Disciple & Scandals: How the no-excuses disciplinary model of Achievement First Amistad High School created a toxic school culture and enabled disciplinary scandals

Abstract:
This capstone narrates the celebrated charter network Achievement First (AF)’s flagship school Amistad High School's as staff responded and evolved after a series of high-profile scandals linked to discipline between 2016 and 2020—including a student walkout, a White principal physically assaulting a Black student, and the falsification of the school’s suspension rate. Using interviews with 10 Amistad alumni, 3 teachers, teachers, and 1 AF network leaders and a discourse analysis using AF blog posts, school resources, and local news articles, the article constructs a chronology of how the no-excuses discipline at Amistad High School created a toxic culture impacting students and teachers alike. The failure to substantially reform both school culture and the disciplinary system enabled the school’s disciplinary scandals.

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Introduction

“I remember just trying to do my best to make the class and running towards my teacher. He's like ‘c'mon you can make it!’ You see me, sir! It's not like I was lollygagging in the hallway; it's not like I was just being a miscreant out here. The bell rings. I am like five steps away from the door. I'm out of breath, too, at this point. He's all right, level two [a punishment that automatically earns a student detention], and the next day I spent detention for being late to class. That's so unfair, you know?”

Penny, a Black student currently attending one of Connecticut’s public universities shared this story with me. Four years ago, she graduated from Amistad High School in New Haven, CT, the flagship high school of the Achievement First (AF) charter school network. Nonetheless, she can still vividly recall her high school’s disciplinary system and the first time she ever received detention eight years ago: being a few seconds late to class. While this story may seem shocking or absurd, it is not unique. The strict behavioral expectations and frequent consequences that Penny described as unfair, created a stressful and harmful educational environment for Amistad’s students and teachers alike, and the failure to meaningfully reform that system would eventually contribute to high-profile disciplinary scandals.

Since its inception in 1999, Achievement First has made its mission closing the racial achievement gap, the gap in White and Black/Latinx standardized testing scores. CEO Dacia Toll and former co-CEO Doug McCurry have transformed Achievement First from a single middle school in New Haven, Amistad Academy, to 37 schools serving over 14,000 students in Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island, with plans in action to continue expansion in the latter two states. Most of the network’s students are Black and Latinx (Achievement First, 2019)
Throughout these schools, AF’s students consistently score well on standardized testing and matriculate to college (Achievement First, n.d). In Connecticut, Achievement First often highlights on their website and in promotional materials that their students score higher on standardized testing than students in Fairfield or Greenwich, two incredibly wealthy Connecticut towns (Achievement First, 2018; Achievement First, n.d).

By extension, Amistad has also experienced this success. Since becoming AF’s first high school in 2006, Amistad has proudly celebrated the acceptance of nearly all of its graduating Black and Latinx student body to four-year colleges year after year, including some of the most selective colleges and universities in the country (Peak, 2019a; Zahn, 2018; Landry, 2017; Slader, 2017; Bailey, 2013; Shelton, 2012). Additionally, in 2016 and 2017, Amistad ranked 3rd and 1st in US News high school rankings and among the top twenty public high schools in the country (DeAngelis, 2017; Cura, 2016). This achievement has earned Amistad glowing coverage from local media and institutional recognition, with former New Haven mayors, Toni Harp and John DeStefano, serving on the school’s board of directors (Bailey, 2014).

This success has not come without controversy, however. Achievement First schools are a subset of charter schools known as no-excuses. These schools are united by common practices and a shared mission: ensuring every child has access to a quality education and college regardless of their race, zip code, or income (Golann, 2015; Achievement First, n.d.). These schools, generally locate in impoverished urban communities, like New York or Chicago, and serve low-income Black and Latinx students. Despite being successful in raising student test scores and getting students into college (Cheng et al., 2017; Davis & Heller, 2017; Tuttle et al., 2015; Ross et al., 2007), no-excuses charters have also faced significant criticism for their strict disciplinary practices. No-excuses often enact strict disciplinary codes where minor behavioral
infractions, such as talking during class or having a shirt untucked, can result in detention (Golann et al., 2019; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Golann, 2015; Lack, 2009). Although these behavior regulations are often enforced on the premise that they prepare students for college and maintain orderly classrooms (Golann & Torres, 2020; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Golann, 2015), these disciplinary practices have been described as racist because, at these schools, predominately young White staff enforce punitive disciplinary measures to control Black and Latinx students (Love, 2019; Lack, 2009).

Although the no-excuses model has generated significant controversy throughout the last decade, it was not until 2016 that Achievement First found itself the subject of public criticism. That year, students staged a walkout at the network’s largest high school, Amistad. This event set the stage for a series of scandals at Amistad High School connected to the school’s disciplinary practices. These scandals pushed the school into the national spotlight and became “the narrative of Achievement First,” in the words of an Amistad teacher named Danielle. A second scandal happened in 2018 when the AF leadership was caught protecting Amistad’s White principal after he shoved a Black student into a locker, eroding trust between AF leadership and Amistad’s student body, teaching staff, and community. In response, the school appointed a new principal who promised to address the culture of the high school. In 2020, however, news reports uncovered that the new Amistad principal intentionally underreported the school’s suspension rate, once again bring AF’s disciplinary practices and school culture into question.

Over four years, these three scandals damaged the reputation of a once-celebrated charter network and school. Nonetheless, they were not isolated instances. At Amistad, students were subjected to the school’s strict disciplinary system: the demerit system. Although the demerit system is not currently being used due to remote learning, it is usually enforced. For years, this
stringent disciplinary system created a hostile and toxic schooling culture, where there was no trust between the student body and the school’s teaching staff. The scandals that occurred at Amistad are simply inherent byproducts of this toxic culture that has been allowed to persist at the school because of a lack of reform to the demerit system.

Nonetheless, following these scandals, Achievement First is reevaluating its practices and committing to racial equity. This is the most serious transition AF has experienced in its twenty years of operation. As a 2017 graduate of Amistad, I followed both the scandals and AF network changes with intense interest. I had witnessed the walkout as a student and understood how it occurred, but a student being pushed by a principal or a suspension rate being intentionally altered--these stories were shocking to me. As a result, I set out to investigate what caused this. I wanted to understand what aspects of Amistad’s no-excuses model enabled a school culture where it was possible for several scandals to quickly occur? I also wanted to understand what kinds of changes AF was making and if they would sufficiently respond to the controversies that had taken place.

As a result, I interviewed ten former classmates. I identified the classmates I wanted to interview through the Amistad yearbook and contact alumni through social media messages, asking if they’d be willing to speak with me about their high school experience. When selecting my sample, I intentionally ensured that my sample was fairly evenly split between boys and girls, Black and Latinx, and attendees at selective and non-selective colleges to capture the different high school experiences these different types of students may have (See Appendix for specific sample information). I found it important to include student testimonies because research about the no-excuses model rarely centers on the experiences of the students enduring the stringent discipline and academic systems typically found in these schools. I found that
alumni were very candid and open with me about both their time in high school and college. I believe that both my assurances that student confidentiality would be protected and my status as an Amistad alum myself established trust. Every interviewed student graduated in 2017, meaning that they experienced—and often partook—in the 2016 walkout but learned of subsequent scandals the same way I did: through the news.

Therefore, I also interviewed 3 teachers who could both provide additional insight for additional scandals and share their experiences with the no-excuses model. To protect their confidentiality, these teachers’ current employment status will not be shared, but all three teachers worked at Amistad during the scandals. As I did with students, I reached out to two teachers I knew from my time at Amistad through social media. Snowballing sampling allowed me to recruit the third teacher in my sample, who I contacted through email. During my conversations with teachers, I found that they also spoke candidly about the demerit system, but they did not share personal stories about their time at Amistad to the same extent students did. I attribute this to two possible causes: wanting to protect their confidentiality and the fact that students personally experienced the schooling model while teachers did not.

All 13 individuals were assured that their confidentiality would be protected, meaning that they have all been assigned pseudonyms and, in some cases, have had identifying information changed to protect their identities. I also interviewed Richard Buery Jr., the new CEO of AF, but as the CEO of Achievement First, he consented to speak on the record. During my interviews, each member of a group (teacher or student) were asked the same set of questions, but my interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I could follow up on any important stories alumni shared with me (See Appendix for interview questions) All of my interviews occurred over Zoom, were recorded with consent, and transcribed via Trint. I then
hand-coded my data looking for the impacts the demerit system had on school culture and trying to understand what elements of Amistad’s schooling model enabled the scandals. Through these interviews, it became clear that Achievement First’s disciplinary model created a negative schooling environment that enabled the school’s scandals.

The Early Days

Before Achievement First became one of the nation’s most significant charter management organizations (CMOs) and suffered a series of damaging scandals, there was one middle school: Amistad Academy. When Amistad first opened its door in 1999, the school initially served 84 fifth and sixth graders (Yale News, 1999). Dacia Toll founded the school after graduating from Yale Law School, where she simultaneously pursued a teaching certificate (Salzman, 2005). In an interview with The 74 (2016)—a pro-charter school news organization—Toll recounted teaching Black and Latinx students in New Haven public schools, who were reading and writing at a level significantly below what would be expected of students in their grades. She recalls struggling to teach her students the book, *Johnny Tremain*. When seeking advice from colleagues, Toll was advised to just show the movie (Whitmire, 2017; The 74, 2016). Toll’s frustration at the achievement gap (the gap between Black and White students on standardized test results) and the low expectations of some New Haven teachers, motivated her to open her own school.

In order to open Amistad, however, Toll needed both money and examples of great teaching. To attain the former, Toll gathered a 32-person team, who of whom viewed the achievement gap as the twenty-first century’s civil rights issue, and raised 3.5 million dollars (Whitman, 2008). Toll also visited many high performing schools to learn about good
educational practices, following a common practice among no-excuses charter schools of meeting with consultants or adopting the best practices and data sharing with other charter schools (Stahl, 2020a; Stahl, 2020b; Goodman, 2013) Among the many no-excuses charter schools she observed, Toll visited Devin Levin and KIPP at least a dozen times and traveled to North Academy in New Jersey, where she was introduced to eventual co-CEO Doug McCurry (Ahmed et al., 2017; The 74, 2016; Whitman, 2008).

Finally, Toll and her team applied for their charter in 1998. All charter schools must apply for a charter in order to legally operate and hold charter accountable to state regulations and educational goals (Stahl, 2020a; Stahl, 2020b; Goodman, 2013). Toll’s application was very strong and quickly ranked as Connecticut’s Education Commissioner’s top priority (Ahmed et al., 2017). The charter was subsequently approved in April 1998, and, thus, Amistad became the state’s 17th charter school. The name Amistad carried a special significance in New Haven. In 1839, 53 African slaves were tried in New Haven after revolting against their captors on the Spanish ship, “La Amistad.” These men were eventually granted freedom in a landmark 1841 Supreme Court case, the United States v. The Amistad. By naming the school Amistad, Toll and her team hoped to honor New Haven’s history and signal the school’s commitment to racial equity (Ahmed et al., 2017).

The following fall, Amistad Academy opened its doors to the school’s first 5th graders. From the start, Amistad embodied many characteristics typical of no-excuses schools when it opened in 1999. For example, students were required to wear uniforms, school days were extended, and strict academic and disciplinary practices were enforced. (Whitman, 2008; Delisio, n.d). Like other no-excuse charters, a college-going culture was an important aspect of Amistad’s schooling model. To consistently reinforce the importance of college, classrooms were named
after colleges and college pennants were placed in the school (Whitman, 2008). Moreover, many of Amistad’s practices were justified under the premise that they would prepare students for college, particularly their disciplinary system (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Whitman, 2008).

Amistad Academy enacted a behavioral code that students were expected to follow at all times. Failure to comply would result in consequences, such as being separated from classmates, being suspended, having to apologize to their entire class, or losing (Whitman, 2008; Salzman, 2005; Delisio, n.d). Suspensions were common at Amistad, with 41 students being suspended from 2003-2004, equating to one in every seven students (Whitman, 2008).

Amistad’s leaders created this strict disciplinary system because they subscribed to Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) “broken windows” theory of policing. This theory suggested that police could reduce serious crime by eliminating signs of disorder, such as broken windows or graffiti, and by cracking down on small forms of crime. Amistad openly embraced this model and embedded it into their disciplinary system. Teachers at Amistad learned about the theory during teacher training and were instructed to “sweat the small stuff,” encouraging teachers to penalize even the smallest of behavioral infractions (Ahmed et al., 2017; Whitman, 2008). Amistad’s disciplinary system was built and justified on the premise that allowing small forms of student misbehavior and disorder would result in more serious forms of misconduct and, by extension, larger classroom disruptions. The disciplinary system, therefore, was considered an instrumental aspect of Amistad’s academic model and school culture.

At Amistad, academics were also stringent, and students were subjected to high expectations. Students were assigned large amounts of homework and penalized for missing two assignments in a week with a two-hour detention on Fridays (Whitman, 2008). During the school
day, students took two reading and writing courses and an extended math class to maximize student instructional time. Students were also required to read on a daily basis, and they were tested through standardized testing every six weeks (Whitman, 2008).

Four years after Amistad Academy opened, these efforts had already begun to pay off. Students excelled on Connecticut’s standardized test, the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMTs). While only 31% of New Haven eighth graders achieved proficiency on the CMT’s reading test in 2003, 81% of Amistad’s students did so. Likewise, 75% of Amistad’s students passed the CMT math test compared to 19% of students in New Haven (Salzman, 2005.) In 2007, students from Amistad were scoring almost at the same level as students from Greenwich and Madison, Connecticut, two prominently White and incredibly wealthy areas (Whitman, 2008). Toll was incredibly proud of this fact, especially because Amistad had less funding per student than New Haven’s public schools did, and promoted this accomplishment as evidence that Amistad’s schooling model was closing the achievement gap (Whitman, 2008). As Amistad did not yet have a high school, another indicator of their success was their high school placement. About a third of graduating eighth-graders from Amistad Academy were accepted to elite private high schools including Choate Rosemary Hall, the Gunnery, and Hopkins School. The graduating classes of 2002 and 2003 raked in over 2 million dollars in scholarship money from these high schools (Delisio, n.d.).

These academic results were unheard of for Black and Latinx students in urban Connecticut and immediately garnered widespread media attention. By 2004, the school was receiving over eight applications for every available seat (Delisio, n.d). That year, PBS came to Amistad to record a documentary on the school, celebrating their success in closing the achievement gap. Former Secretary of Education Rod Paige paid a personal visit to Amistad
Academy after seeing the documentary (“Paige Applauds School's Commitment to High Expectations”, n.d). Paige also called Amistad possibly the best charter school in the United States (Whitman, 2008).

The positive press and significant success also captured the attention of New York City Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein. Klein was an enthusiastic believer in the Amistad model. He would keep a copy of Amistad’s student achievement data in his pocket to prove to multiple groups that the achievement gap could be closed (Ahmed et al., 2007). Klein proceeded to invite Toll and McCurry to New York to open schools in Brooklyn in 2003. Every demand that the two school leaders listed (equal funding, building space, independence) was immediately granted by Klein and, thus, AF opened three schools in Brooklyn in 2005.

This meeting with Klein came at an opportune moment for Achievement First. It was around that time that Toll and McCurry began to think about transforming Amistad Academy from one school in New Haven that was defying the odds to a network of high-performing no-excuses charter schools aimed at closing the achievement gap. In July 2003, the co-leaders established the Achievement First Charter Management Organization (CMO). The following year, they opened their second school: Elm City College Preparatory in New Haven. Soon, AF began its expansion into New York, opening three schools in Brooklyn (Achievement First, 2017a; Ahmed et al., 2017). By 2006, the charter network was attracting significant donations from the Robin Hood Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and New Schools Venture Fund (Ahmed et al., 2007). In 2006, Achievement First also opened their first high school, Achievement First Amistad High School in New Haven, Connecticut, graduating their first class in 2010 (Achievement First, 2017a).
Amistad High School

Amistad High School adopted many of the practices from the middle school with slight modifications for an older group of students. Instead of polos, students were expected to wear button-down shirts with either a tie (for men), khakis, or a skirt. Amistad High also maintained the same high academic expectations there was a continued emphasis placed on standardized testing and attending college. Students were encouraged to take AP courses and the SAT, both of which were funded by the high school. In 2012, Amistad’s students surpassed the national AP passing rate and the SAT average (Achievement First, 2015). Looking at Amistad’s 2019 profile, 93% of students took AP courses, and students scored an average of 1015 on the SAT, higher than the averages for Black (946) and Latinx (990) students but lower than the overall average of 1068 and White average of 1123 (Achievement First, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Alongside college pennants around the school to reinforce a college-going culture, students received extensive college counseling at Amistad to ensure that they would successfully matriculate to a four-year college following their high school graduation. Amistad High’s students were incredibly successful in earning college acceptances, with every graduating senior earning an acceptance to a four-year college/university (Peak, 2019b; Zahn, 2018; Terzi, 2016; Bailey, 2013). Nonetheless, an acceptance to a four-year college or university was listed as a graduation requirement in the 2017-18 student handbook, but not in the 2018-19 handbook, suggesting that until 2018, Amistad had such a perfect college acceptance rate because it was a necessity for students to graduate (Achievement First, 2018; Achievement First, 2017b). Overall, though, Amistad’s college acceptance rates and high academic performance on standardized testing led U.S News & World Report to rank Amistad as Connecticut’s fourth best public school.
in 2014. In 2015, Amistad moved up to the second best before finally being ranked as Connecticut’s top public school in 2017 (DeAngelis, 2017; Achievement First, 2015)

The Demerit System

Behind this success story, were Amistad High’s disciplinary practices, called the merit system. The merit system—commonly referred to as the demerit system—was used at the sole discretion of Amistad’s teachers to reinforce good and deter bad behavior. The two defining features of the system were merits and demerits. Merits were issued by teachers to students embodying the school’s core values. On the other hand, demerits were given to students for various levels of misbehavior. ‘Level ones’ were issued for the mildest bad behavior (being off task in class, talking to classmates, being out of their seat without permission, etc). ‘Level twos’ were given out for more serious behavioral infractions, such as being late to class, using a phone during the school day, swearing, or even responding to being issued a demerit, and would result in automatic detention the following school day (Achievement First, 2018; Achievement First, 2017; Achievement First, 2015). Initially, three Level 1 or one Level 2 demerits would result in detention the following day, but these thresholds for earning detention were eventually raised to five Level 1 or two Level 2 demerits in 2017. Amistad’s disciplinary practices were criticized by Connecticut’s Department of Education in 2017 because the school’s suspension rate was 27.9% compared to 8.2% for New Haven’s public schools (Liu, 2017).

Nonetheless, Amistad justifies the merit system by characterizing as essential in preparing students for college. Amistad’s 2019 student handbook reads, “We enforce these expectations [demerit system] because they are highly conducive to ensuring rigorous academic learning in our schools and success in college and beyond” (Achievement First, 2019; pg. 61).
Here, Amistad explains that their demerit system is necessary to prepare students for college. This possibly implies that the school’s leadership did not believe its Black and Latinx student population would be ready for college without the enforcement of a strict disciplinary code. This would suggest that students were viewed as having a deficit that only the disciplinary system could fix. Additionally, Amistad commits to “sweat[ing] the small stuff” to create and preserve a safe and focused learning environment” in the same student handbook (Achievement First, 2019; pg. 61). This reflects the same language Amistad Middle used when the school openly embraced the “broken windows model.” This suggests that the demerit system is also rooted in the premise that minor student misbehavior would devolve into larger classroom disruptions. The demerit system was, therefore, justified on the grounds that it would prepare students for college and ensure focused learning environments.

The demerit system was a large topic of my interviews with Amistad’s former students. Four years after graduating, alumni still vividly recall some of the demerits they received as students of Amistad. Some students laughed when recounting these stories while some spoke angrily or emotionally. Nonetheless, nearly every alumnus levied criticism at the demerit system. Take Jaxon and Victor, for example. Jaxon, a Black senior at a Connecticut state university, told me that the “disciplinary stuff felt very needless at times.” He recalled getting detention often when starting at Amistad—often for minor infections.

Similarly, Victor, a Latino student at a selective liberal arts college, also recalled receiving demerits he felt were unjustified. One time he quickly spoke to a student during class, causing him to receive a demerit for having a side conversation during class. Recalling the event, Victor told me, “I wasn't distracting anybody around, I wasn't being super loud, I just turned around and I was like hey, ‘we are on this page and we’re talking about this.’” Victor strongly
believed that he did not deserve this demerit and spoke with the teacher after class to appeal the decision, which—at the time—was the only way to address a demerit with the teacher without earning a level 2 for an inappropriate reaction (Achievement First, 2015). Although he provided this context to his teacher, the teacher “basically didn’t care,” in Victor’s words, and the demerit was not removed.

The merit system was focused on student behavior and more broadly on rule compliance. Students recalled getting demerits for uniform violations, such as having their shirts untucked. Forgetting a tie, belt, or other important uniform components would result in a student spending all day in-school suspension. Kendrick, a Black student who matriculated to a Connecticut state college, angrily recalled being held in in-school suspension (ISS) for forgetting his belt. This event was so memorable because it came the same day he was supposed to take an AP exam, and although he was able to leave ISS and take his test, the experience left him frustrated and anxious for his exam. Like Jaxon, Kendrick left Amistad believing that the demerit system’s strictness was “really unnecessary” at times.

Victor and Kendrick’s stories also reveal how enforcing the disciplinary code oftentimes took precedence over being good students or even the school’s academic performance. Just as Penny received detention despite sprinting to class in the opening narrative, Victor and Kendrick eventually realized that the no-excuses model punished every infraction regardless of the context.

However, students also saw justifications for the demerit system. For example, Reese, a Black student at a Northeastern liberal arts school, saw “where the merit system was necessary in high school” because she can recall many times when “some students would not pay attention in
class” or stay focused. Even students who were very critical of the demerit system had trouble balancing their critiques of the system and the misbehavior certain students demonstrated. Stella, a Latina also attending a Northeastern liberal arts college, reflected “I've had a difficult time trying to justify classroom disruptions because there are definitely times where they would disrupt the classroom, but I don't think that's enough justification to be like ‘now you need to get out of my class.’”

**Counter effectiveness of demerit system**

While some students recognized and appreciated the system for responding swiftly to misbehavior at Amistad, many students explain how the justification for the merit system was not true, in practice. They did not feel prepared for college as a result of the strict behavior code they were subjected to. Ted, a Black student who attended a liberals arts college, captured this sentiment, telling me that “once I made it to college, I don't think it [the demerit system] really did affect me. As soon as students graduated, many of them wanted to forget and move on from Amistad’s disciplinary practices.

Jaxon also felt that his college transition was not impacted by the disciplinary system. He stated, “I think they [Amistad’s staff] were trying to instill good habits for us to be better, and I don't know if that's going to help us in college. Personally, it didn't change me at all.” Here Jaxon recognizes the purpose of the demerit system—building the habits and character traits students would need for college. Despite this goal, the demerit system did not prepare Jaxon for college or anything else; once he left Amistad, he no longer felt impacted by the disciplinary model. Therefore, the demerit system created frustrating schooling experiences without fulfilling its key justification, preparing students for college.
Furthermore, alumni argued that the demerit system frequently created a worse learning environment within the high school by motivating student misbehavior. For many students, receiving demerits and detention was an inevitable part of the school day. In Kendrick’s memory, it often felt like he would walk into his first classes and get detention, ruining the rest of his day—a sentiment was shared by other students. Many students simply accepted that they would receive detention regardless of their behavior. As a result, many students decided that they “might as well get in trouble for something that’s worth it,” in the words of Izzy—a Latina attending a research university. Similarly, Penny felt that students who often misbehaved were just trying to express themselves. Since the demerit system restricted opportunities for fun and expression, students would sometimes intentionally misbehave to attain the enjoyment and socialization absent from their school days. Consequently, some students became more disruptive in class since earning detention was viewed as a certainty for some students, hurting the academic learning of all students.

**Student-teacher relationships & teacher experiences**

In addition to creating a frustrating schooling environment for students, alumni also described how the demerit system deteriorated their relationships with teachers. Jaxon emphasized that receiving a demerit “for absolutely no reason” sometimes meant, “you just don't like them [the teacher] anymore.” Similarly, Penny remembered many students thinking of teachers as “the enemy” due to the demerits they received. These perspectives demonstrate that students resented teachers because of the disciplinary system. Some students also felt intimidated by their teachers. For Miles, a Latino student, “it was always a risk” talking to teachers because they could easily misinterpret a joke or comment as rude or unprofessional, resulting in a
demerit. Students began to both resent or fear their teachers as a result of the merit system, establishing distrust between students and teachers.

Teachers also described the harmful effects that the demerit system had on their daily experiences. For Grace, a White teacher at Amistad for over five years, the demerit system was her “least favorite thing about being in Amistad” because it created a “negative energy at that school.” She found that the demerit system created “this place where there was no trust between staff and students,” causing her to have many tense encounters with students. She even believes that students were “set up to hate” her and other teachers due to the disciplinary practices students endured at Amistad and Achievement First’s middle schools, which she has heard are stricter than Amistad. She felt the distrust and tension that the system created with her students daily, creating “a very toxic place,” in the words of Grace.

Nonetheless, while students often viewed demerits as discretionary power teachers processed, teachers often did not view the demerit system as optional. Grace also felt “micromanaged” at times by school leadership and noted that the demerit system was one of the first school systems taught to newly hired teachers. Julia Fisher (2016), a former English teacher at Amistad, shared in a Washington Post article that Amistad’s administrators monitored her class after she did not initially enforce the demerit system, but she was praised by school leaders after issuing thirty-seven demerits in a fifty-minute class period. Additionally, Danielle, a Black teacher at Amistad, recalled crying before a meeting because she thought she would be reprimanded for not using the demerit system enough in class. Although Danielle was never actually reprimanded, she still questions her use of the demerit system. These three anecdotes all reveal that although teachers may not fully believe in the demerit system, they often feel pressured or, in Fisher’s case, are forced to use it.
Students, themselves, were even told personally by teachers that there was a demerit quota system. During their interviews, multiple students mentioned that teachers were expected to hit a demerit quota. Nonetheless, Miles was the only student who had been personally told by a teacher that there was a quota system. Miles recalled being astonished when, after school, he saw one of his teachers debating which students to issue demerits to. He was told by the teacher that “he had a quota to fill for the demerits you're supposed to give out.” For Miles, this encounter revealed that “there was an expectation, students would act out,” again suggesting that students were viewed at a deficit, and “the lack of trust between teachers and students.” While the existence of this quota system was denied by the teachers I interviewed, the rumored existence of a quota system captures how the demerit system created a toxic schooling environment. Teachers felt obliged to issue demerits while students felt they were being artificially but excessively punished.

**Differential Treatment**

One of the most striking trends that came up during my conversations with alumni and teachers was that both groups agreed students were treated differently by the demerit system. When asked if different groups or types of students were treated differently, nearly every student agreed without any hesitation. “100%” or “absolutely” were two of the most common responses to the question. Alumni described how teachers would often be more willing to give demerits to students with reputations as troublemakers or students who were not their “favorites. Frankly, it is not surprising that teachers had favorites at Amistad; this happens at every high school. What is notable, however, is the damaging impacts that this favoritism had on students and school culture because of the merit system.
The differential treatment was obvious to students. Both Miles and Penny stated that it was often predictable which students would receive demerits. It was certain that the student known as the troublemaker would receive a demerit at some point during the class. Consequently, students sometimes felt targeted by teachers. Penny recalls students telling teachers “you’re always on me” because they felt targeted by the merit system. In fact, during their interviews, many students recalled instances where they felt a teacher was targeting them, creating a hostile relationship. Furthermore, Stella felt that the targeting of troublemakers by teachers created a self-fulfilling prophecy for students, where troublemakers knew they would get a demerit because “teachers were ready to give them a demerit no matter what they did.” Stella’s claim again captures how the demerit system may be counter effective at moderating discipline, as Izzy explained earlier.

On the reverse side, student academic performance was also correlated with how students experienced the merit system, creating division in the student body. At most high schools, academic tracking or other academic-based divisions often racially segregate schools (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). At Amistad, however, academic differences among the Black and Latinx student body resulted in a status difference rather than racialized ones. Students with higher grades received fewer demerits as a result of their reputation. As a result, students like Jaxon experienced the full brunt of the demerit system, harming their schooling experience and self-perceptions. He described how “unfair” it felt to witness classmates with higher GPAs being placed on “a pedestal” and viewed “like angels just because they're doing better in school. Jaxon also shared that this “was consistent all the way through from about middle school to high school,” suggesting that this trend may be occurring at schools throughout the AF network.
Finally, Jaxon developed a lower self-perception because of this preferential treatment, explaining that he as if “less than” his peers. This was a sentiment shared by other interviewed students as well and shows the damaging psychological impacts the demerit system has on self-worth and self-perceptions. For eight years—from the fifth to his high school graduation—Jaxon witnessed high academic performers given preferential treatment while he and many of his classmates were regulated to “abuse by the demerit system.”

For students who benefitted from this differential treatment because of their higher grades, they sometimes developed feelings of superiority. Stella was a high academic performer in high school. Stella did not receive many demerits despite not “following the rules one hundred percent of the time.” Instead, her reputation for doing her work and earning high grades resulted in Stella receiving a special status: alpha wolf status. To apply for this status, students needed a minimum GPA of 3.0 and letters of recommendation from every teacher. Alpha wolves earned extra privileges, such as eating lunch in a special lounge.

Stella described how this status impacted her perception of her classmates, “If we did the best, we were alpha wolves. They led us to believe that you deserve all of this stuff. The way I thought about it was, ‘we're better because we follow the rules, and you guys are not following the rules because you don't want to succeed.’” Here, Stella shares that she believed she deserved her extra privileges because she typically followed the rules and earned higher grades. She negatively viewed classmates with fewer privileges because she interpreted their noncompliance with school rules as a lack of desire for success. While Stella repeatedly emphasized her regret at her former perspectives, her story exemplifies how the demerit system implicitly told certain
students that they were better than their peers because of their grades and behavior, causing her to feel superior while others felt inferior.

Like Stella, Ted recalled feeling untouchable. Talking about how this preferential treatment impacted his self-perceptions, Ted said, “it almost made me feel untouchable, like, ‘oh, the teachers aren't going to demerit me. I am usually a good kid. They're going to assume I didn't do it,’ and most of the time that was exactly the case.” While students like Jaxon experienced the full strength of the demerit system, Stella and Ted’s academic performance allowed them to attain Alpha Wolf status and by, extension, leniency from their teachers. Ironically, although a justification for the demerit system is that it equips students with the behaviors they needed to succeed in college, students with the highest grades and, therefore, highest prospects of attending college are the least impacted by Amistad’s disciplinary model. Perhaps, these students with high grades and good behavior stop receiving demerits because they are no longer at a deficit. Since these students will succeed in college, teachers may believe these students no longer need to learn certain behaviors, causing them to only demerit lower performing students.

The teachers I interviewed also noticed how students were treated differently. Although Grace did not notice students being treated differently while she was a teacher, in hindsight, she realized that “depending on the reputation a student had, one kid would get a reminder and another kid would get a demerit.” Grace also assumed that students with higher grades “probably received fewer demerits” regardless of their behavior because she knows some students “with straight A’s that were buttheads.” Nonetheless, Grace also shared that there was anecdotal evidence, shared with her by a school leader, “to show that teachers were given more
consequences to the students of darker complexion.” Hence the demerit system may have reflected the biases of the teachers.

*Embedded Racism*

Grace’s story points out that while it is clear to students and teachers that the demerit system had negative impacts on interpersonal relationships, school culture, and student experiences, there was another large problem with the demerit system: race. In a school named Amistad, a central problem with strict disciplinary practices came through the fact that they were established and upheld against low-income Black and Latinx students by primarily White leaders and teachers.

As a result, many students saw the demerit system as a tool of racialized power and control. For Stella, removing students from class for uniform violations or receiving too many demerits was a mechanism through which teachers maintained power. She believes that within the merit system, maintaining “power was more important” than student learning. Reese also saw the demerit system as a tool of control. However, this belief stems from a specific interaction she had with a teacher. One time, one of Reese’s math teachers told her entire class that the demerit system “was around to help tame Black and Hispanic families, saying that parents at home weren't giving their child the necessary skills and tools to be presentable out in the real world, so the merit system was there to help students be prepared for the real world. And I felt like if that's how they justify the merit system, that was pretty shitty to have that type of mindset.”

This encounter was shocking for Reese but affirmed for her that the demerit system was rooted in controlling the character and behaviors of students—once they even left the high
school. It demonstrates that students and their families were viewed from a deficit lens and believed to need civilizing—a longtime racist narrative in the United States. Jaxon also felt as the demerit system was trying to “conform students all into one thing.” Teachers also shared similar perspectives. Marco noticed that boys would get in trouble for wearing Timbs (Timberland), a tan boot worn by many Black and Latinx males in Connecticut, because their shoes were not all brown, but students would not get into trouble for wearing boat shoes with different shades of brown, a shoe more synonymous with Whiteness. Additionally, Marco recalled how girls could not wear their winter boots over their pants, but White teachers were doing it. Although these rules were present to equip students with the professionalism they will need in college and the workforce, Marco saw these practices as examples of the ways racial inequality was embedded into the merit system.

All of these examples suggest that the demerit system was holding students to a White standard of professionalism and success. Reese’s story exemplifies this and reveals the presence of White saviorism in the no-excuses model. Marco noted how this negatively impacted certain student. He found that students who utilize the codes the furthest away from Whiteness or who struggled to code switch the most, were the least likely to succeed at Amistad. Students who would not or could not conform to the White standards expected of them could not succeed at Amistad. They would become troublemakers wasting time in-school suspension rather than learning in the classroom. They would become the students in detention every day. Therefore, the merit system was more than a nuisance for students. To students and teachers interviewed, the demerit system not only created tension, it was racist.
The racial implications of the demerit system forced staff members to consider their role at Amistad. Danielle, for example, described occasionally feeling imposter syndrome because of her conflict with the school’s disciplinary practices. Marco also began to question what he and his colleagues were accomplishing in their attempts to prepare students for the world. He asked, “At what point are we not just preparing students for the world, and are we just replicating what happens in the world to students?” If the world is racist, sexist, transphobic, homophobic, and oppressive, what does it mean to prepare students for the world through an oppressive system?

While the disciplinary system created underlying problems for interpersonal relationships, student retention and student experiences, several public controversies brought Amistad’s disciplinary system into the national spotlight starting in 2016.

Events at Amistad High School 2016-2020

“*It just felt unfair every day at Amistad*”

As teacher and students’ testimonies describe, tension had been building in Amistad over many years. They had been subjected to a toxic and distrustful school culture on a daily basis. Nonetheless, despite this negative schooling culture, the demerit system was not reformed, exacerbating the tension at Amistad. Students were reaching a breaking point—they were sick of the merit system. They were frustrated. They were tired of the detentions, the demerits, and—most importantly—of being “micromanaged by teachers and admin that didn't look like us” in the words of Penny. For Jaxon, it increasingly “just felt unfair every day at Amistad.” He knew that a “protest was coming,” and it would capture the attention of local media—especially Paul Bass & Aliyya Swaby of the New Haven Independent.
On May 31, 2016, hundreds of students from Amistad High School crowded the school’s football field once they got off their school buses and parents’ cars. Like students at other significant no-excuses networks, Amistad’s students decided to protest the lack of Black and Latinx teachers at the school. (Bass & Swaby, 2016). Student leaders spent weeks planning the protest. They informed the student body of the event through social media platforms. Marco told me that school leaders knew of the protest and sent a Black dean to talk the leaders out of the protest, but the dean’s efforts were futile—the protest was already all over Snapchat. These posts also instructed students to wear white t-shirts. The student protest organizers wore black shirts to signify the lack of Black teachers at Amistad. While 98% of the student body identified as Black or Latinx, only 27% of staff members could do the same (Bass & Swaby, 2016).

Students wanted to have staff members advocating on their behalf against the demerit system. However, many students could not “promise that someone who is White is going to go into those meetings” and speak about discipline the way students needed them to, in the words of Izzy. Student Students, therefore, conducted this protest, making their demands loudly and clearly to Achievement First’s leaders and the media.

School and network leaders initially responded fairly strictly to the walkout, informing students that they would not be able to take the school bus home (a serious consequence for students living thirty to forty minutes away in Bridgeport), could not eat lunch, could not participate in any after school activities and that administrators would only meet with the leaders of the walkout if they came inside (Bass & Swaby, 2016). These threats were effective at discouraging students from participating in the protests. Some students described staying home, avoiding the protest, or leaving the protest early to evade these punishments. Nonetheless, after a
meeting between student protesters and AF leaders, administrators relented and allowed Bridgeport students to take the bus home (Bass & Swaby, 2016).

By the conclusion of the protest, school leadership struck a more positive tone when talking to the media. Dacia Toll offered praise for the leadership of Amistad's student protesters while committing to addressing their concerns, angering some of the students I spoke with (Bass & Swaby, 2016). “It's kind of messed up how they try to kind of claim ‘we're proud of our students for being leaders’ for news articles, but that's not kind of the messages that were communicated” in the words of Joe. Additionally, student protest leaders believed they were listened to and respected in the meetings, but they were skeptical that their concerns were really being heard or that change would really occur (Bass & Swaby, 2016)

Ultimately, despite not generating significant or long-lasting news coverage, the 2016 student walkout created enough of a negative image for AF that school leaders accepted that changes had to be made. In the words of Marco, “What AF, and by extension Amistad, really values, it’s aesthetics. It's all these things about how do we look?” As a result, more teachers of color were hired--responding to the most prominent demand from the student walkout. Additionally, two changes were made to the demerit system. First, Amistad’s leaders raised the demerit threshold for detention from 3 to 5. This was a small change but had significant impacts on student life. Jaxon, for example, suddenly stopped getting detention after two years of regularly earning it. Secondly, the new principal of Amistad, Morgan Barth, created a simpler demerit system by lowering the number of reasons for which students would earn demerits from 35 to about 8. These changes did address student concerns and created a laxer demerit system. Nonetheless, the reforms did not seriously change Achievement First’s schooling model or their
methods of enforcing discipline, meaning that there could be no changes to Amistad’s school culture.

**Captured on Camera**

By 2018, the student walkout was old news. Another year of universal college acceptances and academic accolades brought positive media coverage back to Amistad. Nonetheless, while the high school was celebrating being ranked Connecticut’s top high school in 2017, a toxic culture persisted at Amistad. The lack of systematic changes to the demerit system following the student walkout meant that the same resent and distrust existed between student and teacher even if fewer students were earning detention. As a result, in 2018, Achievement First suffered their most damaging scandal. The years of distrust between student and teacher, created by the demerit system, finally came to a head.

That October, Morgan Barth, the school’s White principal, was captured on a security camera and observed by school staff shoving a Black student into a locker or wall. Even though there was video evidence and witnesses, Barth was not fired by the charter network’s administration. It was only three months later when Christopher Peak of the New Haven Independent published the video of Barth manhandling the student that he was allowed to resign in January 2019 (Peak, 2019b). A week before this story was published, Steve Cotton, a Black behavior specialist at Amistad, quit and refused to sign a non-disparagement clause although it meant he was forgoing a significant severance payout. Cotton then proceeded to post a Facebook Live video criticizing the practices he observed at Amistad. He claimed that students were not treated with humanity and that the school reflected the structure of a prison, suggesting that school culture enabled this scandal (Peak, 2019b).
These revelations sparked massive outrage among teachers, the student body, and the community. Over 65 teachers, out of nearly 100 teachers, at Amistad signed a letter calling for the school to systematically transform into an antiracist institution, a risk since these Amistad’s teachers are not unionized and are employed at will. (Peak 2019c). As the directors of AF met to investigate the Barth incident, hundreds of teachers, students, and family members crashed the meeting (Peak, 2019d). In two-minute speeches, community members argued that the charter network’s leaders were not transparent and should be held accountable for not disciplining Morgan Barth. Steve Cotton attended this assembly, continuing his activist role even after departing Amistad.

Even a few years after the incident, teachers and students expressed serious anger with both Morgan Barth and AF’s leadership. The alumni I spoke to were frustrated and shocked. In the words of multiple students, “nothing that student did justified Barth putting his hands on him.” Notably, however, most students were not surprised by the incident. They saw the scandal as an inevitable result or a reflection of the school’s disciplinary practices.

Teachers voiced similar levels of outrage. Grace, for example, recalled many “sleepless nights” that winter following Peak’s story. Teachers also recalled the extensive damage control efforts led by Achievement First’s leaders. In the fallout of the Barth scandal, there was messaging “from the top down” not to “sound or feel or act like” teachers were “oppressing students in any way,” leading to little enforcement of the demerit system, in the words of Grace.

In order to avoid more scandals, leaders of AF temporarily abandoned the disciplinary system that, for nearly a decade, had been justified as necessary for college preparation.
Another response from AF’s network leaders was to hire a Black private investigator, Leander Dolphin, to assess the network’s failed handling of the situation. Dolphin discovered that the Achievement First’s two CEOs, Dacia Toll and Doug McCurry, and superintendent, Jeff Sudmeyer, had known about and actively covered up the actions of Morgan Barth. They did not tell the Amistad board of directors about the incident until right before the video leaked, left no written records of the incident, and only verbally disciplined Barth—who was required to attend a course in de-escalation and restraint. These actions were all an attempt to protect a White principal over a Black student. Moreover, in the lead-up to this event, they failed to address three years of complaints about Barth (Peak, 2019e). Although the complaints were not disclosed, Morgan Barth seemingly was allowed to act as a principal without any accountability.

Dolphin also revealed that she was explicitly told to limit the scope of her investigation to the network’s policies although, in January, Dacia Toll and Doug McCurry had publicly stated that the investigation would analyze their own culpability in the scandal in emails to staff (Barnum and Darville, 2019). Dolphin’s report was also published online on the Achievement First website, but it has since been removed, along with nearly every mention of Morgan Barth (Barnum and Darville, 2019). The Connecticut Freedom of Information Commission also found that AF leaders had illegally withheld 69 pages of records explaining how it handled Barth’s actions and forced the network to release those documents (Peak, 2020a). Toll and McCurry also promised four network-wide changes: embracing anti-racism, bettering student life, holding leaders accountable, and granting schools a bigger role in decision making following the Barth incident (Barnum and Darville, 2019). Finally, McCurry stepped down as co-CEO at the end of the 2019 academic year, leaving Toll as the network’s sole CEO until she stepped down in 2021 (Barnum, 2019).
Dolphin’s report and Toll & McCurry’s role in covering up the scandal suggests that Amistad’s disciplinary system, which expects perfection of students at all times, does not also hold its leaders to the same standard. Dishonesty, physical violence, and not taking responsibility are all actions that would get any student detention if not suspended or expelled. Longtime Black teacher Marco, also revealed that this Barth scandal was not “insular” as many problematic behaviors “never made it to the news.” Instead, years of complaints from staff or students against Morgan Barth were not taken seriously by AF leaders, who would focus on calming tensions rather than accountability. The Barth, therefore, scandal raises questions about the culture that the no-excuses model produces within school leadership and how they believe they should be held accountable. Grace shared that Dacia Toll was personally asked in a meeting with teachers and administrators what made her fit to lead AF given the scandal and her role in it. This incident suggests that just as students had lost trust in their students and administrators, Amistad’s teachers lost trust in Toll’s leadership and no longer trusted her to led the organization.

It is also important to realize that the Barth scandal goes beyond individual actions. Jaxon, for example, had seen multiple teachers “teeming with frustration” due to a lack of student obedience. Student noncompliance seemingly felt like a direct attack to some teachers, causing these displays of tension. Failure to reform the demerit system after years of students’ complaints and the walkout preserved a tense and toxic culture at Amistad, where students and teachers had a distrustful and sometimes resentful relationship. While Morgan Barth is responsible for his actions, his scandal is an inherent byproduct of a school culture where students viewing teachers as enemies and teachers brimming with anger at student disobedience were normalized.
“The rules, policies and procedures are racist. It doesn't matter who's executing them, it still is racist”

The Barth scandal also brought leadership changes to Amistad high school in the naming of the school’s first Black principal. At the end of the 2019 school year, Dr. Simon Obas was appointed as principal of Amistad. Obas is a Black man who was born in Connecticut, giving him a shared background with many of Amistad’s students. Before accepting this position, Obas was the principal of an AF middle school in Bridgeport, CT, where he had successfully increased test scores and built strong relationships with both staff and students (Peak, 2019f). Initially, there were some concerns about his appointment. Christopher Peak (2019e) reported that Obas came to Amistad with complaints of inappropriate physical contact with students--claims that Dacia Toll says were investigated--and was a strong believer in “strict structure and rules” that were “consistent and fair.” There were also concerns that his prior history working at AF would mean that he was not held accountable by the network’s leadership or that Obas was tokenized during the hiring decision. Grace believes that AF’s leaders treated this decision as another form of damage control and hired Obas as a means of “appeasing” an angry community and media.

Nonetheless, Obas has brought changes and awareness to AF. His arrival sparked excitement. Danielle, for example, shared that she was “happy that” Amistad’s principle was not “another White man.” Obas also brought several changes to the high school, beginning with many disciplinary practices. Detention was no longer a daily occurrence. Instead, it only occurs on Fridays and would be based on student behavior throughout the week—meaning that one bad day or a few bad mistakes would no longer result in a detention. Obas also created “open” and “non-argumentative” spaces for students and staff to discuss the impacts of AF’s policies on
students of color. These conversations enabled teachers to unpack any biases they may have and what effects they may have on school life.

Additionally, Obas is also co-leading a group evaluating whether to change Amistad’s name due to the history of the Amistad slave ship. The racialized discipline and scandals that occurred at Amistad shifted the name from a celebration of New Haven’s anti-slavery history to one that was perceived as racist. As a result, having a Black principal at Amistad created a new awareness about race at Amistad. This empowered the school to have more honest conversations about race and begin moving Amistad in a positive direction.

Despite these many promising changes, the no-excuses philosophy remained. The changes made to detentions still maintained the demerit system and its stringent discipline. As important as Obas’s appointment was to the high school, students were “not going to experience any radical difference in the outcomes in terms of discipline” because leadership would “actually have to change the policy” in the words of Marco. As a result, controversy struck once again at Amistad in early 2020. Obas became the third principal in four years to face media backlash when New Haven Independent reporter Christopher Peak (2020b) published yet another story about Amistad. His scoop proved that Amistad’s leadership was falsely underreporting their suspension rate by marking suspended students as absent. Although the school claimed that it had cut its suspension rates by 75%, Peak discovered that 60 students had been suspended in one day for skipping detention—making Amistad’s claim impossible. Achievement First conducted an internal investigation into the incident and found that Peak’s report was true. However, unlike Morgan Barth, Obas was held immediately accountable and given a two-week unpaid suspension (Barnum, 2020). Currently, Dr. Obas still serves as Amistad’s principal.
During my interviews, it became clear that this controversy was a consequence of school policy. Marco recalled that while he was working at Amistad, there were policies that closely outlined how many students could be suspended by certain dates to ensure that the suspension rate was not high enough to risk the school’s charter. Just as policy changes after the 2016 protest were focused on reducing media criticism and AF’s leaders focused on damage control during the Barth scandal, this suspension controversy reveals that behavioral policies were dictated by a desire to manage public perception. Rather than enforce a consistent form of discipline to equally “prepare” students for college, Amistad’s leaders sought to protect the school’s image.

Ultimately, this final also scandal proved Marco correct. The change in leadership could not sufficiently produce changes in the schooling model because “the rules, policies, and procedures are racist. It doesn't matter who's executing them, it's still is racist.” This suspension suggests that Amistad’s leaders expect their students to be suspended at high rates—another example of the disciplinary model viewing students as having a deficit—and rather than change these disciplinary policies so that fewer students were suspended, administrators attempted to maximize the number of suspensions they could do a year. Therefore, despite Obas’s efforts to bring attention to the role of race at Amistad and its impacts on the schooling model, the architecture of the no-excuses disciplinary system had not fundamentally changed, meaning that school toxic culture school that led to the 2016 student walkout and Barth scandal had not changed.
“Every year has been different, 2016 and beyond; we’re still trying to get a stable learning environment”

A few months after this latest cycle of bad media coverage and scrutiny over AF’s disciplinary practices, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted nearly all facets of society. The murder of George Floyd then served as a painful reminder that, even during a pandemic, racism would never be interrupted and prompted many organizations, including in education, to make a stronger public commitment to anti-racism. In response, many Black students began to share their experience about being Black in many private schools. Alumni of elite high schools and colleges created Instagram pages, typically titled “Black at (institution name).” For example students at the elite boarding school, Choate Rosemary Hall, created a page titled “Black at Choate” while Black students at Dartmouth shared their experiences through the “Black at Dartmouth page.” The Black and Latinx alumni of no-excuses charter schools soon adopted a similar tactic to critique the racism elements of their schooling model, leading to the creation of pages like “Black at Prep for Prep,” or “Being Black at KIPP” Similarly, Black and Latinx AF alumni created the “Dear Charter School,” Instagram page in June or July 2020. Although this page was deleted by August, it temporarily provided a platform for Black and Latinx AF alumni to voice their anger at the network’s no-excuses model and disciplinary practices.

The “Dear Charter School” page drew a quick response from Achievement First’s leaders. On July 25, 2020, the AF blog posted an article titled “Achievement First Board Resolution: Our Commitment to Lead for Racial Equity.” There, AF admitted that the network had failed to uphold an anti-racist schooling model and presented its 5-year plan for changes. As a result of these changes, students would no longer be punished for not their body postures (slouching, not slanting hands) or lose social times as punishment. AF also committed to
reevaluating their suspension policies, setting clear guidelines for how staff members should address students and families, and incorporating student and alumni feedback.

AF leaders quickly delivered on the last commitment by holding virtual town halls over the summer for alumni. Through these events, alumni shared their experiences and grievances with network leaders, including Dacia Toll. Students were told that their perspectives would help shape the changes. Many of the students I spoke to expressed optimism about these changes and many saw them as a “good start” to creating a better schooling experience. Marco, however, worried about which student opinions were present in the town hall. In his view, Amistad “already burned bridges to students who had the most challenging experiences within schools,” so the students who could offer the most significant critiques of Achievement First likely did not attend. Students also expressed skepticism about the town hall or changes. One alum recalled annual surveys that students and families filled out during his time at Amistad; he never saw his feedback about the schooling model lead to changes. Other students were worried that these changes did not go far enough or that teachers would continue to use harsh discipline.

Nonetheless, there have also been clear shifts in the rhetoric coming from Achievement First’s leaders. One of the teachers I interviewed (I am not including their name here to protect their identity) has attended multiple planning meetings for the committee working on changing AF’s disciplinary system and school culture. During one of these meetings, this teacher recalled an AF CEO—the teacher did not recall if it was Toll or McCurry—admitting that they did “develop this [disciplinary] system through a White savior complex without being aware of that.” The teacher also shared that there have been many conversations unpacking the ways in which racism is embedded in the schooling model and how to increase the transparency of the network’s leadership and decision-making.
While this shift in rhetoric from network leadership has made this teacher optimistic about the school’s future, it is worth remembering that tweaks—both rhetorical and to the demerit system—were made after the 2016 walkout and Barth scandal. In both cases, these alterations were not enough to overhaul the school culture of Amistad or avoid further controversy from taking place because, according to Danielle, the school’s leaders “were trying to implement changes based off of old practices.” For her, “every year has been different, 2016 and beyond; we're still trying to get a stable learning environment.” Despite tweaks to the disciplinary system, the demerit system continued to reflect its original form—ensuring that a toxic and unstable environment persisted at Amistad.

**Staff and Leadership Changes**

Perhaps, radical changes have not occurred to the demerit system because of the school’s hiring model. Like other no-excuses charter schools, Achievement First and Amistad hire many young and inexperienced teachers (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Golann, 2015; Lack, 2009). While these teachers are very accessible and often committed to educational equity, their lack of experience makes classroom management challenging. As a result, no-excuses schools use rigid disciplinary systems, like the demerit system, because they effectively allow inexperienced teachers to maintain control of their classrooms despite the erosion of student-teacher relationships and high teacher turnover these behavioral codes cause (Strauss, 2019; Torres, 2019; Stuit & Smith, 2010).

Many of these trends were also observed at Amistad. Marco believes that it is these hiring decisions that both necessitate the demerit system and create a toxic schooling culture at Amistad. He explained, “if you always hire really young, inexperienced White teachers, how do
they manage a classroom full of Black and Brown children? For a lot of them, they've never managed a classroom before. It's the first time they're interacting with communities of color, so I think when you put that together—inexperienced White teachers means a disciplinary system that lacks nuance, like the demerit system is necessary. Marco then describes how these hiring decisions impact students, claiming that the racial biases of these inexperienced teachers become embedded into their disciplinary decisions. As a result, both Marco and academic researchers demonstrate that the hiring decisions Amistad, and other charter networks, mandate the demerit system and, by extension, contribute to the negative schooling experiences of students.

Fortunately, Achievement First has made it a priority to hire more Black and Latinx staff members. These decisions have already created a large demographic change in the network’s leadership. In August, Achievement First (2020b) shared 60% the organization’s senior leadership were Black, Latinx, or multiracial. These changes have also occurred at the highest levels of Achievement First, with Richard Buery Jr. being named the next CEO of Achievement First. Following the departure of McCurry as co-CEO, Dacia Toll also announced she would depart Achievement First after 20 years leading the network (Achievement First, 2020c). Buery Jr., who has who has served as AF’s president for a year, was then selected as AF’s CEO.

Buery Jr. is a Black man originally from Brooklyn and brings a notable track record with him to AF. He served as KIPP’s policy adviser and helped start New York City’s universal Pre-K program (Barnum, 2020). Buery Jr., despite his history of working with no-excuses charter schools, was also willing to critique the practices of charter schools. After joining KIPP, he publicly agreed that no-excuses CMOs needed to enact changes to address fundamental
problems, such as having mostly White teachers for a Black and Latinx student body and having disciplinary practices that were too harsh (Shapiro, 2019). He expressed a similar criticism during our conversation, stating that no-excuses charters “haven’t always been the best community members.”

By joining AF, Buery Jr. hoped to aid the network to transform its school culture and achieve one of the network’s new values: “leading for racial equity” by better engaging with the communities AF serves (Barnum, 2020). He expressed excitement to lead Achievement First through this challenging period. When asked about the changes AF was implementing, Buery Jr. stated that he believed that there were multiple causes for AF’s changes, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and George Floyd’s murder. According to the CEO, both of these events forced the network’s leadership to engage with their families and communities in a new fashion, creating a stronger bond.

As CEO, Buery Jr. committed to helping AF grow from their past “three of four mistakes.” Although the scandals all occurred before his tenure as CEO, Buery Jr. was excited to building relationships with teachers and supporting them as they implemented changes to the disciplinary model and school culture. He is ready to continue engaging AF’s communities and is prepared to incorporate the feedback these families provide into the network’s planned changes. Buery Jr. expressed confidence throughout our conversation that Achievement First would successfully move to pass its tainted history and improve due to the network being a “strong organization” that could learn from its errors.
**Conclusion**

Ultimately, however, Buery Jr. sees the changes that AF is making as the direction that education is now heading in. Taking a look at other no-excuses charter school networks would affirm this view. Facing similar backlash for their disciplinary practices, they have collectively begun to make similar commitments as Achievement First. KIPP, for example, has launched their “Together for Justice” initiative and has announced sweeping changes to their schooling model—such as removing character education, inequitable disciplinary practices, and police officers from their schools (KIPP, n.d). Noble Schools in Chicago faced controversy in 2014 families were being put in debt and having collection agencies sent on them by Noble as a result of a policy charging families actual money for the demerits their students earned. Nonetheless, Noble now admits that their schooling practices are racist and is committing to change (Karp, 2021). Even Success Academy—whose leader, Eva Moskowitz, has defended the school’s practices despite the network also suffering high-profile disciplinary scandals—promised to make changes that promoted racial inclusion (Moskowitz, 2020; Taylor, 2016 Moskowitz, 2015).

While it is a welcome sight to see Achievement First and other no-excuses charter school networks admit their mistakes and commit to constructing an antiracist schooling system, I wonder why are these changes occurring now despite years of student protests at most of these networks. These schools’ commitment to change comes at the same time corporate America is embracing social justice and antiracist rhetoric due to the backlash and raised awareness about race following George Floyd’s murder (Friedman, 2020). Since no-excuses schools rely on philanthropic donations, these schools may be motivated to embrace the same rhetoric their corporate donors are employing (Stahl, 2020a; Stahl, 2020b; Goodman, 2013). Likewise, the
social attention on race may have made the racialized discipline at no-excuses charters an untenable position.

Most importantly, however, what impact will these changes actually have? Amistad has already made numerous changes to the demerit system. They did so after the 2016 student walkout and again after Barth hit a student. However, none of these policy changes have dramatically altered student life because they all maintained the core of the demerit system. Before every school year, Danielle and Grace remember sitting in teacher training as school leadership would “roll out” a new version of the demerit system and explain how to frame demerits so that “kids would not hate them,” in Grace’s words. Nonetheless, even as teachers stopped giving out demerits for untucked shirts or slouching, students “still felt like they were being nitpicked at—which maybe they were, maybe they weren’t—but if the perception is they are, it doesn't matter; it's not gonna work,” in the words of Grace.

Hence, Achievement First is now at a crossroads. Do they enact changes using the same system that has created a need for these changes or do they finally shift away from a system that students will never accept because they will always, correctly, perceive it as overbearing and racist? Remote learning has provided AF and Amistad an opportunity. The teachers at Amistad voted not to use the demerit system at all for the 2020-2021 school year. It is unclear how many or if any other of Achievement First’s schools also adopted this practice, but ironically Buery Jr. told me that student ratings have been the highest this academic year—a year where student behavior can not easily be micromanaged and surveilled through the demerit system.

The time has come for schools to stop employing schooling systems that assume Black and Latinx students need to be trained, monitored, and improved. The demerit system inherently
assumes that students of color both do not know how to properly behave and that they need constant behavioral reinforcement. That is racist and no change to that system will make it not racist. As a result, making adjustments to the demerit system is not a solution but a mere bandaid—outsourcing of the problem to a later date or a later scandal. To conclude, Marco perfectly summarizes the changes that must be made for comprehensive changes in school culture and student life to take place at Amistad: "there's got to be an undergirding philosophical change to what you believe about educating Black and Brown children, and as long as you see Black and Brown children as deficit, it doesn't really matter what the rules are. Children are always going to be made to feel as though they are not good enough. What they bring is not good enough. Who they are is not good enough. Who their family is, is not good enough. Who their community is, is not good enough. It always is going to not be good enough. And so until you really address that, you're never really going to change anything about the student experience."
Literature Review

The no-excuses model was developed in the late 1990s by David Levin and Michael Feinberg when they opened the first Knowledge is Power (KIPP) schools (Ellison & Iqtadar, 2020). Other prominent charter school networks in addition to Achievement First and KIPP are Success Academy, Uncommon Schools, Democracy Prep, and Noble Network. These schools were inspired by educational reforms to end the achievement gap in test scores between wealthy White students and low-income Black and Latinx students, and they are united by a belief that there are no-excuses for Black and Latinx students to not succeed academically (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Lack, 2009; Whitman, 2008). As a result, no-excuses charter schools are typically located in impoverished urban school districts and primarily serve Black and Latinx students (Sondel et al., 2019; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Goodman, 2013).

No excuses charter schools are also characterized by extended school days and years, a strong focus on increasing standardized testing scores, and strict discipline practices (Sondel et al., 2019; Sondel, 2016; Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Whitman, 2008). No excuses schools are also focused on efficiency and order to maximize instructional time. As a result, these schools often remove distractions by enforcing uniforms, requiring students to constantly stay on task, and practicing walking through hallways and stairwells in a certain fashion, and providing students with precise instructions at all times (Goodman, 2013). Advocates of no-excuses charter schools justify these practices by pointing to studies showing that students are experiencing higher levels of academic success, particularly on testing (Cheng et al., 2017; Tuttle et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2007). Jay Matthews, a Washington Post columnist and longtime supporter of KIPP, has argued that these testing improvements are quite significant and real effects of the no-excuses charter schools (Matthews, 2017). On the other hand, Lamboy & Lu (2017) argue that
these increases in testing are a natural and inevitable result of longer school days, not a more effective schooling model. Golann (2015) also argues that the highly rigid routines that no-excuses charter schools enforce create “worker-learners,” students who are externally motivated by authority rather than intrinsically.

The primary focus for maximizing time for teaching is because no-excuses charter schools are committed to preparing students for college. College graduation is a core part of the school’s culture, with classrooms being named after colleges, college pennants being displayed throughout hallways, and providing college trips and counseling for all students (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Many no-excuses “view college as a ‘promise’ that they make to their students and families;” they also hold senior “signing day” celebrations where students announce what college they are attending. This is an opportunity for the school to promote its 100% college acceptance rate—a common benchmark that the school annually achieves and uses to demonstrate to families, media publications, potential teachers, and benefactors that they are accomplishing their promise (Achievement First, 2020; Whitmire, 2019; Lamboy & Lu, 2017:210; Sullivan, 2017). Improving test scores is a necessity to maintain high college acceptance rates, explaining the effort that these no-excuses charter schools put into maintaining an efficient and orderly classroom environment.

The success that no-excuses charter schools had in maintaining orderly classrooms and producing high academic achievement brought much celebratory media attention to these schools. KIPP was featured in 60 Minutes, on Oprah Winfrey, and even at the 2000 Republican Convention (Lack, 2009; Hendrie, 2002; Wallace, 2000). KIPP and other no-excuses charter schools were also celebrated by PBS and significant printed media publications, such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Forbes, Newsweek, and others (Golann & Torres, 2020; Lack,
No-excuses charter schools were also featured in the 2010 documentary, *Waiting on Superman*. The film followed families as they attempted to gain access to no-excuses charter schools and highlighted the academic success that these schools were having (Guggenheim, 2012). These publications typically presented no-excuses charter schools as innovative and positive educational reforms, and they were likely instrumental in making no-excuses charter schools such a phenomenon in their early years.

Nonetheless, for all the praise no-excuses schools have received for their academic success, they have received as much, if not more, criticism for their disciplinary practices and character education. These two features are undoubtedly the most controversial aspects of the no-excuses industry. These schools have a plethora of rules and regulations that students are expected to comply with at all times without exception. Rules are often minor because these schools are rooted in “broken windows” theory, meaning that they believe one incidence of unacceptable behavior will exponentially grow disorder and other serious bad behaviors in the classroom (Golann & Torres, 2020; Whitman, 2008; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). As a result, these schools often “sweat the small stuff” (Whitman, 2008). Offenses like talking in class, dream dreaming, not sitting up straight, or not looking at the teacher or speaker are all examples of actions that will result in disciplinary action for the student committing the infraction (Golann & Torres, 2020; Stahl, 2017; Golann, 2015; Whitman, 2008).

Students at no-excuses charter schools can expect serious consequences for breaking the rules. At KIPP, students lost the privilege to wear their standard uniform shirts if they did not meet behavioral expectations (Lack, 2009). (Ross et al., 2007) describes KIPP students being sent to a time-out area known as the bench or dugout whenever they broke the rules. In both cases, students were either publicly distinguished as rule-breakers or removed from the

...
classroom setting. Detention and suspensions are also common punishments for students who do not comply with the educational practices of no-excuses charter schools (Golann & Torres, 2020; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Whitman, 2008). In the 2011-12 school year, 374 charter schools, with at least 50 students, suspended at least 25% of their students, and about 20% of these schools have suspension rates above 50%. 235 charter schools suspended over 50% of their students with disabilities that same school year (Losen et al., 2016). Although not all of these schools may be no-excuses, it is likely that most--if not all--charter schools with suspension rates that high have at least partially embraced the no-excuses model.

Many no-excuses charter schools also reward students with merits for following the school’s regulations while demerits are handed out as punishments for failing to meet the school’s rules. It is common practice for these schools to have a monetary system, where students receive mock “paychecks,” with demerits subtracting from the baseline total while merits add to it (Goodman, 2013). Having balances that are too low could result in detention and suspension while high balances would result in privileges, such as field trips or items from a school store (Goodman, 2013). KIPP implemented this system in the form of KIPP Dollars (Goodman, 2013; Lack, 2009). Demerits are intended to be administered often. Former Achievement First teacher, Julia Fisher (2016) describes handing out 37 demerits in a fifty-minute class.

These disciplinary practices supplement the character education has been a feature of the no-excuses industry since their beginnings. Dave Levin was a founding member of the Character Lab, alongside psychologist Angela Duckworth who popularized the term grit (Love, 2019). Levin was a big believer in positive psychology and created the seven-character values of KIPP--grit, zest, self-control, optimism, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity--from his work with
the Character Lab because he believed that these traits could translate into finishing college and life success (Love, 2019; Snyder, 2014). Levin even wanted to create a “Character Report Card” that would show employers and college admission officers how well students embodied these character traits (Love, 2019; Snyder, 2014).

Although Levin’s idea of a character report card never came to fruition, the charter school industry is still rooted in these principles. Many Northeastern charter schools chains, Achievement First, Democracy Prep, Mastery) believed that the college graduation rates of their alumni were too low. Therefore, despite high testing scores and college acceptance rates, these schools believed that students needed to internalize character traits that would produce success in college and the workforce (Dishon & Goodman, 2017). This would suggest although other charter school leaders may not be as believers of positive psychology like Levin is, they are still implementing character education because they believe it will aid them in their ultimate quest in helping students graduate from college. This focus on success also explains why no-excuses charter schools developed a disciplinary system that rewards students who display the desired character traits while publishing students who fail to do so.

Critics of no-excuses charter schools argue that the disciplinary system and character education found at these schools are both counterproductive and racist. Golann & Torres (2020) argue that the stringent disciplinary practices of these schools do not allow students to develop the nonacademic skills that are necessary for life success, such as agency and self-regulation—two skills that are not possible to develop in such a structured environment. More importantly, however, critics argue that no-excuses charter schools enact a series of policies that would never be accepted for White, middle-class children (Golann & Torres, 2020; White, 2015; Goodman, 2013). These critics, admittedly, have a point. Fisher (2016) shared that after leaving AF, she
Martinez 49

got to teach in a Washington DC that her affluent White students were all deeply engaged in
the class discussion but were all doing actions that would earn them a demerit at Amistad despite
their engagement.

Critics of the character education found in no-excuses schools also argue that these
schools reinforce institutional racism. Love (2019) and Lack (2009) also argue that no-excuses
charter schools reinforce institutional racism. She argues that teaching students grit and zest
telling them that they are no excuses for not succeeding implies that any failure on the student’s
part to overcome systemic barriers, such as racism or classism, are personal shortcomings. As a
result, character education puts the burden on students of color to personally overcome racism
rather than allowing these students to recognize that these institutional barriers blocked their
success and demand change. Moreover, the staff of no-excuses charter schools is primarily
composed of young White teachers despite the student body being mostly composed of Black
and Latinx students (Lamboy & Lu, 2019). These teachers often come to no-excuses based on
idealism and saviorism (Sondel et al., 2019; Lack, 2009).

Supporters of the no-excuses model, on the other hand, claim that their practices are both
necessary and are preferred by parents. Eva Moskowitz (2015), the CEO of Success Academy
notorious for doubling down on the network’s practices, claimed that despite the chain’s 11%
suspension rate, compared to 3% for all of New York City, there were over 20,000 applications
for 2,688 seats. This, according to Moskowitz, was a sign that parents preferred the disciplinary
practices of the no-excuses models. Moskowitz also suggests that lowering the severity of the
network’s disciplinary practices would disadvantage students of color because their learning
environment would be interrupted by violence or bad behavior. Moskowitz, in her oped, reflects
much of the language that charter schools supporters utilize. They claim that not holding Black
and Latinx students to high behavioral and academic expectations by not allowing any excuses is racist (Green, 2016; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Nonetheless, research suggests that parents are not enrolling their children in no-excuses charter schools for their disciplinary practices. Often, parents are choosing to put their child in one of these schools because their local public schools are either underperforming or are unsafe environments (Chabrier, 2016). Although these parents are utilizing school choice to enroll their child in a no-excuses charter school, they are not affirmatively preferring the practices of the charter school but are instead opting against a dangerous or failing traditional public school (Golann, et al., 2019).

Likewise, researchers found that Black parents at no-excuses charter schools liked the high academic results that the schools helped produce but were not fond of the school’s disciplinary practices. These parents worried that the model was overly harsh and would not develop necessary life skills, such as self-advocacy. Moreover, these parents also had racial grievances with their schools. They found that White staff members could be arrogant and act as if they were “saving” the child. Another parent claimed that the character education implied that the school was trying to raise the child itself, rather than trusting the parent to do so (Golann et al., 2019). These anecdotes provide other examples of how no-excuses charter schools can actively peddle White saviors and reinforce racist structures.

Therefore, no-excuses charter schools have had a complicated existence. While their academic success has been widely celebrated, they have come under increased scrutiny due to their racialized discipline. Academic and society are grappling with which they find more important: student academic success or racial equity.
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### Student Interview Sample

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**Teacher Interview Sample**

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<td>Marco</td>
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**Interview Questions**

Alumni:

In this interview, I’m going to ask you to reflect both on your transition to college and your time at Amistad. To begin, let’s talk about your transition from high school to college.

1. Tell me about the college you attended following Amistad, and how the transition to that college was?
   a. What role did AF play in this decision?
   b. What surprised you the most?
   c. Are there any accomplishments/events that stand out?
   d. What was most challenging?
   e. How has AF supported you throughout this transition?

2. How would you describe your social adjustment to college?
   a. What role has race played in this adjustment?
   b. What kind of relationships were you able to make?
   c. Were you able to connect with peers? How about professors and staff?
   d. Did any of your Amistad experiences aid this transition?

3. Can you also tell me about your academic transition to college?
   a. How did you adjust to the new workload and new academic environment?
   b. Do you think you had the academic skills you needed to succeed?
   c. How often do you go to office hours or speak with professors/staff when you needed help?
   d. Did any of your Amistad experiences aid this transition?

4. To end this section, I have one last question. As you probably know, many of AF’s rules, like uniforms, demerit system, high workload and so on, are justified by the idea of
preparing students for college and the workforce. In your experience, to what extent has this been true for you after leaving Amistad?

a. Do you think the academic rules were more or less effective at preparing students than the demerit system
b. What aspects or rules from AF had a positive impact once you left?

Okay, now let’s move on to talking about your time at Amistad more specifically:

5. Now that you’re in college, how do you remember your time at Amistad?
   a. What did you enjoy most about the school?
   b. What did you dislike the most?
   c. How were your relationships with teachers and staff members?
   d. What was your daily routine like?

6. Now can you speak a little about the demerit system? How do you think it impacted your high school experience?
   a. Any impacts on student or teacher relationships?
   b. Impacts on morale?

7a. (2017 graduates) Can you describe what led to the student walkout in 2016 and any changes that came as a result?
   a. Do you remember the reactions that AF leaders and teachers had to the walkout?
   b. Do you recall the protest having any lasting impact on student life, changes at the school?

7b. (students graduating after 2017) Can you talk about both your and your classmates' reactions once the video of Morgan Barth pushing a student was shared?
   a. Did you notice a change in teacher moods? How about a change in the mood of the school?
   b. Did the increased media attention present any challenges?
   c. How did the school leadership respond and were students satisfied with it?
   d. Do you recall any conversations you had with teachers or AF leaders?
e. Do think this was an issue of individual leadership or broader problems among the staff?

8. After conversations this summer, AF is proposing the following changes around school discipline, culture, etc? (show slide with proposed AF changes) Can you give me your initial reaction to the changes AF is implementing for the following school years?
   a. How do you think these changes will affect student life?
   b. When you were a student, did you ever see any policy changes that impacted student life in a positive or negative way?

9. Is there anything I haven’t asked you that you want to discuss? Is there anyone that you think I should interview?

Demographic questions:
   - When did you graduate from AF Amistad High School?
   - When did you first begin attending an AF school?
   - What college are you currently attending/what job are you currently working?
   - (if in college) What are you studying?
   - (If not in college) When did you leave?
   - Has anyone in your immediate family previously attended or graduated college?

Teacher Interviews:

I’m interested in how Amistad reacted and changed following 3 critical events around student discipline. Before we jump into that, however, I’d like to hear a little about your experience teaching at Amistad:

1. Can you recount how you came to Amistad and give an overview of the teacher training newly hired teachers receive at AF?
   a. How was the demerit system and academic curriculum introduced?
   b. Do you remember your initial reactions to the training?
   c. How did trainers explain the logic of the disciplinary system to staff?
2. Can you describe your experience teaching at Amistad?
   a. What relationships have you formed?
   b. What has been your favorite and less favorite aspect?
   c. What would you change about Amistad?
   d. Did your perceptions towards AF change over time? What changed them?

3. Can you describe how you implemented the demerit system in the classroom and what positive and negative impacts do you remember it having in the classroom?
   a. What--if any--impacts do you think demerits had on students?
   b. Do you think the demerit system impacted any relationships you had with students?
   c. Did AF encourage teachers to employ the demerit system? If so, how?
   d. Did you have any colleagues who left the school over the disciplinary system?

4. (If teaching in 2016) Can you describe the reaction of you and your coworkers to the 2016 student walkout?
   a. Do you remember what the students were requesting?
   b. How seriously were student concerns taken by teachers and higher ups at AF?
   c. Do you remember if the walkout had any impacts on school culture?

5. (If teaching in 2018/2019): As you remember in 2018, Morgan Barth shoved a student into a wall or locker. Can you describe how this event and the media coverage of it impacted both you and school culture in the following weeks and months?
   a. Can you describe interactions you had with students and higher ups at AF?
   b. What did teachers discuss before penning the letter to leaders of AF?
   c. How did the media spotlight on AF impact you and the school?

6. In addition to the student walkout, and Morgan Barth video, it was also reported that Amistad falsified their suspension rate in 2020. Can you give your opinion on what you think contributed to these three events occurring?
a. Were they just individual mistakes or reflective of characteristics of AF?
b. What role do you think students, teachers, and the leadership team played in these events?
c. Do you think the demerit system played a role?

7. Can you describe any conversations you and other teachers had with AF leaders throughout these 3 events?
   a. Did anything in particular stand out?
   b. What do you think AF leaders were the most focused on following these events?
      Did their focus change over time?
   c. What contribution did teachers bring to these conversions?

8. As you likely know AF is making changes to both their academic and discipline model in the upcoming school year. What are your thoughts on these changes and the impact they will have?
   a. Do you have any insights on how AF leadership decided upon these changes?
   b. Do you see student or teacher feedback reflected in the changes?

9. Is there anything I haven’t asked you that you want to discuss? Is there anyone that you think I should interview?

Demographic questions:
- What years did you teach at Amistad for?
- What subject(s) did you teach?
- What grades did you teach?
- Why did you leave Amistad (if applicable)?
- How long did you teach before coming to Amistad?

Admin

To begin, I’m interested in hearing about your time with AF and in a leadership role.

1. Tell me about how you came to AF?
   a. How long have you been with AF?
   b. What motivates you to come to work everyday?
   c. How did you enter a position of leadership?
2. Can you describe how AF has evolved over your time in leadership?
   a. What has enabled these changes?
   b. Has AF faced any limitations in making further changes?

3. Can you describe how AF leadership makes decisions about school life or the academic curriculum?
   a. What are the main priorities?
   b. To what extent is student or teacher feedback incorporated into these decisions?

4. What AF achievements make you the proudest?
   a. How did you achieve this?
   b. Why does this make you so proud?

Now I want to refocus on the conservation on the proposed changes AF is making and discussing what has led to them

5. Can you describe how AF came to the proposed changes for the upcoming school year?
   a. What were the biggest influences?
   b. Which policy changes were seen as priorities and why?
   c. What changes are you hoping that these policies bring about in AF schools?

6. In the years leading up to these changes, Amistad High School was in the news because of the 2016 student walkout, Morgan Barth, and the falsification of the suspension rate. How did the AF leadership team navigate and respond to these events?
   a. What influence have these events had on AF’s proposed changes?
   b. Are there any key conversations or moments of activism that really got through to the team?

7. Let’s focus a little more specifically on the actions of Amistad Principal Morgan Barth. Do you have insights into the way the leadership team navigated public response from inside and outside the school?
   a. What were the biggest challenges?
b. What do you think the AF team did well?

c. What does the team wish they had done differently?

8. What were initial reactions of the leadership team to the Dear Charter School IG page
   a. What role did it play in motivating these changes?
   b. Do you know what has since happened to the page?
   c. Did seeing these student stories lead to the team connecting the events occurring at Amistad to the broader AF community?

9. Is there anything I haven’t asked you that you want to discuss? Is there anyone that you think I should interview?

Demographic Questions:
- How long have you been with AF?
- What is your current position?
- What positions have you held in AF?
- What are the responsibilities of your current position?