

What will it take to change teacher demographics?

BY PAM GROSSMAN

I'm fond of saying that the resources that matter most in education are human resources, and that the *school-based* human resources that matter most are teachers. So, not surprisingly, I applaud any publication that focuses on the importance of teachers. This *Kappan* report is especially relevant because it addresses crucial questions related to the recruitment, preparation, and retention of Teachers of Color who represent both valuable and rare resources in the educational landscape.

The Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, edited by Conra D. Gist and Travis J. Bristol, shows that, in this time when issues of racial justice are at the forefront of our national conversation, we still know very little about how best to recruit and support Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers in U.S. schools.

As the research syntheses make clear, Teachers of Color represent only 19% of teachers in U.S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), whereas Students of Color represent more than half of public school students. And these numbers present an incomplete picture because Teachers of Color are not evenly distributed across districts or states. For example, in 2017, Students of Color represented 71% of Texas students, whereas Teachers of Color represented only 38% of the teachers; and in Washington State, Students of Color made up 44% of the student

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population, whereas only 10% of teachers identified as Teachers of Color (Brown & Boser, 2017). This means that in all too many schools across the United States, Students of Color can go through their entire schooling without ever seeing teachers who look like them. As one pair of researchers (Bireda & Chait, 2011) noted, “in over 40 percent of public schools there is not a single teacher of color” (p. 1). The research presented in the *Handbook* also makes clear that Teachers of Color have a positive effect on student achievement and graduation rates for Students of Color, as well as on students' sense of belonging in school. If we are to provide the most robust learning opportunities for historically marginalized students, then creating a more diverse teacher workforce must be part of the solution.

There is no shortage of ideas as to how we might accomplish this; many of them are described in this special report. But, as the powerful commentaries from teachers convey, all too often Teachers of Color fail to receive the specific kinds of preparation or support that would help them remain in the classroom. This failure reflects a larger challenge around retention in the teaching profession that is greatly intensified for Teachers of Color.

So, how can we move toward changing the demographics of the teaching force? The first step is to recognize and understand the nature of the problem and to face the challenge, for as James Baldwin (2010) famously commented, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (p. 42).

This publication squarely addresses the challenge by helping us understand the realities Teachers of Color face. It also makes clear, however,

that we have not sufficiently invested in the kinds of systematic research studies that would help us understand which programs and practices are most effective, for which populations of teachers and under what conditions.

Perhaps most important, we have too little research into the policies that might lead to substantive improvements in teacher diversity. We know that federal and state policies can change the nature of educational opportunity for *students*, particularly when we look at clusters of equity-oriented policies. (For instance, Rucker C. Johnson's 2019 book, *Children of the Dream*, details how the combination of school funding, access to Head Start, and school integration leads to greater social mobility.) But we do not yet know which policy strategies are most effective at increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce.

Still, the problem is too urgent for us to wait for the research in this area to mature. We need to act now, both at the federal and state levels, to create policies that aim to improve the recruitment and retention of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. For example, we can provide forgivable loans for Students of Color who become teachers; create robust pathways and financial support for Paraprofessionals of Color to earn degrees and certification; offer better financial, pedagogical, and culturally appropriate supports during both teacher education and the early years of teaching, and compensate Teachers of Color who take on additional tasks of mentoring younger colleagues and student teachers. And in the meantime, while we pursue such reasonable policy strategies, we can also invest in sustained, longitudinal research to help policy makers learn from and improve upon these efforts.



With a new U.S. presidential administration in place, and as our national reckoning with racial injustice continues to unfold, now is the time to take action to ensure that the adults in our public schools reflect the country's racial diversity and to ensure that all students, most especially Students of Color, have the opportunity to learn from Teachers of Color. ■

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