Diversifying the Teaching Profession Through High-Retention Pathways

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Abstract

Research illustrates the importance of greater teacher diversity because of the substantial benefits teachers of color provide to all students, and to students of color in particular. Studies also show that policies must focus more effectively on retention of teachers of color, if diversity in the teaching profession is to be sustained. While more teachers of color are being recruited than in years past, their turnover rates are high, in part due to inadequate preparation and mentoring, poor teaching conditions, and displacement from the high-need schools in which they teach. Increasing the number of teachers of color in the workforce requires building high-retention pathways into the field that offer high-quality preparation and financial supports, including service scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, teacher residencies, Grow Your Own programs, ongoing mentorship, and other policies and strategies that improve teacher licensure, hiring, professional growth, and teaching conditions for current and aspiring teachers of color.

The full report can be found online at https://learningpolicyinstitute. org/product/diversifying-teaching-profession.

External Reviewers

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More and more states and districts are recognizing that recruiting and retaining teachers of color can help meet the needs of their students, while at the same time helping to curb critical teacher shortages that continue to worsen across the country.[1] Prospective teachers of color encounter unique barriers to entering the profession and continuing to teach for the long haul. But high-retention pathways—combining high-quality clinically rich preparation with financial support—can be especially effective at reversing those trends.

Why Teacher Diversity Matters

A growing body of research demonstrates that teachers of color provide benefits to all students, especially to students of color. For example:

- Studies have found that teachers of color boost the academic performance of students of color. Teachers' influences include improved reading and mathematics test scores, improved graduation rates, and increased aspirations to attend college.[2] One such study found that the benefit to Black students of having a Black teacher for just 1 year in elementary school can persist over several years, especially for Black students from low-income families.[3]

- Students of color also experience social-emotional and nonacademic benefits to having teachers of color, such as fewer unexcused absences and lower likelihoods of chronic absenteeism and suspension.[4] Students of color and White students also report having positive perceptions of their teachers of color, including feeling cared for and academically challenged.[5]

- Teachers of color are a resource for students in hard-to-staff schools. Many teachers of color report feeling called to teach in low-income communities of color, positions that are often difficult to fill.[6] Indeed, three in four teachers of color work in the quarter of schools serving the most students of color nationally. Teachers of color play an important role in filling gaps in these schools, and whether they decide to remain in teaching has significant impacts on students of color.[7]

Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Teacher Workforce Today

Teachers of color comprise an increasing share of the U.S. teacher workforce.[8] They comprised 20% of the teacher workforce in 2015–16, up from just 12% 30 years ago.[9] Still, that share is disproportionately low compared to the percentage of people of color in the nation (about 40% in 2016).[10]

While the population of teachers of color as a collective group is growing, Black and Native American teachers are a declining share of the teaching force (see Figure 1). Black teachers made up more than 8% of teachers in 1987 but made up 6.7% in 2015. Similarly, the share of Native American teachers declined from 1.1% in 1987 to 0.4% in 2015. Meanwhile, the percentage of Latinx teachers has increased from 2.9% of teachers in 1987 to 8.8% in 2015. Although this group of teachers is growing steeply, the gap between the percentage of Latinx teachers and students is larger than for any other racial or ethnic group. More than 25% of students were Latinx in 2014, 16 percentage points greater than the number of teachers (see Figure 1).[11] The share of Asian American teachers increased from 0.9% to 2.3% over the same period.

Figure 1
The Share of Teachers of Color in the Teacher Workforce
1987–2015
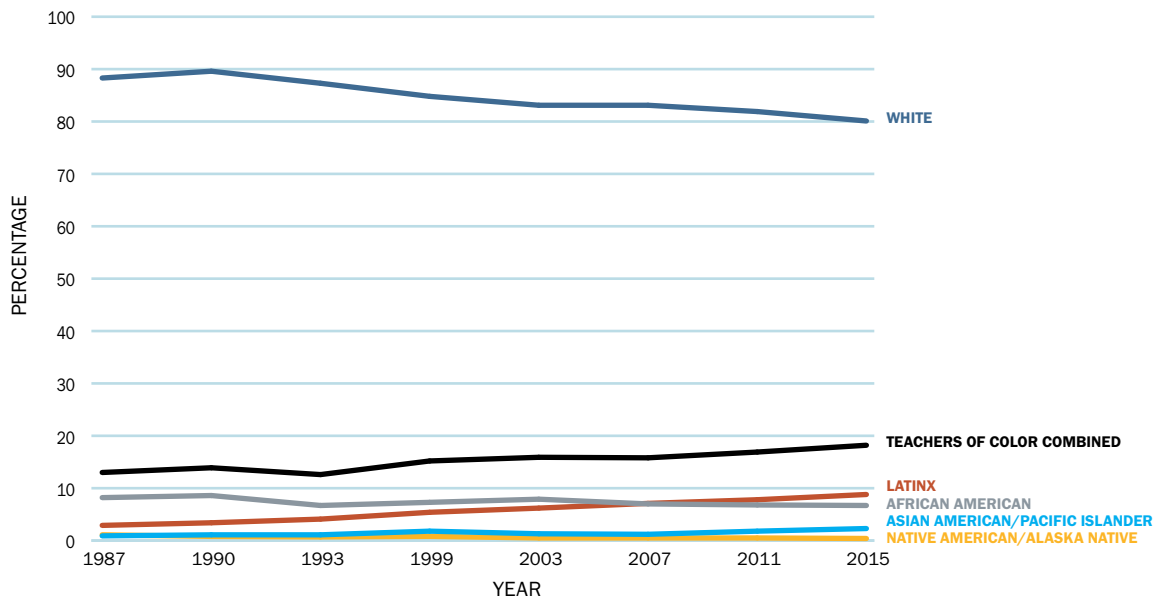
Note: Analysis by Learning Policy Institute. Full source information below.

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Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Research shows that teacher retention is crucial in reducing shortages of all teachers, including teachers of color. High turnover rates—or teachers moving schools and leaving the profession—have more than offset the successful recruitment of teachers of color in recent years.[12] In addition to negatively impacting student achievement, high teacher turnover rates exacerbate teacher shortages because inexperienced and underprepared teachers—who have some of the highest turnover rates—are often hired to replace those who leave, resulting in a "revolving door" of teachers.[13] Higher turnover rates among teachers of color disproportionately impact students of color and students in poverty because teachers of color are more likely to serve these groups of students.[14]

Teachers of color are also more likely to enter teaching through alternative certification pathways in which they complete teacher licensure requirements while teaching instead of beforehand. Such programs often omit key courses and student teaching, leaving teachers with less opportunity to learn how to meet their students' needs and respond to challenges while teaching. A quarter of all new teachers of color entered teaching through an alternative certification pathway in 2013, which is double the rate of White teachers.[15] While the quality of alternative certification programs varies, generally, teachers with the least comprehensive teacher preparation are two to three times more likely to leave their teaching position or teaching altogether than the most prepared candidates. Even after controlling for many key student, teacher, and school characteristics, research shows that alternatively certified teachers are 25% more likely to leave their schools than their traditionally prepared counterparts, exacerbating shortages of teachers of color and contributing to school instability—often in the neediest schools.[16]

Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining Teachers of Color

Studies show that both teacher recruitment and retention policies must be designed to more effectively retain teachers of color, if diversity in the teaching profession is to be sustained. While more teachers of color are being recruited than in years past, their turnover rates are high, in part due to inadequate preparation and mentoring. Barriers to enrollment in and completion of high-quality teacher preparation programs—such as cost, lack of support, and teacher licensure exams—play a key role in limiting both the recruitment and retention of teachers of color.

The impact of student debt on teacher preparation, enrollment, and completion

Increasing the pool of teachers of color begins with increasing the number of college students enrolling in and completing teacher preparation programs. Currently, college students of color are less likely to enroll in teacher preparation programs than White college students, despite an increase in overall college enrollment over the past 2 decades for students of color.[17]

This lower enrollment of students of color in teacher preparation programs could be due, in part, to the high opportunity cost of teaching. Research shows that college students choose careers, in part, based on the debt load they will face in relation to the salaries they can earn in a given line of work.[18] While teacher salaries remain low, the cost of a college degree has increased, especially for students of color. Twelve years after earning a bachelor's degree, Black graduates owe $43,000 more than White graduates.[19] This debt gap between Black and White college graduates is due to Black students borrowing more as undergraduates and graduate students, and greater interest accumulation when interest accrues faster than loan payments are made.[20] While Latinx college students tend to borrow about as much as White borrowers, their loan default rates are about twice as high, suggesting that even the same debt amount presents a greater relative burden.[21] Rising tuition and the high cost of student loans can dissuade students of color from pursuing careers in education.[22]

It is no surprise then that, faced with steep student loan debt, college students of color would choose better-paying careers. Even after adjusting for the shorter work year in teaching, beginning teachers nationally earn about 20% less than individuals with college degrees in other fields—a wage gap that widens to 30% by mid-career. The difference between teachers' compensation as compared to other workers with a college degree has grown larger over time.[23]

Obstacles to completing college

Completion rates are generally low among those students of color who enroll in college, and this is also true for those who enroll in education programs. While 40% of all college students finish a bachelor's degree in 4 years, completion rates for Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Native American, and Alaska Native college students are between 21 and 30%.[24] The financial burden of college is a key challenge, but scholars also cite difficulties related to family responsibilities, lack of exposure to college-level coursework in high school, and students' dissatisfaction with college environments that offer little faculty diversity or do not reflect their culture or experience.[25]

Low college completion rates, however, are not inevitable for students of color. Teachers of color who attended Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) are more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree from a school or department of education compared to teachers of color who attended Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs),[26] and MSIs produce more teacher candidates of color than other colleges.[27]

MSIs can serve as models for other institutions in how to recruit teacher candidates of color and support them to complete their programs. State and federal support for MSIs can help them to maintain and grow their impact.

Teacher licensure exams

Most states require that teacher candidates demonstrate basic skills, general knowledge, and subject-matter competence by passing a series of standardized exams, even when candidates have secured a college degree and, often, majored or minored in the subject they are preparing to teach. However, there is little evidence that passing these multiple-choice exams predicts teaching effectiveness. Black and Latinx candidates disproportionately fail these exams, which can exclude them from the teacher pool or even discourage interested individuals from pursuing teaching.[28] The exams are financially costly, particularly for candidates who must retake one or more of them.

Studies suggest that performance assessments can more authentically evaluate candidates' readiness for teaching, while reducing barriers to entry into the profession for teachers of color. Teacher performance assessments typically require candidates to develop portfolios of work that include unit plans, videos of their instruction, evaluation of student work, and written reflections that connect their teaching practice to theory, and a number of these assessments have been found to predict teaching effectiveness.[29] Several studies of candidate pass rates on teacher performance assessments have found small or no differences among candidates by race and ethnicity.[30] These results are significantly better than the outcomes of traditional multiple choice teacher exams, and they are arguably more important because they deal with candidates' actual abilities to teach.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Research shows that improving teacher retention begins with high-quality teacher preparation; however, in many cases, teachers of color are more likely to begin teaching without having completed comprehensive preparation. As discussed earlier, this is not surprising given the cost of traditional teacher preparation programs and the debt burden faced by college students of color. By underwriting the cost of completing a high-quality teacher preparation program and addressing the other barriers to completing preparation, federal, state, and local policymakers can both encourage more students of color to pursue teaching and do so through high-retention pathways that better prepare teachers of color for successful, long-term teaching careers. Policies that would support such a strategy include:

Service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs

The federal government and states can support candidates of color and encourage their retention by subsidizing the cost of teacher preparation. Service scholarship, grant, and loan forgiveness programs cover or reimburse a portion of tuition costs in exchange for a commitment to teach in high-need schools or subject areas, typically for 3 to 5 years. These programs tend to be more effective when they cover a significant portion of educational costs. One of the most lauded

service scholarship programs was the recently relaunched **North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program**, a highly selective scholarship program that provides fellows up to $8,250 annually for up to 4 years to attend an approved North Carolina university in exchange for a commitment to teach in the state for at least 4 years.

Several states currently offer service scholarship or loan forgiveness programs aimed at increasing the number of teachers of color. These include Florida's **Fund for Minority Teachers**, the **Kentucky Minority Educator Recruitment and Retention Scholarship**, Minnesota's **Collaborative Urban and Greater Minnesota Educators of Color Program**, the **Missouri Minority Teaching Scholarship**, and the **Tennessee Minority Teaching Fellows Program**.[31]

Teacher residency programs

The federal government and states can also invest in high-quality teacher residency programs. Several studies show that such programs are effective both in bringing more teachers of color into the profession and in preparing them to stay long term.[32] Nationally, about 49% of residents are people of color. That is the same as the proportion of public school students of color and far more than the 20% of teachers nationally who are people of color. Principals find graduates of residency programs to be well-prepared, and in many cases to be better prepared than typical new teachers. In addition, a review of residency program evaluations shows that residents tend to have higher retention rates over time than nonresident teachers.[33]

Grow Your Own programs

At the federal, state, and local levels, investments can be made in Grow Your Own programs that recruit teacher candidates from nontraditional populations who are more likely to reflect local diversity and more likely to continue teaching. These programs may reach out to high school students, paraprofessionals, after-school program staff, or other community members and support them financially as they complete preparation programs, in exchange for the candidates returning to teach in their communities.[34] **Pathways2Teaching**, based in Colorado, is working to increase teacher diversity by offering programs that emphasize the role of teachers in advancing social justice to high school students in low-performing schools. The **California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing** program offers school staff, such as paraprofessionals, up to $4,000 per year for up to 5 years to earn a bachelor's degree and teaching credential. Since receiving funding in 2016, the program has supported 2,000 classified staff to become teachers, nearly half of whom are Latinx.[35]

Course articulation agreements and "2+2" partnerships

Teacher preparation programs can improve recruitment efforts by partnering with community colleges to create degree articulation agreements so that candidates can begin preparing to teach in a local community college and fully transfer their credits to a 4-year program where they will complete their preparation. Such a program can be found at Leeward Community College, the third-largest campus in the University of Hawaii system that serves more Native Hawaiian undergraduates than any other community college in the system.[36] The college offers an associate degree in teaching that simultaneously prepares candidates for employment as paraprofessionals and for transfer to a 4-year education program. Articulation agreements with three 4-year universities allow candidates to complete their teacher preparation in a total of 4 years with considerable savings over the cost of a traditional degree at a 4-year college. Furthermore, the college offers several supports to ensure candidates are prepared for transfer, including providing classroom case studies, field experiences, peer mentorship, and counseling. Similar 2+2 programs that offer access to teacher preparation courses at community colleges in rural communities can help build the pipeline of teachers in hard-to-staff rural communities. As community colleges often serve students of color, they can be a useful source for diversifying the pool of aspiring teachers.

Teacher preparation accreditation and licensure policies

States can increase enrollments of candidates of color by implementing data monitoring policies that report on and reward teacher preparation programs for greater diversity. In Tennessee, for example, the State Board of Education revised the state's Teacher Preparation Report Card in 2016. Each teacher preparation program receives an overall score and several sub-scores, including one for a candidate profile. The candidate profile score is based, in part, on the percentage of program completers who are non-White. Title II of the federal Higher Education Act requires that all states report on

the racial and ethnic diversity of teacher preparation enrollees; however, they are not required to report on the diversity of program completers. Tennessee is unique in requiring and monitoring that data point, which is a better indicator of the supply of teachers of color than enrollment data. Other states can also monitor and report teacher preparation enrollment and completion demographics.

Ongoing mentoring and support

Colleges can offer support to candidates of color throughout the college and teacher preparation experience to improve the likelihood that they will complete the training and certification process. Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models), founded at Clemson University in 2000 and active in several other colleges throughout the South, works to increase the pool of Black male teachers through a comprehensive system of supports that includes loan forgiveness, mentorship, academic and peer support, preparation for state licensure exams, and assistance with job placement. Participants commit to teaching in a local school for each year they receive financial support. The program maintains contact with graduates, and graduates are expected to become mentors to new program participants. Of the approximately 150 participants who have graduated since 2004, 100% remain in education and 95% are teaching in South Carolina schools, far exceeding national retention rates.[37]

Conclusion

High-retention pathways and financial supports can build a pool of diverse teacher candidates who are well-prepared for long-term success in the classroom. Still, many teachers of color encounter challenging teaching conditions and punitive accountability policies that can push them out of the field. Other policies, such as implementing proactive hiring and induction strategies, improving teaching conditions through improved school leadership, and investing in low-performing school communities, rather than closing those schools, can also help to retain these well-prepared teachers of color once they are in the classroom.[38]

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.