

To retain Teachers of Color, nurture them

By Kiah Duncan



I left teaching after four years with no intention of returning. It wasn't because the students lacked discipline or because I couldn't handle the pressure. It wasn't even because the pay was too low. The real problem was that every time I began to flourish, something cut me down.

Imagine a sturdy tree that keeps being struck by lightning, until it finally falls. The first time lightning hit me was when I was given a pink slip, right after having received great evaluations and positive feedback from my principal. Meanwhile, colleagues who no longer had the passion for teaching kept their jobs simply because they started before I did. Perhaps I should have known that nontenured teachers could be let go for any reason, but I was caught completely off guard.

To make sure I didn't have a gap in employment, I took a new job, teaching 2nd grade, that paid \$5,000 less per year. Two months into the fall semester, a new principal took over the school and abruptly turned everything upside down, including the master schedule. I was given just one day to move my entire classroom (furniture included) to the other side of the school, with no assistance. More important, I had only that one day to prepare myself to teach 1st grade — a grade I hadn't taught before. That was another lightning strike.

Nevertheless, despite the stressful circumstances, and even though the 1st graders were bewildered by the sudden change of teachers, we had a successful year. Once again, I received glowing evaluations, and the new principal complimented my work, telling me I was an accomplished teacher. However, he added, he did have one problem with me: He told me I needed to “perk up” and that I should smile

more often. At that point, I could sense the storm clouds beginning to gather once again. What did my face have to do with the quality of my teaching? Was I being stereotyped as an angry Black woman, simply because I didn't plant a smile on my face and meet the principal's desired level of perkiness?

By the following year, the principal had become displeased with me for neglecting to overhaul my face and personality. During my evaluation, he insisted that I do something to address this “issue,” telling me, “You know your stuff, and the kids seem to really like you. But if you plan to continue to work for me, you'll have to change who you are.”

I couldn't believe he actually expected me to transform into a new person. I couldn't do such a thing, I said, so he would have to do whatever he found necessary. Of course, on my next evaluation, he gave me extremely negative feedback. This time, the lightning lit me on fire and burned me down. I was stressed out already from working long hours, but now it was clear that my hard work would not be recognized, no matter how well I did my job. Nor were my veteran colleagues spared from this principal's harassment. Some tenured teachers even lost their jobs midyear, and the teachers union did nothing to help.

I loved my job, but only when the doors were closed and I was in my own world with my students. Every time I left the classroom, my stress level would rise. I couldn't stand being there and couldn't wait to be fired. As predicted, I received a pink slip. This time I was calm. My tree had been reduced to a stump. Like many early-career Black teachers working in underserved and overpopulated low-income schools, I was ready for reincarnation.

I knew I had to leave teaching before my anger poisoned my work with children, so I found a job as an office manager, which was fun for a while. However, I couldn't stop thinking about how much I had enjoyed teaching. So, I decided to go to graduate school to get my master's degree in reading. I went back into teaching, better prepared this time, and armed with new expertise and wisdom. Going to graduate school had given me a chance to root myself in a better place, where the lightning didn't strike.

My new principal gave me opportunities to grow. It started small, with me leading a few staff meetings, mentoring, and taking on more responsibility. Then it grew to leading large events for the community, leading professional development programs, and sitting on committees at the district level. With

KIAH DUNCAN is an instructional interventionist, grades K-5, in the greater Chicago area.

the confidence I gained from these experiences, I decided to seek out a new position: I now work as an instructional interventionist for grades K–5, which enables me to coach other teachers; work in small groups with students who need support; select teaching materials, and guide my entire school building in collecting, interpreting, and using data for improvement. All this has led me to study leadership so I can be a bigger part of the change that is needed.

Leaving teaching was necessary to prevent me from becoming a jaded teacher. I refused to be

someone who contributes to that vicious cycle of systematic inequality, in which substandard educators work with the most vulnerable children, damaging them further.

Unfortunately, though, most teachers who leave don't find their way back to the profession. And among those who do come back (or never leave at all), some do so because they see no other options. Unless we find better ways to nurture those educators — both when they start their careers and later on, when they need to be rejuvenated — we will all suffer. ■

