Strengthening the Pipeline:

Recommendations from Teach Plus Illinois Policy Fellows on Supporting Educators of Color in Teacher Preparation Programs

INTRODUCTION

In Illinois, 53 percent of the school system is composed of students of color, while only 18 percent of staff are teachers of color.[1] A deep body of research shows the positive impact teachers of color have on both students of color and white students.[2] While considerable research has focused on the challenges of retaining teachers of color in the classroom, there has been less attention paid to the equally critical issue of **retaining candidates of color in teacher preparation programs.**

Initial research on this topic shows that a lack of support from Education Preparation Programs, (EPPs) at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) hinders program completion for teacher candidates of color.[3] Candidates of color need to see a clear pathway to becoming a teacher, no matter if they are joining the field after high school or through a non-traditional route. The Illinois State Board of Education's Diverse and Learner Ready Teacher Network acknowledged this problem and identified "increasing the number of minority teacher candidates" as one of its main goals.[4] But increasing the number of candidates must be paired with a focus on retaining them in their EPPs.The practice of recruiting and retaining teacher candidates of color in Illinois needs attention, and it also needs to be informed by the voices of those teacher candidates.

We are a group of diverse educators and Teach Plus Policy Fellows from across Illinois who believe in the importance of retaining and recruiting teachers of color — starting with the students in EPPs. To better understand the issue, we held focus groups with teacher candidates of color in EPPs across the state. In this brief, we present findings from our research and recommendations for EPPs and institutions for higher education in our state on retaining teacher candidates of color.

Findings

1. Teacher candidates of color believe that faculty at EPPs must be diverse and representative of the students they teach.

2. Teacher candidates of color agree that faculty in the EPPs often do not demonstrate cultural competence in their classes.

3. Teacher candidates of color find mentoring, particularly from other people of color, a key component of their success in the program.

4. For many candidates of color, cost is a barrier to teacher preparation program completion.

Recommendations

1. Illinois institutions of higher education should commit to hiring practices, supportive cultures, and financial incentives that prioritize faculty diversity.

2. Educator preparation programs should provide cultural competence training for faculty and staff in order to ensure affirming spaces for people of color.

3. Educator preparation programs should establish mentoring programs that connect students of color with peers, faculty, working educators, and faculty of color.

4. Illinois legislators should address the cost of becoming a teacher by expanding the state's Minority Teacher of Illinois program, and university leaders should create emergency relief funds for students of color in their EPPs.

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METHODOLOGY

To better understand the lived experience and needs of pre-service teachers of color in undergraduate teacher preparation programs, we formed a partnership with Golden Apple, an organization which supports nearly 800 teacher candidates yearly, 45 percent of them candidates of color. The Teach Plus team consisted of seven teachers with backgrounds in early childhood education, bilingual education, and secondary education, all from diverse backgrounds. The Golden Apple scholars were all undergraduate students of color currently enrolled in teacher preparation programs.

Our research was driven by the following two questions:

+ How can undergraduate teacher preparation programs more effectively create an engaging and supportive program of study for pre-service candidates of color?

+ How can undergraduate teacher preparation programs more effectively retain pre-service candidates of color?

We designed a focus group protocol to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on the experiences and perspectives of pre-service teachers of color in their teacher preparation program. Fourteen Golden Apple scholars of color led virtual focus groups with 48 pre-service teachers of color who attend public and private universities across the state. Of these participants:

+ Fifteen percent (7) of the focus group participants identified as Black, 17 percent (8) identified as Asian, 54 percent (26) identified as Latinx, 10 percent (5) identified as multiracial, and the race of two participants was unknown.

+ Ten percent (5) of the focus group participants were freshmen, 40 percent (19) were sophomores, 42 percent (20) were juniors, and eight percent (4) were seniors.

+ Participants came from 11 different Illinois colleges and universities; four were public universities and the remainder were private colleges or universities.

FINDINGS

1. Teacher candidates of color believe that faculty at EPPs must be diverse and representative of the students they teach.

A common theme across all focus groups was the need for a more representative faculty in teacher preparation programs. One respondent stated, *"The most important thing for me has always been working with and meeting other teachers of color."*

Nationwide, 76 percent of higher education faculty are White, which does not reflect the diversity of their students.[5] Students need to see their cultural identities reflected in their professors, as one respondent noted, *"I think that diverse faculty is so important because [even though I would like to turn to] someone who has been in my shoes, it's not possible."* In addition to providing representation for students of color, diverse faculty members can contribute to a tighter sense of community belonging. Another respondent noted, *"I feel as though a diverse faculty can [help] students [of color] feel seen and heard within their [teacher preparation] programs."*

Faculty of color have the ability to inject shared experiences that connect to the curriculum and therefore are more likely to create an inclusive classroom that engages all students in deep discussions around relevant topics such as identity, race, and culturally responsive teaching. Students noted that when their White professors addressed issues of race in the classroom, they were oftentimes not able to explain the impact or convey the appropriate emotions. One focus group participants explained:

"As of right now, I've had only one teacher of color, and that [does not] sit right with me, especially when I'm taking classes about people of color. It's just odd that ALL of my teachers are White, but most of my classes are about specific groups of color in America."

The need for increased faculty diversity at EPPs cannot be overstated. One respondent put it this way, *"If you really want to retain students and future educators of color we need to start with who is teaching in these pre-service programs."*

2. Teachers candidates of color agree that faculty in the EPPs often do not demonstrate cultural competence in their classes.

The National Education Association describes cultural competence as "having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families."[6]

Focus group participants felt that some White faculty members showed deficits in cultural competence, specifically when teaching about people of color. When conversations about culture and identity did occur, they felt that these were surface level and done with the intention of just checking a box. As one participant noted, *"[While the student body is very diverse], we rarely have discussions about our backgrounds, interests, or needs. We are left to reflect on our identities independently. We don't have enough discussions about inclusivity in general."* Some participants also indicated that people of color were only discussed during one-off conversations about a holiday or celebration, but their stories were not integrated into the curriculum as a whole. Overall, the teacher candidates of color felt that conversations surrounding culture, diversity, or inclusion lacked substance and depth.

Only 12 percent of focus group participants responded "strongly agree" when asked if their EPP valued diverse student experiences. White professors often asked students of color to speak on behalf of all people of color. The experience of having to single-handedly represent an entire population of historically marginalized people left many participants feeling frustrated and tokenized. One participant shared, *"Teacher prep programs say they want to hear student stories that represent multiple perspectives, however, many biases and assumptions get in the way. Our professors often see people of color as monolithic entities and we need to challenge this misconception if we truly want to engage with students from diverse backgrounds."*

Teacher candidates of color indicated that when discussions on diversity do take place in the classroom, White professors tend to focus on the negativity that surrounds communities of color versus the positive or uplifting aspects. When readings

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about people of color were included in the curriculum, *"the readings only focus on the struggle and trauma of people of color."* Additionally, the participants reported only receiving course-related readings about people of color when the professor or teaching assistant was also a person of color. Many participants had no other choice but to find resources on people of color on their own time outside of class.

3. Teachers candidates of color find mentoring, particularly from other people of color, a key component of their success in the program.

When asked to identify programmatic components that were crucial to the retention of students of color in a teacher preparation program, our focus group participants ranked mentoring from working educators and faculty of color as number one. Research shows that mentoring can provide students of color with relational outlets that facilitate adjustment at their institution. Furthermore, students of color exhibit higher self-esteem, self-efficacy, and fulfillment when engaged in mentoring relationships with others, especially with other people of color.[7]

Focus group participants reported feeling "othered" in their preparation programs. Mentoring, specifically from peers, working educators, and faculty of color, could help assuage these feelings. As one teacher candidate of color expressed, *"I put mentoring first because it's crucial for me to feel recognized. If I don't feel like I belong at school, I'll become uninterested in the curriculum as a whole."* Mentorship from people of color allows teacher candidates of color to feel more connected to their education programs and helps students of color process feelings of ostracism particularly at PWIs.

Mentors of color can help create a community with students of color because they often share similar lived experiences and struggles. One focus group participant stated, *"Having teachers of color as mentors is important because they can identify with our struggles."* Having a mentor who represents them has also led our focus group participants to believe that they can make it too. Being mentored by people of color increases persistence and positively impacts program retention for students of color. Additionally, respondents believed that mentorship experiences with working educators or faculty of color could better help them navigate a career path that lacks diversity. One teacher candidate of color stated, *"As a student of color, it is really difficult to feel validated and motivated in a space where you see no one else that looks like you, so having mentors of color would be very beneficial."*

It is important to note the difference between an advisor and a mentor. All focus group participants had an academic advisor, however, this advisor was not considered a mentor. Teacher candidates of color felt that their universities tried to pass off this advisory transaction as a mentoring relationship, when that was not the case. One teacher candidate of color clarified, *"I have a very supportive advisor but my advisor does not serve as a mentor. I go to them for class advice but not for support regarding my lived experiences the way I do with my mentor. That is not my advisor's job and they do not look like me."*

Overall, mentors of color play an important role in the trajectory of students of color in EPPs. Mentors of color not only provide academic and career-related guidance but also contribute positively to a student's social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical well-being. Teacher candidates of color believe that mentorship from working educators and faculty of color can provide the support they need to complete their education degree and persevere as teachers.

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4. **For many candidates of color, cost is a barrier to teacher preparation program completion.**

College is an expensive investment for those who do not have financial resources. Financial challenges were brought up frequently throughout all the focus groups and our respondents felt that EPPs often overlooked the economic barriers faced by teacher candidates of color. One respondent shared: *"Teachers of color typically come from families that do not have the means to supplement income lost due to clinical placements or student teaching."* For many, financial stability heavily influences the decision to continue or leave a teacher preparation program. As one focus group participant stated: *"Cost heavily influences whether I stay in my teacher prep program; it is number one for me. If there were more programs to support students financially, other aspects of my life would fall into place."*

Teacher preparation programs often lose sight of the seemingly minor expenses that accrue as a result of education coursework. One respondent expressed frustration at a surprise $800 fee that accompanied one of her education classes. A music education teacher candidate of color struggled to complete a class because they could not afford to purchase the required music software. These additional expenses add undue financial burden to teachers candidates of color, many of whom find themselves working part-time jobs or taking out additional student loans to cover the costs.

Teacher candidates of color are eager to enter the teaching profession, but many struggle to come to terms with the fact that teaching is a low-paid profession. One focus group participant stated: *"Teachers are underpaid, so if an expensive preparation program is accompanied by a low future salary, it can be hard to justify staying in the program even if you want to."* The teaching profession needs and deserves more teachers of color. For this reason, teacher candidates of color need additional scholarships, grants, and other emergency relief funds to ensure they finish their preparation program and go on to enter the classroom to serve students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Illinois institutions of higher education should commit to hiring practices, supportive cultures, and financial incentives that prioritize faculty diversity.**

As noted in our first finding, teacher candidates of color place a high priority on seeing faculty of color in their programs. For this reason, institutions of higher education need to commit to diversifying their faculty. We offer three suggestions to achieve this goal:

Improve hiring practices. While it is true that there are fewer scholars of color when compared to their white counterparts, by no means are there none. In 2015, approximately 37 percent of all doctoral degrees were conferred to graduate students of color.[8] In order to make sure these candidates can obtain tenure-track positions, EPPs need to eliminate hiring practices that perpetuate the status quo. University hiring committees need to actively focus on eliminating bias from the selection process. They should ensure that the initial review of cover letters

and curriculum vitae is "blind," meaning that candidate names do not appear to reviewers: a 2003 study showed that White-sounding names receive 50 percent more callbacks than Black-sounding names.[9] EPPs should also standardize their interview process, so that each candidate is asked the same set of defined questions. Universities should set diversity goals to guide their hiring process. While such goals can cause backlash from traditionally privileged groups, they can also help keep diversity in mind during the hiring process.[10] Programs should establish interview panels which include a diverse set of colleagues to mitigate unconscious personal biases, make diverse applicants feel more comfortable, and consider an applicant from a broader perspective. Finally, programs should establish diversity goals to hold themselves accountable.[11]

Create supportive environments for faculty of color. Just as K-12 teachers of color frequently voice their reluctance to stay in the classroom in schools where they do not feel included, scholars of color in academia also desire more targeted and intentional support.[12] Many faculty of color have suggested that, for them, academia has not been a supportive and inclusive environment, which has led them to seek employment elsewhere.[13] To counter this, the American Council of Education suggests several solutions. Departments and universities need to implement safeguards that eliminate insular academic cultures that allow implicit bias and microaggressions to go unattended. EPPs need to acknowledge and reward the scholars of color who carry heavier loads of service work (serving on committees, mentoring students, etc) than their peers, particularly as relates to tenure.[14] Scholars of color may also benefit from support with the tenure track and promotion process.

Provide financial incentives. Financial incentives, particularly when combined with an effort to create a supportive and affirming environment, could be particularly powerful. One promising program shows inclusive space for scholars of color. The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) has developed a Pipeline to an Inclusive Faculty (PIF) Program that is designed to "recruit and support outstanding historically underrepresented PhD students, who are interested in pursuing careers as faculty members." The intent of the PIF Program is to "support these [promising scholars of color] with competitive funding packages, skills and professional development opportunities and mentoring in order to ensure their success in graduate school and in their future careers." The PIF program at UIC offers funding, mentoring, grant writing experience, networking, and professional development. With regards to funding, "PIF Scholars receive three years of funding at $28,000 and one year of top-off funding at $10,000 to add to the stipend provided by a teaching assistantship." The extra funds provided by UIC help alleviate the disproportionate financial burden that scholars of color experience when compared to their White colleagues. PIF Scholars engage in both faculty and peer-mentoring opportunities that include other scholars of color, thus creating a support network that actively advocates for the needs of emerging scholars of color in academia.[15] The PIF program at UIC is an excellent example of how institutions of higher education can actively prioritize the needs of scholars of color in order to maximize retention in academia.

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2. **Educator preparation programs should provide cultural competence training for faculty and staff in order to ensure affirming spaces for people of color.**

Because our findings clearly highlighted gaps that faculty have in their cultural competence, we recommend comprehensive, ongoing, job-embedded cultural competency training for all EPP faculty. This training needs to address and begin to resolve bias, stereotypes, and discrimination. It should include active learning techniques in which all participants can engage, and should be ongoing and consistently provide opportunities for growth and reflection among faculty groups.

It should also include opportunities to deepen knowledge of their students beyond "surface" issues such as holidays and musical preferences, preparing faculty to hold courageous conversations around race and ensuring that they do not rely on their candidates of color to educate their White peers about marginalized communities. This cultural competence training would also help prepare undergraduate faculty to better implement Illinois' new Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards at their EPPs. Prior to the end of the training, each professor should create an individual growth plan that can work as a tool box of resources and a plan that will aid students in the process of deepening self-awareness and continued growth in their cultural competence journey.

3. **Educator preparation programs should establish mentoring programs that connect students of color with peers, working educators, and faculty of color.**

Our findings show that students of color are looking for opportunities to be mentored by faculty, peers, and working educators of color to help navigate a career path that is still predominantly White. Interactions between mentors and teachers candidates of color should be:

1. Comprehensive and specific enough to address their social, academic, and personal development needs during their academic journeys. As one candidate noted, *"Connect them with organizations that have their success in mind and align with their desired goals as a teacher, and advocate for summer internships, and fellowships, to help students continue to enhance their skill set and knowledge."*

2. Rooted in a social justice approach that is individual, holistic, and systemic across their universities.

3. Established at the beginning of a teacher candidates' career. Some students mentioned that they felt like giving up early in their college career. As one participant emphasized, *" I believe that one-on-one support can be so helpful as a way to not feel intimidated and feel as if you can ask for questions and ask for support."*

One promising peer mentoring program at Illinois State University called Mentoring, Academics, Scholarship, and Achievement Initiative (MASAI) is doing just that.[16] The program targets students of color, first-year, and first-generation students. The MASAI program sets students up with student leaders on campus, with the goal of retaining students of color. A mentor from the program gave their perspective, *"The MASAI program allowed me to give back the knowledge and opportunities to those in need."*[17]

Programs like MASAI are promising examples of how universities can support students of color through mentoring. Each student in the program is connected to someone who understands how college works and guides them through it. Mentees in the program are supported academically and socially on campus, andget cultural support from their mentors. One participant put it this way: *"Mentoring opportunities with experienced teachers/faculty of color [is important] because I would want to see how teachers of color are treated or how their experience has been in a school setting and give me tips on what to do or what to look out for."*

4. Illinois legislators State and University leaders should address the costs of becoming a teacher by expanding the state's Minority Teacher of Illinois program and institutions of higher education should consider creating emergency relief funds for students of color in their EPPs.

Focus group participants most frequently mentioned the high cost of college as a barrier. While the Minority Teachers of Illinois scholarship program currently provides $5,000 yearly scholarships to eligible students, the demand for this program far outstrips the available scholarship monies: 705 aspiring teachers of color applied for the MTI scholarship in 2020, but available funding could support just 362 teacher candidates. Furthermore, the award amount for this scholarship has remained unchanged since 1992 — and in this same period, tuition costs at Illinois four-year institutions have more than doubled.[18]

The Illinois Legislature, in passing the omnibus education bill HB2170, created a window for changes to take place. The law allows, for example, for increasing the MTI award amount to $7,500 pending appropriations, as well as creating a priority for Black male candidates and for bilingual candidates.[19] Increasing funding for the program from its current funding levels of $1.9 million to $4.2 million would allow Illinois to both add 200 more candidates to the program and expand their grant to $7,500. The legislature, if it is serious about equity and addressing teacher diversity, needs to fund this expansion.

Additionally, as noted in our Findings, unexpected program costs such as hidden fees or costly software programs may derail some students. To address such costs, we recommend that EPPs establish emergency relief funds for their students of color.

When a teacher candidate of color or a first-generation student enters an institution, they often arrive unprepared for the economic hurdles that arise during their course work, such as day-to-day transportation, living expenses, increased tuition costs, and family financial obligations which many of their White peers do not often experience. Organizations like All Chicago, which support homeless college students with emergency funds, note that at least 25 percent of students who had to drop out of college have done so because of the inability to pay as little as $1,000 to continue course work.[20] Pilots of the emergency relief fund approach, such as the University Innovation Alliance, have shown promising results. Over the course of three years, the 11 institutions participating in the Alliance provided over $3 million in grants to nearly 5,000 students. The average grant award was $741, and eighty-three percent of these students completed their degree or remain enrolled at their university.[21] Illinois institutions that do not already participate in the Alliance should consider creating similar programs to support their teacher candidates of color, first-generation candidates, and low-income candidates.

CONCLUSION

In order to successfully diversify Illinois' teacher workforce, we must provide Illinois' teacher candidates with a welcoming, supportive, and diverse environment in their educator preparation programs. Illinois' educator preparation programs can modify their hiring practices, train their faculty around cultural competence, and establish mentoring programs for candidates of color with people of color. Both the state and colleges and universities can do more to address barriers of cost by expanding the Minority Teacher Initiative and creating emergency assistance funds. Only then will we be able to create a diverse teacher pipeline that our students need and deserve.

AUTHORS:

Teach Plus

Erica Abangan

Jeanette Delgado

Daniel Jackson

Jay Mehta

Irene Post

Shawnita Tyus

Lisset Rosales

Golden Apple Scholars

Joyce Matanguihan

Jazmine Barajas

Jasmine Mendez

Kareena Shah

Mikayla Vicente

Aliana Kottabi

Jennifer Robillard

Giselle Menjivar

Andrea Du

Raygn Jordan

Evelyn Martinez

Morelia Lara

Tosin Olowu

Daniela Morelos

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