Dreaming beyond education policy: a BlackCrit analysis of ESEA and ESSA

Robert P. Robinson

SEEK, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York, New York, USA, and

Jordan Bell

Department of English and Humanities,
SUNY Dutchess Community College, Poughkeepsie, USA and
Department of Urban Education, CUNY The Graduate Center, New York, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to analyze the first major federal education policy, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the most recent federal policy, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, through a Black critical theory (BlackCrit) lens to understand better how these educational policies have served as antiblack projects. Furthermore, this study locates examples of educational Freedom Dreams in the past and present to imagine new possibilities in Black education.

Design/methodology/approach – By analyzing education policy documents and history through BlackCrit methods, the authors expose how education policy is inherently an antiblack project. Freedom Dreams catalyze possibilities for future education.

Findings – The data confirms that while these policies purport equity and accountability in education, they, in practice, exacerbate antiblackness through inequitably mandated standardized testing, distributed funding and policed schooling.

Originality/value – This paper applies BlackCrit analysis of education policy to reimagine Black educational possibilities.

Keywords Antiblackness, BlackCrit, ESEA, ESSA, Freedom dreams, Grassroots organizing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The authors first met through City University of New York's Urban Education Program. Robert P. Robinson is a black gay cis man, historian of education and Africana studies

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professor who looks at the history of Black education and its implications for curriculum and pedagogy in the present. Jordan Bell is a cis black father, who is an English and Black studies educator who seeks to disrupt educational antiblackness and create Black education spaces (Bell and Sealey-Ruiz, 2023; Warren and Coles, 2020) intended to center, support and heal black students. We came to this project with a desire to connect as Black academics with shared interests in Black possibility.

Before meeting at a Black critical theory (BlackCrit) research conference in summer 2022 and discussing *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*, we collectively reflected upon our antiblack educational experiences and questioned how policy shaped them. We then determined our piece had to be historical, with attention to antiblackness while still exploring opportunities that existed through Black grassroots efforts. We have come to understand antiblackness as "any private or state-sanctioned action that seeks to individually or collectively undermine, mute, other, or dehumanize Black folx" (Bell and Sealey-Ruiz, 2023, p. 2). Dumas (2016) argued that education policy positions black people as the problem that must be fixed. Moreover, as the first comprehensive federal education policy, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) positions itself as saving grace but frames black students within deficit language. All subsequent policy derived from that premise advances new antiblack orientations.

Mindful of the antiblack origins of United States Education policy, we write this piece as both a truth-telling statement about interlocking institutional inequality and as a dreaming project – an opportunity to build with each other as scholars and to envision spaces for other scholars to take up dreams and/or dream anew. We open with brief histories of the ESEA and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), focusing on precursors, timing, funding and drawbacks. Next, we discuss our analysis through BlackCrit and Freedom Dreaming. After analyzing each policy, we examine Black Freedom Dreaming projects within and beyond education policy. We close with implications to push the dream forward.

History of Elementary and Secondary Education Act

In 1965, as part of his Great Society and War on Poverty initiatives, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the ESEA – one of the first federal policies that established government influence in education. In 1958, fearful of Soviet global takeover, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) to offer federal funding for training in math and science education (Casalaspi, 2017). NDEA "was not designed to equalize opportunity but to raise the academic quality of schoolwork in the sciences, mathematics and foreign languages, especially for the most academically talented students" (Kaestle, 2016, p. 41). Eventually, Johnson signed ESEA which extended NDEA's attempt to combat international communism and the space wars. While the population focus shifted under ESEA, the disciplines were similar. One critical component of ESEA, especially concerning black Americans, was the Title I clause (Juravich, 2015), which provides funds for supplementary educational materials to support students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families (Skinner, 2018). At the same time, this legislation tasked states with adopting standardized tests to track local district funding and educational efforts. On paper, ESEA met the needs of students from lower SES backgrounds (often overrepresented by black people and folx of color). In practice, however, ESEA had a fraught start.

The early rollout of ESEA did not yield robust funding. 1965 was the only year the program had been fully funded (More Schools Eligible, 2018). Title I was supposed to close literacy and mathematics *gaps* in education. By federal measures, schools demonstrated mixed results. Math and reading greatly improved for black children ages 9–13 (Barton and Coley, 2010), but those same scores for 17-year-old students marginally increased (Note: the

authors do not fully subscribe to standardized metrics and mainstream notions of *success*). The notion that education was the great equalizer, even with the modest 6% graduation rate increase between 1960 and 1980 (Murnane, 2013), was invalid. Education had not done enough to *save* black people economically. In fact, by the late 1980s, 40% of black people were below the poverty line, despite an increase in college attendance; 20% of black college graduates were also earning poverty-level wages (Kantor and Brenzel, 1992).

Beyond the mixed economic results, ESEA ushered increased standardized testing, resulting in the 1983 Reagan-prompted *A Nation at Risk* report along with iterations of ESEA, including Clinton's Goals 2000, George W. Bush's NCLB and the most recent Obama-led ESSA. While each iteration was different, all had a home base in the original ESEA and Title I. To qualify for Title I funding, schools had to comply with standardized tests. Part of this accountability was to guard against further misuse of funds. Former US Attorney General Robert Kennedy "feared that Title I schools might not always use the federal funds to help low-income children as the legislation intended" (Vinovskis, 2022, p. 246). Ironically, the attempt to mitigate inequitable spending only increased inequitable testing pressures that negatively affected black children. This legacy persisted with each reauthorization of ESEA.

History of No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act

Before discussing Obama's contribution to education policy, we must first acknowledge NCLB. In January 2002, George W. Bush signed NCLB into law. His administration argued that NCLB's role was to ensure "high expectations for all students" with a specific emphasis on "African American and Hispanic students" (The Bush Record, 2023). Recycling discourse of "basic skills" and "rigor" from its predecessors, NCLB reinforced "school improvement," and added "real options" via vouchers, which ultimately ushered in a wave of for-profit charter schools (Spring, 2015). Schools with predominantly black populations continued to flounder as the funding and support diverted from local public schools to more privatized charter schools (Au, 2016). Black students in all contexts saw a greater shift to standardization, test-prep instruction, police presence and disproportionate suspensions (28% black students vs 14% white) and less focus on culturally responsive teaching and restorative practice (Dillon, 2010; Hammond, 2015; Wun, 2014). Regardless of public, charter or private contexts, NCLB positioned "deficient" black students as the problem to be solved through testing and policing (Wun, 2014, p. 472).

In December 2015, President Obama signed the ESSA, his amended extension of ESEA (ESSA, Primer). ESSA left decisions about a school's proposed improvement up to state and local districts (Adler-Greene, 2019; Vinovskis, 2022). Nevertheless, it still reinforced the "college and careers" discourse heavily embedded in Obama's first term. Under ESEA, schools were required to provide report cards. Like NCLB, ESSA emphasized accountability based on its commitment to "positive change in our lowest-performing schools, where groups of students are not making progress, and where graduation rates are low" (ESEA Amended by ESSA, 2016).

While the emphasis was on the lowest sector, funding and accountability did not permit a clear way to see all the other schools' progress. NCLB overemphasized standardized assessment (Vinovskis, 2022). ESSA's hands-off approach provided opportunities for local districts to creatively leverage funding, even as it left little financial accountability or protection for students who needed the funds most. In short, black students were still underprotected and overstigmatized. Obama's first term ensured a nationwide adoption of Common Core standards. Standardized test measures under ESSA maintained NCLB's requirement that 95% of students test in the major age ranges (More Schools Eligible, 2018). As with other iterations of ESEA, this was meant to ensure greater data collection on all

students supposedly for *equity*. Obama already maintained a neoliberal articulation of ESEA under Common Core by focusing on college and careers through market-based language of innovation and incentivizing teacher pay through standardized test performance. With ESSA, Common Core was still the focus; however, schools deemed the most failing were the most tested. English and Math became the target, minimizing the role of social studies (Arold and Shakeel, 2021). This often meant additional stress with fewer resources and decreased cultural consciousness at predominantly black schools.

BlackCrit theoretical framework and methods

BlackCrit draws from both critical race theory (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) and Afro-pessimist (Hartman, 1997; Moten, 2013; Wilderson, 2010) theoretical frameworks. BlackCrit (Dumas and ross, 2016) centers the endemic cultural, psychological and structural dehumanization of Black folx (Tillis, 2018); and it distances itself from antiblackness by locating, creating and celebrating Black success, happiness and beauty (Coles, 2020). For our context, BlackCrit is about identifying the permanence of antiblackness in education and connecting it to education policy, examining how black students have been dehumanized and then pivoting to the ways Freedom Dreams have created Black happiness, success and joy in school settings.

Freedom Dreaming as BlackCrit theory

Robin DG Kelley (2002) argued that Freedom Dreams functioned as a catalyst for social change in movements for Third World liberation, African American liberation, Black feminism, reparations and the arts. Kelley's Freedom Dreaming is informed by Surrealists – such as Joans (1989), Jayne Cortez (Melhem and Cortez, 1996), Franklin (Rosemont and Kelley, 2009) and Penelope Rosemont (Rosemont, 2000). Surrealists taught Kelley that any legitimate liberation movement must originate in the mind (Kelley, 2002). Moreover, Freedom Dreaming is informed by feminists – such as The Combahee River Collective (1977; BlackPast, 2012), Lorde (2012) and Collins (2022). Feminists helped Kelley better understand how the interlocking systems of race, gender and class work to subordinate the majority of society (Kelley, 2002). Freedom Dreams of a just society begin with the Black radical imagination.

The Black radical imagination incites "new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting, new attitudes toward work and leisure and community" that are not predicated on dominance (Kelley, 2002, p. 5). The Black radical imagination interrogates what is quotidian and accepted as "normal," and it exposes how the state and dominant culture surveils and constrains behavior in domains such as gender, sexuality and social relationships. Moreover, the Black radical imagination implores constructing "a politics rooted in desire" (p. 6). Kelley's work examined collective mobilizations that are radically imaginative political projects changing how we perceive and experience the world, challenging our limits and broadening our sense of possibility (Sherwin, 2022). We understand Freedom Dreaming as the catalyst for achieving the BlackCrit aim of creating, highlighting and sustaining Black joy and beauty. Freedom Dreams incite concrete, pro-Black social change by operationalizing radical possibilities dreamt in the Black imagination. This reframes the question – How do antiblack education policies function – to a new question: How can pro-Black education policy be created?

We focus on identifying how "revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement" (Kelley, 2002, p. 8). Kelley helps us understand antiblack educational policy and the machinations of resistance. Moreover, Kelley helps us identify and examine the Freedom Dreams of Black students, educators and communities and how they have sought to

confront and transform public K-12 education. Unpacking the imagination behind the collective resistance to the adversities inherent in the educational survival complex (Love, 2019; Spaulding *et al.*, 2021) may provide entry points for creating contemporary pro-Black education policy. However, for pro-Black policy to manifest, we must accept that all pro-Black activism "is science fiction, for envisioning a world without oppression requires the active creation of socially just societies formed from innovative ideas and visionary possibilities" (Toliver, 2021, p. 83). Freedom Dreams illumine what a socially just education policy can be.

Methods

Ross (2016) introduced BlackCrit as methodology. BlackCrit methods do more than interpret; they speak directly against antiblackness. BlackCrit methods presume that antiblackness is endemic and permanent, which "means that BlackCrit intervenes at the point of detailing how policies and everyday practices find their logic in, and reproduce Black suffering" (p. 34). BlackCrit methods aim to: (a) focus on antiblackness during the entire rESEArch process; (b) resist traditional deficit paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain Black students' experiences; (c) "consider the possibilities of black futurities"; and center the intersectional experiences of Black students (p. 34). BlackCrit causes us to foreground moments of Black educational resistance and liberation. For us, this entails locating the moments of how systemic antiblackness and education policy merge to make schools sites of Black suffering (Dumas, 2014), and how Black folx have radically reimagined and created Black futures that move beyond antiblackness (Coles, 2020). We examine how education policy operationalized antiblackness and deficit frames to ensure Black dehumanization. Furthermore, we highlight how Freedom Dreams can radically transform schools into liberatory spaces that center Black joy, love and happiness.

Data analysis of antiblack projects in education policy

ESEA (1965)
ESEA solidified deficit-based education policy discourse. During the first 5 years of ESEA implementation, "87.3 percent of all Blacks [. . .] were classified as disadvantaged, while only 44.6 percent of the whites were so classified" (Wargo and Lauritz, 1972, p. 90). A clause in the policy withheld funds from schools that refused to integrate racially (Frankenberg and Taylor, 2015; ESEA Amended by ESSA, 2016). While ESEA appeared to be an effective educational policy that would improve academic outcomes for Black students, the policy was inherently antiblack, as it mandated standardized testing, which has a history fraught with racism (Anderson, 2007).

ESEA also reinforced antiblackness with an increased racial divide existing between mostly white women educators (Aronson and Meyers, 2022) and their black students. Many white educators displayed an "inability to relate to children who are 'different'—whether due to lack of knowledge and experience or to negative feelings and attitudes [. . .][thus serving as] a major barrier to the achievement of equal educational opportunities" (Buchanan, 1972, p. 2). In other words, ESEA failed to address educators' antiblack worldviews of the mid-20th-century Civil Rights era. Because of the policy's refusal to address the iterative constructions and permanence of antiblackness, the structural education equity gaps still exist today (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rocha *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, Title I positioned black students as a problem that needed to be solved by tying funds to support black students to schools' performance of equity. What this really meant was Eurocentric, homogenized learning standards, closer surveillance of black children, overrepresentation in special education (with greater stigmatization and less support) and overemphasis on linguistic white-washing.

Even though ESEA institutionalized the federal commitment to improving education for the poor, it was still unable to prioritize equitable education for black and other disadvantaged students (Kantor and Brenzel, 1992). For example, ESEA did not meaningfully address racialized schooling inequities, in part because the 1964 Civil Rights Act attached federal funds to the Title VI provision – which prohibited federal aid to schools that practiced discrimination. Federal funding was not enough to incentivize local school districts to make structural changes that supported black and other underserved students. Indeed, this failure unveiled how federal reformers were unable "to expand the capacity of the federal government to initiate change without directly challenging state and local control of schooling," thus allowing schools to reproduce racialized inequities (Aronson and Meyers, 2022). Federal funding issues raised awareness of an ESEA dilemma that effectively assured most schools would not address the needs of black students. Furthermore, federal efforts to desegregate schools and improve educational outcomes for black and other underserved students largely failed; this accounts for the fact that schools in the North are more segregated today than they were in 1967 (Ladson-Billings, 2022).

ESSA (2015)

ESSA purportedly provided more regional flexibility so that schools could better support all of their students through the reinforcement of "annual report cards" to ensure positive changes for the lowest-performing schools (ESSA.org). However, many argue that ESSA's passage was in direct response to growing public rejection of the Common Core State Standards by parents and local communities "opting-out" of standardized testing (Zarra, 2016). ESSA results were similar to previous national education policy in that the policy "ignore[s] the underlying socioeconomic and racial issues affecting our nation's students" (Adler-Greene, 2019, p. 12). While ESSA supposedly ensures the educational equity of all students, it blatantly ignores how race, gender and other forms of oppression limit black students' learning opportunities. For example, ESSA did not change standards or improve pedagogical support for black students by focusing on developing educators' cultural competency. While ESSA does *not* address cultural responsiveness, it *does* address racially inequitable disciplinary practices. Even though ESSA asks states to collect school discipline data as a resource for mitigating racialized disparities in disciplinary outcomes, it does not provide a plan of action for reducing race-based disciplinary inequities (*ESSA Primer*, 2016). Consequently, black students are still disproportionately suspended at higher rates (Del Toro and Wang, 2022).

ESSA functions as an antiblack project insofar as policymakers recognize that black students are more likely to attend schools that have historically received inadequate funding, resources and teachers. Despite policymakers' awareness of racialized/antiblack educational inequities, ESSA still does not provide specific provisions to address these well-documented issues facing many black students in school settings (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Crenshaw *et al.*, 2015). Federal policy must address the specific issues related to race in education and the longstanding barriers to Black students' academic and social development. Instead, ESSA reinforces the metric of standardized testing to assess student success, even though IQ, literary and standardized testing have historically been constructed around white, male social norms (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Little, 2022). Moreover, general academic standards and their associated mathematics and English language arts curricula reinforce white superiority and black inferiority because the standards and curriculum are presented as critically objective, culturally neutral and politically unbiased (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Tate, 1995). This paradigm has contributed to furthering the academic divide between black students and their white peers.

ESSA refuses to mandate school climate provisions that address educational conditions that reproduce and perpetuate harsher discipline and discriminatory practices for many black students (Payne and Welch, 2015). Instead, ESSA allows states to choose the most relevant indicator for school quality or student success: (a) "student and educator engagement, (b) school climate and safety, (c) student access to and completion of advanced coursework, (d) postsecondary readiness, and (e) state-selected Indicator" (Allen *et al.*, 2018, p. 11). Even when ESSA explicitly requests states to explain how schools would reduce the overuse of disciplinary practices that remove black students from classrooms and the use of aversive behavioral interventions that compromise student health and safety (Allen *et al.*, 2018), it does not explain how to transform schools who do not do so. In short, while ESSA asks for explanations of how schools can reduce race-based inequities, it provides neither resources to help schools accomplish these goals nor consequences for states who refuse to adhere to ESSA requests. Thus, for many Black folx, ESSA is another performative education policy that increases surveillance, carcerality and testing with no commitment to improve their material conditions.

Living our Freedom Dreams

The past, present and future Freedom Dreams of Black folx have manifested as active forms of resistance to antiblack educational policy. Sometimes, resistance entails working within the larger structure; other times, it entails rejecting the structures in place and building new structures that better serve the needs of Black folx. The following Freedom Dreams serve as school and community-based responses to state-sanctioned antiblack educational projects and as communal practices that positively affect the lives of black students.

Freedom dreaming with and beyond Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Regardless of the shortcomings of federal, state and local governments, Black folx nationwide have combined government dollars and local support to mobilize for education. The birth of ESEA was timely. Just before they were passed, Malcolm X was assassinated. A year later – the year when many local districts assessed ESEA's effectiveness (Juravich, 2015; Phillips, 1966) – Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Turé) popularized the term *Black Power* (Spencer, 2016), thus connecting burgeoning Black grassroots efforts with self-determination (Spencer, 2016). From 1966 into the 1970s, the California protests for Black and Ethnic Studies programs spread across the nation.

Educational efforts for children also greatly benefited from this organizing (Rickford, 2016). As Black Power opened new opportunities for local organizations to create independent Black educational spaces to confront the *unintended* consequences of *Brown v. Board of Education*, they first raised money within the community and then used local, state and federal dollars to fund their projects (Rickford, 2016; Robinson, 2020b).

In Oakland, California, the Black Panthers established their own educational trajectory. Upon the broader establishment of the Black Panther Party (BPP) for Self-Defense in 1966, the Panthers opened chapters (inter)nationally and taught political education courses to develop a shared consciousness. In 1969, the BPP opened liberation schools for children (Robinson, 2020b), which helped students with basic literacy skills while teaching the mission of the party, social skills and practical skills.

In 1970, the BPP created a small home school to protect Panther children from teacher emotional abuse (Huggins and LeBlanc-Ernest, 2009). In 1971, they established a full-fledged school, the Intercommunal Youth Institute. The Institute provided experiential learning and some politically engaged lessons (Robinson, 2020a). By 1974, it was the Oakland Community School (OCS). The OCS offered a mix of traditional school structure and the Panthers'

emphasis on experiential learning. Children ages 2–12 received three meals a day, learned math using a Korean arithmetic method, created a garden, performed for Rosa Parks and listened to James Baldwin. They had access to full health services and could take West African dance classes, ballet or martial arts. Drawing on a tradition of Black schools as community hubs, the OCS was a K-12 school at the beginning of each weekday and an East Oakland resource center all other times (Rickford, 2016; Robinson, 2020a).

In addition to tuition, general volunteerism and fundraisers, the OCS eventually accepted federal funding allocated through ESEA. When they began test-taking in the mid-to-late 1970s, students were scoring two to three levels above average in reading and mathematics. Panthers built the vision first, then applied for funding to fit the school they envisioned (Huggins *et al.*, 2021). While they did not endure, their ability to dream about Black possibility did. They saw the need, dreamt of sites of Black opportunity and built them. Whether their school was completely donation-based, tuition-based or established on a mixed funding model, this cohort of black educators built and dreamt without money as their driving factor (Robinson, 2020a).

Freedom dreaming within and beyond Elementary and Secondary Education Act

During ESSA, Black education movements have worked both within and beyond the bounds of formal education. One movement operating within the boundaries is the Alternative School Movement. Alternative education schools operate as individual schools with their own principals and teachers but usually serve nontraditional populations, such as students involved in the criminal justice system (Henderson *et al.*, 2018). Some school districts created alternative education programs as school inclusion models to provide an opportunity for suspended students to remain in school and graduate (Wilkerson *et al.*, 2016). Many of these programs provide more individualized student support services. Alternative schools were just one site where Freedom Dreams turned into reality and improved Black education outcomes.

Another example of enduring Black spaces are high-quality afterschool, academic and social programs such as Umoja, Black Girls Rock and Black Girls Code. Afterschool and social programs provide extended learning time (ELT) that can accelerate learning and reduce out-of-class learning opportunity gaps existing between many black students and their white peers (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). Drawing from the federal affordances of ESSA for additional curricular support beyond the school day, Black folx have created programs to focus directly on black students. These programs help students connect their school work to culturally relevant strategies and experiences that make learning engaging. An example of this collaborative style exists in Oakland Unified School District's community schools, "where ELT is a core model of their full-service community schools approach" (p. 73). Oakland schools use several strategies to increase collaboration, such as developing partner staff and faculty relationships by including partner staff in monthly meetings in addition to providing copious opportunities for ELT staff to talk with teachers about current class curricula. In some Oakland schools, ELT staff serve as teacher aides and provide small group instruction. These practices create seamless integration of all student learning opportunities.

Freedom Dreams in response to ESSA have also incited the creation of Freedom Schools, where Black folx have cultivated pedagogical practices and curricular choices specifically designed to support Black students. One example is the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020). CDF Freedom Schools are modeled after the 1963 Mississippi Freedom Schools, which invested in communities by identifying and honing the skills of black leaders who could exercise their political power. CDF Freedom

Schools collaborate with community organizations, churches and schools to provide five-to-eight-week-long literacy-rich summer programs for K-12 students. CDF Freedom Schools provide resistance to typical schooling by including communal practices, such as beginning each day with a community meeting called Harambee (a Kiswahili word that means "let's come together"). Students then engage with an Integrated Reading Curriculum that entails reading about diverse cultural experiences and participating in activities intended to further students' love of reading during a 3-h block of literacy instruction. These CDF Freedom Schools challenge ESSA and work beyond the confines of state schools. For example, CDF Freedom Schools center on fugitive literacies, with social action and community services as key components. Thus, staff and students collaborate to identify issues affecting their community and then "develop and implement a social action plan to address the community issues they identified. These social action projects embody a foundational idea that the CDF Freedom Schools work to instill in students: I can and must make a difference" (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020, p. 75). CDF Freedom Schools, Alternative Schools and afterschool programs serve as concrete examples of how Freedom Dreams improve contemporary Black educational attainment, educational experiences and social conditions.

Implications

US educational policy has always been connected to interlocking systems of oppression. To presume that sweeping aid efforts will undo the very foundation of our structure is naive at best. Multiple systems engage antiblack efforts across class, gender and location, and multiple fights are needed to combat systemic injustice. We operationalized Freedom Dreaming with BlackCrit to draw attention to the historical efforts for Black liberation through education as we simultaneously dream of possibilities. Freedom Dreaming honors the BlackCrit call to disrupt antiblackness and pivot to Black joy and beauty, and it elucidates the longstanding Black tradition of creating liberatory education.

By outlining how Black folx have fashioned Freedom Dreams in response to education policy, we can gain insight into what components future pro-Black educational policy might include. The BPP of the 1970s and 1980s created a comprehensive school and community center using their own funds with supplemental support from ESEA, while other Black independent schools operated entirely on community contributions (Rickford, 2016). Today's freedom schools are supported by the CDF by combining local efforts and support from several federal initiatives, whereas the alternative schools and afterschool programs accessed ESSA funds. These examples demonstrate the possibility of operating within and beyond the constraints of these policies to improve Black well-being. In short, they draw on the hollow commitments of policies like NCLB, and they create opportunities to speak directly *to* and *with* black people.

For us, these historical and contemporary practices provide the foundation for our future Freedom Dreams. The Panthers operated on a model of "survival-pending the revolution," and perhaps our current work within ESSA might mean building programs within the school day that feed the entire black child. While black mothers leveraged ESEA to enter the classroom, schools did not draw on the wealth of their cultural experiences (Robinson, 2020b). We dream of spaces where black community members are embedded in the school – engaged as thought partners in the classroom, in the school and beyond the school (Ladson-Billings, 2022). Beyond ESSA, a future pro-Black educational policy can be founded in:

- including community members and students in all stages of the policy planning process;
- eliminating standardized testing; and
- tying funding to Black apprenticeship and cultural resource building.

While the Freedom Dreams outlined above are for operating within the current education structure, we also have Freedom Dreams that exist beyond the confines of the state. We dream of rejecting state-sanctioned educational policy as a whole and creating our own schools situated in Black intellectual thought, Black love and community and Black creativity. We dream of schools that abolish carceral, capitalist and colonial logics, while uplifting fugitive, liberatory and communal ways of being and knowing.

While we Freedom Dream and take concrete action for better todays and beautiful tomorrows, we understand that antiblackness has continuously attempted to thwart our ancestors and our own Freedom Dreams. For example, in ESEA, OCS stopped, in large part, because COINTELPRO infiltrated the Black Panthers and destabilized their work (Robinson, 2020b). In NCLB and ESSA, standardized testing radically increased, to black students' detriment. We also realize our dreams may be thwarted by school districts deeming apprenticeship programs targeted at black students as being an unAmerican, reverse racist practice. Using a BlackCrit framework helped us locate how antiblackness seeks to destroy past and future Freedom Dreams. In closing, we hope other scholars and activists will join us in taking up our three framings for pro-Black education policy in future work. We also hope others consider using BlackCrit Freedom Dreams to identify, think through and respond to antiblackness in ways that incite and perpetuate Black beauty, joy and success.

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Corresponding author
Robert P. Robinson can be contacted at: rrobinson@jjay.cuny.edu