



CELEBRATING AND  
PRESERVING DIVERSITY:  
RECOMMENDATIONS ON RETAINING  
TEACHERS OF COLOR IN CALIFORNIA

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## INTRODUCTION



California is a diverse state in many ways, but this diversity is not reflected in the demographics of educators in the classroom. Numerous studies show that teachers of color have profound and positive impacts on the learners they serve, regardless of students' race or ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> Having just one Black teacher between 3rd and 5th grade makes a significant positive difference for students of color, including reducing a Black student's chance of dropping out of school by 39 percent.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, students who share the racial or ethnic identity of their teacher have been found to increase their math and reading scores by three to four percentile points.<sup>3</sup> Research has also shown that student graduation rates have increased, as have their aspirations to go to college, when classrooms have greater racial parity.<sup>4</sup>

Teachers of color often work in high-need schools that experience resource scarcity. Educators at these schools face challenges in serving the unique needs of their students, as well as difficult work environments.<sup>5</sup> Research reflects that teachers of color tend to leave the profession at higher rates than their White counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Data also shows that teachers of color, particularly men, are more likely to leave a school site than their White peers.<sup>7</sup> Among teachers who choose to move school sites or leave the profession, teachers of color were more likely to cite career advancement or job dissatisfaction than were White teachers.

We are a group of California Teach Plus Policy Fellows who teach and work in schools across Los Angeles serving a diverse group of students with a range of life experiences and needs. In this report, we seek to build on this robust body of research and our own experiences to explore patterns among our fellow teachers in Los Angeles and gather insights on the intersection of race and education. By doing so, we hope to illustrate ways to improve the professional experiences of teachers of color and identify what could be done to retain more teachers of color in the profession.

What follows are qualitative, first-hand accounts that speak to how school districts, namely the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and the state of California can make a concerted effort to invest in retaining teachers of color.

## FINDINGS

1. **Teachers of color report feeling isolated and undervalued** at their school sites, citing the need to establish specialized professional communities and recognition for the assets they bring.
2. **Teachers at all experience levels report the desire for more appropriate and effective support** throughout their careers from experienced peers that better reflect their needs, as well as their racial and ethnic identities.
3. **Teachers overwhelmingly experience lackluster professional learning opportunities** that do not reflect current student needs or provide concrete guidance for pedagogically-sound and culturally-relevant practices.
4. **Teachers report feeling disconnected and unsupported by school leadership** and needing equitable access to leadership opportunities in the school systems they serve.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

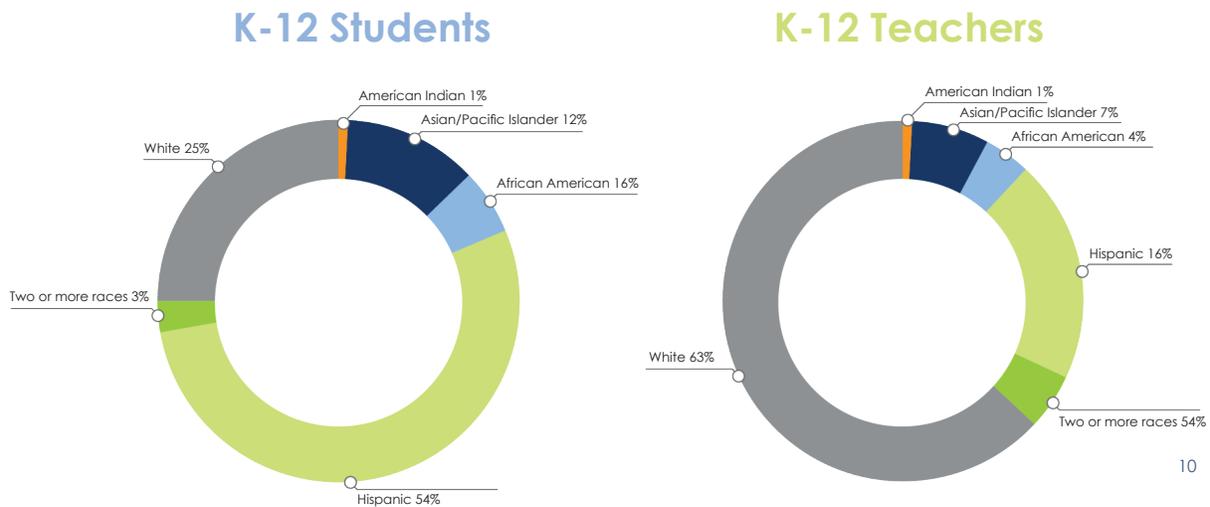
1. **Implement equitable hiring and placement practices** that allow teachers of color earlier access to hiring opportunities and help establish diverse teaching cohorts throughout a district.
2. **Invest in teacher residencies with strong mentorship** and explicit goals for recruiting and retaining teachers of color.
3. **Prioritize learning opportunities for relevant, research-based professional development** such as socio-emotional supports and implicit bias training for all staff members.
4. **Improve organizational conditions by providing ongoing bias and critical race theory training for school administrators and create more pathways to leadership** so teachers can lead without leaving the classroom.



## TEACHER DIVERSITY IN CALIFORNIA AND LOS ANGELES

Unequal access to high-quality and demographically-diverse teachers has been considered one of the primary causes of disparities in outcomes for disadvantaged students.<sup>8</sup> While only 25 percent of California's students identify as White, more than 60 percent of our teachers do, with just 16 percent identifying as Latinx and four percent as Black.<sup>9</sup>

**FIGURE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC PARITY OF/BETWEEN CALIFORNIA STUDENTS AND TEACHERS**



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The picture may not seem quite as stark in Los Angeles where 82.5 percent of students identify as Latinx or Black, and 50.7 percent of teachers share those identities.<sup>11</sup> Although there seems to be comparable representation in Los Angeles when it comes to teachers reflecting the identities of Black students (10.1 percent and 8.4 percent respectively), there is a significant gap between Latinx teachers and students. Over the last five years, we have seen a gradual increase in the percentage of teachers who identify as Black or Latinx, but this has not kept pace with the student demographics. In Los Angeles, while there has been an increase in African-American teachers as a whole since 2012, there has been a 10-percent decrease in Black male teachers and district data indicates that the majority of Black teachers are reaching retirement age over the next decade.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, increases in racial diversity in the teaching profession are due less to recruitment and retention strategies districts have in place than to younger generations of teachers simply being more diverse than their predecessors.<sup>13</sup> If school districts, including LAUSD, want to have a more representative teaching force, they will need to implement intentional strategies to address the barriers throughout the teacher pipeline, including teacher retention.

# METHODOLOGY

In order to better understand the factors contributing to the retention and turnover of teachers of color in Los Angeles, we conducted focus groups with twenty teachers in traditional public and charter schools within the LAUSD about their classroom experiences and their thoughts on what can be done to improve the retention rate of teachers of color.

In our focus groups:

- + Ninety percent of participants work in traditional public school settings; ten percent work in a charter public school setting.
- + The average teaching experience was ten years in the classroom.
- + All participants worked in middle or high school settings; thirty seven percent were middle school educators (grades 6-8), and sixty percent of respondents were high school educators (grades 9-12).
- + Ninety-five percent of respondents identified as being a person of color: thirty percent of respondents identify as Latina/o/x; fifty-five percent identify as Black; five percent of respondents identify as Asian.

# FINDINGS

**FINDING 1.** TEACHERS OF COLOR REPORT FEELING ISOLATED AND UNDERVALUED AT THEIR SCHOOL SITES, CITING THE NEED TO ESTABLISH SPECIALIZED PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES AND RECOGNITION FOR THE ASSETS THEY BRING.

The focus group participants were concerned about the number of teachers of color working at school sites across the district. These educators were placed at their campus without the opportunity to build communities with peers that share their racial and ethnic background. As a result, many teachers of color were left feeling isolated and had the impression that their school site did not value the cultural assets and resources that they brought to campus. A Chicano teacher shared his experience, *“...with respect to teachers of color, I think pairing them up with other teachers of color would be ideal. I also think that in general teachers of color aren’t valued in the same way a white counterpart would and that is a systemic issue that gets to the core of our educational system.”* This educator emphasized the persistent feeling he experienced over fourteen years of working within a system that did not fully value his identity. This feeling compounds over time. When teachers do not have a safe space or structure that allows for greater access to diverse peers with whom they can voice their experiences and opinions, they become the sole cultural transactor. The immediate consequence is increased stress for teachers of color. Over time, however, the workplace pressures become increasingly taxing, ultimately playing a larger role in why teachers of color exit the profession at much higher rates than their White peers.

*The cultural funds of knowledge of teachers of color are generally undervalued, and under-leveraged by White administrators or teachers.*

A similar process occurs when teachers feel that they don't receive the recognition they deserve for their work. Although teachers of color might be isolated at their school sites, they often feel simultaneously hypervisible as a cultural representative, yet invisible when it comes to receiving acknowledgement for their efforts. A Black high school English teacher expressed her dismay at the lack of acknowledgement teachers of color receive at their school sites: ***"I think teachers of color are often the last to be appreciated for doing good work. They are usually not nominated for teacher of the year or other accolades because people assume 'students work for you because you're black'..."***. This illustrates a common feeling among the focus group participants of their skills being ignored because it is assumed that their success is less based on professional aptitude, and more on relationships with students. When teachers of color are repeatedly passed over for leadership opportunities or awards, it heightens the sensations of being overlooked and needing to meet unrealistic expectations because of one's race.

**FINDING 2.** TEACHERS AT ALL EXPERIENCE LEVELS REPORT THE DESIRE FOR MORE APPROPRIATE AND EFFECTIVE SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS FROM EXPERIENCED PEERS THAT BETTER REFLECT THEIR NEEDS, AS WELL AS THEIR RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES.

Another consistent theme was the need for additional pedagogical support and guidance from mentor teachers. Focus group participants discussed how all teachers can benefit from the counsel of experienced peers, noting, in particular, the need for guides if teachers change schools or districts with a different school culture. A mentor who can guide them through that new school's written and unwritten rules or traditions, share materials or resources, and provide personal and professional support, can make a teacher feel less isolated, more at home, and more likely to stay at the school.

*...At these sites, there also tends to be a lack of support from admin & mentors because there is so much that needs to be done and so little in terms of resources to address the challenges. Teacher well-being is often considered a low-priority.*

Interestingly, the need for mentoring was raised by teachers who had been in the classroom for more than two years, illustrating that mentors should not just be provided to brand new teachers. A veteran Chicano teacher of fourteen years shared this sentiment: ***"I think the number one factor in retaining a teacher past five years is support. I think schools need to do a better job of mentoring young teachers, and with respect to teachers of color, I think pairing them up with other teachers of color would be ideal."*** On average, our focus group participants were a decade into their career, yet they consistently emphasized the need to continually reflect on their experience with mentors, and the perceived benefit of having access to strong mentor teachers who shared their racial and ethnic identities. Just as students benefit from having teachers who reflect their racial or cultural diversity, teachers appreciate the advantage that having a mentor who shares his or her ethnic or racial background could bring. Namely, this relationship would allow newer teachers of color to grow and learn under the tutelage of a veteran teacher of color who could provide advice and guidance based upon his or her unique experiences.

**FINDING 3.** TEACHERS OVERWHELMINGLY EXPERIENCE LACKLUSTER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES THAT DO NOT REFLECT CURRENT STUDENT NEEDS OR PROVIDE CONCRETE GUIDANCE FOR PEDAGOGICALLY-SOUND AND CULTURALLY-RELEVANT PRACTICES.

The teachers interviewed were dismayed at their lack of access to research-driven professional development. Participants noted the ever-evolving needs of their students and how difficult it is to keep up with best practices for meeting those needs. Participants also felt an acute lack of support from school and district leaders when it came to learning about critically-relevant issues, like restorative justice practices and trauma-informed care. A Latina participant noted that many emerging practices are discussed broadly, but teachers lack the support to implement the ideas effectively: ***“I’ve been pushing for restorative justice, but it keeps getting put on the back burner. I’m not the only one who keeps asking for trauma-informed care. In order for us to be trauma-informed, we need to heal first. We’re going to keep repeating behaviors that we might not even be aware of....I’m asking the Intervention Coordinator if I can present this to staff and I keep finding barriers. And, in terms of teacher preparation programs, I got my Masters at USC. We never got training on trauma-informed care or restorative justice. People in power might not understand that.”*** Many new and emerging professional development opportunities are beginning to address the unique needs that students of color might need, yet school districts are often not prepared to bring these resources to their teachers and staff.

*Strategies enhancing retention start with support. Support can be directly for the teacher such as trainings and workshops or it can be indirect for the teacher such as having systems in place at the school to deal with student behavior, student and family social needs, and even adequate counseling for students...*

Participating teachers were looking for leadership and greater investment from their district and school leaders to provide responsive, research-based trainings, rooted in what today's students really need. Oftentimes, teachers of color are placed in reading intervention classrooms (i.e. high school students reading at an elementary level) due to their race and “perceived” background. However, these teachers (usually novice practitioners) are not equipped or are seldom given the expertise to deal with social and emotional trauma that plagues their marginalized students. This lack of preparation and ongoing development can add to workplace stressors that teachers of color experience at their school site. As these school climate issues build over time, teachers are more likely to leave their school in the hope of finding a more supportive environment.

*PD on how to best teach students in poverty or in other disadvantaged situations. Sometimes you don't know if your approach is the best way due to lack of understanding, even if you grew up in similar circumstances.*

#### **FINDING 4.** TEACHERS REPORT FEELING DISCONNECTED AND UNSUPPORTED BY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, AND NEEDING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEMS THEY SERVE.

A final theme from participating teachers was a need for more support from their school administrators. Participants noted a persistent feeling of being undervalued by principals and staff. Many interviewees expressed dismay that they did not have strong relationships with their administrators and feared that they were overlooked for leadership opportunities because of racial biases. The lack of support also influenced administrator support with classroom management and handling issues with student behavior. In turn, this led to teachers not feeling they could produce the student performance outcomes expected of them, subsequently causing them to feel frustrated at their school sites. A Black 6th grade teacher described this defeating experience when reflecting on questions with fellow participants: ***“I think a lot of schools are not adequately supporting students of color and that impacts teachers of color. High expectations of teachers are not met and lack of support from admin leads to lower teacher efficacy which then results in teacher burnout.”*** Without robust support from administrators on highly-effective instructional techniques and classroom management strategies, teachers of color struggle to meet the expectations placed upon them.

*Not having opportunities for leadership, better pay and other things would definitely lead me to consider leaving the profession.*

Additionally, focus group teachers shared the concern that implicit biases taint their access to leadership opportunities and relegate them to be disciplinarians and not school leaders. This was most clearly manifested in administrator expectations that because teachers share the race or background of their students, they were predisposed to know how to teach or discipline them independently of anyone else. A Black 8th grade STEAM instructor described her experience of having a fix-all label as such: ***“Most teachers of color are working at low socioeconomic schools. Because of the greater needs placed on the teachers at these schools, many are often overwhelmed by the greater needs of the community and too often feel helpless in the system. Also, we need to stop the assumption that teachers of color “get” their students more than their white teacher peers. Sometimes, teachers of color do not. Whether teachers of color are at low socioeconomic schools or not, too often the school site will dump all of the students on them with behavior problems. This practice wears teachers out prematurely. This practice is inequitable and builds resentment.”*** Although teachers of color are serving communities they may have cultural familiarity with, it is important to acknowledge that they are still working within a community that as a whole has greater needs which could influence the culture and climate of their school. These needs, beyond what one teacher can address, can cause teachers to feel helpless and unable to fix the systemic problems present at the school site. Such workplace stresses can be compounded if school leaders do not address any internal biases that they, or the educational system, might have.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **RECOMMENDATION 1.** IMPLEMENT EQUITABLE HIRING AND PLACEMENT PRACTICES THAT ALLOW TEACHERS OF COLOR EARLIER ACCESS TO HIRING OPPORTUNITIES AND HELP ESTABLISH DIVERSE TEACHING COHORTS THROUGHOUT A DISTRICT.

Recognizing the feeling of isolation many teachers of color experience, districts should explore how hiring and placement practices can counteract that isolation. Moreover, many scholars, including Harvard's Deborah Jewell Sherman, believe that the placement of minority teachers is key, and that teachers of color should not be placed in isolation at an all-White school.<sup>14</sup>

Many traditional hiring processes disadvantage new teachers, as well as high-need schools. Teaching positions at highest-achieving schools are quickly filled, and many hard-to-staff schools struggle to find teaching candidates without any hiring restrictions.<sup>15</sup> These policies frequently result in the least-experienced teachers being placed at the highest-need schools where challenging school climates make it difficult for new teachers to remain in the field.

School districts in California have the opportunity to make changes to internal hiring practices in order to better support diverse educators. Districts can also provide district-wide professional learning communities in which new teachers can learn alongside veteran educators who can empathize with their backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, LAUSD can work to place teachers using a cohort model and provide affinity groups to prevent diverse educators from being isolated on campus.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2.** INVEST IN TEACHER RESIDENCIES WITH STRONG MENTORSHIP AND EXPLICIT GOALS FOR RECRUITING AND RETAINING TEACHERS OF COLOR.

Teachers in our focus groups repeatedly noted the lack of resources at their school sites, most notably the lack of mentors to help teachers of color grow in their profession. To counteract this, the state can invest in additional resources in the teacher residency programs designed to address the needs of districts with significant mismatches between the demographics of their student body and teaching force.<sup>16</sup>

This year, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) awarded several Teacher Residency grants for specific types of educators, including special education and bilingual educators, but this initial investment only scratched the surface.<sup>17</sup> The state should make an additional investment in residencies to help ensure that teachers of color (and their mentors) are retained and supported.

LAUSD could also offer additional Teacher Quality Specialists at high-need schools to support and coach the district's new teachers. These positions have been developed across 37 of the highest-need schools in Los Angeles and have demonstrated success in increasing student performance and retaining teaching staff.<sup>18</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION 3.** PRIORITIZE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELEVANT, RESEARCH-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SUCH AS SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS AND IMPLICIT BIAS TRAINING FOR ALL STAFF MEMBERS.

Educators in the focus groups emphasized the lack of high-quality and culturally-responsive professional development opportunities. A recent report finds that non-traditional providers recruit more teachers of color (as a proportion of teacher candidates) than traditional providers, 35-41 percent compared to only 26 percent.<sup>19</sup> These non-traditional routes do not offer the same series of courses for new teachers.

Notably, there are differences when it comes to the types of culturally-responsive pedagogy to which new teachers have access. Although the California Professional Standards requires these to be implemented into educator practice, we would encourage the state to update those standards to be more reflective of current student needs.<sup>20</sup> We recommend that all local-, district-, and state-level staff receive ongoing and mandated culturally-relevant professional development to ensure that educators are continuously trained as they make their way through the profession. By receiving additional supports in social emotional learning, and recognizing implicit bias and restorative justice practices, teachers working in communities of color can better support students experiencing social and emotional traumas.

**RECOMMENDATION 4.** IMPROVE ORGANIZATIONAL CONDITIONS BY PROVIDING ONGOING BIAS AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY TRAINING FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AND CREATE MORE PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP SO TEACHERS CAN LEAD WITHOUT LEAVING THE CLASSROOM.

One of the most common reactions to questions regarding teachers' experiences at their school sites dealt with how they interact with their administrators. Focus group respondents detailed a lack of administrative support and the persistent feeling of being undervalued by principals and staff. Research has found that teachers of color often left when they were not given a voice in schoolwide decisions or given autonomy in their classrooms.<sup>21</sup> A 2011 national study by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education found that organizational conditions at the schools were the strongest factor for causing teachers of color to leave a school site.

Therefore, it is critically important for hard-to-staff schools and schools serving majority minority students to invest in improving organizational conditions. Recent studies have shown that administrative support matters when it comes to teachers' perceptions of their school environment.<sup>22</sup> Black teachers are more likely to stay in schools with strong leadership, more effective mentoring, and higher-quality professional development. One way to ensure this is to strengthen principal preparation programs and provide administrators ongoing professional learning opportunities that include implicit bias and cultural sensitivity trainings. Additionally, districts can use school climate surveys as a tool to determine where additional resources and supports need to be placed. Districts should also provide training about cultural biases and how they may shape teachers' interactions with students. Although removing all explicit and implicit biases is likely out of reach, educating administrators and teachers about them and building their awareness of these biases could improve campus conditions for many educators of color.

## CONCLUSION

A teaching force of effective educators that also reflects the diversity of their students can have long-term benefits for students and can help narrow achievement gaps across student demographics.

The teachers we surveyed share a strong desire for improved school conditions, access to higher-quality professional development, and peer mentorship. Teachers expressed the need for higher-quality mentors, access to culturally-responsive professional development and curriculum, changing school cultures to value their expertise and solicit advice, changes in local hiring practices, and implementing affinity spaces at the district level to problem solve and lend support. Additionally, educators who had previously thought about leaving their school sites attributed it to negative school climate and feeling undervalued as a staff member. What teachers want more than anything is respect and the opportunity to be teacher leaders. Instead, they overwhelmingly feel micromanaged or ignored.

The views of these educators should be used to guide necessary district changes. The biggest drivers for keeping teachers of color in the classroom are often tied to support and intervention that will improve outcomes for students. We urge districts to be intentional in identifying and supporting strategies, like teacher residencies and robust, targeted professional learning, that can help recruit and retain a more diverse body of excellent teachers for California's students.

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## FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus group participants responded to the following questions:

- + **QUESTION 1** - In your experience as a teacher of color and/or working with other educators of color, what do you attribute this difference in turnover to?
- + **QUESTION 2** - What strategies can schools and school leaders use to improve the retention of teachers of color?
- + **QUESTION 3** - What strategies can district leaders, such as superintendents or other senior leaders, and district departments of offices, such as the office of human resources, use to improve the retention of teachers of color?
- + **QUESTION 4** - What strategies can state departments of education or state leaders use to improve the retention of teachers of color?
- + **QUESTION 5** - What professional development and professional learning topics should be provided to school staff and teachers to improve the retention of teachers of color?
- + **QUESTION 6** - Have you thought about leaving the classroom, changing schools or districts, or even leaving teaching altogether? What would cause you to leave? If you have been thinking about leaving, what could your school, your district, or your state do to retain you?
- + **QUESTION 7** - In general, do you have any other ideas of suggestions on what can be done to improve the retention of teachers of color?