

INTRODUCTION

Research has repeatedly shown that a diverse teaching force benefits all students, yet nationally, both the recruitment and retention of teachers of color in the profession is not commensurate with the number of students of color in the classrooms.¹ Unfortunately, the story is the same in Indiana. In 2018, 32.1% of Hoosier public school students identified as a person of color, yet, only 16.2% of our educator preparation program enrollees were people of color.²

In fact, we don't just need to increase the diversity in our public school classrooms in Indiana; we need to double it. This daunting task begins with a discussion of the recruitment and retention strategies at Indiana's educator preparation programs. What can these programs do to attract and keep people of color in the teaching pipeline?

We are a group of classroom teachers and Teach Plus Indiana Policy Fellows. In the spring of 2021, we spoke with 10 pre-service teachers of color in both traditional and alternative programs. We were interested in what attracted them to the profession and their programs, and what recommendations they have to increase the student and faculty diversity within educator preparation programs in Indiana. In this memo, we present recommendations derived from these conversations on what we need to do to create a more diverse teaching force in Indiana.

METHODOLOGY

Among the 10 pre-service teachers we spoke with, seven were enrolled in four traditional preparation programs in Indiana while three were in alternative programs operating in the state. Four of our participants identified as Hispanic, four as African American, and two as multiracial.

We asked all participants a series of questions to find out what made teaching attractive to them and how their preparation programs can improve their recruitment and retention of pre-service teachers of color.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide More Robust Financial Support for Teachers of Color.

According to focus groups and research from the joint report by Teach Plus and Education Trust, *"If You Listen, We Will Stay,"* participants describe an intrinsic devaluing and lack of associated financial resources as barriers to the retention of classroom educators of color.³ In the report, challenges, solutions and recommendations are provided to describe and better support these educators. Unavoidably, this reasoning can be traced back and connected to similar challenges within the realm of teacher preparation. Bridging this relationship between pre-service teachers and early career educators is an avenue to be further explored.



All of the pre-service teachers of color we spoke with indicated that they need more financial support. The financial support they received focused on the unexpected and indirect expenses of pursuing a teaching career that they were not receiving from their respective programs. Licensure tests and the time demands for field experiences were barriers to earning a living wage in order to support themselves while in the program. While these tests are critical to examine the readiness in teacher cadets, the unexpected expense is a financial roadblock for many candidates; especially, if they have to sit for multiple examinations. One alternative program pre-service teacher explained, *“Program cost--it’s not so much the cost of the program, it’s being able to maintain your non-traditional student life while doing the program. Many, if not all of us, had jobs aside from the full-time jobs we were doing as student teachers. School itself is very stressful and hard. Add working a full eight-hour day and then having to go to part-time work or back home to your family or both is draining, and almost impossible. Yet, we do and did it.”*

Many educator preparation programs, especially those that offer an alternative pathway, advertise opportunities for financial assistance; however, these aid packages are often not sufficient. The teaching candidates we interviewed desired their programs to focus on awarding more robust financial support to fewer, more deserving candidates as opposed to giving less support to more candidates. As one alternative program teaching candidate stated, *“FINANCIAL SUPPORT 110% quality over quantity. Give more substantial financial aid to the few over giving thin aid to many students.”*

Michele's Story

I teach high school chemistry and due to the nature of my subject matter, I have seen my fair share of students dealing with frustration. During a lesson a couple years ago, one of my young Black students Marcus took his leave of my class, expressing his frustration with the slamming of the door as he exited to the hallway. Everyone in my class stopped what they were doing and looked directly at me for my response. I assured them all would be well and to continue working. Checking the hallway briefly, I saw the security guard walking with my frustrated student.

After class, I found Marcus, still with the security guard and the three of us talked. Marcus stayed after school that day to get help solving his chemistry problems. He returned to class the next day and offered an apology to his classmates, explaining he'd been angry at not understanding and he didn't always handle his anger well. His classmates responded with verbal affirmations of knowing how he feels and offered to help him, as they were able, next time he was frustrated. Marcus continued to ask for help and not only did well in the class but the following year, also asked for a recommendation for a scholarship to the college he was admitted to.

Reflecting on my interactions with Marcus, I know the story I shared could have very easily ended another way, as it

so often does in our schools everyday. Yet as a teacher of color, I was able to build trust with this student — a trust that was not easily given, but earned over time. In his words, “I trust you because you have my back and you remind me of my mom.” I, uniquely, could encourage him with tutoring and call him on his behavior because we have a kinship. When I think about how my race impacts my work as a teacher, I know I am needed here and now. Yet I find myself wondering, will I be joined by other teachers of color or will I be replaced when I retire?

I wanted to teach because I saw early in my life the value of investing in the development of children. So many people were instrumental in teaching me and modeling for me the nobility of this profession that I felt compelled to do the same. As I spoke with the participants of the focus group and listened to their frustration because they wanted to reach students in spite of obstacles along with being their very best selves, I felt a very familiar tug.

It is the tug of every teacher of color who hears an excellent question and moves in sync to give an answer. It is the tug of agreement when hearing an unspoken yet tangible exasperation of wanting to understand and do something to change. It is the tug of wanting another “aha” moment. It is the tug of the past calling me to the present to invest in the future. It is a pull I will not resist but share with those entering the call to teach.

The teachers we interviewed made clear that lucrative financial gain was not their primary motivator in becoming a teacher. However, as the demands on educators continue to increase, the support that is given must do the same, especially for teachers of color. One pre-service teacher explained, *“Students of color are disproportionately affected by the financial burden this program places upon them. Student teaching is 11 weeks of full-time unpaid work that many students of color cannot afford. Teacher candidates of color need more material resources so that they can successfully fulfill all the obligations of the program.”*

2. Provide Non-Monetary Resources and Supports for Teachers of Color.

In addition to the financial support, the teachers we spoke with indicated that pre-service teachers of color also need access to non-monetary resources. Support from personnel including faculty, staff at the college, and mentor teachers during a clinical practice are recognized as essential to helping pre-service teachers of color be successful in their programs. One teacher noted that, *“I was fortunate enough to have an OUTSTANDING cooperating teacher, but that was not the case with so many others in my program.”*

Having to navigate a clinical practice as a teacher of color can come with a number of challenges such as experiencing microaggressions and even more overt racism in the classroom from both colleagues and students. In fact, one pre-service teacher mentioned a difficult situation in which the mentor teacher did not support the teaching candidate in effectively helping their students of color speak up when racism occurred in the classroom. The teaching candidate reported, *“I have had a student teaching experience where something happened against a student of color and it wasn't talked about until after the class had left. That's not helping the students or the teachers learn. We need those discussions within the classroom and with other teachers.”* Having access to diverse mentor teachers and active allies willing to guide the pre-service teachers of color through their programs is essential to teaching candidates feeling safe, accepted, and able to help their students address racial conflict in a productive and healing way.

At the college and university level, pre-service teachers of color should also have increased access to specific resources to overcome barriers such as access to the information pipeline. For example, while funds are a major setback for students of color, it is often access to information about financial support that is the first significant barrier. Many teaching candidates of color are first-generation college students who do not have access to a support network of professional college graduates who can help them navigate this often-confusing experience. One pre-service teacher suggested that students of color need to *“actively seek out resources that will assist [them] with degree completion - talk to deans, faculty, support staff, etc.”* Providing the necessary pipeline of informational resources upfront will help to make pre-service teachers more confident throughout their journey toward program completion.

3. Increase the Diversity of Staff and Mentors Who Work with Incoming Teachers of Color.

Teachers of color often leave the classroom because of an antagonistic, or at the very least, unsupportive culture. According to *“If You Listen, We Will Stay,”* “[d]istricts cannot place teachers of color on an island, left to navigate the workforce without colleagues who have similar experiences and backgrounds.”⁴ Sixteen percent of pre-service teachers identify as teachers of color, so the same experience is happening in our preparation programs as well. One teaching candidate echoed this sentiment in her interview, *“Camaraderie was nice to have during classes. I felt great support in my fellow classmates who were going through some of the same struggles that I was. Knowing I wasn’t alone in the struggle helped me to persevere.”* Teachers — both current and pre-service — need the support of other teachers of color as they navigate their profession.

Indeed, we heard many of our participants report the importance of camaraderie, especially between mentor teachers and teaching candidates. Participants shared that they would have benefitted from having a mentor who was a person of color, both in the university classroom and during clinical experiences. A pre-service teacher reported, *“I believe that having experienced mentors who could give advice and share wisdom about their time in the classroom would have been very helpful for me. I would have not felt so alone on my educational journey.”*

Pre-service teachers of color often feel alone when the racial and ethnic make-up of their mentors do not reflect their own. Increasing the diversity of faculty and staff at the college and university level will increase the success of teaching candidates of color.

Greg’s Story

I was inspired to become an educator by the passion my own teachers exhibited while I was in high school. Seeing the varied and rewarding nature of their day-to-day experience, I thought I would love the profession. In retrospect, I may have been naive in my expectations of what teaching might be. As I began my teacher preparation program, my initial observational and learning experience took place in suburban and white-dominated educational settings. In observing actual classrooms, I quickly realized I could not be like the teachers I had in my own school experience. That wouldn’t cut it. As a teacher of color, I would have to prioritize relationships over content. The mission that I had been called to perform required the embodiment of the saying, “People don’t care what you know, until they know that you care.”

Yet showing up for students emotionally while moving them academically and also being a representative as a male teacher of color has proven to be challenging at times. As I establish relationships, I sometimes find

myself filling the buckets of my students and colleagues without properly re-filling my own pail, and, at certain points, I’ve started to feel a sense of burnout. So while I set out to avoid this sensation from the start, I’ve found myself thinking, “I work in a profession where I don’t see myself well represented, I am someone who has worked in a space for an amount of compensation that was significantly less compared to other educators across the state ... Now what?”

Maintaining the balancing act of making yourself whole through self-care or adding more endorsements to your professional profile can only go so far amid the realization that the lack of support for teachers of color, like me, is a substantial systemic issue. The challenges will vary from person to person but at the end of the day the consideration of how to support teachers, specifically teachers of color, when they reach this crossroad from the early stages in their career is the key to igniting innovative solutions to the related realms of teacher preparation and teacher retention.

4. Commit to Diversity in Action.

During our research, we found the word “diversity” used broadly in teacher preparation program materials. Its usage, however, did not always equate to action. While quite a few of these pre-service teachers know that they are needed so that Indiana schools better reflect their student demographics, they themselves are missing the “diversity” experience in training. Many of the teaching candidates noted there were very few instructors of color in their programs.

Discussing and instructing about the concept of diversity is a good beginning. Educator preparation programs must now move from concept to action and hire a more diverse teaching staff for both undergraduate and graduate schools. Teaching candidates expressed the desire to see themselves doing what they aspired to do in the people teaching them how to teach. We must continue to listen to these educators and adjust how we teach educators to teach in order to repair the systemic challenges in developing a diverse teaching force.

5. Provide Teachers of Color with Opportunities to Sustain the Community.

Despite all of the setbacks and barriers to entering the teaching profession, the students of color we spoke with were determined. There was an intrinsic need to address the issue of so few teachers of color in the profession. One interviewee noted that, “... *having interacted with students, I see just how much of an impact that my background as a POC or minority has on students ... I see myself in my students, and when I think about my own experience as one of them, I can only imagine the impact that having an educator with a similar background to me would have been.*”

As this educator noted, the experience of being able to see themselves reflected in their students was just as impactful as the reverse. Similarly, another interviewee focused on how impactful being a teacher of color in the classroom is on all students: “*The job you are doing, and especially as a minority, is incredibly valuable. Students will learn from you and connect with you in ways others without the same background can't.*” These reasons have continued to motivate teaching candidates of color to pursue the teaching profession, slowly attempting to fill a gap that will hopefully grow no wider in the future.

Colleges and universities need to be educating a community of diverse learners and we as educators should be a community of diverse educators, bringing our whole selves to the endeavor. Reminding new teachers of color of these important truths through mentoring provides support during “dry times” and helps to speed the filling of the gap mentioned earlier.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the strategies to strengthen the pipeline of preparation to retention of teachers of color in Indiana have room for improvement. The adversity teachers of color experience disrupts the pipeline of training excellent teachers. Educator preparation programs and school districts need to increase the support and resources available to diverse educators who work within our most diverse communities in Indiana.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dixon, R.D., Griffin, A.R., & Teoh, M.B. (2019). "If you listen, we will stay: Why teachers of color leave and how to disrupt teacher turnover.", The Education Trust & Teach Plus, Washington DC.

² "A Broken Pipeline: Teacher Preparation's Diversity Problem." (2020). Retrieved May 16, 2021, from TNTP website: https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_BrokenPipeline_FINAL.pdf

³ See Endnote 1

⁴ See Endnote 1