Culturally Sustaining Schools:
Recommendations From Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows for Retaining Teachers of Color

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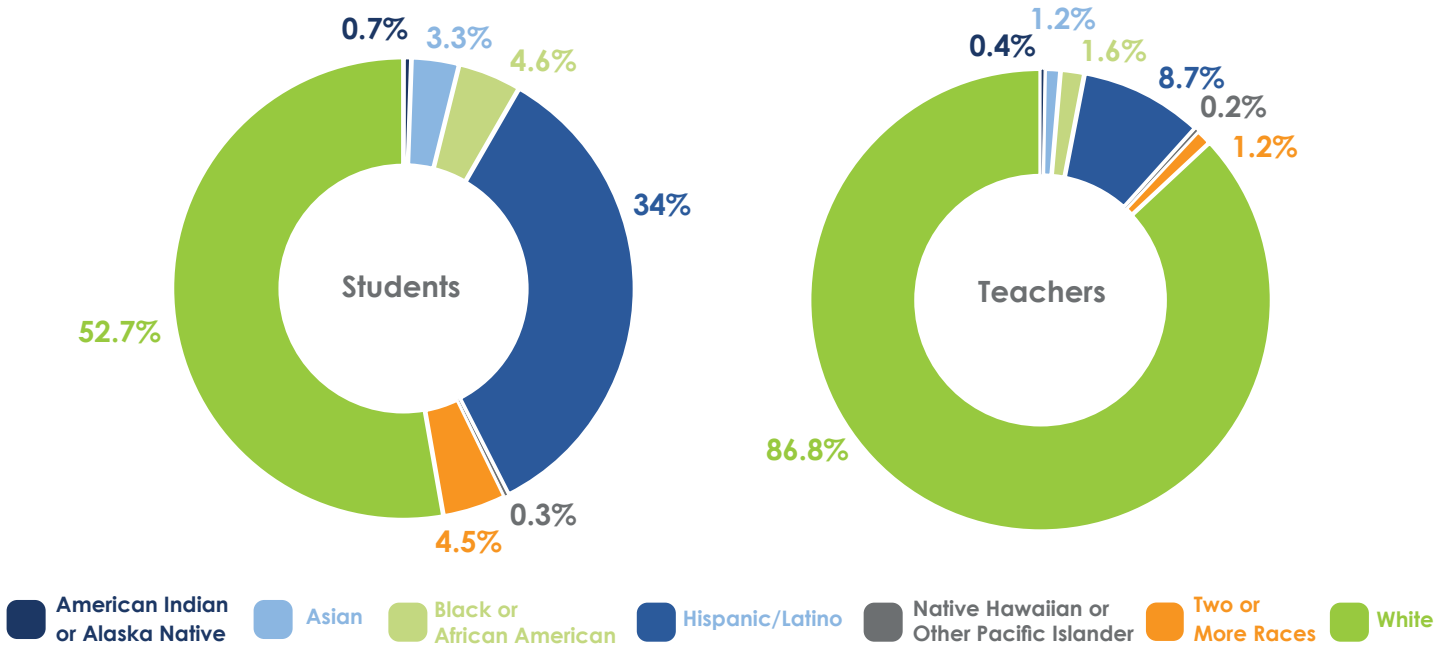
INTRODUCTION

Research shows that teachers are the most important in-school factor when it comes to student learning,[1] and a racially and culturally diverse teacher workforce contributes positively to an array of student measures and outcomes, such as student attendance, equitable discipline and referrals to special education and gifted programs, access to advanced coursework, social emotional learning, and student academic achievement.[2] Research also shows that while all students benefit from having a teacher of color, students of color especially flourish in classrooms with teachers who share their racial and cultural background.[3]

Regrettably, Colorado students do not have the benefit of a diverse teaching workforce. While students of color made up nearly 50 percent of the K-12 public school enrollment in Colorado in 2019-20,[4] teachers of color comprised less than 20 percent of the teacher workforce.[5] Across the state, around 4.5 percent of students were Black, but only 1.6 percent of teachers, and the gap is even more stark for Latino students; around 34 percent of students identified as Latino, but only 8.7 percent of teachers. In comparison, 52.5 percent of Colorado students were White, while White teachers comprised a widely disproportionate 86.8 percent of the teacher workforce. And because most teachers of color are concentrated in a few urban districts, state data show that 18 percent of Colorado schools have no teachers of color at all, and nearly 10 percent of Colorado students attend schools with no teachers of color on staff.

Figure 1. *Colorado demographic data from Ed Trust*



Source: "Is Your State Prioritizing Teacher Diversity & Equity?," The Education Trust. Colorado Report Card. https://edtrust.org/educator-diversity/#CO

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There are a number of historical and current factors that drive the disparities in the teacher workforce, including systemic barriers to teacher preparation training, biases in recruitment and hiring practices, lack of culturally responsive induction programs and retention strategies, and particularly high psychological and economic costs experienced by teachers of color.[6] And while over the past few decades, progress has been made in increasing the number of teacher candidates of color, both nationally and in Colorado, those gains are erased by higher turnover rates among teachers of color. Recent studies have shown teachers of color leave the classroom at a higher rate (19 percent) than White teachers (15 percent), largely due to the fact that many are concentrated in public schools serving high-poverty, high-minority students, or in urban communities where teachers report having inadequate resources, less classroom autonomy, and fewer opportunities or professional development than teachers in other school settings.[7] Low retention among teachers of color is also partly due to teacher pathways, particularly some alternative teacher preparation programs, which are often created to address the teacher shortage in high-poverty schools.[8]

We are a group of Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows and Colorado classroom teachers who teach across grade levels, subjects, and geographies in the state. We developed this brief in response to a 2014 report by the Colorado Department of Education, required by HB 14-1175, which studied and offered strategies to increase and improve the recruitment, preparation, development, and retention of high-quality teachers of color in K-12 schools across the state. In that report, the commission found that a number of factors could decrease the turnover and attrition among teachers of color: higher salaries and incentives; effective principals and school leadership; comprehensive mentoring and induction programs; networks of teacher collaboration and support; increased classroom autonomy; better facilities and education resources; and support of, or positive reinforcement for, teachers' humanistic commitments.[9]

This brief is also built on the findings of the 2019 report by Teach Plus and The Education Trust, "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover.[10] Following that national research into the causes and potential solutions for low retention of teachers of color, Teach Plus Colorado conducted a series of focus groups to listen to the voices of Colorado teachers of color as they underscored the reasons teachers feel unwelcome and undervalued in the profession and made recommendations for promising strategies and practices to retain teachers of color.

We believe that teachers of color hold key insights into the causes and potential solutions to the lack of teacher diversity in our state, and we urge policymakers and school leaders to listen to the experiences, perspectives, and wisdom of teachers as they craft solutions that serve all students through a diverse teacher workforce.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the experiences and perspectives of teachers of color in Colorado, we conducted focus groups with 32 teachers from across the state during May and June 2020. Each of the ten focus groups was facilitated by a Teach Plus Policy Fellow over Zoom. Prior to the focus group, the participants were sent the "If You Listen" report for their review.

Focus group participants were asked a series of 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, 30 percent identified as Latinx, 39 percent identified as Black/African American, 18 percent as Asian/Asian American Pacific Islander, and 12 percent as multiracial. Participants spanned grade levels and experience, with a range of teaching experience from one to 34 years.

TEACHER IDENTITY

In our focus groups, teachers of color told us that their racial and ethnic identity is often what first motivated them to enter the profession, and the extent to which their identity is affirmed or undervalued in their school can make a substantial difference in their decision to stay or leave. For many teachers of color, connecting with students whose identities they may share is an asset both to their profession and to the school community. One Asian-Filipino/Italian high school teacher shared the extent to which identity informs her role as a teacher: *"My ethnic identity is central to me being a teacher. It's why I became a teacher. I grew up in an immigrant household and experienced quite a bit of racism in my life and never wanted other kids to feel that way. I felt invisible in school like many of our students."* For this teacher, identity is a point of connection with students that supports her sense of belonging.

However, pressures to conform to the dominant teaching culture, which is often White or perpetuates White standards, detract from those important connections. One high school social studies teacher shared, *"The positives that teachers of color bring to the table are often overlooked or not valued. When we are critical of this type of culture [teachers of color] are often made to feel like it's only us or that we're exaggerating. This leads to being silenced which then leads to isolation."* A number of Colorado teachers of color in our groups reported feeling *"out of place and unseen," "not valued and affirmed,"* or that their *"input is largely ignored"* by their administrators and colleagues.

Moreover, teachers of color often take on additional roles that are unacknowledged or uncompensated, which can lead to isolation, frustration, and ultimately, pursuit of other professional opportunities. One common extra burden is translation of materials or during meetings with parents/guardians, which teachers are asked to complete outside of work hours and without scheduling in advance: *"Sometimes I'm asked to translate, for free, on my own time, at the last minute usually."* Rather than being compensated for this support, it is viewed as an expectation of the job. One teacher explained that she is *"expected to use these skills during every meeting and to support other teachers."*

Teachers of color in Colorado are also often asked to engage in informal and uncompensated disciplinary roles because of their ability to build relationships with students of color. Students of color are often labeled as "tough" and are disproportionately referred for disciplinary actions. As one third grade teacher reported,*"There were consistently students at my door who needed discipline that I, as one of few teachers of color, was supposed to provide…I was always the model for relationship building but never for content knowledge."* These additional expectations and responsibilities go beyond one´s fair share, and teachers of color feel undervalued when they are not recognized or compensated for this extra work.

Teachers of color enter into a unique space in which they support and uphold the same schoolwide systems and responsibilities as their peers, but as individuals of color, they may face challenges distinct from their White peers. Whether in discipline systems, dress codes, or teaching styles, teachers of color are often asked to follow standards that they know are harmful to populations they serve.

The educators we spoke with suggested that teachers of color will remain in the classroom and in the profession when they see diverse representation in administration and other staff, and also experience school climate and culture that value a teacher of color's input. A high school teacher highlighted the positive impact of having administrators and/or teachers of color engage in the work of hiring other staff and teachers: *"More than once, my administrator has asked my opinion on new hires and asked if I felt valued as a Chicana teacher in the building."* Here, the alignment between a self-identified Chicana's perspectives and the shared goal of hiring staff that would support students' identities both affirms the teacher and supports the creation of a strong learning environment for students.

SCHOOL CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

Teachers of color often feel like they are navigating unfavorable school cultures and have little agency and autonomy in their schools to create the changes necessary to better serve their students. Teachers of color "are often silenced, pedagogically questioned, not chosen for leadership opportunities, and viewed as less competent than their White peers, even in schools serving majority student of color populations."[11] A high school science teacher explained that a factor that further complicates the situation is that *"teachers of color are less likely to have someone in the family who's a teacher. That means they're more vulnerable to being taken advantage of when it comes to hiring practices, negotiating salary, class load, and other responsibilities."*

Additionally, one Colorado high school English teacher described the frustration and internal struggle one may feel upholding a racist system:

> *"I did not like having to uphold such a strict and oppressive discipline system because if you looked at it on the surface it was all White teachers demanding complete compliance of students of color to conform to a strict social code, which I felt was a White social code. One of my Black students even brought this up to me on his own, and I couldn't help but agree though … I did not see what agency I had to challenge the system."*

Furthermore, microaggressions that teachers of color face create an even more toxic space. While the experiences of teachers differ by building, focus group respondents pointed to a "plethora of racist microaggressions." These microaggressions, committed by both staff and even students, are an extra challenge that teachers of color encounter. For example, in a narrative from a high school science teacher:

> *"When students commit racial microaggressions it's usually by statement—comments about Chinese people eating dogs, comments about slanty eyes, etc. When teachers and administrators commit those microaggressions it's usually by omission—not wanting to talk about or address issues of race in the profession."*

Although schools may have Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) professional development offerings to discuss issues of diversity and inclusion or have conversations about race and ethnicity, they are often not tailored toward a diverse

workforce. Instead, teachers shared that they are *"designed to help White people understand their own privileges."* Therefore, these professional development sessions can actively harm teachers of color when they

> *"[lack] measurable, data-driven goals to keep staff accountable, rely on the good nature and prior social justice knowledge of staff members, require or push [teachers of color] to advocate for themselves in uncomfortable ways and speak for an entire group, [or] are reactive rather than being part of an integrated staff community-building effort."*

In many instances, rather than cultivating a safe space for teachers of color to examine their own biases or discuss their own experiences, teachers of color may find DEI professional development and discussions about race and ethnicity to be *"retraumatizing,"* or *"result in forced emotional labor of educators of color and rarely [lead] to any actual policy changes at any level."* DEI professional development and conversations among staff without proper facilitation, differentiation, or subsequent action, create a toxic work culture that negatively affects the experiences of teachers of color.

Conversely, when DEI professional development is done well, it can be leveraged as a tool to support students while also supporting the needs of teachers of color. One third-grade educator recommended that schools in their professional development programs *"create a safe space for people to speak on their beliefs, experiences and to give feedback. Build relationships with teachers of color just as you would students so that interactions feel authentic."*

Teachers in our focus groups felt that once schools have recruited teachers of color, they can retain them through intentional supports that empower them and grow them as leaders. One secondary school math teacher shared, *"I like my network's emphasis on mentors and coaches for teachers that develop one-on-one relationships with individual teachers."* Similarly, another high school math teacher recommended *"intentional relationship building between administrators and teachers of color to be able to foster honest and respectful understandings and conversations between the two [and] mentorship and leadership opportunities"* that allow teachers of color to participate in collaborative decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Accountability and Transparency

State education leaders should ensure public accountability around the recruitment and retention of teachers of color through data transparency and monitoring at the state, district, and school levels.

What is not tracked cannot be measured, and if we are to truly prioritize the recruitment and retention of teachers of color in Colorado, clear metrics statewide need to transparently and widely inform policymakers and education leaders on the current state of educators of color.

Collect, disaggregate, and publish relevant data.

State education leaders can ensure accountability by requiring schools to collect, disaggregate, and publish data on the recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers of color. Much of this data is already housed within school or district human resources, making it a low-cost and high-impact action for schools and districts. The data

metrics used should be both representative and comparative, including raw data on the numbers of teachers of color as well as comparative percentages in proportion to the entire staff and percentages comparative to the student body. These data can then be shared out transparently and publicly through the school and district accountability committees as well as published on school and district websites and in School Performance Frameworks (SPFs) across the state.

Define the measures to ensure transparency.

How the data is disaggregated will also provide a clear picture of how schools and districts are doing in recruiting and retaining teachers of color. State education leaders should put particular emphasis on ensuring accurate representation of data through explicit defining of the measures used. Defining who is included as a "teacher" (i.e., who in administration, classified staff, and licensed staff is reported) ensures that the data reflect the composition of teachers across the state. Disaggregating these categories will allow transparency in understanding where educators of color currently are and may provide insight into where efforts for "grow-your-own" programs could exist.

Utilize accountability committees.

In Colorado, all schools and districts are required by state law to convene accountability committees that solicit feedback from stakeholders beyond school and district administrators, including families, who may have a strong stake in seeing a diverse teacher workforce in their schools. State law already requires public disclosure of various information through accountability committees, such as priority spending recommendations, school performance and improvement plans, and family engagement plans, among other requirements.[12] The emphasis on family engagement and transparency makes accountability committees an ideal opportunity to focus and prioritize the recruitment and retention of teachers of color.

Culturally Sustaining Environments

District and school leaders must take appropriate action to foster culturally sustaining environments in school buildings.

A culturally sustaining school is one that affirms the identities of people of color and allows teachers and students of color to maintain and feel comfortable sharing their identities and cultural practices. A truly inclusive environment celebrates linguistic and cultural pluralism and is necessary to disrupt oppressive systems of assimilation into dominant White culture. Schools that want to retain teachers of color need to create space for them to be their authentic selves, which might encompass everything from ensuring that there are no policies or practices that negatively and disproportionately impact teachers of color (e.g., policing of hair and tone) to encouraging teachers to bring their identity and language to the students they teach.

Commit to equity and anti-bias work.

The first step in cultivating a culturally sustaining environment is for school and district leaders to commit to equity and anti-bias work. It is imperative that districts implement a comprehensive diversity and inclusion professional development series for administrators and teachers with emphasis on reflection and dismantling racial biases in the school environment and curriculum. This focus on equity and inclusion will establish a staff culture that values the identity, opinions, and contributions of staff of color.

Support teacher autonomy.

District and school leaders must support teacher autonomy to tailor their teaching to the population of students in the classroom. Frequently, teachers of color are asked to teach a specific curriculum or in a specific manner that is known to be harmful to students of color. They are not able to differentiate or deviate in order to adequately foster the students' academic, social, and emotional growth, and this lack of autonomy takes a toll on teachers of color. In order to dismantle systemic racism and racial biases in a school, districts and school leaders must not only allow, but encourage, teachers to affirm and sustain the identities of their students within the curriculum that they teach while maintaining high expectations and combatting deficit thought.

Create opportunities for family involvement and community connection.

Another way that districts and schools can create a culturally sustaining environment is to organize and fund programs and opportunities for family involvement and community connection. The community around the school and the families that attend it can be the school's greatest resources and strengths. The school exists to serve these communities; thus, the school building should be a place where family input, particularly those of color, is solicited, appreciated, and utilized to create change within a school building. In order to cultivate and sustain these partnerships, district and school leaders must provide funding for positions such as family or community liaison and outreach. Finally, districts and school leaders must fund translation services necessary to reach out to families of color. Oftentimes, teachers of color unofficially serve in this role or translate for others in the building in addition to their daily duties. If a teacher is engaging parents and community in this way, they must be compensated for their work.

Professional Development and Advancement

State and district leaders should invest in teachers of color through programs that support professional development and advancement through career development pathways and assistance.

Professional development—from induction programs to ongoing training in diversity, equity, and inclusion, to leadership programs—is crucial to retaining teachers of color. This professional development should be differentiated to support teachers of color all throughout their teaching career, particularly as they are entering and looking to step into leadership.

Ensure induction support and mentorship.

First-year teachers who receive induction support are twice as likely to stay in teaching as those who do not receive this support.[13] Comprehensive induction programs that include mentorship, particularly from another teacher of color, will support the development of teachers of color new to the profession. Teachers of color are more likely than White teachers to enter teaching through alternative teaching pathways, and these programs often require fewer courses or hours of student teaching.[14] Providing mentorship for teachers of color, whether licensed through alternative pathways or traditional licensure will ensure that these teachers have the support they need to stay in the profession.

Provide differentiated professional development.

Because teachers of color have experiences in education distinct from their White peers, they have an increased need to receive differentiated professional development to support their growth in the profession. As we heard from our respondents, this is particularly true when considering professional development around DEI. Differentiated professional development will serve the needs of teachers of color and their development in their teaching careers. It is also critical that school leadership participates in development programs that prepare them to lead a diverse teaching staff in more culturally sustaining school environments.

Create safe spaces for teachers of color to be heard.

In a career field that is predominantly White, it is especially important to provide safe spaces for teachers of color to be heard and embraced. As a teacher of color in these spaces, it is very easy to feel isolated and alone. Safe spaces like affinity groups and peer coaching can be extremely valuable to any school district or network looking to increase retention of teachers of color. As stated in the Learning Policy Institute report, many teachers "wanted to leave and then realized they just needed a community."[15]

Implement intentional pathways to leadership for teachers of color.

Targeted fellowships and leadership academies can also support professional advancement and increase pathways to leadership. Massachusetts recently made such a commitment through their Boston Public Schools Male Educators of Color (MEOC) Executive Coaching Leadership program, a nine-month program led by other males of color throughout the district. The program saw a 91 percent retention rate for the teachers who took on this leadership pathway, and in the process the program developed 61 leaders of color for their district.[16] Implementing intentional pathways to leadership and ensuring authentic advancement opportunities will lead to increased retention of teachers of color and the development of leaders of color.

Ease teachers of color financial burdens.

Finally, the disparate financial burdens experienced by teachers of color can be mitigated through service scholarships, grants, and loan forgiveness programs funded by the state and local districts in partnerships with private and nonprofit organizations. With the high cost of living in Colorado, particularly for housing, service scholarships and grants can supplement salaries to help secure longevity in the careers of teachers of color in both rural and urban schools, and loan forgiveness for years of service will go a long way to alleviating the financial burden of teacher education and licensure.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of color face a variety of unique challenges in the workplace that are not experienced by White educators. Disproportionate professional and psychological burdens, and unsupportive, sometimes hostile, work environments mean that existing recruitment and retention of teachers of color in the state are failing to provide many students with the teachers they need.

We need dedicated efforts to ensure that teachers of color can thrive and grow within their chosen career paths because our students also thrive when they have the benefits of a diverse teacher workforce. Colorado policymakers and

education leaders can address high turnover among teachers of color by promoting accountability and transparent publication of state, district, and school-level data on the demographics of the educator workforce, creating more culturally sustaining school environments that affirm teacher identity and support teacher autonomy, and investing in professional development and advancement programs that value and cultivate the talents, experiences, and perspectives of teachers of color.

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ENDNOTES

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