Teacher Diversity and Student Success

State policymakers should name diversity as a marker of teacher quality.

Constance A. Lindsay

In 2014, U.S. public school students became majority students of color for the first time, and a broad range of stakeholders have noted that the race composition of the teaching workforce is vastly mismatched: With some geographic nuance, teachers across the nation are largely White and female.[1] This mismatch has serious implications for students of color.

Teachers should reflect the constituencies they serve, and the failure to do so can drive inequality in student outcomes.[2] The largest segment of research to support this contention shows how same-race teachers affect end-of-year test scores in public prekindergarten, elementary, middle, and high schools. One such study uses statewide data for all of Tennessee's public school students in the early 2010s and finds that students score significantly higher on end-of-year standardized math and reading tests when they have a same-race teacher.[3] And it is not just Tennessee: Three studies from North Carolina by different researchers span two decades of data and find similar race-match effects in charter and traditional public schools.[4] Similar results are found in Florida's elementary and middle schools and Texas's high schools.[5]

Given the evidence of positive effects on students of having at least one teacher who shares their race or ethnicity, state boards of education, other state policymakers, and school leaders need to recognize teachers' race and ethnicity as markers of teacher quality. Whether purposefully or not, education systems have long defined teacher quality based on what is best for White students. Asserting that diversity is a dimension of quality can disrupt practices that privilege one group of students over another and can level the playing field for teachers and students of color, who stand to benefit most from a diverse teaching force. By explicitly equating diversity with quality, state policymakers can affirm the unique benefits of racially diverse teachers and implicitly elevate diversity as an objective unto itself.

Policy conversations typically default to how states and districts can recruit more teachers of color and then retain them by making schools more welcoming. While greater workforce diversity is certainly an important policy objective in its own right, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for closing racial gaps in educational outcomes. The ultimate goal is to ensure that students of color have greater access to teachers of color and that all students experience a high-quality, diverse workforce. Increasing teacher diversity in the aggregate is a means to that end but will not guarantee universal exposures if teachers of color are found in a few schools within a given district. Teachers must be allocated across schools in a way that allows all students to see and learn from a diverse set of educators. It is important to note that White students are largely exposed to White teachers, role models, and see themselves reflected in the curriculum. There is no evidence that exposing White students to teachers of color and other adults of color harms their achievement and achievement-related outcomes.

Teacher Pipeline

Using American Community Survey data from the U.S. Census to model the educator human capital pipeline for adults ages 25–34 as of 2015, my colleagues and I demonstrate key exit points along the teaching pipeline that constrain the number of teachers of color who end up in the classroom and stay there.[6] Almost all routes to teacher

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licensure require a bachelor's degree, yet there are not enough college graduates of color. Only 21 percent of all Black adults and 16 percent of Latino adults have a college degree in any field—a serious constraint on the number of eligible adults for teaching licensure and certification. We show the following:

- 9.1 percent of White college graduates received a teaching degree, as compared with 6.4 percent of Black college graduates, 7.1 percent of Hispanic college graduates, and 2.3 percent of Asian college graduates.
- 10.8 percent of White college graduates become teachers, as compared with 8.6 percent of Black college graduates, 9.4 percent of Hispanic college graduates, and 3.3 percent of Asian college graduates. This suggests that more diverse candidates are entering the profession through nontraditional routes.

The most recent Teacher Follow-Up Survey, a nationally representative survey administered by the U.S. Department of Education, suggests that teachers of color leave the profession at a higher rate than White teachers (8.3 versus 7.5 percent). Teachers of color also change schools at a higher rate (10.6 versus 7.5 percent), and of teachers who move, teachers of color are more likely to report their move as "involuntary."

Additional evidence from the American Community Survey on the latter stages of the teacher human capital pipeline reveals interesting disparities in the career paths of diverse teachers. A look at teacher unemployment and attrition for those who received their teaching degree reveals differential exit and hire rates for teachers of color that may help explain why large representation gaps remain. For example, of people who have teaching degrees, teachers of color (~50 percent) report not teaching at higher rates than White teachers (~35 percent).[7] Teachers who are not teaching may still be in education or have changed jobs. But there is also a stark disparity between unemployment rates for White teachers and for teachers of color. These gaps indicate friction in the teacher labor market. Although some "frictional" unemployment—vacancies that result from people moving to new jobs—is expected, the racial differences warrant further investigation. Considering all these data in the context of the country's well-documented teacher shortage areas raises questions about why teachers of color leave the profession and whether better addressing diversity in hiring and retention could alleviate shortages.

Teachers of color are underrepresented at all stages of the pipeline, and differential employment rates in an industry characterized by many job openings and mobility challenges may be exacerbating an already stark situation. In addition to seeking ways to increase the ranks of college graduates of color overall, policymakers and administrators should examine why teachers of color leave the profession and consider levers aimed at increasing equity later in the pipeline.

Reducing turnover among existing Black and Latino teachers is a critical element in diversifying the teacher workforce and thus a critical policy goal. Yet there is little research about the in-school experiences of teachers of color to explain why retention varies by teacher race and the role that job responsibilities, compensation, accountability pressures, curricular support, school environment, facilities, and resources might play in making Black and Latino teachers more likely to leave the profession. Descriptive data from national teacher surveys offer a useful starting point: When asked the reason for leaving a school or the teaching profession altogether, teachers of color point to "school factors" as the primary reason.[8]

Role of State and Local Policies

Local and state policies play a critical role in determining barriers to entry into the profession and the working conditions that teachers of color face once they are in the classroom. Given the gaps in college access overall, degree and licensure requirements pose formidable barriers to potential teachers of color. Racial gaps in taking licensure and other exit/entrance exams and meeting cut scores are also major hindrances.

Without sacrificing the quality screens they represent, rethinking these requirements would open the door to many Black and Latino teacher candidates. A passing score on state licensure exams does not guarantee a teacher's effectiveness. Many states have lowered entry requirements into teaching via provisional credentials or alternative certification routes; evidence shows little difference in teacher effectiveness across

the various entry routes into the classroom, though traditionally trained teachers do tend to stay in the profession longer.[9] Requirements for alternatively prepared candidates vary by state. For example, most of Florida's pathways into the classroom require exam passage, but two routes do not.[10]

The utility of the bachelor's degree requirement is harder to discern because all teachers must hold one. However, getting a master's degree makes no appreciable difference in teaching effectiveness for most teachers.[11] Also, evidence from the early childhood education literature illuminates this question, as prekindergarten teachers do not have to meet the same requirements as K-12 teachers. Moreover, employers' revealed preferences suggest indifference to the bachelor's degree.[12]

Certainly, a case could be made that the costs of these barriers to teacher diversity is greater than the benefits. Indeed, the best way to improve overall teacher quality may be reducing barriers into teaching and then aggressively selecting and working to retain top performers based on their first few years in the classroom.[13] A secondary benefit of this provocative idea would likely be increased diversity.

Expanding on a proposal made by Ana María Villegas and Beatriz Chu Clewell, I and my colleagues recommend extending teachers' career ladders so that the bottom rung is not the novice, newly licensed teacher with a bachelor's degree.[14] Instead, the beginning rung would include prelicensure candidates with associate's degrees. Such a move can diversify the teacher workforce while still encouraging the continual professional development that underpins career ladders.

This solution recognizes and elevates the work paraprofessionals are already performing in schools. For example, teacher aides and instructional assistants have fewer education and licensure requirements and consequently tend to be more racially and ethnically diverse than teachers.[15] Often ignored in policy discussions, paraprofessionals can be role models, mentors, and confidants for students and thus already contribute importantly to student success. Drawing some into teaching takes advantage of their current skill set and boosts diversity.

Seeing paraprofessionals as teacher apprentices marks a paradigm shift. Rather than exclusively relegating grading and behavior management to them, school leaders and lead teachers can purposefully assign them tasks focused on developing skills in such things as lesson preparation and leading instruction—much as student teachers receive.[16] Paraprofessionals performing substantive classroom work can also help contravene what could otherwise be viewed as a racialized hierarchy, with predominantly White teachers and leaders supported by predominantly non-White staff and administrators.

Changing the career ladder will diversify the teacher workforce in another way.[17] Since people of color accrue more debt while in college, they are more likely to interrupt their studies to work. These decisions lengthen the time to graduation and make completion less likely. If these students can engage in an educator apprenticeship, they can earn money and gain valuable experience during formal schooling. Better yet, states or districts can pay (or subsidize) the tuition of paraprofessionals who are completing their bachelor's degrees because this is a better use of scarce funds than subsidizing master's degrees, given the research on the scant impact of a master's degree on student outcomes.[18]

Partnering with teacher training programs will be necessary. Hence, this approach is similar in spirit to the grow-your-own programs ongoing in several states and districts, but with university partners instead tailoring offerings that are more accessible to working paraprofessionals.

Grow-Your-Own Programs

Adopted by many states and districts, grow-your-own and teacher residency programs aim to increase teacher diversity. Because of the growing popularity of these programs and their unique potential to bring people of color into the profession, state boards of education who have not yet done so should consider them.

As the name suggests, grow-your-own teacher programs identify potential teacher candidates, develop them, and then place them in local schools. Grow-your-own programs typically are adjacent to traditional teacher preparation programs, with districts often partnering with area universities to help candidates achieve certification. These programs engage in outreach and support that extends far beyond that of most

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teacher training programs. Because they are designed to make use of the local talent pool, grow-your-own programs can target specific shortages in local labor markets (e.g., STEM or special education teachers).

Grow-your-own programs have been shown to work.[19] For example, Project Nueva Generacion in Illinois, a partnership between a community-based organization and a traditional teacher preparation program, filled needed positions in urban and rural communities.[20] Another example is Georgia's extension of Future Educators of America, which identifies and supports high school students who show dispositions similar to in-service teachers.[21]

Teacher residency programs likewise warrant serious consideration. These programs target early- and mid-career college-educated professionals who might be interested in transitioning into education. Candidates typically enter the profession through an alternative certification route and receive initial support once in the classroom. These programs have also shown success in developing and retaining diverse teachers. For example, Boston Teacher Residency graduates are more racially diverse than other Boston Public School novices, more likely to teach STEM courses, and more likely to remain in the district after five years.[22] Other programs, like the Relay Graduate School of Education, offer formal education (typically afterschool) in conjunction with a teacher residency to provide a credential that boosts teacher salaries. More than 60 percent of its participants identify as people of color.

A key strength of both types of programs is their connection to local communities. This connection increases the chances of long-term teacher retention and having teachers who are cued into culturally relevant issues that improve their performance in the classroom. However, this localized nature could also be a vulnerability: These programs tend to thrive in urban areas with active job markets but do not have the same reach into rural areas. This urban focus means the highest-diversity settings get more racially diverse teachers, reinforcing teacher segregation across schools. Pairing urban-based programs with initiatives that redistribute teachers across schools is paramount to providing more universal access to a diverse teaching force.

Grow-your-own programs with broader reaches into suburban and rural settings could be developed, which would increase diversity where it is needed most. For example, the Montana legislature in 2019 passed a grow-your-own grant program to develop teacher pipelines aimed at serving rural and reservation school districts.[23]

States are clearly in the best position to develop and foster residencies and grow-your-own programs with broad geographical reach. Because teacher residencies focus on recruiting college-educated professionals, this is the quickest approach to diversifying the workforce. Because the primary bottleneck in the teacher pipeline for individuals of color is earning a college degree, however, grow-your-own programs have more potential as a sustainable source of new teachers of color. Moreover, grow-your-own programs avoid the problem of poaching college-educated people of color from other professions that themselves suffer from a lack of diversity and representation.

The most urgent priority for increasing teacher diversity is at the start: entrance into educator preparation programs. Retention and development comes next, with the expansion of alternative routes into teaching being critical as well. ■

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[2]Jason A.Grissom, Emily C. Kern, and Luis A. Rodriguez, "The 'Representative Bureaucracy' in Education: Educator Workforce Diversity, Policy Outputs, and Outcomes for Disadvantaged Students," *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 3 (2015): 185–92; Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2010).

[3]Ela Joshi, Sy Doan, and Matthew G. Springer, "Student–Teacher Race Congruence: New Evidence and Insight from Tennessee," *AERA Open* 4, no. 4 (2018): 1–25, doi: 10.1177/2332858418817528. This finding means that the experimental evidence of race-match effects are not unique to the subset of low-performing schools that voluntarily participated in the Project STAR experiment in the 1980s (Alan B. Krueger, "Experimental Estimates of Education Production Functions," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114, no. 2 (1999): 497–532, doi: 10.1162/003355399556052). Instead, these effects exist throughout the state and continue to occur today.

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[5]Anna J. Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus A. Winters, "Representation in the Classroom: The Effect of Own-Race Teachers on Student Achievement," *Economics of Education Review* 45 (2015): 44–52, doi: 10.1016/j.

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[1]DC State Board of Education, "State Board of Education Resolution on the Implementation of Working Group Proposal," SR19-7, July 17, 2019, https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/SR19-7%20Implementation%20of%20Working%20Group%20Proposals%20Signed.pdf.

[2]Previously, state-level functions related to education were carried out by the central office of DC's largest local education agency, DC Public Schools.

[3]DC State Board of Education, Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee, "Why Revise DC's Social Studies Standards?" web page, https://sboe.dc.gov/page/social-studies-standards

[4]Experts included Dr. Danielle Allen, director of Democratic Knowledge Project at Harvard University; Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, historian and producer of the Southern Poverty Law Center podcast "Teaching Hard History"; Dr. Karen Thomas-Brown, member of C3 Framework Writing Committee; Natalie Wexler, author of *The Knowledge Gap*; Dr. Bernard Demczuk, historian at Ben's Chili Bowl Foundation; Jennifer Manise, executive director of The Longview Foundation for World Affairs and International Understanding; and Christopher Riano, executive director of the Center for Civic Education.

[5]Historian David Blight describes hard history as dealing with the "hard questions of our past—slavery, exploitation, violence, dispossession, discrimination and the work that has been done to overcome or thwart those realities." "Teaching Hard History" (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018), p. 7.

[6]DC State Board of Education, "State Board of Education Resolution: Social Studies Standards Guiding Principles," SR20-15, December 16, 2020, https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/documents/SR20-15%20Social%20Studies%20Standards%20Guiding%20Principles%20SIGNED.pdf.

[7]DC does not use the free and reduced-priced lunch designation. Instead, DC designates particular students at risk: those who qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, have been identified as homeless during the academic year, are under foster care, or are high school students at least one year older than the expected age for their grade.

[8]Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "Quick Stats: Public Schools in the District of Columbia," web page, https://osse.dc.gov/page/data-and-reports-0.

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[15]Conor P. Williams et al., *Multilingual Paraprofessionals: An Untapped Resource for Supporting American Pluralism* (Washington, DC: New America, 2016).

[16]Robert Rueda, Lilia D. Monzo, and Ignacio Higareda, "Appropriating the Sociocultural Resources of Latino Paraeducators for Effective Instruction with Latino Students: Promise and Problems," *Urban Education* 39, no. 1 (2004): 52–90, doi: 10.1177/0042085903259213.

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