

## INTRODUCTION

We are a group of teachers of color and Teach Plus California Policy Fellows, serving a diverse group of students with a range of life experiences and needs. Along with teachers across the state, we strive to ensure our students actively and positively engage in their education in order to achieve high levels of learning. In advocating for our students, we have seen first-hand how pivotal a role culturally affirming school environments play in shaping the lives of young people.

Our years spent in California schools, both as students and as teachers, have revealed much about what it means to be a learner of color within this school system. Students of color, who make up the majority of the children in our public schools, deserve to feel welcomed and understood in their classrooms. That is not always the case.

For this report, we gathered insights on the role of race and identity in education. We seek to build on the robust body of research and explore patterns among the experiences of our fellow California teachers, as we endeavor to best support the needs of our diverse student body.

Our research took place in the spring of the 2019-2020 school year, in the midst of two simultaneous national crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in racial unrest and protests against police brutality. Particularly, four of our ten focus groups took place after the May 25th killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police, the event that served as a catalyst for the racial justice demonstrations. In our focus groups, teachers of color, disproportionately affected by both crises, shared valuable insights on many aspects of their work including their sense of belonging, or lack thereof, on their school campuses. In sharing our findings, we hope to shed light on how we can best improve school culture in ways that affirm teachers of color, and to identify what can be done to retain more teachers of color in the profession.

### Findings

1. Efforts to create culturally affirming spaces in schools are all too often undertaken in response to a perceived racial problem, such as student achievement or incidents of hate on campus.
2. Teachers of color do not feel safe having authentic conversations about race and racism in their schools, often because administration and staff are unwilling or unable to do so.
3. Teachers of color bear many additional burdens, but these experiences can look and feel different for teachers of different races.
4. Hiring people of color is not enough to create a culturally affirming school. Districts need to have structures and programs whose goals are to foster environments that value teachers and students of color.



## Recommendations

1. School leaders should prioritize creating a culturally affirming learning environment for all students and staff. Rather than reacting to injustice, schools should adopt a proactive approach within their school site plans, assess progress, and realign as needed.
2. School leaders should affirm, value, and elevate the work of teachers of color through feedback, compensation, leadership roles, and capacity building.
3. Staff of all races and positions must meaningfully participate in equity and cultural proficiency efforts. School leaders should model authentic conversations about teacher and student identity, and include staff members of color in developing school site plans.
4. District, county, and state educational leaders should build structures that systematically support school administration in equity-driven efforts to create affirming school environments. This includes prioritizing funding for anti-racism and equity efforts, in addition to adopting training materials for culturally proficient leadership.

## BACKGROUND

California teachers share the unique experience of serving students of the most diverse state in the nation. However, this diversity does not manifest in the teaching profession. In 1999, only 24 percent of California teachers identified as an ethnicity other than white, and after twenty years that percentage has crept up to 39 percent. Unfortunately, the proportion of teachers of color in the workforce continues to lag far behind the share of students of color in our schools. 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>1</sup> Additionally, the percentage of African American teachers has declined, and research has shown that teachers of color continue to leave the teaching force at a higher rate than their white colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1. Ethnicity of California Students

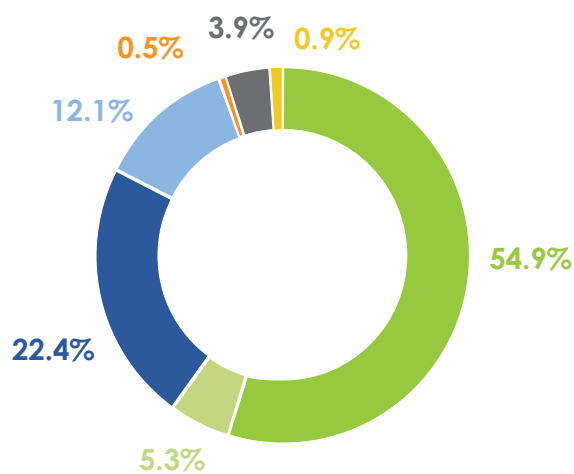
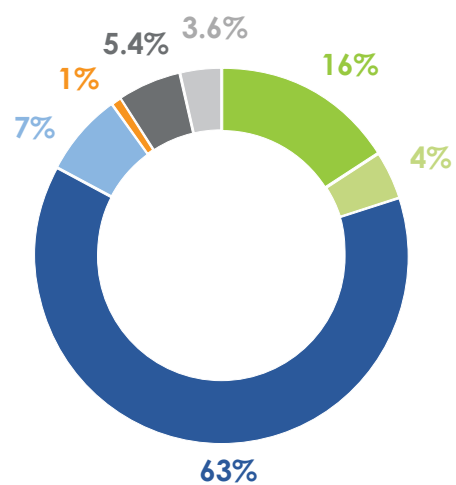


Figure 2. Ethnicity of California Teachers



A growing body of research consistently shows that teachers of color matter for all students. Teachers of color have a profound and positive impact on the learners they serve, regardless of students' race or ethnicity.<sup>3</sup> A report from the Learning Policy Institute identified the benefits for students of having diverse teachers as "higher test scores, higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates, lower suspension rates, and more interest in post-secondary education."<sup>4</sup> 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>5</sup>

Studies have also shown that educators of color can have a positive effect on overall school climate. Teachers of color tend to provide culturally responsive instruction and understand the social and cultural narratives that students of color face. Teachers of color serve as cultural ambassadors and liaisons that shape a positive culture and climate for students of color and they tend to view students of color positively, with a comprehensive eye toward the wellbeing of each one of our students.<sup>6</sup>

Recruiting teachers of color increases the immediate diversity on school campuses, which is a start. However, we must pay equal, if not more, attention to their retention to make a long-lasting change in the diversity of the workforce. In 2019, Teach Plus and The Education Trust set out to learn why teachers of color are leaving schools, what teachers of color believe would help solve the problem of teacher turnover, and what strategies exist in schools and school systems that are intentionally working to bring about change. "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover" examined the challenges teachers of color face as they navigate the profession.<sup>7</sup> Teach Plus California 2019 policy fellows also published the report, "Celebrating And Preserving Diversity: Recommendations On Retaining Teachers Of Color In California," which focused on the professional supports and experiences of teachers of color in Los Angeles.<sup>8</sup>

As educators, we know that effectively teaching students requires the consideration of their physical, social, and emotional needs. A child must feel valued and affirmed in their personal identity in order for them to actively participate in the classroom and school environment. This same sentiment is true for adults. Teachers need to feel recognized, valued, and affirmed at school.

In "If You Listen," principals working to retain teachers of color in their schools said that one of the first things they do is address the culture of the school. They want to ensure that their vision for the school aligns with teachers' personal values and beliefs. With our own research, we hope to add to this body of knowledge and provide guidance for school and leaders about how they can create school cultures that better affirm and value the culture of teachers of color. To that end, we spoke with teachers of color in California about their identities, their school environments, and what schools can do to better support and retain teachers of color.

## METHODOLOGY

To better understand the experience of teachers of color in California, we conducted focus groups with 50 teachers from across the state. Each of the ten focus groups was facilitated by a Teach Plus Fellow over Zoom. Prior to the focus group, the participants were sent "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover" for their review.

Focus group participants were asked a series of fourteen questions divided into three sections:

1. Teacher Identity
2. School Environment
3. What Can Schools Do To Better Value and Affirm Teachers of Color?

While all participants identified as teachers of color, 31 percent identified as Latinx, 29 percent identified as Black/African American, 25 percent as Asian/Asian American, 10 percent as multiracial, four percent as Indian American, and two percent as Native American. The range of teaching experience among the teachers surveyed was from one to 38 years, with a mean of 14 years.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Efforts to create culturally affirming spaces in schools are all too often undertaken in response to a perceived racial problem, such as student achievement or incidents of hate on campus.

Teachers of color want their schools to be affirming environments for both staff and students. In our focus group discussions, teachers underscored the importance of having authentic dialogue among staff about racism and injustice. However, they expressed not always feeling supported by their administration and colleagues in doing the work to make this a reality. Several teachers described that when their school leaders introduced discussions of racism, it was in response to a perceived problem on campus. The majority of focus group participants shared that their staff generally avoids discussions of race or ethnicity unless they pertain to student performance, such as academic achievement data and behavior trends. One teacher explained, *“When we look at the African American students in our school, the biggest thing that we focus on is their attendance. There’s not much of an initiative to promote community, to include their parents, or ‘let’s do this for the black students to really engage their culture.’ We just look at them almost like a statistic rather than trying to embrace their culture.”*

Some school and district leaders have attempted community building programs in response to incidents of hate on campus. However, introducing topics of race and culture, without the foundation of an affirming school climate, does not lead to meaningful progress. One teacher shared her frustration about her administration’s inability to deal directly with a racist incident: *“Last year, for a history class project, these students changed the jingle. “Santa Claus is coming to town” to “ICE is coming to town,” so the school tried to have a conversation about race, but they tend to skip around the idea. I think a lot of what is missing is that explicit discussion behind it. Most of the time, the message is ‘Hey, don’t forget, we’re all in this together. We’re just one big family.’ When my kids feel like they’re being attacked or they’re getting different treatment from another teacher, no, we’re not all in this together. So unless schools explicitly talk about race, about ethnicity, about racial problems, you can’t assume people are going to learn by those implicit conversations. If our administrators aren’t able to talk about it, how can we rely on our students to talk about it?”* Another participant presented a similar situation, in which students were

ready to participate in conversations about racism and implicit bias, but were not supported by the adults in their endeavor. *"We had a sixth grade boy who passed away during P.E. and afterwards, we had a challenge with helping our African American students deal with that loss. A lot of the students felt that had it not been an African American boy, had it been perhaps a white kid, then the teachers would have responded differently. Maybe they would have believed him when he said he couldn't breathe when he was running and they wouldn't have forced him to run to the point where they had to call 911."*

Given this reactive approach to racism in their schools, teachers of color highlighted the disconnect that hinders educators' ability to discuss race in a meaningful way. One teacher shared, *"All of these things always have race attached to them. In American culture, that's one of the biggest ways that we identify people. And it just baffles me because at my school, we don't talk about it even though it is attached to every single thing in our community, in our world, every day. Our kids are aware of it. Our kids are thinking about it. They know what's happening. It's at the forefront of our lives and we've pushed to the side just enough to check the box off that we're talking about it. But we don't go deep enough."*

In addition, while schools have attempted to showcase student identities with events such as multicultural assemblies and heritage months, focus group respondents pointed out that efforts to celebrate student culture are generally unsuccessful. At best, they include superficial performances or activities, and at worst, tokenize minority groups and perpetuate stereotypes. As one teacher described, *"I was cringing when students were coming to school in ponchos and sombreros for Hispanic Heritage Month, and that was the extent of the celebration. It's actually a disservice to people who might be part of that identity because it oversimplifies everything. It's well-intentioned, but it has a detrimental effect."*

Rather than continue to react to the problems surrounding race on school campuses, teachers expressed the need for proactive plans that prioritize racial and social justice work. This includes professional development that will help them support all students, but especially students of color. Despite the importance of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy in affirming the identity of students of color and creating a sense of belonging, teachers are not receiving adequate professional development in this area. Therefore, this curriculum is not provided to all students. One teacher explained, *"if we never get a chance to address our biases, then it doesn't matter how many strategies we're learning during those PDs. We're still taking those biases into our classrooms. We are now taking PDs with the same biases. And are we successful? Is that the reason why those strategies don't stick?"* Many teachers also reported that when professional development is provided it is often optional so colleagues who participate are often already doing the work. One teacher expressed, *"[My district] offers Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) sessions every year to teachers, but it is always optional. The teachers that choose to attend are already teachers that, in my mind, are ready to have the tough conversations and discuss issues within our district. I really feel like it needs to not be a choice as there are teachers who need to understand these issues on a deeper level, but they will never volunteer to attend training."*

**"So unless schools explicitly talk about race, about ethnicity, about racial problems, you can't assume people are going to learn by those implicit conversations. If our administrators aren't able to talk about it, how can we rely on our students to talk about it?"**

## 2. Teachers of color do not feel safe having authentic conversations about race and racism in their schools, often because administration and staff are unwilling or unable to do so.

In our focus groups, teachers of color shared that an unwelcoming school climate contributes to them leaving the school or district. Particularly, several African American teachers reported not feeling a sense of belonging due to explicit or implicit racism on campus. One teacher shared, *“When I was hired at my school, there were two other African American teachers there. That same year, both of them left to other campuses. One of the teachers who left had a doctorate and the principal would not give her the respect of that title and he told her flat out, ‘I will never call you Doctor.’ She was one of the best teachers at that school.”*

As teachers of color in our focus groups suggested, this unwelcoming environment may be exacerbated by the exhaustion from navigating interactions that are centered around the experiences of white people. When teachers of color try to have authentic conversations about racism, they report that other teachers and staff members are either ill-equipped, unwilling, or uninterested, and often resist efforts to address equity concerns. Participants shared interactions with fellow teachers, administrators, and parent communities during which they displayed white fragility<sup>9</sup>, exercised white privilege and tone policing, or evoked stereotypes of staff and students. Several teachers of color described a heightened awareness of the feelings of their white colleagues. During one focus group discussion, a teacher shared her response to the murder of George Floyd, *“another African American man who was killed at hands of police officers.”* She reported, *“I did not sleep last night because of that. But I had to come to meetings. I can’t bring that to the table without making other people feel uncomfortable or without other people looking at me and saying, ‘Here she goes, bringing up Black issues again.’ I don’t have that safe space to be able to say, ‘I might not be here 100 percent because I’m stressed over this.’ That’s another way of making us feel like we don’t belong in that space. I can’t talk about the things that are important to me.”*

Because of the constant experiences of microaggressions and explicit racism, teachers of color rely on affinity spaces and express comfort in interactions with colleagues, administrators, parents, and students with whom they share life experiences. One teacher observed, *“It’s just appalling sometimes because if they’re treating me like this and I’m a professional like them, how are they treating our students? Our students do not have a voice in those classrooms.”* Another teacher, who feels safety among other teachers of color, shared, *“If I feel this way as an adult and a colleague, I cannot imagine how our students must feel. I do feel comfortable speaking about it to trusted individuals of color—only—because I know they can empathize.”*

Teachers of color feel a deep responsibility of knowing that students of color look to the few adults of color on campus as role models. Several participants described an oasis of belonging in their classrooms, as one expressed, *“I feel more comfortable talking about it with my students because the majority of them are minorities who reflect parts of who I am. There is a stronger sense of belonging talking to them about it.”* Others described the fear of what students of color are experiencing in potentially unsafe learning environments. While many described their classrooms as a safe space on campus for students of color, they know that not all students have access to a culturally affirming space. One teacher summed up the concern with this

observation: *“Unfortunately, most teachers have limited information about cultures and beliefs outside of their own. For this reason, their attempts to be equitable are often focused on misguided stereotypes and fall short of offering a meaningful and intentional sense of belonging and acceptance for students.”*

Focus group participants communicated an overwhelming need for safe spaces to discuss race with their colleagues, administration, and school community. Despite the importance of engaging in courageous conversations that address inequity, teachers of color are hesitant to broach topics surrounding race and culture. Interactions similar to the ones discussed in this section – which prioritize the feelings of white people – hinder productive discussions about these legitimate equity concerns. Without this crucial space of professional learning, teachers of color feel undervalued or unwelcome on campus.

### **3. Teachers of color bear many additional burdens, but these experiences can look and feel different for teachers of different races.**

Teachers of color we spoke with expressed feeling responsible for representing their race, ethnicity, or culture on campus, which includes advocating for students of the same identity group, and going above and beyond their job description to do so. One teacher described this position as *“a double edged sword because for Black staff, it becomes our responsibility to create programming for our Black students, and that's not something that we're getting paid for. But if we didn't do it, it wouldn't exist. That's something that I always grapple with because I definitely want to do it, but I don't always think about the toll that it takes on me on top of the other jobs that I have to do.”* Other Black teachers supported this sentiment, as one expressed, *“I am the only African American teacher on campus. And so the ‘problem African American students’ without a doubt, once they hit fourth grade, are going to be in my class. ‘She can handle it.’ If there’s a problem with an African American student, here they come.”*

Several Black or African American teachers reported that their expertise and contributions were only valued in limited situations and did not lead to meaningful opportunities for leadership. One participant shared, *“I am experiencing more of Black female invisibility. They find me very useful for the difficult classes and the ‘rough’ kids, so to speak, but not always useful for other areas.”* Another participant explained, *“I replaced a teacher of Caucasian descent, and later on I found out even though I did the same job she had done, she was given compensation for after school tutoring and participating in different leadership groups.”*

A Latinx teacher revealed the added pressure of speaking a language other than English, and advised: *“Be aware that if you are bilingual, you will be taken advantage of. The school will use you to translate and support those who need it in the school environment. Know that your kind heart will not mind, but that your ability to do that should be acknowledged and rewarded.”* When a Latinx participant chose to use a potentially controversial text with her students she reflected on a parent's comment that *“if any other teacher had read this, I would be worried. But I know that because you read it, you have the right conversations with them about it. That you introduced it in a way that I'm sure it was just so rich and wonderful. But I wouldn't trust any other teacher that my kids have at that school who would have read that book with them because they wouldn't have talked about it the same way.”* Knowing and centering student experiences can help teachers skillfully guide their students through challenging conversations.

Many Asian American teachers described the pressure to suppress aspects of their identity in order to fit in with their colleagues. One teacher shared, *“I have grown up shutting out my identity. I grew up thinking my own identity wasn't worthy and I shunned who I was. Aside from being the authority on being Asian, or even being ignored and having no identity, I have struggled quietly.”* Without support from administrators or colleagues, an already difficult job can feel totally isolating. A first generation Vietnamese American teacher described her feelings about her colleagues' lack of response to her efforts to share her personal story. *“There is a specific school activity, “Vietnam Day,” which I've done my due diligence to better understand, as well as offer suggestions for how to make a historical event that was traumatic for my family not feel trivialized. This was met by pushback from my colleagues in the history department who maintain the stance that the event is ‘the best way to simulate for students what the era represented.’ After the first 5 years of pushing back, I have resigned to just not being on campus for the day of the event due to discomfort.”*

Similarly, participants of all ethnicities expressed a struggle to balance their personal identity with their teacher identity. Because of this struggle, some feel an expectation or pressure to stay silent on issues of race and identity on campus. One participant shared, *“In our district, the majority of our administrators and 80% of the teachers are white. A lot of times I feel like they're going to say, ‘she's always bringing up equity,’ or ‘always making things about race.’ I can't really feel free to discuss those topics that obviously are going to benefit the students.”*

#### **4. Hiring people of color is not enough to create a culturally affirming school. Districts need to have structures and programs whose goals are to foster environments that value teachers and students of color.**

There is a dire need for more effective structures – including professional development, leadership, diversity programs, and hiring practices – to create a more culturally affirming culture on school campuses. While some may believe that increasing diversity is enough, teachers in all focus groups indicated the deep-rooted injustices that are present in schools across the state. One teacher shared, *“The education system was made to stop specifically Black and Brown students from succeeding. When we talk about oppression, it's everywhere. It's all systemic. In order to even have conversations like this, we have to start from the bottom ground, by first acknowledging what is around us.”*

Teachers of color expressed a desire for professional development on education policy and data-driven best practices for recruiting, supporting, and retaining teachers of color. Most of our participants reported having little to no professional development around critical race theory or culturally responsive pedagogy. One teacher shared, *“I think our district can do more in recruiting and hiring teachers of color. They need to incentivize with a promise and commitment to provide a support system that's focused on helping them work with diverse students and address diversity, equity and social justice.”* Another teacher reflected, *“I believe that PD in my district falls short in providing the tools and resources to support teachers in their own understanding and learning to foster equity in their classrooms. Racism often lies at the heart of what hinders real progress in the area of culturally responsive teaching and most people are not comfortable in addressing that head on. Though race is not the only factor in equity, it is unavoidable.”*



Lack of consistency and vision from administrators and district leadership was another barrier to creating culturally affirming spaces. Teachers of color want to engage in authentic discussions about race with administrators and colleagues. One teacher explained, *“For students, we have so many programs for developing self-esteem, acceptance, respect, and leadership. But those same types of programs need to be implemented for teachers and administrators as well.”*

Without a commitment to including teachers of color in the hiring process, supporting them throughout their careers, and elevating them to leadership roles, we will continue to see a teaching force that does not match the students it serves. This was highlighted by one Black teacher who explained, *“In terms of recruitment, we need to acknowledge the different communities of color specifically. Latinx people are the fastest group becoming teachers so targeted support may need to be made. But to use the term ‘teachers of color’ can be obscure. When you look around and see all of these Black administrators*

*there should have been a generation of teachers under them. And there’s not.”* This was echoed by other teachers who shared *“I am one of three Black teachers on staff right now. The majority of the staff is not in the classroom which I think creates tricky dynamics for students. They see the majority of their teachers are non-Black, but the support staff is almost entirely Black”* and *“Our only Black teacher retired and this leaves our Black students without a role model on campus.”*

Teachers of color know that hiring practices and systems don’t currently support or encourage more people of color to enter the profession. *“A lot of our students of color do not have a positive relationship with school itself, so why would they want to go back to a place that hurt them? If we want students of color to go to college and come back into the classroom, they need to have those positive relationships with their environment. The solution isn’t the teachers of color. The solution is to teach all teachers how to work with all students. We aren’t creating an environment where our students would want to come back into this profession to make a difference, like that teacher made a difference in their life.”*

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. School leaders should prioritize creating a culturally affirming learning environment for all students and staff. Rather than reacting to injustice, schools should adopt a proactive approach within their school site plans, assess progress and realign as needed.**

Beyond setting intentional strategies for establishing school culture that values student and teacher identity, school leaders must frame these strategies with a mindset of continuous improvement, allowing for shared reflection, learning, and adjustment that centers on equity.

California state leaders have recognized the importance of this role for school administrators, as the California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE) include cultural proficiency considerations and reflect the foundational expectations for new administrators from the California Professional Standards for the Teaching

Profession (CPSEL).<sup>10</sup> CAPE reinforces the need for administrators to have cultural proficiency: the skills, attitudes, and beliefs that enable people to work well with, respond effectively to, and be supportive of people in cross-cultural settings. It also outlines the importance of developing and implementing a shared vision. However, there is a disconnect between the standards set forth by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) and the practices of site and district leadership. Our focus group research demonstrates the varied and plentiful examples of the consequences of not having a proactive approach to creating an affirming learning environment for all students and staff members.

How do we close the gap between the theory of practice set by the CTC and the reality of practices that exist on school sites? We recommend that school sites leaders commit to these actionable steps:

- + **In their school site plan, administrators and teacher leaders should set explicit goals for culturally affirming school climates and determine what systems should be in place in order to shift to a proactive approach to meeting the needs of all students.** Administrators should assess progress to those goals and make the necessary adaptations to those strategies on an ongoing basis.
- + **All school site staff should participate in cultural proficiency training in order to navigate interactions among the diverse staff in a respectful way.** Training should not be optional.
- + **Administrators should establish a clear Multi Tiered System of Supports that has continuous progress monitoring to support all students in academic achievement and their well-being.** This will allow teachers and administrators to better understand the needs of diverse students.
- + **All staff should make a commitment and hold each other accountable to the new vision and mission of being proactive and determining what that looks like for the school site.**

## **2. School leaders should affirm, value, and elevate the work of teachers of color through feedback, compensation, leadership roles, and capacity building.**

Research on culturally responsive leadership has shown that establishing an environment that is solid enough to recruit, retain, and support the growth of strong teachers needs to be a central responsibility of school and district leaders. They also recognize the need to cultivate culturally responsive teachers.<sup>11</sup> To do that, school site leaders should be intentional about providing affirming feedback and compensation, and building teacher capacity. As one focus group participant said, *"I think a space should be provided for teachers of color to share what they have to offer outside of the classroom. Many times we are asked to help discipline students of color when we have so much more to offer."* To achieve this, school leaders should create leadership roles that name and value the work that is already being done. These roles can include Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) site facilitators or culture and climate coaches, as a proactive measure to support students experiencing trauma or displaying a need for additional behavioral support, instead of overly burdening teachers of color with students in need. These roles should offer training support and financial compensation for additional work. Creating structures and roles such as culture and climate coach would demonstrate a value for the cultural

competency and social and emotional learning skills that many teachers of color bring to school sites. As one teacher suggested, *“Listen to teachers of color and help them to implement their ideas for cultural inclusion. Don't just sit back and say 'good job for doing that.' Schools should regularly check in with teachers of color to give them a voice and make sure that their ideas are being implemented for the betterment of the students.”*

**3. Staff of all races and positions must meaningfully participate in equity and cultural proficiency efforts. School leaders should model authentic conversations about teacher and student identity, and include staff members of color in developing school site plans.**

Creating a safe space that fosters authentic conversations about teacher and student identity is no easy task. Too often, schools and districts would translate such a recommendation into a single professional development or policy change, a strategy that has been largely unsuccessful. As one participant explained, *“we had the mandated culturally responsive teaching PD and half the faculty was just insulted that they had to sit through this. They feel they're doing everything right, and if they're being called out for something, they interpret it as the students accusing them of being racist. It's not a comfortable topic.”* In order to create a safe space for meaningful dialogue around identities and equity, the school site leaders must do the following:

- + **Build authentic relationships with students and staff.** This takes time and intention, recognizing that all members of the school community are learning together. Some schools have instituted book studies and other longer-term professional learning spaces. One teacher shared, *“Our school engaged in a book study this last year and a half on Brene Brown's book, Dare to Lead, so concepts of race and ethnicity and culture come up. Whereas maybe two years ago when I first got to the school, people would tiptoe around these topics when we would talk about students, teachers now after engaging in that. We had some tough conversations, and it did get uncomfortable at times. But those are the conversations that are needed at campus.”*
- + **Value the concerns and perspectives of others about how the culture and climate feels on campus.** Many schools conduct school climate surveys, but survey data is not consistently being used to shape decisions. Schools should make sure that there are mechanisms to gather feedback from students, families and staff, and make clear how that feedback is informing school decisions. *“Learn how to step back and let others step up, and let others have a voice. You may think you are advocating, but reflect so that you are not patronizing others. We have strong voices, we just need the platform to speak and be heard.”*
- + **Provide effective and sustainable culturally responsive professional development.** Professional development opportunities *“cannot be on the surface or generic. Instead of the focus being on the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy, we need to reflect on our own issues with racism, bias, and hate. We need to go deeper into individual roots of racism and the ways our educational system is based in inequitable practices. The entire system must be analyzed before it can be dismantled and rebuilt.”*



- + **Require all to participate rather than offering optional equity and anti-racism training.** Teachers of color want to be viewed as a valued asset in the pursuit of equitable education, but also ask that teachers of all races actively engage in the effort. *“Don’t put all the burden on the teachers of color. Train all teachers to be advocates for students.”*

**4. District, county, and state educational leaders should build structures that systematically support school administration in equity-driven efforts to create affirming school environments. This includes prioritizing funding for anti-racism and equity efforts, in addition to adopting training materials for culturally proficient leadership.**

District and state leaders should support the restructuring of school systems that maintain and exacerbate inequities. In order to create an affirming school environment for both teachers and students that can be sustained, school site leaders must be supported in becoming equity-driven leaders. This should be a central part of local planning and budgeting processes. District leaders need to articulate how they will address equity gaps in their local plans, whether the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) or the current Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan, and ensure meaningful stakeholder processes in developing those goals. Finally, county superintendents should hold districts accountable and help support them in meeting those equity goals.

As one teacher shared, *“It starts with representation. If students see themselves in others, they can feel motivated to continue and push through. We need more people of color in teaching positions, we need them to talk about their experiences and their backgrounds so students can feel seen and represented. From there, more needs to be done to provide opportunities for students to continue their education.”* Because representation matters, local leaders should also include in their

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plans clear goals for recruiting and retaining more teachers of color, that include targeting resources at teachers of color. School and district leaders should also involve teachers of color in the hiring process. As one participant said, *“California has been bleeding African American teachers. We need to be ok with using racially disaggregated data for targeted teacher recruitment, hiring and induction.”* Historically, policymakers have pointed to systemic barriers like Proposition 209, which bans programs that promote equity based on race and gender, as reasons why districts cannot explicitly provide incentives or support for teachers of color. Proposition 16 on the 2020 California ballot would remove that barrier, an essential first step if we are to truly address the lack of representation in our teaching force.<sup>12</sup>

In setting these goals and assessing their impact, it is also important to have comprehensive and transparent data on both teachers and students. Because data regarding teacher preparation, employment, and recruitment are scattered among various sources - educator preparation programs, the CTC, the California Department of Education, and Local Education Agencies (LEAs, districts) - which all

have access to varied and inconsistent information about teacher movement. If we want to respond to the needs of students and districts, the state needs to provide districts and the public clearer information on the current trends in recruitment and retention centrally located and disaggregated by teacher race and ethnicity.

In terms of students, while districts are obligated as part of their local planning process to assess school climate, how they do that and how they report the data is locally determined. Therefore, there is significant variability in terms of what information is available to the public about school culture and climate. *“Looking at the suspension and discipline data is really important. It’s also important to have transparent conversations where we can name our specific practices that might be holding students of color back.”* All districts should not only publicly report school climate data; they should share how it informs their local planning and budgeting, so we can assess how it is improving the school experience for our students and teachers of color.

## CONCLUSION

As California’s student population continues to grow more diverse, the teaching force must adapt to meet the needs of our students. Whether leaders are recruiting and hiring teachers of color, working to ease the burden on current teachers, or making it a priority to dismantle unjust systems, it is imperative that school, district, and county educational leaders strive to create an affirming school climate for all staff and students.

Rather than identifying race as a source of discomfort or a problem to be solved, California schools need to articulate structures and systems that support teachers in building culturally affirming school environments. This means that every student should have access to an engaging and relevant education, as well as adults who understand them – both crucial elements in a successful and respectful learning experience. It also means that school leaders need to recognize and value the thankless efforts of teachers of color, address concerns of racism and microaggressions among staff, and foster strong relationships built on mutual appreciation. Teachers of color should be acknowledged, praised, and encouraged into positions of leadership where they can be involved in highlighting institutional racism and working to disrupt it. Above all, school leaders should create safe spaces for teachers of color to share their experiences without judgment, but rather, with openness to ensure all teachers feel respected and valued by their peers, administration, and school communities.

The experiences of teachers of color should be used to guide necessary changes in California. This year has brought unprecedented changes to education and has thrust systemic injustice to the forefront of national conversation. Now is the time to shed light on our existing school systems – institutions that perpetuate racism and disproportionately harm students of color, the majority of California’s students– and begin to shift school climates to affirm diverse identities. In order for our teaching force to uphold our expectation of excellence and progression in teaching, we must recruit, hire, support, and retain a diverse body of teachers and establish an affirming school climate for all.

# AUTHORS

## TEACH PLUS CALIFORNIA TEACHING POLICY FELLOWS

Briana Nelson

Nadia Razi

Meghann Seril

Tamra Simpson

Sarah Lillis, California Executive Director

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>9</sup> White fragility is the phenomenon coined by Robin DiAngelo, characterized by the belief that "the smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable – the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses...such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress inducing situation. . . Although white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement." (DiAngelo, Robin J. *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018.)
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# FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

## Part 1. Teacher identity

1. Please tell us about yourself, where and what you teach and how long you've been a teacher.
2. In the report, "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Turnover," we heard from teachers that their identities, with respect to race, ethnicity, and culture, play a role in how they are perceived and treated in their schools. To what degree does this resonate with you? How does your cultural, racial, or ethnic identity influence your role as a teacher?
3. In our prior research, we found that teachers of color often struggle to have their identities valued and we used the term "affirm" to discuss this. Do you feel that your school is a place where teachers' cultural, racial, and ethnic identities are valued or affirmed?

## Part 2. Your School Environment

4. How comfortable are you and your colleagues talking about race, ethnicity, culture, and identity in your school? How does this make you feel?
5. Let's talk about your students. How are your schools succeeding or failing to create a sense of belonging for your students? How do your students' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities influence your teaching, if at all?

## Part 3. What can schools do to better affirm teachers of color?

6. Do you feel your school's recruitment, hiring, and induction practices reflect a commitment to diversity and equity? If so, what practices are working well? If not, what do you think needs changing?
7. Professional development can be a powerful and important tool to affect change in schools. To what degree do you feel that your school's professional development and learning offerings reflect a commitment to diversity and equity?
8. To better support, retain, and grow teachers of color, what topics or issues should schools address in their professional development?
9. What practices do you feel best contribute to creating a supportive and affirming school culture for teachers of color?

## Part 4. Advice section - to be completed on your own at the conclusion of the focus group session

In this section, we won't be discussing these questions as a group, but we ask that you help provide advice to practitioners and policymakers on what they can do to better support, retain, and grow teachers of color.

10. What advice do you have for school leaders who want to create more affirming and supportive school cultures for teachers of color?
11. What advice would you like to share with other teachers of color as they consider if and how their racial and ethnic identities intersect with their work as educators?
12. What advice would you like to share with white educators when it comes to thinking about race and ethnicity in education?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to share when you think about the role of race, ethnicity, and culture in schools?
14. Given the current state of schools, with many buildings closed for the foreseeable future due to COVID-19, what impact, if any, might this have on teachers of color and general educational equity?