

Obfuscating systemic racism in media representation of a school district state takeover

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From left, Christian Z. Goering, Trish Lopez and Holly Sheppard Riesco. Credit: University of Arkansas

A group of researchers at the U of A recently examined the media portrayal of education policy in Arkansas surrounding a 2019 decision to continue or terminate the state's takeover of the Little Rock School District.

Their findings were published last week in the *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, a peer-reviewed, open-access, international, multilingual and multidisciplinary journal focused on education policies.

Doctoral students Trish Lopez and Holly Sheppard Riesco, along with their adviser in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Christian Z. Goering, co-authored the article. "It has broad appeal, as it is relevant to the educational situations in Arkansas and several other locations across the country, most recently Houston, Texas," Goering said. "Our research can be used to understand current and future policies as they pretend to be 'race-neutral' but are in reality deeply connected to racism."

The researchers have 40 years of combined experience across elementary-, secondary- and higher-education settings, including first-hand experience as educators in Arkansas. Lopez is a doctoral student and fifth-grade teacher who taught in Arkansas for nine years. Goering, a professor of English education, has worked with teachers and teacher educators in the state for 16 years. Riesco is a third-year doctoral student who taught in Arkansas schools for 15 years.

Their research centers around how takeovers of school districts happen most often in urban, majority-Black communities. "We wanted to examine if media portrayals of a decision to continue or end state control supported, refuted or called out this pattern of systemic racism," they noted in a video the three created to go along with the article.

The researchers used "critical [policy](#) discourse analysis" to study the

issue, which offered a methodological framework allowing them to consider policy in a relational, constitutive and context-specific way. The three analyzed major print media sources that discussed and conceptualized the state takeover of LRSD for public stakeholders. "Given the results of this study, we have determined that education policy decisions in Little Rock were part of a pattern of systemic racism, in this instance enacted through the neoliberal state takeover of the LRSD," the article states.

In 2015, the state selected the Little Rock School District as a district for state takeover following a state plan to meet federal mandates for schools classified as academically distressed based on student achievement scores. By law, the mandate of state control is reexamined at the five-year mark to make further determinations for the future of a [school](#) district, the article notes.

As this five-year deadline for LRSD approached near the end of 2019, Arkansas print media sources covered the policymakers involved and described proposed plans to move forward. The researchers studied these various articles.

"Despite representation of both sides, the policy decision to grant [local control](#) operating under a memorandum of understanding with the state serves to underscore how the dominant, neoliberal frame continued to influence the policy process," the article states. Their findings emphasize the role of community engagement, [media coverage](#) and "the importance of taking a critical stance when reading news media."

More information: Trish A. Lopez et al, Obfuscating systemic racism: A critical policy discourse analysis on the operation of neoliberal ideas in media representation of a school district state takeover, *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (2023). [DOI: 10.14507/epaa.31.6707](https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.31.6707)

Provided by University of Arkansas

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