

Policy Matters

By Juanita Price



Beginning my junior year of high school in a new district, I entered the hallways of an unfamiliar school. It was a world away from my comfort zone; I was in for a culture shock. My old school, in Indiana's Gary Community School Corporation, had become my second home. There I was met by warm voices and kind faces that resembled mine and those of my family. This was my community!

In this new school, I could not relate. Nothing about this change made me feel welcomed, not even the pairing with a Black guidance counselor who ultimately fed into my withdrawal and self-doubt. Being removed from a learning space that confirmed my Blackness and excellence raised questions in my mind of my worthiness and preparedness to occupy this new learning space. I still wonder whether it was a matter of the white teachers not believing in me or whether the schoolwork genuinely became more difficult. Either way, I no longer felt capable — and I definitely didn't feel supported. In lieu of providing the necessary scaffolding, the teachers suggested that I take a lesser course load or "basic" courses, rather than the Advanced Placement classes I was consistently encouraged to take in my previous district.

As I reflect on this now, as an educator, I'm certain it was the bigotry of low expectations. If policies existed to support teachers and staff members to bring out the best in all students, more students would benefit from traditional schooling, no matter which district they're in. Students tend to rise to the expectations of their teachers, especially teachers who share the students' cultural experiences (Lombardi, 2016). Research suggests that Black students are more successful when they've had just one Black teacher (Rosen, 2018). Imagine how much more successful Black students could be with multiple Black teachers throughout their academic careers.

Despite my experience in the new school, being

taught by Black teachers throughout the majority of my public school education provided a rich foundation. The teachers in Gary believed in me, and their support still sustains my will to reach high expectations. Ultimately, attending Fisk University — a historically Black university — allowed me to recover that early momentum. And so began my trajectory of becoming a teacher who meets the needs of Black and Brown students.

It is essential that we establish policies to recruit, hire, train, and sustain Black teachers. Two approaches in particular offer attractive incentives and long-term professional support, as well as opportunities for career advancement. The first, *compensated teacher residency programs*, pairs resident teachers with highly effective teachers on completion of undergraduate coursework. Resident teachers receive mentoring and supervised training to equip them with the skills and experience they need to succeed in high-need areas. Residents are compensated while continuing their work toward a master's degree.

Mentoring programs, the second approach, support teachers as they adjust to teaching within their own classrooms. This gives novice teachers a space to speak openly about their successes and challenges, without fear of repercussions on a formal review. Induction programs usually offer two tracks — one for new teachers (whether they are just out of school or transitioning from another career path) and one for experienced teachers who are new to a school or district.

In addition to providing for such programs, state and local policies should ensure that principals are trained to support Black teachers and teachers in urban settings that predominantly serve Black and Brown students. New teacher orientation programs, in which administrators review the school's expectations and identify each teacher's needs and strengths, can help create a sense of collaboration and point teachers to professional development tailored to their needs.

Imagine policy that would provide Black teachers with a mentor during their first few years of teaching. Mentor teachers should be highly qualified and should be compensated for their time. Mentor and mentee would meet to review and internalize lesson plans, record lessons for feedback, and participate in practice clinics. Building leaders should be accountable for the success of these programs; they should meet with mentor teachers and track goals and progress. Ultimately, the mission should

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be clear; every staff member in the building needs to be committed to supporting the aspirations of every student.

Other approaches are worth noting, too. *Competitive compensation* implies that an educator's salary should align with the salary of other careers that require the same amount of education and experience. Considering how much professional development and training are necessary for teachers to remain licensed and up-to-date, educators deserve a more competitive salary and corresponding raises and benefits over the years.

Culturally responsive pedagogy, *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, and *universal design for learning* prioritize professional development. Every adult who is in contact with students should commit to attending training sessions in which everyone explores the science of learning and teaching and how to serve and support their community. Policies should hold administrators accountable for providing high-quality professional development, so teachers will be better prepared and more likely to stay in the profession.

If policies were in place to support these approaches, more students would share my first schooling experience, one in which they're

surrounded by teachers who look like them and who believe they can succeed. The Black teachers who intentionally taught our heritage and incorporated our culture in interactions helped us become more conscious of the world as it *should* be while nurturing our confidence and strengthening our skills to critically think about and exist in the world as it is.

Policies are important. They should be designed to ensure that teachers receive the training they need to boost their confidence to manage a classroom; to internalize, differentiate, and implement the curriculum, and to productively engage with parents and the community in which they serve. Policy normalizes support and sets standards and expectations while providing a framework for accountability. ■

References

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Rosen, J. (2018, November 12). Black students who have one black teacher are more likely to go to college. *Johns Hopkins Magazine*.