>2</sup></b>	Teachers are trained professionals within a public bureaucracy	Teachers are individually empowered to negotiate their position within a private market	Teachers have differing levels of skill, content knowledge and experience	Teachers as community members, advocates, and allies
<b>Role of Teacher Unions &amp; CBA's<sup>2</sup></b>	Teachers are empowered through collective bargaining to negotiate rights and benefits within	Union demands stymie innovation, market competition, and lead to inefficiency. CBAs limit the	Unions ensure that teacher voices are present in decision-making. CBAs are a bureaucratic tool	Unions are a mechanism to promote social justice in alliance with other labor rights

	<b>State/ Bureaucratic Logics</b>	<b>Neoliberal Market Logics</b>	<b>Professional/ Vocational Logics</b>	<b>Family/ Community Logics</b>
	the organizational hierarchy	ability of schools to effectively manage human resources	to ensure a safe and professional workplace	organizations. CBAs offer protections to teachers against retaliation and/or discrimination
<b>Approach to Accountability<sup>2</sup></b>	Bureaucratic process through a standardized process to measure a mix of locally and federally determined goals	A high-stakes performance evaluation system of reward and punishments based on outcomes such as test scores and student enrollment	Professional performance evaluations that take in context the school environment and student demographics	Schools are accountable to the communities they serve and are evaluated through a process of community feedback
<b>Definition of Equity<sup>2</sup></b>	“Equal opportunity” with emphasis on inputs	“Closing the achievement gap” with emphasis on outcomes	“Closing the achievement gap” with an emphasis on inputs	“Closing the opportunity gap” with an emphasis on access to resources and long-term outcomes

<sup>1</sup> Sources of legitimacy, authority and identity are adapted from the framework developed by Thornton, Ocasio et al. (2012). *The Institutional Logics Perspective*, Figure 6.1, “Endogenous Dynamics of Practices and Identities Within Organizations” p. 135. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780191767036.

<sup>2</sup> Views of leaders, teachers, teacher unions & CBA’s, approach to accountability, and view of equity are adapted from Douglass-Horsford, Scott, & Anderson (2019) *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality*. Figure 7.1 “Periods of Professionalism” p. 149.

## School District Change

Despite normative forces buttressing the grammar of schooling, there are times when public school districts have undergone a regime change in which the core institutional logics shifted over a relatively short period of less than two decades. The long-term sustainability of educational reforms often depends on the interest, resources, and capacity of supporters to maintain the reforms until they become entrenched into a dynamic equilibrium that resists further change (Welsh & Hall, 2018; Datnow & Park, 2009). Scholars of institutional logics argue that we cannot theorize about institutional change without analyzing the social practices and symbolic aspects of institutions that contribute toward the observed heterogeneity of institutions across contexts (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). They often point to meso- and macro-level factors that can motivate or accelerate district change, arguing that the local socio-political environment creates a particular set of internal (e.g., leadership change or financial constraints) and external (declining enrollment, accountability or political change) pressures that disrupt equilibrium and motivate change (Marsh et al., 2021, Welsh

& Hall, 2018). For example, in examining the changes following the implementation of Tennessee's Achievement School District (ASD), researchers found that established charter management organizations (CMOs) initially faced challenges in achieving their accustomed success under the tighter regulatory environment, which precipitated a shift toward community-oriented practices and beliefs (Glazer et al., 2019).

### **Qualitatively Determining Institutional Logics**

Policy researchers within the field of education have developed critical theories to understand and interrogate hegemonic power structures in how policies are formed, interpreted, enacted, and resisted at all different societal levels (Young & Diem, 2017). In education policy research, scholars have used a variety of methods to qualitatively capture institutional logics in analyses of policy documents, discourse, surveys, videos, images, and semiotic practices that consider not only the words used, but also context, speaker, and an attention to structures of power and privilege operating within the institution (Reay & Jones, 2016). Fairclough (2001) describes CDA as a methodology that can be used to examine relationships of power through public discourse in the form of text, images, public speech, and semiotic interactions. This allows us to consider the forms of interaction that shape and influence societal change, including “how language figures within social relations of power and domination” and “the negotiation of personal and social identities” (Rogers, 2011). CDA can be combined with social theories such as institutional logics to develop frameworks to help researchers understand how individuals and groups can make and shape policy (Diem et al., 2022).

Examining public discourse during times of conflict or change can enhance our understanding of differing logics within and between stakeholder groups. For example, CDA was used in a study examining the logics used by advocacy groups engaging with the state-managed School District of Philadelphia during the 2013-2014 school year. The analysis showed how advocates of reform drew from market logics and viewed school choice as a solution to longstanding inequalities, whereas opponents of reform drew from community and state logics, viewing school choice as a problem that perpetuates and exacerbates these inequalities (Quinn & Ogburn, 2020). While some research evidence indicates that proponents of market-based school reform tend to employ market and economic logics more often than opponents of reform, other studies suggest that market logics have become the dominant logics on both sides of the policy debate. For instance, Diehl (2021) found that justifications stemming from market logics were dominant in the rationales cited by school board members when discussing their vote to both approve and deny charter school applications.

### **School Board Public Comment**

School board public comment sessions, where members of the public are invited to speak to the governing body about issues of concern, have increasingly become a platform for political debate. However, evidence suggests that these spaces often favor advantaged groups due to the greater access to language, time, transportation, and social capital, thus perpetuating systemic injustice (Hampton, 2009). As described in a recent study that examined public comments about school boundary rezoning in two Virginia districts,

[T]here is an underlying politics of public commenting that legitimates which values and discourses are rejected or upheld. This politics also dictates whether school officials and board members align with a particular viewpoint to avoid the costs of public rejection or political damage. (Castro et al., 2022, p. 5)

That study employed CDA to identify the underlying values behind arguments resisting school integration. These include arguments such as the “rushed process” (demanding more data, more time, etc.), “we do this already” (saying that schools were already diverse) and expressing concerns about “school quality” if the enrollment boundaries were moved. From a critical perspective, these comments could be interpreted as “boundary maintenance” by wealthier parents working to secure educational advantage for their children.

While public comment sessions often favor privileged groups, marginalized communities have sometimes also leveraged these platforms to demonstrate resistance to hegemonic power. Drawing on the work of critical race scholars, Bertrand and Sampson (2020) examine incidences of intertextual co-optation in school board meetings. This discursive strategy involves “speaking back” to a person in power using their own words to expose hypocrisy and double standards. The authors illustrate how this strategy can be an effective way to challenge educational leaders’ use of language that perpetuates racism and reproduces white supremacy (p. 335). A later study investigated how minoritized community members advocated for equity within a predominantly white district. The authors describe strategies of civil disobedience, or rule subversion used by these community members to undermine the board’s “whiteness as property” logics. These strategies included deliberately exceeding the allocated time limit for speakers, making unsanctioned comments from the audience, and publicly calling out behavior of specific board members (Sampson & Bertrand, 2022).

### **Rhetoric of Advocacy Groups**

An integral component of the PMM approach is the reliance on intermediary organizations (IOs), such as philanthropic foundations, city services, and political advocacy groups, to provide services to schools. These IOs, backed by local and national reform advocates, invest substantial resources in think tank research, media campaigns, and political action committees to influence public opinion and to sway voters toward their policy agenda (Anderson & Donchik, 2016). Scott and colleagues (2015) revealed how local philanthropies partnered with national non-profit organizations in Denver to distribute information to the public that constructed a media narrative supportive of their policy agenda. This study, along with a wealth of supporting evidence, suggests that the reforms in Denver could not have occurred without the backing of wealthy foundations and of local and national political elites, many of which remain actively engaged in Denver’s current educational landscape (Scott et al., 2015).

### **Collective Bargaining Agreements**

Most scholars agree that within the education system, teachers and school leaders are the most significant factor that contributes to student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000). As such, obtaining buy-in from teachers as to the intent and purpose of reform initiatives has a potentially large influence on the effectiveness of such reforms.

This issue of the professional status of teachers is a point of tension within the education reform debate. Neoliberal approaches to school district management such as the PMM have re-engineered teaching and leadership to create what sociologists have termed the “new professional” (Anderson & Cohen, 2015). These new forms of management (or networked systems) are often just as restrictive as the old bureaucratic ones in terms of teacher professionalism and empowerment. In “flattened hierarchies” such as the PMM, the pyramidal hierarchy is replaced by a horizontal elite core and a mass periphery with minimal mediation and communication between the two (Douglass Horsford et al., 2019, p. 142). In a traditional district, human resource management is generally done through the central office, usually in concurrence with the union-negotiated CBA. Under the PMM

approach, however, teacher unions and collective bargaining agreements are often portrayed as a hinderance to school improvement (Bulkley & Henig, 2015; Lake & Jochim, 2017).

Scholars have identified two major ideological perspectives about teacher unions: “rent-seeking” and “teacher voice”. While the rent-seeking perspective argues that CBAs increase the cost of education without an equivalent increase in test-score outcomes, the teacher voice perspective posits that CBAs amplify the voices of those best positioned to understand the needs of students—the teachers (Lyon, 2022). These perspectives are not always dichotomous, and within the teacher voice perspective, there are nuanced differences in teachers’ feelings of agency and empowerment in relation to union membership. As shown in Table 1, an institutional logic lens can be used to further different views of teachers, leaders, and CBAs by examining their sources of authority, legitimacy and identity, in a way similar to the “Periods of Professionalism” identified by Douglass Horsford and colleagues (2019) in their analysis of the politics of education policy.

Like all individuals, teacher logics are drawn from a diverse array of backgrounds, beliefs, and identities. A recent study examined competing logics behind teacher interpretations of reform to determine the extent to which teacher logics differ depending on the type of school, their teacher education program, or their personal identity (Bridwell-Mitchell & Sherer, 2017). They found that teachers working in schools with low test scores tended to have high market-accountability logics, whereas teachers in high-performing schools were able to draw more on logics of family and communities. Furthermore, the study showed that teacher identity was the strongest predictor of the type of logics they would employ, and teachers who identified as a member of a marginalized group were much more likely to draw on community logics. These differences and complexities are particularly salient in this discussion around the DPS board member’s proposal because innovation teachers must vote their approval of the innovation plan; teachers in these schools are thus arguably willing to trade traditional “union protections” for the autonomy and leadership roles offered by innovation schools (Kurtz & White, 2022). In fact, initial research suggests that teachers’ feelings of empowerment in DPS innovation schools appear higher than in traditional schools, although these findings should be interpreted with the understanding that teachers self-select to work in innovation schools (Hashim et al., 2021).

### **Context: Reform in Denver Public Schools**

DPS is a large urban school district that at the time of the study served approximately 88,000 students and operates a PMM approach to manage over 200 schools that include traditional, charter (both autonomous and CMO-managed), and “innovation” (both autonomous and IO-managed) school models (DPS, 2021). These schools have varying levels of autonomy over legal, financial, and operational decisions. All traditional district-managed schools adhere to the terms negotiated between the district and teacher union in the CBA, but state charter law grants automatic waivers from the CBA and other sections of the state education act to the district’s charter schools. Innovation schools request similar waivers on an ad-hoc basis in an “innovation plan”, which should be supported by a vote of at least 60% of school staff before the plan is approved by the district<sup>1</sup> (CDE, 2022).

Between 2008 and 2017, DPS was held up as a model of successful reform, as it swiftly and relatively smoothly transitioned to a PMM district—a transition that was facilitated by stable leadership and a supportive school board (Marsh et al., 2021; Baxter et al., 2022). During this time

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<sup>1</sup> While some staff are involved in the creation of innovation plans, there are multiple instances of staff reporting that the plans were approved and implemented without a staff vote, or that they were unaware of what was in the plan before they were asked to vote on it (Research and Evaluation, 2022).



period, DPS approved innovation status for over 60 schools as either turnaround or newly opened schools, almost all of which included the CBA waivers (A+, 2019; Kottenstette & Paga, 2022). In 2015, a board member worked with school leaders and non-profit foundations to establish DPS's first innovation zones (i-zones) as a group of innovation schools managed by a third party IO (Gottlieb, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2017). The board member's non-profit group worked to quickly establish two more i-zones to expand the number of schools operating under alternative management. By 2017, the number of autonomous schools in DPS eclipsed the number of traditional schools in the district, with 106 traditional schools, 59 charter schools, and 58 innovation schools, including 12 i-zone schools (Asmar, 2017).

Although the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) initially supported the autonomous school model, it soon became apparent that school leaders were using innovation plans to waive CBA policies relating to teachers' right to due process and appeals (Marsh et al., 2021; Zubrzycki, 2015). By 2018, negotiations between DCTA and the district failed to reach an agreement, culminating in a 3-day teacher strike in January 2019. The strike highlighted the tensions brought about by the PMM approach and galvanized a coalition between DCTA and grass roots community organizations working to preserve traditional public schools, and the strike ended with significant concessions from the district. Many viewed the strike as the resurgence of a relatively weak union aiming to regain some of the power that had previously been relinquished (Campbell, 2019). In November 2019, all three open seats on the school board were won by candidates endorsed by DCTA, sealing a majority of seats for the first time in 12 years (Asmar, 2019).

### **Innovation Pause and Reflect**

In June 2020, the “flipped” school board implemented a “Pause and Reflect” period to review the costs and benefits of innovation status before approving any new innovation plans (Olson & Anderson, 2020). The subsequent report, released in July 2021, pointed to a set of interrelated concerns. First, the report showed significant demographic disparities between third-party managed i-zone schools and district-managed innovation schools. The i-zone schools had the lowest proportion of students on free and reduced lunch (FRL), students of color (SOC) and multi-lingual learners (MLL), whereas the district-led innovation schools had the highest. Second, in comparison to the district as a whole, i-zone schools employed the lowest proportion of teachers of color across all school types. Third, innovation teachers expressed uncertainty about the implications of waivers, and raised concerns over annual contracts that stipulated ongoing non-probationary status. Several reported a lack of understanding about their innovation plan, with some stating their innovation plan was written and approved by an entirely different staff. Central office staff identified multiple “operational challenges” stemming from the inflexibility of innovation school calendars and bell times, which impacted district operations such as bus schedules and payroll adjustments (Board Innovation Working Group, 2021).

Responding to these findings, a member of the DPS school board proposed a revision to the district's Executive Limitations (EL) policy<sup>2</sup> that would extend rights and protections in the CBA to innovation-school teachers. This proposal faced opposition from reform advocates and leaders of innovation schools, who argued that the waivers were essential to maintain the autonomy that comes with innovation status (Asmar, 2022). The school board decided to “take it to the community,” to gather stakeholder feedback relating to the proposal (DPS Board meeting, January 20, 2022). This process included three Town Hall events, a district-wide survey, school visits, and two public

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<sup>2</sup> Under the Policy Governance approach, a school board holds the superintendent responsible for operating the district. The board works together to outline the shared goals of the district, including a set of Executive Limitations, which specify the boundaries within which the superintendent must operate to achieve the goals.

comment sessions. The result of this process is important to note: After nine weeks of feedback, the board passed a watered-down version of the EL proposal in a contentious 5-2 vote; three months later, even that weaker version was repealed, when three board members withdrew their initial support (DPS Board meeting, June 16, 2022). This leads to the question of why a union-endorsed board would be persuaded to vote against expanding teacher rights and protections.

## Data Collection

### Town Hall Event and Stakeholder Feedback Report

The primary data source for this analysis comes from a 90-minute video recording of the first of three virtual events hosted by the district as part of the stakeholder feedback process about the EL proposal. Although not broken down by meeting, the district published entry-poll data for 173 attendees (excluding school leaders) across the three Town Hall events, which is summarized in Table 2 (Research and Evaluation, 2022). Field observations and recordings of the other two Town Hall events indicate that all three meetings also included a significant number of school leaders, and that the demographics of the attendees at the primary event used in this analysis were similar to the combined district polls. Most attendees (65%) were from Northeast Denver, which is the region with the highest number of innovation schools and its own i-zone. Most attendees (73%) reported annual incomes of over \$100K, with 40% reporting annual incomes of over \$200K. Most attendees (59.4%) identified as white, 7.4% identified as Black or African American, 10.3% as Latinx, and 4.8% as Spanish-speaking (Research and Evaluation, 2022). This compares to overall DPS student demographics of 25.3 % white, 13.5% Black or African American, 52.1 % Latinx, and 36.4% Spanish-speaking ELL students.

The recording includes a 20-minute introductory presentation by three school board members, a 48-minute breakout session, and a 33-minute “share out” time that was interrupted by a former teacher who claimed to have been forced out of an innovation school. The teacher, who self-identified as Black and had a Puerto-Rican flag in the background, appealed to the board members to approve the EL proposal. About 100 participants were present for the introductory presentation and approximately 35 were present in the recorded breakout session (the remaining participants were in two other breakout rooms that were not recorded). In the breakout, seven parents (P1-P7) spoke for a total of 15 ½ minutes, four school leaders (L1-L4) spoke for a total of 12 ½ minutes, a retired teacher (RT) spoke for 3 minutes, and the school board member (BM3) spoke for around 9 minutes. Figure 1 shows a visualization of how the speaking time was allotted to each group and shows that parents had the majority of the speaking time for the first 15 minutes, but after that, the majority of the time was taken up by school leaders. Information about each speaker is shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** All four of the school leaders were from an innovation school, with three of them being in the Northeast Denver i-zone. Six of the seven parents had children attending an innovation school, and one had recently removed her child. Of the parents, one self-identified as Black, and the others did not explicitly mention their racial identity.<sup>3</sup>

### Supplemental Data Sources

The information from the breakout room discussion was triangulated with supplemental data from several sources. This was done to add to trustworthiness of the findings and to assess which issues raised in the initial meeting were reiterated and reinforced as the stakeholder feedback

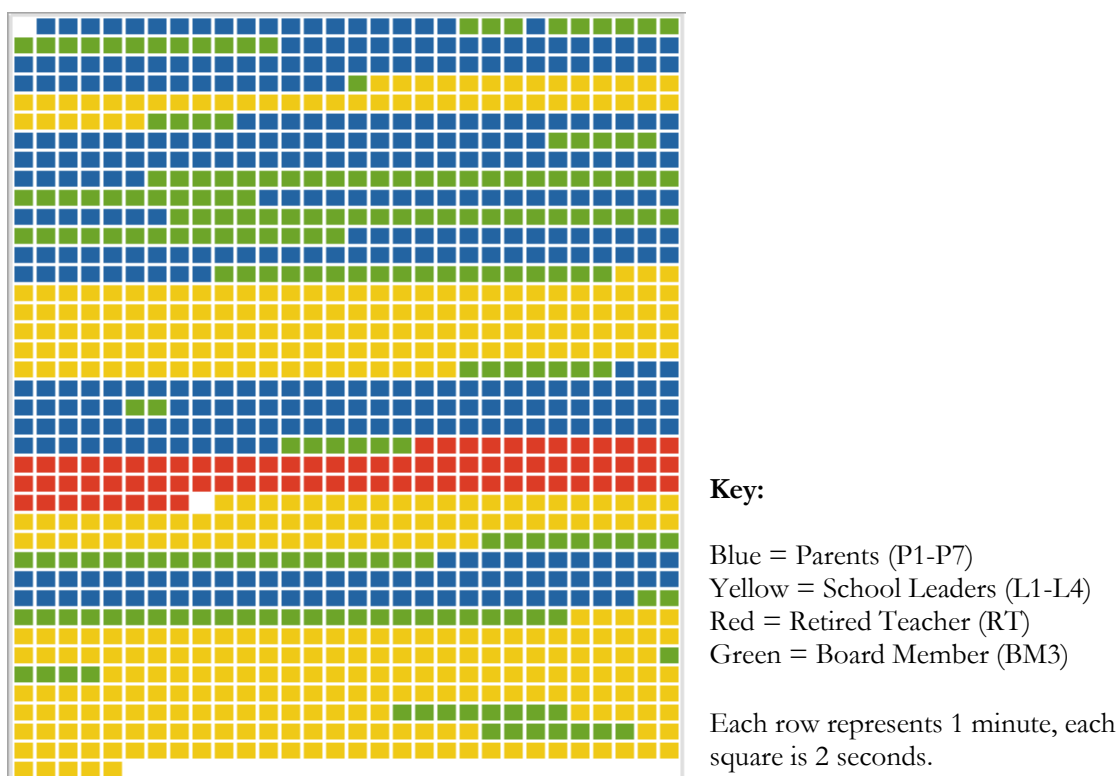
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<sup>3</sup> Not all speakers self-identified as belonging to a given racial or ethnic group; however, where participants did not self-identify, researcher prior knowledge and audio-visual cues were used to draw conclusions about likely racial and gender identities of speakers.

cycle progressed. First, district data from the Pause and Reflect report, state accountability reports and the state's annual report on innovation schools were used to compare data relating to student, teacher, and school leader demographics to those who participated in the stakeholder feedback process (Board Innovation Working Group, 2021; Kottenstette & Paga, 2022). Second, data collected during the stakeholder feedback cycle were presented to the board in the stakeholder feedback report at the board retreat on March 10, 2022 (Research and Evaluation, 2022). The report also included information from a district-issued survey distributed to teachers and leaders in both innovation and traditional schools, and the full dataset was obtained via an open records request. Data from this survey are shown in Table 4. Third, the district accountability committee (DAC), administered a survey in Fall 2021 to teachers in both types of schools, and the (deidentified) comments and suggestions from teachers were considered in the absence of teacher voice present in the breakout room (District Accountability Committee, 2022). Finally, the ability of different stakeholder groups to influence the public narrative was considered by comparing these data to nine different media accounts dated between February 3<sup>rd</sup> and March 23<sup>rd</sup> of 2022, which are summarized in **Error! Reference source not found.** All of the media information and stories were widely shared on social media accounts followed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. These nine were selected to represent a range of political views, styles and formats.

### Figure 1

*Visualization of Breakout Room Speaking Time at DPS Innovation Town Hall, February 2nd, 2022*



**Table 2***Demographic Data for Town Hall Attendees compared to District Demographics*

<b>Region</b>	Town Hall Attendees (%) <sup>4</sup>	DPS Population (%) <sup>5</sup>	<b>Annual Income</b>	Town Hall Attendees (%)	Denver Population (%) <sup>6</sup>	<b>Racial Identity</b>	Town Hall Attendees (%)	DPS Population (%)
<b>Central</b>	10.1	9.4	<b>Below \$15,000</b>	1.2	12.8	<b>African American/Black</b>	7.4	13.7
<b>Far Northeast</b>	5.6	22.5	<b>\$15,000 to \$24,999</b>	1.2	14.1	<b>Caucasian or White</b>	59.4	25.3
<b>Near Northeast</b>	65.2	22.2	<b>\$25,000 to \$49,999</b>	8.6	17.8	<b>Hispanic or Latin@</b>	10.3	52.1
<b>Northwest</b>	3.9	11.1	<b>\$50,000 to \$74,999</b>	5.6	17.2	<b>Other</b>	7.4	8.9
<b>Southeast</b>	12.9	13.4	<b>\$75,000 to \$99,999</b>	9.9	11.8	<b>Prefer not to respond</b>	15.4	
<b>Southwest</b>	2.2	21.4	<b>\$100,000 to \$149,999</b>	13.6	13.1			
			<b>\$150,000 to \$199,999</b>	19.8	6.1			
			<b>over \$200,000</b>	40.1	7.2			

<sup>4</sup> Entry Poll data for the three town hall events were compiled from the “Stakeholder Feedback from Staff Surveys and Community Town Hall Events Regarding EL Proposal on Teacher Rights and Protections”, Presented to the Board on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The district did not release entry poll data about the number of school leaders present.

<sup>5</sup> Denver Public Schools, DPS by the Numbers [website] (Data from October 2022). Retrieved November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022 from <https://www.dpsk12.org/about/facts-figures/#students>

<sup>6</sup> Overview of Denver County School District 1, Colorado – Household Income [website] (Data from 2020 Census). Retrieved November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022 from <https://statisticalatlas.com/school-district/Colorado/Denver-County-School-District-1/Household-Income>.

**Table 3***Breakout Room Speaker Information for DPS Town Hall Event, February 2nd, 2022*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Racial and Gender Identity</b>	<b>Self-Described Role</b>	<b>Number of Times Speaking</b>	<b>Total Speaking Time</b>
<b>P1</b>	White Female	Two children in an i-zone school. On the CSC	2	01:58
<b>P2</b>	Black Female	Four children, two of whom are students with disabilities. They have attended all kinds of DPS schools, with the youngest currently attending an i-zone school.	2	05:36
<b>P3</b>	White Male	Two children - one middle and one high schooler. Both of them are at i-zone schools. On the i-zone board.	1	01:42
<b>P4</b>	White Female	Two children, both in innovation schools.	1	00:47
<b>P5</b>	White Female	Two children in an innovation school. Also serves on the PTSA and as a volunteer at the school.	1	01:49
<b>P6</b>	Hispanic Male	Two children at i-zone High School. Also works as a Baseball coach at that school.	1	01:06
<b>P7</b>	White Female	Recently got legal guardianship of middle school aged niece. Attended an innovation school but transferred out after the principal cut the drama program.	1	02:26
<b>L1</b>	Asian Female	Principal of i-zone elementary school with competitive pre-IB program.	3	03:52
<b>L2</b>	Hispanic Male	Principal of an innovation middle school with a focus on the environment.	1	03:33
<b>L3</b>	White Male	Assistant Principal in a Northeast i-zone high school with an IB program.	2	02:13
<b>L4</b>	White Female	Principal of a i-zone middle school with a competitive pre-IB program.	2	02:40
<b>RT</b>	White Female	Retired 25-year veteran teacher and union member. Has taught in both innovation and traditional schools.	1	02:53
<b>BM3</b>	White Male	At large board representative elected in November 2021. Former teacher at innovation high school.	9	09:01
<b>FT</b>	Afro-Latino Male	A Black teacher who was “pushed out” of an innovation school, “because of the teacher that I am”.	n/a	n/a

**Table 4**

*Results from District-Issued Staff Survey Relating to the EL Proposal*

	District-Run Teachers			Innovation Teachers			District-Run Leaders			Innovation Leaders		
<b>Surveys Sent</b>	3353			1707			105			57		
<b>Responses</b>	570			515			47			21		
<b>Response Rate</b>	17%			30%			50%			37%		
<b>Margin of Error</b>	2.4%			2.8%			8.1%			13.9%		
<b>Question/ Response</b>	<i>N</i> <i>R</i> %	<i>Neg</i> %	<i>Pos</i> %	<i>N</i> <i>R</i> %	<i>Neg</i> %	<i>Pos</i> %	<i>N</i> <i>R</i> %	<i>Neg</i> %	<i>Pos</i> %	<i>N</i> <i>R</i> %	<i>Neg</i> %	<i>Pos</i> %
How do you feel about the EL proposal?	13	4	82	28	28	67	15	46	39	5	58	10
How do you think the proposed EL will affect teacher retention?	64	3	33	46	22	33	80	18	2	5	81	14

**Table 5**

*Comparative Media Reports Relating to the EL Proposal*

Source	Date	Type	Author	Title
<b>Denver Gazette</b>	2/2/22	Newspaper	Gottlieb	DPS board throws innovation under the bus
<b>Chalkbeat</b>	2/7/22	Magazine	Asmar	Denver proposal would grant innovation school teachers union job protections
<b>Front Porch</b>	3/1/22	Newspaper	Osborne	DPS Board Looks to Neuter Innovation
<b>Chalkbeat</b>	3/9/22	Magazine	Asmar	Inside the debate over teacher rights and innovation schools in Denver
<b>Denver 7 News</b>	3/9/22	Local News	Haythorn	DPS board debates future of innovation schools and question about teacher rights
<b>Denver Post</b>	3/16/22	Op-ed	Saldana-Spiegal and Schmidt	Opinion: DPS is attacking the innovations that make schools excel
<b>Westward</b>	3/20/22	Magazine	Martinez	Op-Ed: Putting Students First: Why Innovation Works in Denver Public Schools
<b>CBS News</b>	3/23/22	Local News	Staff	Parents, Teachers Worry Proposed School Board Changes Could Negatively Impact Thousands of Students At 52 Innovation Schools
<b>9 news</b>	3/24/22	Local News	Roy	DPS board eyes changes to innovation schools

## Methods and Study Design

This article is part of a larger study exploring the technical, political, and normative barriers encountered by the DPS board in its attempts to modify certain policy components of its PMM in a pursuit of greater district-wide equity. It asks the following questions about the community Town Hall discussion:

- 1) What logics were revealed in the arguments and rhetorical strategies used by stakeholders to justify their opposition to or support of a proposal to extend collective bargaining rights to innovation-school teachers?
- 2) How were stakeholders able to leverage their power and status to influence the policy revisions and the vote to adopt or reject the policy proposal?

The analysis employs CDA as a tool to analyze the arguments, justifications, and strategies of participants in the Town Hall event to understand the negotiation of personal and social identities, and their relationship to power within the institutional environment of DPS. The study combines the analytical methods from CDA with a modified institutional logics framework that includes conceptualizations of teacher professionalism and unions (Douglass Horsford et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2012; Whiteman et al., 2017). The components of this framework allow for consideration of how public discourse associated with an organization (such as a school district) interacts with other organizations (such as a union) or individuals (such as a community member) through a system of power relations.

Through the analysis of language that structures institutional orders and their logics we can see not only how power operates in and through institutional talk, but also ways in which agents attempt to resist being positioned by powerful institutional actors. Furthermore, we can begin to reconstruct meanings and the taken-for-grantedness of language and claims to truth embedded in institutional talk (Whiteman et al., 2017 p. 188).

Understanding how individuals self-identify to the group, follow institutional norms and terms of engagement, use professional language and questioning strategies, cite evidence and respond to others gives information about the sources of legitimacy and authority of underlying institutional logics. By comparing the arguments and justifications from the initial meeting to those raised in subsequent meetings and cited in media reports, we can begin to build a picture of how facts are discursively created and make inferences about the relative power of stakeholder groups to influence policy change (Rogers et al., 2016).

### Analytical Methods

A video recording of the public meeting was manually transcribed using MAX-QDA software and checked for accuracy by two independent reviewers.<sup>7</sup> The transcript included notes on semiotic observations on the speaker such as gestures and facial expressions, using the features on Zoom, and how other participants responded to the speaker. After assigning codes for participant role (Board Member, School Leader, Parent, or Teacher), comments were first coded as generally supportive, neutral, or oppositional towards the EL proposal. An example of a supportive comment might be to say that the EL will improve equity for teachers across school models. Comments

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<sup>7</sup> Punctuation was added by the transcriber. Speech was edited for clarity, such as removing “um” and “ah”. The grammar usage and colloquialisms are the author’s best interpretation of the original. Names of individuals and schools have been removed.

asking for clarification about the EL or personal accounts of experiences with innovation schools were classified as neutral. Comments were classified as oppositional if they spoke about a perceived harm or loss of benefit caused by the EL. Oppositional comments include criticisms of “the process,” district management, and the board’s leadership.

In a second round of coding, the comments of participants were inductively coded to summarize the arguments, questions, or statements that were raised. Some of the comments had clear associations to specific institutional logics—for example, parent comments about “choosing the best school” for their children likely stem from market logics that prioritize values of individual choice. Other comments were less clear and may have had contradictory or multiple meanings and interpretations. For example, several participants raised the issue of “equity” in their justifications; however, what participants meant by that was often ambiguous or had multiple meanings. In these cases, the researcher took into consideration the context of the comment in relation to the role and identity of the speaker, the response that the comment received, and the degree to which similar comments were reiterated or rephrased as the meeting progressed. These were further consolidated these into four themes: “The Process,” “Autonomy,” “Equity,” and “Teacher Rights”.<sup>8</sup>

For the final round of coding, comments were evaluated using a CDA approach and the Institutional Logics in Education framework to assess the relative power and privilege of the individuals who spoke up. A secondary set of codes was developed to include observations about tone, gestures, adherence to norms for a virtual meeting, how the comment was received by other participants, and if they referred to other participants. For this stage, the researcher considered the stated identity of the speaker, and compared their comments to district-collected data, media reports, and communications from i-zone leaders and managers. Most parents and all of the school leaders named the school that they associated with. This meant that the student demographics, fundraising ability, and relationship to non-profit advocacy groups could be included in the assessment. This allowed the researcher to assess the speaker’s relationship to power and privilege in district politics and the relative ability of stakeholder groups to motivate individuals to attend these events. Also present at this town hall event were at least two local reporters, who summarized the community discussions in media reports that were distributed to the public through newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts. This allowed the researcher to consider the way that the voices of stakeholders were amplified or marginalized in the creation of a public narrative about the EL proposal.

## Findings

Consistent with other studies examining the type of individuals most likely to engage in public comment sessions, Table 2 shows that the attendees were substantially wealthier and whiter than the population of the district and were more likely to live in Northeast Denver, the region with the greatest number of innovation schools (Research and Evaluation, 2022). This illustrates how this relatively small population has a significant structural advantage when it comes to having their needs and desires considered by policymakers. Of the twelve individuals who spoke in the breakout room, only one (P2) mentioned race as a factor that affected her children’s educational experience. All of

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<sup>8</sup> Comments about “the process” included criticizing the timing, the communication, or the motivation for the proposal. Comments about “autonomy” included statements about their innovation status, their curriculum, the structure of the school day, field trips, school supplies, and the structure of their leadership model. Comments about “equity” included statements that saw innovation status as both a tool to improve equity within a school, and as one that exacerbates inequity between schools. Comments about “teacher rights” included portrayals of teachers and teaching, as well as statements about the roles and purposes of collective bargaining agreements.



the breakout room participants followed linguistic and institutional norms of polity such as raising hands, thanking the host, and keeping their microphones muted when not speaking.

### **Status**

Institutional logics assign status to individuals according to their priorities and beliefs about authority and legitimacy (Thornton et al., 2012). These statuses are dependent upon mutual recognition and unspoken social contracts about how and where to speak. Statements made by higher-status individuals are viewed as more legitimate and/or knowledgeable than those with lower status within the organization. In the context of a school district, status is assigned to a person based on their role and social connections within the institution (Whiteman et al., 2017). At the start of the breakout room session, participants were asked to introduce themselves and their relationship to innovation schools. The speakers identified as either a school leader, a teacher, a parent, or a community member. Table 3 shows how participants described their role in relation to the district. Each of these roles has a certain institutional status that affords members the right to speak about a given issue. These institutional statuses coexist with other forms of social capital including those associated with race, class, educational attainment, and social networks (Whiteman et al., 2017). This section describes the role and status of speakers in the breakout room.

### ***Board Members***

In the town hall event, school board members assigned themselves the role of neutral facilitators seeking stakeholder feedback on the upcoming vote. The role of board member allowed them to set the terms of engagement by making decisions about how stakeholders were allowed to participate (Whiteman et al., 2017). This included disabling the chat function on Zoom (questions and comments were directed to the entry poll google form), randomly assigning people to breakout rooms, and setting norms that participants were expected to follow.

### ***School Leaders***

Although entry polls did not include the number school leaders attending the town hall sessions, in the recorded breakout room session four of the twelve speakers (33%) were school leaders—all of them from innovation schools, and three of them from schools in the Northeast Denver Innovation Zone (NDIZ). Three of the leaders represented schools serving student populations significantly wealthier and whiter than the DPS student populations (Board Innovation Working Group, 2021). As shown in Figure 1, school leaders were given the most speaking time, especially toward the end of the session. Three of the leaders spoke more than once, and all school-leader comments were coded as oppositional toward the proposal. This is consistent with data from the district staff survey (Table 4) that showed innovation school leaders as the only group with a majority negative view of the proposal. Comments from leaders implied mistrust of the district and of the board members' motivations and conveyed a sense that the proposal was a threat to their status as an autonomous school. School leaders spoke authoritatively with presumed insider knowledge about district and board operations. Although the purpose of the Town Hall was to relate questions and concerns to the school board, two of the leaders took it upon themselves to address parent questions directly, including their interpretation of the intent and purpose of the EL proposal.

### ***Parents***

By coming to the meeting and speaking directly to the board member, parents communicated a belief that their opinions should be taken into consideration by district decision-makers. When introducing themselves to the group, most parents included additional roles to signal

their insider status, such as PTSA member, coach, or volunteer. Toward the start of the breakout session, most parent comments were classified as neutral toward the EL. Questions from parents asked for clarification about the purpose and the process of ELs, and these were generally less hostile in tone than those from school leaders. As the session progressed, more parent comments were coded as oppositional. Parents expressed concern over how their child might be affected by the policy change, and some conveyed fear that their child could lose an educational advantage. Parents tended to downplay their knowledge of the EL proposal through comments such as “I’m not sure if I am understanding correctly, but...”; however, the similarity of expressed concerns suggested that some parents had been prepped beforehand. This was confirmed by supplementary data sources that included communications from i-zone leaders containing suggested talking points and information about the “negative impact” the proposal would have on innovation schools (Dennis, personal communication, 2022; Magana, 2022).

### ***Teachers***

Notably absent from the Town Hall meeting were any current teachers—arguably the group most affected by the proposed policy. Therefore, this analysis should not be assumed to represent the opinions and feelings of current DPS teachers (both traditional and innovation) toward the EL proposal. Rather, the analysis aims to capture the arguments and beliefs *about* teachers and CBAs made by innovation school leaders and parents attending the town hall event. It is important to note that, contrary to statements by school leaders on behalf of their staff, the results from the district-administered survey indicate that the majority of DPS teachers (85 % of traditional, 67% of innovation) viewed the EL as positive.

In the breakout room, one speaker identified as a “retired teacher and community member” (RT). She spoke of her experiences teaching in both innovation and traditional public schools and expressed a positive view of the EL proposal. RT directly addressed what she perceived as a mischaracterization of the proposal and used her time to explain why it was important that teachers have access to rights and protections in the CBA. RT was the only person who quoted directly from the EL proposal and the only person that the board member did not thank for their contribution. After the breakout groups reconvened and the board was wrapping up the meeting, a former teacher (FT), held up a handwritten sign directing viewers to a statement by the Black teacher caucus of the union, and gestured that he would like to speak. When he did not get a response from the board, he un-muted his mic himself, but was quickly re-muted by the facilitator. After several attempts to cut him off, the board member allowed FT to speak directly to others in the session. He identified himself as follows:

I’m a Black teacher that was recruited by [school] because of the teacher that I am! I was pushed out of [school] and pushed out of DPS because of the teacher that I am! (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 95)

The lack of response to RT’s comments by other participants in the breakout room, and the attempts to prevent FT from speaking during the wrap up time suggests that those present at the event were not particularly interested in hearing their perspectives, despite the fact that both RT and FT were speaking from personal experience. This implies that these two participants did not hold a high status in relation to other attendees.

This interaction was significant because FT’s rhetorical strategy broke the terms of engagement set by the school board. The status of board members allowed them to exercise a “right to exclude” by muting FT’s microphone. When FT broke the social and institutional norms by interrupting the meeting, he also broke linguistic norms by turning to the use of African American dialect. In choosing to break social, institutional, and linguistic protocols, FT positioned himself as

an outsider to the institution. This purposefully oppositional behavior is described by Yosso (2020) and has been identified as a strategy stemming from community logics and used by members of minoritized groups during school board meetings as a way to resist power stemming from white supremacy (Sampson & Bertrand, 2022).

### **Themes and Justifications**

In the Town Hall event, the main arguments and justifications given in support of or opposition to the EL proposal were categorized into four themes: The Process, Autonomy, Equity, and Teacher Rights. This section describes and illustrates some of the comments that were coded into each of the themes and how they relate to the institutional logics described in Table 1.

#### ***The Process***

The first point of tension identified in the second round of coding were ways that breakout room participants criticized “the process” that the board used to introduce the policy proposal. Leaders expressed surprise and displeasure that they had not known about the EL until it was presented at the board meeting and indignation that they had not been consulted beforehand. For example, L1 questioned why “in a COVID year” they would be “hit with” the proposal “suddenly” and “out of nowhere.” Similarly, L2 stated that there is a “process being circumvented,” and that he thinks the proposal is an “overcorrection” that he likened to “using a hammer instead of a scalpel to fix a problem.” Comments such as these imply that school leaders believed that they were entitled to be consulted by the district and included in the policy-making process before its introduction to the public. As all four leaders came from “high performing” schools, their professional status allowed them to openly question the competence of the district and position themselves as the kind of experts the board should turn to before making policy decisions. Leaders collectively reinforced a narrative that the EL was written without the input of qualified professionals, and that the correct process for changing policy was one that was data driven. They used institution-specific language (“data-driven,” “differentiate”) to signal insider status and position themselves as protectors of “what’s best for kids”. For example, L1 begins by asking the board member for data:

Where’s the research behind this proposal? Is something truly not working? How do we know that? I would ask those questions first -- before processing this to a vote in that we don't have the data behind this. That is very dangerous for students. (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 43)

Similarly, L3 emphasizes the use of quantitative data and reiterates the implication that the policy proposal presents a threat to his schools’ ability to serve students. “Obviously, we use data to drive instruction every single day to do what’s best for kids—to differentiate for our kids ... I would hate for this to be harmful to what we’re doing” (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 65).

These statements indicate that leaders consider data an important value that should control how decisions are made in schools. This suggests that leaders drew from market-logics, which place a high value on quantitative data as a source of legitimacy. Similar to other analyses of school board public comments, these tactics might be considered a way that advantaged groups sought to maintain their status by limiting access to resources (in this case teacher rights and protections), as a form of “boundary maintenance” (Castro et al., 2022; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Notably, none of the leaders provided any data or evidence to support their own statements that waivers to collective bargaining were beneficial to students. Neither did they cite any of the readily available data cited as justification for the EL proposal such as the Innovation Pause-and-Reflect report, the DAC teacher survey, or the concerns raised by DCTA. This suggests a belief that their status as school leaders

allowed them to define what kind of data was considered “legitimate” and to dismiss any data incongruent with their logics.

### ***Autonomy***

A second theme that arose through the coding analysis concerns comments that relate to the perceived benefits that come with the autonomous status afforded to innovation schools. Neoliberal market logics position school autonomy as a mechanism for individual schools to respond to the needs of their students without the constraints of bureaucratic “red tape”. Theoretically, with the freedom to act on their professional expertise, school leaders can develop their own curriculum, schedules, discipline practices and teaching staff to address the demands of state and local definitions of “school quality” (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Consistent with this framing, a stated purpose of Colorado’s Innovation Schools Act is an example of this framing of autonomy: “to obtain greater individual school autonomy and managerial flexibility in order to implement diverse approaches to learning” (CDE, 2022).

The way that school leaders and parents in the breakout room discussed autonomy indicates a belief in the importance of markets, choice, and consumer demand in the provision of educational services to DPS students. Parents cited “flexibility” when they justified their reasons for choosing an innovation school for their child, although none defined what exactly that meant. Consistent with notions of opportunity hoarding, parents expressed a desire to secure what they saw as an educational advantage for their children. For example, P5, who described herself as being “on the PTSA board” of a high-performing innovation school explains, “We chose this flexible innovation school, and so that’s something that we really embrace and feels threatened here.” (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 51)

Throughout the session, school leaders portrayed the operational environment in innovation schools as meaningfully different to that in traditional schools, focusing on what happens “in our building,” and attributing their success to their autonomous status. From the perspective of school leaders, the EL proposal posed a direct threat to their special status as leaders of “successful” innovation schools. No school leaders discussed tensions between school autonomy and district-wide equity, even after an opportunity arose to respond to a parent who asked if innovation schools might have an “unfair advantage” over traditional district schools. Although the EL proposal related specifically to collective bargaining waivers, leaders emphasized the inherent necessity of waivers while describing their school’s innovation status in ways that extend far beyond the scope of teacher rights. For example, L2 explicitly associated the EL with the ability to take students on field trips.

This is like, this is a domino that just opens a can worms for us... My 6th grade team goes to Utah every year at the end of the year. I have to turn around and say no, you can't take a trip ... I think that's just what a lot of us are experiencing within the language—that it takes stuff away from my school. (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 53)

Note how L2’s comment creates the impression that the proposal is not simply about teacher rights, but an attack on their ability to provide services that are portrayed as a special benefit of their autonomous status. Other leaders reinforced the association between the EL proposal and seemingly unrelated aspects of school operations including their ability to purchase classroom supplies, hire paraprofessionals, select curriculum, and set bell times. The retired teacher (RT) attempted to address this, stating that, having carefully read the proposal, she saw nothing relating to “curriculum or the ability to take field trips” and described how the district allows all types of schools to have autonomy over programming and curriculum, and that all types of DPS schools take students on field trips. “This has been brought up more than once, so it concerns me that this is being presented

as some kind of imposition on freedom on curriculum [or] other creative practices" (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 59).

Rather than respond to RT's stated concerns, the next speaker, L1, redirected the conversation, stating somewhat cryptically that "there are reasons why innovation schools and zones exist," and suggesting the board look at "what best practices are being successful", reinforcing the notion that innovation schools are intrinsically different to other DPS schools.

### ***Equity***

A third point of tension that arose through this analysis was how participants described the concept of equity. Scholars of the PMM approach have described how individual school autonomy can create tensions with conceptualizations of equity. As Bulkley and her colleagues explain:

Those who favor the PMM idea, and its underlying theory of action often discuss equity in terms of equitable access to higher-quality schools for students. However, for students, schools, and educators, other issues of equity arose that largely focused on potential disparities resulting from school-based autonomy. (Bulkley et al., 2020, p. 140)

Equity discourse is frequently invoked in education policy debates and is a term that might be interpreted differently within different institutional logics, as described in Table 1. Equity is listed as one of the six core values of DPS, demonstrating the term's centrality to the district's institutional identity (DPS, 2022). The way individuals invoke equity—what it looks like, and how it might be achieved—is contingent upon their institutional logics. Different conceptualizations of equity were evidenced in the breakout room discussion after P1 asked if the EL proposal might have been in response to a "lack of equity." P2 responded by explaining that, in her experiences as a Black parent,

Equity doesn't exist in the school system, so it's not something available right—in any school, whether it be innovation, traditional, charter... I don't know how [the proposal] would create equitable practices because [equity] isn't there in schools *as a whole*. (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 41)

P2 describes equity as an issue that needs to be tackled on a systemic level and implies that equity will be attained when all students, in all school types, have the same access to resources and opportunities. This indicates that P2 could be drawing from community logics that value equity of inputs (resources) and that is measured through authentic engagement with historically marginalized groups. From P2's perspective, the EL proposal is a potentially useful bureaucratic tool to ensure that the "rules of the game" are equally applied across schooling models. L1 responds to P2 saying,

I want to build off of what [P2] said around equity. If we're talking about equity, it means doing what's best for kids. And what's good for kids is *different in every single building*. (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 43)

While L1 says she is "building off" P2's comment, she actually redefines equity as something that is different for every school. From L1's perspective, equity is a measurable output evidenced by an individual school's ability to close the achievement gap, a notion consistent with market logics. As the leader of a majority-white, well-resourced innovation school, L1's comments about equity being different in each school demonstrates a lack of awareness (or concern) about DPS students attending other schools without the kind of resources and support available at her school. L1's reframing of the term is subsequently reiterated by P3, who says, "Equity is something like [L1] said—best determined by those on the ground, not those 30,000 feet above them" (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 45).

The fact that P3 repeats comments from the higher-status L1 (leader of a majority-white i-zone school) over P2's personal account as "as a mother of Black children, two of whom are special needs," illustrates the importance of professional status in the micro-level interactions in the Zoom breakout room. This example highlights how institutional status is intertwined with other social statuses associated with race and class, and how symbolic aspects of language and rhetorical strategies can reinforce the power structures that correspondingly reinforce and perpetuate institutionalized racism (Ray, 2019).

### ***Teacher Rights***

The final theme that arose through the analysis were comments and arguments that relate to divergent views of teachers, unions, and CBAs. As described in the background section, teachers in different types of DPS schools have different relationships to the union and understandings of their role (Kurtz & White, 2022). Innovation teachers are arguably willing to trade traditional union protections for the autonomy and sometimes leadership roles offered by innovation schools (Hashim et al., 2021). Since there were no current DPS teachers in the breakout room, this analysis covers how leaders and parents talked about teacher rights in the absence of a substantial teacher voice, and how their understandings and portrayals of teachers and unions can indicate the institutional logics of stakeholders.

Throughout the breakout room conversation, school leaders downplayed allegations of unfair dismissals or uncompensated labor. In the narrative cast by these leaders, innovation teachers were paid "following the scale steps of the district," and "additional compensation" was available to "honor those who do a little bit more" (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 53). From their perspective, having teachers vote on the innovation plan was "more democratic" than collective bargaining. For example, L4 states, "80% of your staff has to vote on the innovation plan and approve it, and so many more teachers vote on their innovation plan than [the DCTA contract]" (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 67). L1 is more explicit about this:

What's best for kids in our building can be determined by the staff; isn't that the point of them voting on this? Whereby our staff gets to vote on this, and they have a higher percentage required for approval versus what DCTA does for their contract which is voted by like what? I think 11 or 12 people? (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 43)

Although school leaders made statements that were seemingly supportive of teachers, they did not address the concern about equity of teacher rights that was the stated justification for the EL proposal. After a parent question about this, BM3 described his experience as a former innovation teacher who had ideological differences when a new leader was appointed to his innovation school: "Many innovation schools [waive the DCTA] grievance process... I have never had anybody explain to me how this benefits students" (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 50).

Leaders responded to this by stating that they were "sorry that happened," followed by the justifications for the waiver. For example, L3 states that "teacher rights are really important" but "maybe there is a financial difficulty and I have to fire some staff," insinuating that waiving the grievance process will create financial hardships. L1 again explicitly positions teacher rights in opposition to "what's best for kids" (a phrase also used by L3 and BM3) in asking, "Are we weighing what's good for protection of staff versus what might be best for kids?" (CFS 2/2/22, Pos. 61).

Parent comments showed a more varied interpretation as to the role of CBAs. For example, P4 wanted "teachers to be fairly compensated, ... to be fairly treated" (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 49). P7 shared a personal experience of a beloved drama teacher being "let go" from an innovation school

in a way that felt unjust. To P7, the EL proposal offered way to ensure that innovation leaders be accountable for how teachers are treated, and to ensure continuity of the educational approach of the school in the event of leadership change. P2 was primarily concerned with how the EL proposal would “make sure that we [have] more Black teachers,” expressing that, in her experiences “putting four kids through the system,” “Black teachers and admin are not being hired. And when they are, they're put under a different set of scrutiny” (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 57). This claim was restated at the close of the meeting when FT held up a hand-written sign to the camera about disparities in compensation for Black teachers (Asmar, 2020). After being allowed to speak, he implored the board to approve the EL:

We don't need any more time! [Journalist] is in this group! She the one that wrote that article 2 years ago! She talked about this Black excellence plan that y'all ain't—are not—holding to! Let's stop playin'! How long are we going to keep pushing time away? Until we have no more Black teachers? 'Til we have no more Brown teachers? 'Til we have no more white teachers that actually care? (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 95)

FT offered to connect board members with educators who have similar experiences to his own and accuses innovation leaders of “not standing on their values”. When he spoke, some of the leaders and others in the group visibly rolled their eyes, and a couple of them appeared to be laughing. They did not unmute in response to his request or attempt to engage with him. This interaction shows that for FT, the conflict is not just over the EL proposal; it is also taking place on the level of meaning and group identity—the institution assumes a certain right to control the direction of the meeting, but FT positions his racial identity more meaningful than his institutional identity as (former) teacher.

### **Power and Privilege**

When statements made by higher status individuals are repeated in ways that are legitimized through an institutionally specific set of mechanisms, they are presented to the public as facts. These facts depend upon the presuppositions of those defining them and are derived from the institutional logics of the individuals in positions of authority (Whiteman et al., 2017). After the breakout rooms reconvened, the role of the board members allowed them to decide which statements were repeated and shared with the other town hall attendees in the summaries they provided to the whole group. BM3 summarized what happened in the breakout room that was the focus of this analysis:

... there was some discussion of equity and that in the absence of it systemwide, what is it that's not working? And what's best for kids is best determined at ground level, so this feels like an over-correction.... swinging a hammer instead of a scalpel. (CFS 2/2/22 pos. 79)

The summary repeated several phrases used by school leaders in the breakout room, including the concerns about the process and emphasizing the role of school autonomy as means to achieve equity. While BM3 also expressed support for collective bargaining rights, he did not push back against the implication that extending collective bargaining rights to teachers was a threat to student wellbeing.

Local reporters were also present at stakeholder feedback sessions, which were described in media reports that were distributed to the public through newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts. In addition, the i-zones IOs put on a series of parallel town hall events, organized a petition and letter writing campaign, and coordinated speakers for public comment with lists of talking points (Lyra Colorado, 2022). As part of this study, the four above-described themes were compared against nine different media accounts from various stages of the stakeholder feedback

cycle, which are summarized in **Error! Reference source not found.** These accounts included 16 quotes from innovation school leaders, five from innovation school parents, and four from innovation teachers, the majority being from i-zone schools. All but two quotes repeated arguments and justifications similar to those used by parents and leaders in the breakout room against the EL proposal. As the vote drew closer, the tone of the reports grew increasingly oppositional of the EL and critical of the school board's tactics. For example, Northeast Denver's Front Porch newspaper ran a front page story with the headline, "DPS Board Looks to Neuter Innovation" (Osborne, 2022).

Yet the accounts in popular media were contradicted by the findings in the Pause and Reflect study and by data gathered from a district-wide survey administered in February of 2022 asking teachers and leaders to indicate their level of support or opposition of the EL. As shown in Table 4, the data show that the majority of teachers in both traditional and innovation schools expressed a positive view of the proposal. The only group with a majority negative view was innovation-school leaders, but this was not considered statistically significant due to the small sample size. At the time of the study, only 12 out of 204 schools were i-zone schools, yet the views of individuals representing these 12 schools dominated the media narrative. The dominant presence of this small group of powerful individuals was repeated at multiple other events during the feedback cycle, many of which included the same individuals repeating similar arguments and justifications described in this analysis.

## Discussion

When the school board made the decision to take the proposal "to the community," they established a precedent that the decision on whether to expand contractual rights of teachers would be contingent upon the favorable opinion of the public. However, as described, there is a disconnect between the board's stated desire to "take it to the community" and the community that showed up. In the breakout room discussion, the majority of arguments and justifications from stakeholders indicated a set of presuppositions that include a rejection of bureaucratic control, and support for autonomy, school choice, and a belief in the market approach. Using the institutional logics framework, this analysis shows that market logics were used by the majority of individuals participating in the feedback cycle in arguments and justifications both for and against the EL proposal. This suggests that market logics have become embedded into the core beliefs and practices of DPS school district—a finding congruent with other analyses that describe the increasing dominance of market logics in other social institutions that exist within a capitalist economy (Friedland, 2017, Scott & Holme, 2016).

Attendees who identified as innovation school leaders and parents were able to question the legitimacy of the policy process and (re)define concepts such as equity and autonomy as marketable commodities that can be quantifiably measured and used to meritocratically compare schools. These arguments and justifications were repeated in subsequent events and in multiple media accounts as the feedback cycle progressed, creating a public narrative about the intents and purposes of the EL proposal that moved the conversation away from collective bargaining rights for teachers and toward individual rights of school leaders and parents.

The school board responded to the public pressure by amending the EL proposal, making significant concessions to the demands of innovation school leaders. Even after these concessions, five of seven union-endorsed board members were persuaded to reverse their initial support of extending collective bargaining rights to innovation schools. Several school board members cited claims and arguments provided by innovation proponents in their justifications for amending the EL proposal, and one board member stated that his no vote was in response to the demands from



innovation school leaders (DPS Board of Education, 3-22-22). This suggests that, despite the “flipping” of the school board, the individuals and groups behind DPS innovation schools continued to exert a high degree of influence over district decision-making. The fact that a small group of powerful individuals were able to successfully control the media narrative and public opinion to mobilize against a policy change illustrates how Denver’s powerful advocacy groups exert a high degree of influence over school district policy and decision-making (Hashim et al., 2021; Scott & Holme, 2016).

However, despite the rhetoric coming from these powerful groups, there is evidence that this domination is not complete, and that other logics continue to exist alongside and in tension with the “official” version of the educational landscape of DPS. The presence of counter-narratives was observed in the breakout room in comments from the one Black parent, who, in her advocacy for more Black teachers and her depictions of equity as a collective goal indicate the presence of logics associated with communities, and in particular those drawing from African-American community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2020). Similarly, the tactics used by the former teacher to deliberately disrupt institutional norms indicate that he is operating under a set of presuppositions that include understanding the district as a structurally unjust organization that upholds white supremacy. The fact that these perspectives were absent from the media accounts is just as illustrative of the way power operates in Denver as is the dominance of the perspectives of the city’s well-connected political and financial elite. This phenomenon is not limited to media accounts of school board meetings—it has been described by a number of researchers and reporters with expertise concerning the local political, racial and class dynamics (Gordon, 2022; Rubenstein, 2021; Wiley, 2017).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the arguments and rhetorical strategies used within a Zoom breakout room by stakeholders as they engaged in a public discussion of a proposal to extend collective bargaining rights to teachers in innovation schools, and to analyze how stakeholder groups were able to access power and privilege to influence the public narrative and the outcome of the vote. This analysis suggests that a small number of leaders with ties to elite actors and organizations that champion the portfolio approach are still able to wield a high degree of influence on the technical, material, and normative components of Denver’s PMM. The findings of this study demonstrate that the core beliefs and practices associated with market-based school reform have become entrenched into the norms and practices of the majority of school district leaders, including the individuals on the school board. They indicate that, despite recent turmoil and changing political climate, these beliefs have endured the changes in leadership and the 2020 pandemic. While the degree of influence of the actors described in this analysis on this relatively small group on an ostensibly union-supported board might seem surprising, their degree of power and control is consistent with several critical studies of DPS’s portfolio approach (Bulkley et al., 2020; Gordon, 2022; Marsh et al., 2021, Scott et al., 2015).

What is perhaps more surprising is that, given the degree of power and influence that reform organizations have in Denver, union-aligned interests would be able to force these groups to spend a significant amount of time and resources in defending their position. This stands out as an exception to other large PMM districts with a similar degree of influence from so-called reformers (Apple, 2021; Lake & Jochim, 2017). The continued presence of voices and tactics drawing from the Black radical tradition is also noteworthy. Given the racial history of the city, the ability of these individuals to speak back to power, even in settings dominated by whiteness, illustrates the tenacity of this community and offers hope that there are ways to nudge the district toward more racially just goals.

This study adds to the body of knowledge about the ways that public discourse can affect policymaking and how the voices of different stakeholder groups are legitimized or marginalized in the institutionalized spaces where policy is debated. The findings help us understand the ideological and institutional forces that empower certain individuals to control the official version of events. The findings also demonstrate that, while market logics appear to be the dominant logics in the context of policy debate, they are not universal. The analysis illustrates how competing logics push back on the official version and reveal the tensions between autonomy and control in the PMM approach. This is helpful because contests over meaning, perhaps with continued pressure or more organized collective action, can create opportunities for the exercise of strategic agency and power. Future studies might extend the framework to other contexts that include variations in the ways that districts elicit public feedback and the types of policy up for public debate.

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