

Supporting and Sustaining a Diverse Teacher Workforce



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Summary

After decades of slow but steady growth in teacher diversity, the share of teachers of color in the national teacher workforce plateaued at about 20% between 2018 and 2021, raising questions about what could encourage greater progress toward a more racially diverse teacher workforce. Using nationally representative teacher survey data, this study investigates the representation and experiences of public school teachers of color. We find that in recent years, teachers of color were less likely to have access to conditions associated with longevity in the profession: access to comprehensive preservice preparation, sustaining teaching conditions, competitive compensation, and supportive mentoring. Additionally, teachers of color were more likely to owe substantial college debt and experience high levels of debt-related stress. Teachers of color were more likely than White teachers to consider leaving their teaching position, and indeed, Black teachers, in particular, left teaching at higher rates than other teachers. Federal, state, and local policy can support and sustain teachers of color through access to comprehensive preparation, improved teaching conditions, increased compensation, and mentoring and induction.

The report on which this brief is based can be found at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/diverse-teacher-workforce>.

Introduction

A growing body of research demonstrates the vital importance of a diverse teacher workforce. Many studies show that Black student achievement and attainment are strongly and positively affected by access to Black teachers, and other studies have demonstrated broader influences of Black and Latino/a teachers on improved school climate, classroom perceptions, and learning outcomes across student groups.¹ Importantly, teacher diversity enriches the whole school environment. All students can benefit from having diverse role models, and adults also benefit, exhibiting less prejudice when they work and interact with adults of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.²

Despite growing recognition of the importance of building a more racially and ethnically diverse teacher workforce and slow but steady increases over the past 3 decades, the diversity of the teacher workforce plateaued at about 20% teachers of color between 2018 and 2021. This halt in already slow progress raises questions about what may contribute to this overall stagnation in the proportion of teachers of

color and what could encourage greater progress toward teacher diversity. Using nationally representative teacher survey data, this study investigates the representation and experiences of public school teachers of color, including their share of the teacher workforce, desires to transfer schools or leave teaching, preparation experiences, and teaching conditions. These findings draw primarily on data from the 2017–18 and 2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), the 2021–22 Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), and teacher education data from 2008–09 to 2020–21 collected pursuant to Title II of the Higher Education Act.

To increase the diversity of teachers in the workforce, it is critical to recruit more teachers of color into the profession and retain those who are currently practicing. Not only does teacher turnover undermine growing the proportion of teachers of color in the workforce, but it also exacts significant costs on the schools that are most impacted by high turnover rates. Decades of research show that several factors are associated with teacher retention, including access to comprehensive preservice preparation and supportive teaching conditions. In this study, we examine these conditions for teachers of color.

The State of Teacher Diversity

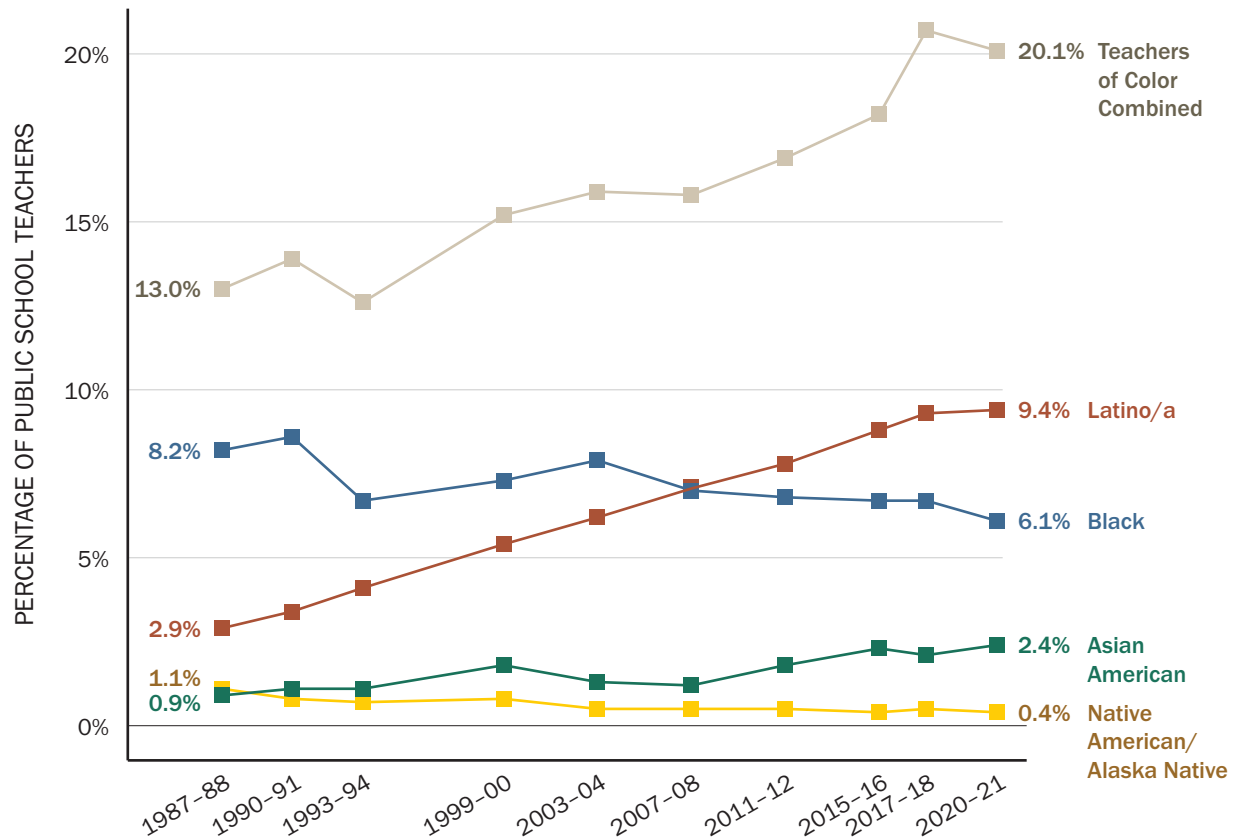
Teachers of color made up 20% of the teacher workforce in 2021, about the same proportion as in 2018. The proportion of teachers of color in the United States increased by more than 50% between 1987–88 and 2017–18, from 13% to nearly 21% (see [Figure 1](#)). However, between 2018 and 2021, when the proportion dropped to 20%, the rate of teachers of color entering the workforce failed to keep pace with the number leaving the profession and the number of White teachers entering. For instance:

- Although 26% of first-year teachers in 2021 were teachers of color, between 2018 and 2021 the proportion of Black teachers in the workforce declined by 5%, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander teachers declined by 29%, Native American/Alaska Native teachers declined by 14%, and multiracial teachers declined by 3%.
- Meanwhile, in 2021, the White teacher population increased by nearly 7%.

The proportions of Latino/a and Asian American teachers steadily increased over the past 3 decades, while the ranks of Black and Native American teachers declined. In [Figure 1](#), we also see the following:

- Between 1988 and 2021, the percentage of the teacher workforce who were Latino/a more than tripled, and the percentage of Asian American teachers more than doubled.
- In contrast, Black teachers went from comprising 8.6% of the workforce to 6.1%, a drop of nearly one third.
- Over the same period, the percentage of Native American teachers declined by nearly two thirds.

Figure 1. Percentage of Public School Teachers Who Are Teachers of Color, 1988–2021



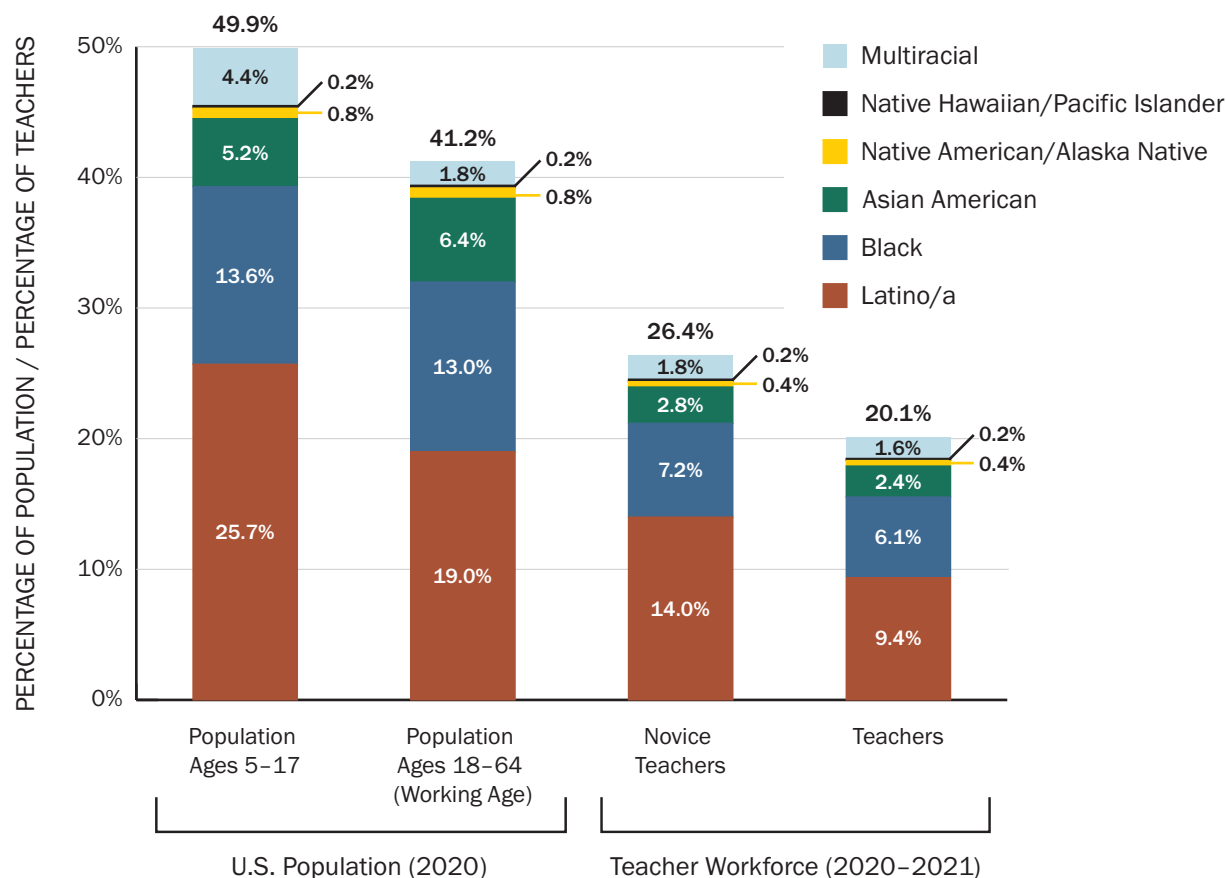
Note: “Teachers of color combined” includes all non-White teachers, including Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and multiracial teachers.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analyses of reports by the National Center for Education Statistics for data available for 1987–88 to 2020–21. (See full report for a complete list of resources.)

Teachers of color are severely underrepresented in the teacher workforce when compared to the U.S. adult and student populations. In [Figure 2](#), we see the following:

- In 2020–21—when teachers of color comprised 20% of the teacher workforce—that was half the proportion of working-age adults of color in the U.S. population (at 40%). Further, the ratio of students of color (50%) to teachers of color (20%) was 2.5 to 1.
- While Latino/a and Asian American teachers grew in proportion among all teachers (9.4% and 2.4%, respectively), their numbers were still smaller than the Latino/a and Asian American populations in the United States. About 19% of the U.S. population is Latino/a and about 6% is Asian American.
- Similarly, while Black teachers made up 6.1% and Native American/Alaska Natives made up 0.4% of the teacher workforce in 2021, 13% of the U.S. working age population was Black and 0.8% was Native American/Alaska Native.

Figure 2. Percentage of Individuals of Color in the U.S. Population (2020) and in the Teacher Workforce (2020–21) by Race/Ethnicity



Note: Novice teachers are those who are in their first year of teaching.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analyses of: [2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey](#), U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division. (2018). [Main projections series for the United States, 2017–2060 projected population by single year of age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin for the United States: 2016 to 2060 \[NP2017_D1\]](#). (accessed 07/17/2025).

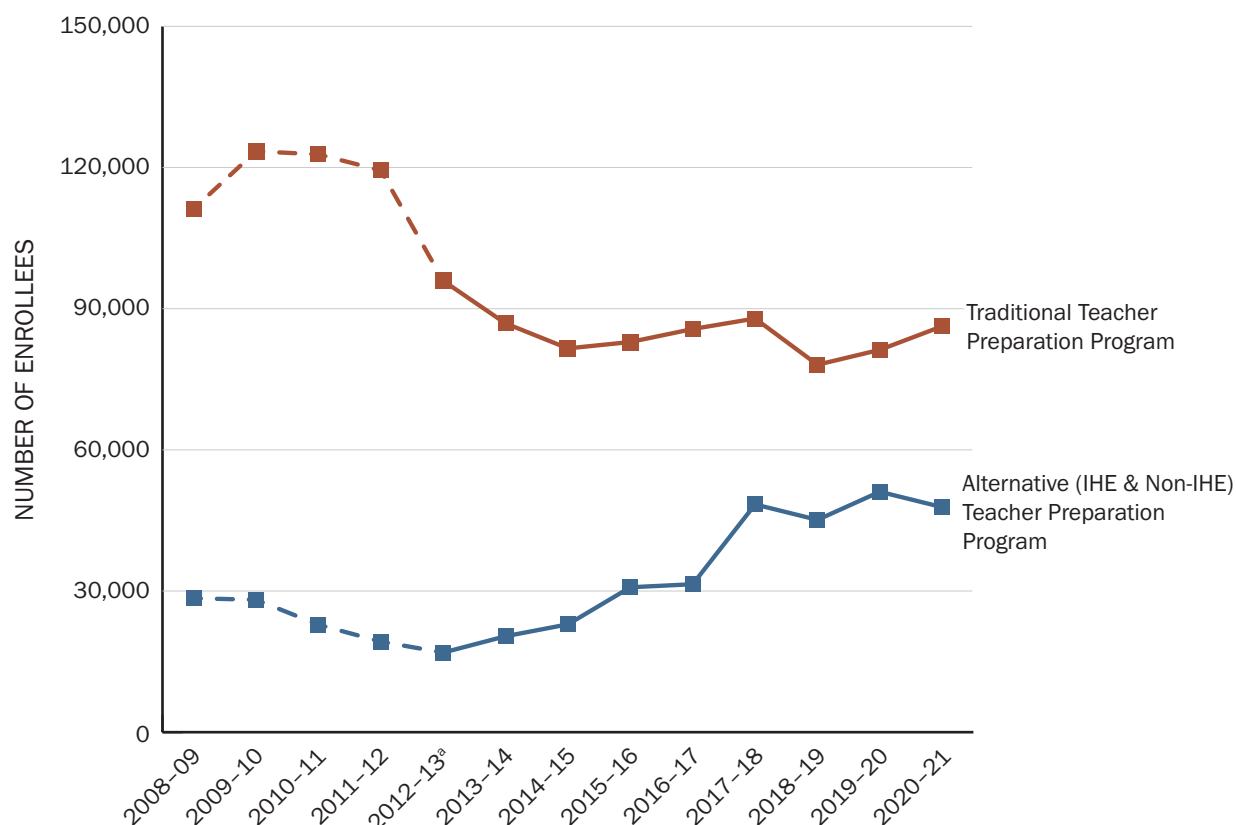
Access to Comprehensive Preservice Preparation

Prior research shows that access to comprehensive preparation—including preservice coursework and student teaching—is associated with greater retention rates among teachers, which in turn supports school stability and student achievement.³ Evidence shows that there were substantial disparities in access to comprehensive preservice preparation between teacher candidates of color and White teacher candidates.

While the share of teacher candidates of color has been growing in recent years, enrollment trends suggest their access to comprehensive teacher preparation has declined as more have entered alternative programs. The number of teacher candidates of color enrolling in all teacher preparation programs, as well as their proportion among candidates, has increased over the past decade. In 2021,

they made up 31% of all candidates. However, as shown in [Figure 3](#), the number of candidates of color enrolling in alternative teacher preparation programs grew nearly threefold between 2013 and 2021, and during the same period, the number of enrollees of color in traditional preservice programs dropped by 10%.

Figure 3. Enrollment of Candidates of Color in Teacher Preparation Programs, 2008–09 to 2020–21



^a Results prior to 2012–13 should be interpreted with caution.

Notes: Alternative teacher preparation program enrollment data include enrollments from institutions of higher education (IHEs) and non-IHEs and are based on data from the 50 states and District of Columbia. Individuals of color include individuals of all racial and ethnic groups, including those who are multiracial. Individuals with unknown race or ethnicity are excluded. Enrollment data exclude completers, as per the Title II definition until academic year 2017–18.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of Title II Teacher Preparation Enrollment data from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education from 2008–09 to 2020–21.

Increases in alternative preparation are concerning. Data suggest these programs have low completion rates for candidates of color. In 2021, the ratio of candidates of color completing their alternative teacher preparation programs to those enrolling in a program was 0.30, compared to the ratio for candidates of color in traditional programs (0.37) or White candidates (about 0.40 in either type of program).

Teachers of color completed less preservice education coursework and student teaching than their peers did, perhaps because of their disproportionate representation in alternative programs. The data show the following:

- In 2021, teachers of color were far more likely than White teachers to have entered teaching through alternative preparation programs (31% vs. 17%). These rates were even higher among beginning teachers (40% vs. 28%).
- Relatedly, only about half of beginning teachers of color—including 37% of Black and 50% of Latino/a beginning teachers—had taken any education classes prior to teaching, compared to 59% of beginning White teachers. Beginning teachers of color were also less likely than their White peers to have completed any student teaching (69% vs. 77%).
- Beginning teachers of color who did take education classes prior to teaching completed less preservice coursework than their peers did. They were less likely than White teachers to have taken courses on topics critical to effective teaching, including classroom management (67% vs. 75%) and lesson planning (67% vs. 77%).

Teachers of color may be more likely to pursue alternative certification because they can begin earning a full salary as a teacher of record while they are taking courses, allowing them to enter teaching without incurring as much debt. The need for financial support is associated both with the steep cost of higher education and reduced access to financial aid for teacher education.⁴ Indeed, Black teachers were more likely than other teachers to have taken out a student loan to pay for their undergraduate or graduate education, whether related to teacher preparation or otherwise (71% vs. 60% for White teachers). Student loan debt can affect teachers of color long into their careers. The survey data show that teachers of color, and Black teachers in particular, were more likely to report that they “still owe” all the student loans they had borrowed compared to their peers, and they reported experiencing a high or very high level of stress regarding their student loan debt.

Access to Sustaining Teaching Conditions

Even when teachers of color enter the profession fully prepared, challenging teaching conditions can discourage persistence in the classroom. For instance, teachers of color disproportionately taught in schools serving more than 75% students from low-income families (50% vs. 28% for White teachers) and more than 75% students of color (62% vs. 20% for White teachers). Other research indicates that these schools are often underresourced for meeting the greater needs students experience and have higher accountability pressures that can include reconstituting staff or closing schools.⁵ Further, more than half of teachers of color taught in the South, where states generally offer lower salaries and spend less per pupil than the national average, adjusting for regional wage differences.⁶ Perhaps as a result of teaching in more challenging teaching conditions and with fewer resources, teachers of color expressed feeling stressed and worried. For example:

- In 2021, teachers of color were more likely to report that “the stress and disappointments involved in teaching at this school aren’t really worth it” (30% vs. 24% of White teachers).
- Also in 2021, more than one third of teachers of color worried about the security of their job because of the performance of their students or their school (34.7% vs. 26.3% of White teachers).

Access to Competitive Compensation

Prior research demonstrates that teacher compensation makes a difference for retaining teachers and that teachers, overall, earn less than other non-teacher college-educated professionals.⁷ In the present analyses, teachers of color experienced a greater wage penalty than did teachers overall. [Table 1](#) shows that all teachers, on average, earned just 73% of what the average nonteacher college graduate earned, after adjusting for state cost-of-living differences. White teachers earned slightly more than the average teacher, at about 74% of average nonteacher wages. In contrast, teachers of color earned from as low as 61% of nonteacher wages for Native American/Alaska Native teachers to 72% for Latino/a teachers.

Table 1. Ratio of Teacher to Other College-Educated Worker Wages by Race/Ethnicity, Average 2016–20 (in 2020 dollars)

Public school teachers	Annual income from wages and salaries	Wage ratio to other college-educated worker wages (\$70,780)
Overall	\$51,640	73.0%
By race/ethnicity		
White	\$52,090	73.6%
Teachers of color	\$50,120	70.8%
Black	\$50,095	70.8%
Latino/a	\$50,695	71.6%
Asian American/Pacific Islander	\$49,775	70.3%
Native American/Alaska Native	\$43,345	61.2%
Other race/ethnicity	\$49,335	69.7%

Notes: The sample includes individuals with a bachelor's degree or more, ages 22–64. Public school teachers are “elementary, middle, secondary, and special ed.,” in industry “elementary and secondary schools,” and worker class “federal, state, and local government employee.” Other college graduates are all other individuals with a college degree or more (in any industry and sector). Amounts are annual income from wages and salaries, in 2020 dollars, adjusted for the state cost of living. Salaries are rounded to the nearest \$5.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of American Community Survey 2016–20 data, adjusted for cost of living using Bureau of Economic Analysis Regional Price Parities (average 2016–20).

Access to Mentoring and Professional Development

Beginning teachers who have access to early-career mentoring and induction support are far more likely to stay in teaching.⁸ However, overall few teachers, including teachers of color, received regular mentoring. This is evidenced by the following:

- In 2018 (the most recent survey year that includes data on mentoring for all teachers), fewer than half of teachers overall (38%) or of teachers of color (44%) received regular mentoring (at least once per month) and even fewer received mentoring weekly (14% and 17%, respectively).
- In 2021, early-career teachers of color (those in their first 5 years of teaching) were less likely than their White peers to report being provided mentoring (79% vs. 83%) or induction programs (71% vs. 74%) during their first year of teaching.

However, early-career teachers of color were more likely than their White peers to report receiving other types of support in their first year, including a reduced teaching schedule; common planning time with same-subject teachers; seminars or classes for beginning teachers; extra class assistance, such as teaching aides; regular supportive communication with school leaders; observation and feedback on teaching practice; and release time to participate in beginning teacher support activities.

Policy Implications

Prior research indicates that there are a number of strategies available to recruit and retain larger numbers of people of color into the teacher workforce. Comprehensive preservice teacher preparation, sustaining teaching conditions, competitive compensation, and access to mentoring matter for attracting and retaining all teachers. However, teachers of color often have less access to many of these conditions. Policymakers can do the following to provide more teachers, including teachers of color, with these key conditions:

- **Provide greater access to comprehensive preparation.** Federal, state, and local agencies can increase access to comprehensive preparation by underwriting the cost of preparation through service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs as well as supporting high-quality teacher residencies and apprenticeships that can provide funding to candidates. High-quality teacher residencies are partnerships between districts and universities that subsidize and improve teachers' training to teach in high-need schools and in high-demand subject areas. Similarly, apprenticeships allow candidates to earn a salary and receive mentored on-the-job experience while working toward a teaching license.
- **Improve teaching conditions in schools serving students of color and those from low-income families.** All teachers, including the disproportionate number of teachers of color who teach in these schools, will benefit from efforts that improve the teaching conditions they encounter.
 - States can develop equitable school funding formulas that provide an adequate and reliable base level of funding for all schools and additional funding to meet the needs of various student groups.

- The federal government and states can support school leader development focused on creating supportive collegial environments, particularly for schools in greatest need.
- States can establish or improve annual working conditions surveys to collect information about factors that may influence teacher decisions to stay in or leave the field.
- **Increase teacher compensation, especially in high-need schools and districts.** There are several opportunities at the district, state, and federal levels to increase teacher salaries. For example, states and districts can raise teacher salaries to be more competitive within the local economy and reduce teacher expenses through teacher housing programs. States can also make their funding systems more equitable so that salaries can be competitive across the state, and add incentives, such as stipends for National Board Certified teachers, for teaching in high-need districts. At the federal level, policymakers can reduce teacher financial burdens by providing refundable tax credits and housing subsidies for teachers.
- **Improve access to mentoring and induction to support early-career teachers.** Through induction programs, state and local agencies can ensure that new teachers are set up for success in the classroom. Induction can include mentoring by a veteran mentor teacher, seminars, classroom assistance, time to collaborate with other teachers, coaching and feedback from experienced teachers, and reduced workloads. Induction is especially effective when teachers participate in a comprehensive set of induction activities.

Improving the conditions influencing lackluster teacher diversity trends can improve teaching and learning conditions for teachers and students broadly. Federal, state, and district decision-makers will need to invest in the long game to improve access to top-notch preparation programs and improve the school environments where teachers of color teach. While there is no quick fix to solve the long-standing and entrenched disparities that teachers of color often face all along the teacher workforce pipeline, evidence suggests that there are promising practices to build upon.

Endnotes

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