

# Motivating Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers to stay in the field

By **Conra D. Gist, Travis J. Bristol, Desiree Carver-Thomas, Maria E. Hyler, & Linda Darling-Hammond**

Recruitment efforts over the last 20 years have resulted in a modest increase in the numbers of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers working in the nation's public schools — they made up 16% of the teaching force in 2000 and 19% in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Warner-Griffin et al., 2016). However, those gains would have been more significant if not for high (and growing) attrition rates among these teachers — about 19% of Teachers of Color left their positions in 2013 compared to 15% of white teachers. In 1992, 13% of Teachers of Color left their positions, a rate comparable to white teachers.

The existing research into teacher retention tends to address the experiences of teachers in general, without considering the distinct experiences of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. For instance, studies have found that teachers of all races and ethnicities tend to leave the profession when they experience a lack of support from colleagues and administrators (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Also, researchers have found that teacher attrition tends to be higher at charter schools than at other public schools — in 2008-09, 7.9% of teachers left public schools in comparison to 12.5% teachers leaving charter schools (Keigher, 2010).

In the relatively few studies that *have* focused specifically on the attrition of Teachers of Color, those teachers cite some of the same reasons for leaving the profession as in studies of teachers in general, sometimes with different degrees of emphasis, as well as some unique challenges. The range of responses includes inadequate educator preparation experiences (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011); difficulty navigating relationships with colleagues (Gist, 2018) and

relating to school administrators (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018); limited professional development supports (Bristol et al., 2020); a restrictive curriculum (Philip, 2013); racial microaggressions (Quinones, 2018); hostile racial climates (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016), and too few career and leadership development opportunities (Rogers-Ard et al., 2013).

Further, data show that relative to their white counterparts, Teachers of Color tend to be much more likely to work in schools serving more Students of Color and students in poverty, which are often under-resourced, resulting in challenging working conditions (Carver-Thomas, 2018) that no doubt contribute to high rates of attrition (Simon & Johnson, 2015). More specifically, Betty Achinstein and colleagues (2010) have divided the umbrella term “working conditions” into several distinct variables — student body characteristics, financial capital, human capital, social capital, and power structures and relations — that can each influence the overall quality of the work environment, influencing teachers' decisions to stay on the job or quit the profession. Teachers of Color, the researchers note, are disproportionately employed at schools that are rated poorly on at least a few of these variables.

Additionally, evidence suggests that school and district administrators' personnel decisions often reflect conscious or unconscious bias about Black educators, with further effects on their retention. For example, researchers have found that administrators are less likely to hire Black teachers than white teachers with similar credentials and professional experience (D'Amico et al., 2017), and they tend to give Black teachers lower teaching evaluations than other subgroups of teachers, regardless of their students'

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performance (Bailey et al., 2016; Drake, Auletto, & Cowen, 2019). Likely because of the concentration of teachers of color in high-needs schools, when district administrators designate schools for closure, they tend to choose schools that employ large numbers of Teachers of Color (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Six recent studies highlighted in the *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers* (Gist & Bristol, forthcoming, 2022) expand the research base in this area.

### What the recent research shows

While researchers continue to explore the causes of high attrition among Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, we're also beginning to see a more concerted effort to identify strategies that will help boost their retention. In one study, Richard Ingersoll and colleagues analyze 30 years of survey data on teacher turnover, along with data on shortages of Teachers of Color. Echoing previous studies, they find that higher turnover is closely associated with poor working conditions, with Teachers of Color citing low salary levels, inadequate professional development, low-quality classroom resources, and — the most important factors, according to teacher surveys — their exclusion from school decision making and their lack of instructional autonomy. To increase the retention of Teachers of Color, the researchers conclude, efforts by school and district leaders should include strengthening teachers' participation in school decision making and allowing them greater professional discretion in the classroom.

Policy makers have often hypothesized, also, that economic incentives (such as merit-based pay, salary schedule modifications, and retirement packages that reward length of service) can boost teacher retention. Andrene Castro has reviewed the research into such policies, focusing on

those implemented between 2008 and 2018, to see if the design and/or duration of the incentive program affected the retention of Teachers of Color in particular. She finds that certain kinds of policies do show promise of motivating Teachers of Color to remain in the profession. Education and training-related incentives (i.e., tuition subsidies, preservice teacher scholarships, financial assistance for nontraditional comprehensive teacher preparation, and tuition tax credits) appear to be particularly promising. However, Castro concludes, to learn more about the effects of such policies on teacher diversity, we'll need to be careful to make sure that school staffing data are disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

These education- and training-related subsidies may be particularly promising for several reasons. Student debt presents a disproportionate burden on Teachers and Teacher Candidates of Color. Black undergraduates, for example, graduate with more debt than white borrowers, and this gap grows over time, amounting to a difference of more than \$40,000 12 years after graduation (Scott-Clayton & Li, 2016). Black college students are more likely to report that they changed their career plans because of their loans, or that their loans were burdensome (Baum & O'Malley, 2003). It is little surprise, then, that Teachers of Color are more likely to enter the teaching profession through alternative certification pathways that significantly reduce the cost of preparation (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b). However, alternative certification pathways typically offer little to no preservice student teaching and coursework and are associated with higher teacher turnover rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017a). Indeed, teachers who enter the profession with the least preparation have higher turnover rates than those who enter with the most comprehensive preparation (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2012).



Other recent studies have focused on how professional relationships support or undermine the retention of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. For instance, a study by Socorro Herrera and colleagues finds that Latinx teachers in predominantly white rural settings often choose to isolate themselves from their colleagues, largely to shield themselves from racial microaggressions and hostile criticism of their efforts to include topics related to race and ethnicity in the curriculum. The more often Latinx teachers have to confront these two forms of hostility, the weaker their resolve to remain in the profession. To improve retention, the researchers recommend providing teachers with professional development opportunities that foreground workplace issues and challenges related to race and ethnicity, build on their cultural assets, and foster strong support systems and networks.

In another study, Ashley Griffin and colleagues find that many Black K-12 teachers experience constant hostility from colleagues and administrators, undermining their commitment to teaching. The researchers conducted a series of focus groups in New Jersey, North Carolina, Alabama, Texas, California, Colorado, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia as a means of gauging Black teachers' perceptions of the professional challenges they face and how those challenges are likely to influence the length of their teaching careers. The participants described being routinely subjected to various and often subtle forms of racism and discrimination, such as being assigned to teach Black students only, being regularly put into the role of classroom or school disciplinarian, being constantly scrutinized and pressured to prove their worth and ability to colleagues and parents, and being offered limited opportunities for professional growth and development.

Similarly, Toya Frank and colleagues surveyed more than 500 Black K-12 math teachers across the United States, eliciting their views on mathematics content and pedagogy, their racialized experiences as teachers, and their current working conditions. A majority of respondents indicated that racism had significant effects on their professional lives, likely influencing their future decisions about whether to continue teaching. For example, more than half said they are subjected to race-related microaggressions at least a few times a month (32.6%), or once weekly (19.5%), suggesting that they endure a steady stream of hostile and demeaning remarks and other slights, which degrade the quality of their teaching experiences and relationships with colleagues.

On a more encouraging note, Maria Tenorio and colleagues examined an American Indian Teacher Program (AITP) that features an Indigenous community of practice, which aims to affirm teachers' Native identity, support their advocacy for tribal educational sovereignty and nation building, and nurture long-term professional relationships and networks. Analyzing data and records from 2010 to 2018, the researchers find that the program has boosted teacher retention, largely due to the quality of the

mentorship it offers — specifically, mentors' efforts not only to help participants cope with the everyday challenges of teaching, but also to reinforce their motivation to stay in the field and serve their community. Of the 35 teachers who graduated from the program during the eight years of the study, 32 remain classroom teachers, two became administrators, and only one has left the profession (due to illness).

### What we don't know yet

There has been less research on the impact on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, specifically, of policies and programmatic interventions that have been found effective at influencing job satisfaction, persistence, mobility, attrition, and retention among teachers, generally. Future studies could investigate the effects for Teachers of Color of economic interventions (e.g., signing bonuses, forgiveness of student loans, and housing supports); human resources (e.g., specific approaches to mentorship, networking, and professional development), and social-emotional supports (e.g., mental health resources and approaches to self-care).

Because school administrators play a key role in teachers' job satisfaction and retention, it would also be helpful to know more about the ways principals (and others who supervise and evaluate Teachers of Color) can foster a racially literate and supportive school climate. It would also be useful to know whether and how teacher retention is influenced when teachers and school administrators share the same racial or ethnic background. And it would be valuable to know whether certain types of programs and learning experiences are effective at preparing principals and other administrators to create a school climate that supports the retention of Teachers of Color.

### Implications for policy and practice

- Provide Teaching Candidates of Color and Indigenous Candidates access to high-retention pathways into teaching by underwriting the cost of comprehensive preparation through programs such as teacher residencies, loan forgiveness, and service scholarships.
- Offer differentiated induction, mentorship, and professional development support that address the teaching strengths and racialized challenges of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers in ways that make race visible, honor these teachers' funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth, and provide antiracist and Indigenous tools, resources, and communities of practice that enable them to remain in the profession.
- Tailor retention support for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers to various stages of career

development, such as novice, mid-career, and veteran, as well as those who have moved into school leadership.

- Invest in high-quality antiracist school leaders who foster formal structures, such as racial climate committees and education and training incentives, to help teachers, staff, and school administrators become aware of and disrupt racism and inequity. ■

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## Research topics to explore

- How differences in working conditions affect Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers within and across groups.
- Critical and racial justice conceptual frameworks for understanding attrition, retention, promotion, advancement, and other professional transitions across an educator's career.
- Various economic and noneconomic interventions that support the persistence and retention of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- Metrics for assessing the racialized experiences of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers using national data sets.
- Antiracist and Indigenous clinical induction and professional development models designed to support the retention of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- The role of education policies in retaining or displacing Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.

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## Research studies to conduct

- **Interpretive studies:** Researchers investigate the experiences of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers who remain in or leave the profession in the same school or district, differentiating for years of experience, working conditions, disciplinary background, school type, preparation pathway, and teacher development and evaluation policies. Using culturally responsive and decolonial methodologies, researchers should engage with teachers who have left the profession and those who have chosen to stay.
- **Design-based studies:** Researchers can design interventions that examine how different economic and humanistic supports influence job satisfaction, persistence, mobility, attrition, and retention for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- **Effect studies:** Researchers can develop causal studies that examine the relationships between the retention of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers at district, state, and national levels and program pathways, teacher characteristics in schools, working conditions, and reform policies. This research should be paired with qualitative sources of evidence, such as focus groups, interviews, and teacher testimonies, to clarify outcomes. Where possible, the research should be conducted longitudinally to more reliably ascertain what factors influence teacher retention.

**Example:** If the problem of practice is that Latino men working in middle schools exit the profession at a higher rate than other Teachers of Color, then researchers might engage in interpretive studies to better understand these teachers' experiences and the middle school contexts in which they work. Drawing from these investigations, researchers would develop theories of change that would drive the development of design-based interventions to foster improved retention outcomes for Latino men.