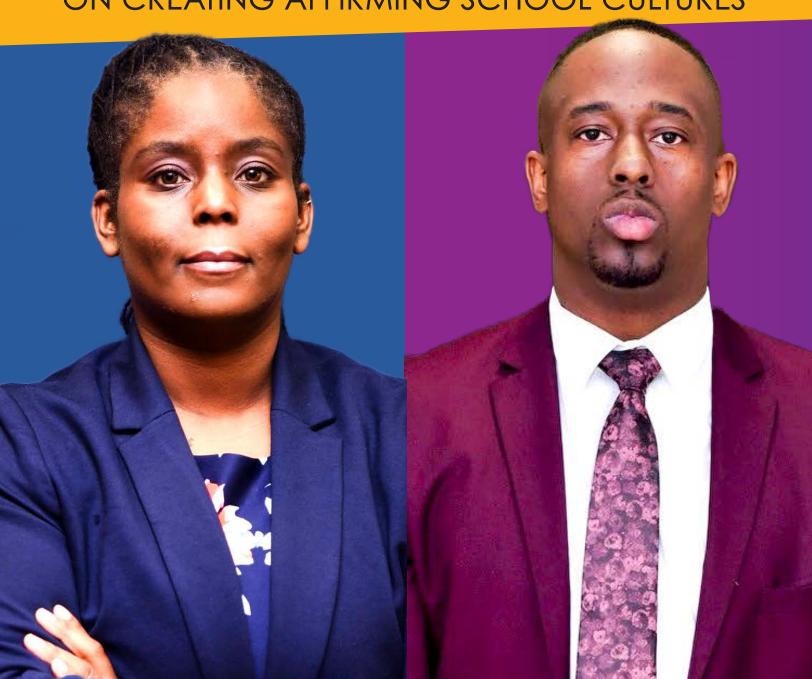# TO BE WHO WE ARE

Black Teachers

ON CREATING AFFIRMING SCHOOL CULTURES

"My school affirms me in allowing me to dress how I want. When my identity and creativity are affirmed and my hair/style is praised rather than labeled as a distraction I am a better teacher and my students are able to look up to me and not the image of me that is acceptable."

—Elementary school teacher

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT THAT SCHOOL CULTURE HAS A PROFOUND EFFECT ON HOW STUDENTS LEARN AND THRIVE. A SUPPORTIVE, AFFIRMING SCHOOL CULTURE CAN ALSO MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TEACHER CHOOSING TO GROW IN THEIR PROFESSION OR LEAVING THE CLASSROOM.

Teach Plus and the Center for Black Educator Development, two organizations committed to helping school systems recruit and retain a diverse teaching force, believe that in order for schools to create more affirming cultures for Black teachers, educational leaders must pay careful attention to these teachers' experiences and heed their advice as they adopt recommendations for improvement.

"I think that we must begin to have those tough conversations instead of putting bandaids on situations. Those conversations need to be in a safe environment free of reprimand and where voices can be heard truly."

—Elementary school teacher

Table of Contents

"School leaders must listen to the Black teachers that work on their campuses and willingly make the changes that are being requested, if they are truly committed to developing and maintaining culturally affirming milieus. Black teachers must feel safe to have unapologetic dialogue about hostile experiences at their campuses, in an effort to execute the disruptive work responsible for eradicating future issues that would cause Black teachers to leave the profession."

**—TEACH PLUS TEXAS TEACHER LEADER AND
CO-AUTHOR OF THE REPORT SHAREEFAH MASON**

TO BE WHO WE ARE:
BLACK TEACHERS
on Creating Affirming School Cultures

TEACH PLUS AND THE CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT
Shareefah Mason, Donna-Marie Cole-Malott, Ph.D., Mark Teoh, Ed.D.,
Amber Ravenell, Sharif El-Mekki, Kelli Seaton, Ph.D., and Mimi Woldeyohannes

Introduction

While our nation's classrooms continue to grow more diverse when it comes to our students, our teaching workforce is failing to be as representative. Teachers of color are about 21 percent of all public school teachers though Black teachers represent only 7 percent of the workforce.[1] At the same time, the number of students of color is growing.[2] Moreover, in a time when *more* Black educators are needed in our schools, Black teacher turnover rates are higher when compared to other teachers, contributing nationally to a growing gap in representation.[3]

Given the growing body of research that underscores the importance of teacher diversity for student outcomes, this disparity in representation between teachers and students of color is significant. Greater diversity in the teaching profession can positively affect the experiences of students of color in school as well as their academic outcomes. Research shows that students of color thrive academically when they have teachers of color educating them.[4] Additionally, Black students matched with Black teachers also experience positive outcomes. Black students taught by Black teachers score higher on standardized tests in math and reading.[5] Other evidence shows that same-race teacher and student matching has positive impacts beyond the classroom for students of color, such as decreases in student discipline referrals and increased college-going aspirations.[6] Black

students are also less likely to drop out of high school when they have exposure to at least one Black teacher. The impact of having diverse teachers is not limited to just students of color—the academic performance of White students improves when they have access to teachers who are ethnoracially diverse.[7]

Teacher diversity also benefits the teaching profession as a whole, by helping to alleviate key teacher shortages in high-need areas.[8] While it is clear that educator diversity has key benefits for students of color, ensuring students have access to diverse teachers is often an elusive goal, as evidenced by The Education Trust's state-by-state analysis of teacher and student diversity.[9]

LACK OF DIVERSITY AND SYSTEMIC FACTORS

The lack of teacher diversity today is rooted in systemic factors that have long served as barriers to recruiting and retaining more Black teachers in schools. The landmark Brown vs. The Board of Education Supreme Court ruling in 1954 changed the educational landscape for students across the country. Implementation of this major legal decision, however, failed to ensure desegregation happened equitably, and led to a major loss of Black educators across the country, particularly in the South.[10]

Further systemic issues continue to serve as barriers to entry and retention of Black teachers that persist to this day. Students of color are less likely to enter teacher preparation programs at universities. This is due in part to the fact that students of color typically take on more student loan debt than White students. Black college students who completed teacher preparation programs are more likely to borrow federal student loans than other students. High amounts of student loan debt can be a barrier for students of color entering the teaching profession given low teacher salaries. Students are often drawn to better-paying professions to help offset significant loan debt.[11] Another barrier students of color face is lower college completion rates, which students of color attribute to family obligations, lack of college preparation coursework in high school, and antagonistic college environments.[12]

Teach Plus and The Education Trust have shown in their report, "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Turnover," that teachers of color, including Black teachers, thrive in school environments that have school cultures that affirm their identities.[13] School culture plays a significant role in influencing the retention decisions of teachers of color.

IN THIS REPORT, a collaboration between Teach Plus and the Center for Black Educator Development, we address the questions of what affirming school conditions look like and what educational leaders can do to create those conditions, particularly for Black teachers. We begin by listening—by turning to Black educators to determine the factors, perspectives, and practices that matter to them—in short, "What does it take to create an affirming school culture?" Their voices, lived experiences, and the reality of often being one of a few educators of color in a school building make their points of view that much more compelling.

Research Approach and Methodology

To better understand what is needed to create affirming and welcoming school environments for Black teachers, we asked the following questions:

Research question 1. What school conditions are needed to affirm Black teachers' humanity and racial identity so they can be their authentic selves?

Research question 2. What can educational leaders and policymakers do to support school cultures that affirm Black teachers?

During the spring and summer of 2020, Teach Plus teacher leaders conducted focus groups with teachers of color across the country. In these focus groups, teachers were asked to self-identify by writing in their race and ethnicity. For this joint report between Teach Plus and the Center for Black Educator Development, we used the sample of participants that included 105 teachers who identified as being "Black," "African-American," and a variety of related racial and ethnic descriptors.[14] Following the research approach used by others in describing this population, we refer to the participants in these focus groups as "Black" which is intended to inclusively represent the variety of racial and ethnic identifiers used by the participants.[15]

The teachers in the focus groups came from 12 states and were recruited to join this study through teacher networks, social media, and outreach led by Teach Plus teacher leaders. In this sample of teachers, 13 percent of participants had less than four years of teaching experience, 31 percent had four to nine years of experience, 25 percent had 10 to 14 years of experience, and 32 percent had 15 or more years of teaching experience. On average, this group of Black educators had 12 years of teaching experience.[16] Focus groups were held virtually and were facilitated by a group of Teach Plus teacher leaders who were trained in facilitating and administering the protocol.[17]

"To create culturally affirming schools, leaders should prioritize the values, identities, and culture of teachers, staff, students, and their communities. They should be intentional about building and maintaining a school culture where anyone walks in and feels seen, heard, and accepted. Teachers and staff members must play a role in the decision-making process that directly impacts their practice. It is imperative that leaders cultivate a culture where families and communities have a platform to advocate for their kids and are given opportunities to play a role in decisions that impact learning and student success."

— TEACH PLUS MISSISSIPPI TEACHER LEADER NICOLE MOORE

Findings

Through these focus groups, we identified **FIVE CONDITIONS** that Black teachers said were critical towards creating school cultures that affirm their identities and enable them to be their authentic selves:

1. Schools should recruit, support, and retain a diverse school faculty.

2. School leaders should take the lead in fostering an inclusive school culture.

3. Curriculum should be culturally responsive and, when it is not, schools should support teachers to make it more inclusive.

4. Professional learning for all teachers should be equity-focused and schools and districts should provide Black teachers access to mentoring and affinity groups to support their personal growth.

5. Schools should authentically implement their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Condition 1. Schools should recruit, support, and retain a diverse school faculty.

Black teachers in our focus groups indicated that teaching in a school with a diverse student population or, more importantly, a diverse faculty, is a key reason why Black teachers feel their identities are affirmed. Black teachers who work with teachers who look like them share experiences, support each other, provide mentorship, and have conversations that empower them to be bold, multi-faceted educators who create educational learning experiences that inspire students. When they are part of a faculty from diverse backgrounds, they report feeling less tokenized or isolated. As one elementary school teacher explained, *"In my school I feel that teachers of color feel very affirmed overall because of the demographic of students that we teach and the parent demographic which is predominately Hispanic. Most of the teacher makeup is predominately teachers of color which makes my experience as a woman of color more validated."*

> *"Hiring people of color is not enough to create culturally affirming schools. Schools need to have systems, programs, and curriculum in place whose main goals are to foster and celebrate people of color. These systems, programs, and curriculum need to be instilled to students in k-12th grade and take place on a year-long basis."*
>
> **—KYLE EPPS, CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT NETWORK TEACHER, PENNSYLVANIA**

Another teacher shared:

> *"Absolutely, I feel that my school is a place where teachers' cultural, racial, and ethnic identities are valued or affirmed. My school community looks just like me and that is something that I truly value. I feel affirmed in my identity and my ability to be myself, which is extremely important."—Middle school science teacher*

It is especially important that Black teachers in predominantly White schools have access to other Black teachers in their schools. Such access to Black peers creates a more affirming environment whereby Black teachers can share best practices and strategies for developing an authentic, multicultural experience for staff and students.

Condition 2. School leaders should take the lead in fostering an inclusive school culture.

Principals are largely responsible for setting the tone and developing an inclusive culture in their schools. Black teachers have made it abundantly clear that principals need to be intentional in co-constructing a climate that allows their identities to be affirmed and valued. Throughout our focus groups, Black teachers pointed to the critical role that school leaders, particularly principals, play in setting the tone for school culture. Research shows that leadership impacts school outcomes in a variety of ways including building a productive school climate and facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities among teachers.[18] Focus group participants pointed to both the positive effect that a school leader can have on creating an affirming culture—and the deleterious impact that a principal can have when it comes to teacher identity.

Principals set the tone in terms of creating welcoming, inviting cultures. As one middle school science teacher explained, *"Yes, I do believe that in my current position, my identity is valued. I first felt this value when I started working at my school. My principal took great measures to make sure that not only the adults but the children as well felt welcomed, valued, respected, and seen."* The principal is the one who is doing the difficult, often challenging work of creating a "family-like" atmosphere, a task which we identified as being critical in the work of retaining teachers.[19]

"If asked this question in my first 19 years of teaching, my answer would have been no. However, this year was the best year ever, and I credit that to the administrator. Her focus was building a culture where everyone had a voice, everyone felt welcomed. Her favorite thing to say was we are a family so we are all in this together. She did not just talk the talk. She walked the walk. It starts at the top. Lastly, with the support of my Big Boss (Regional Supervisor) I could not have asked for a better year."—Special education teacher

Black teachers see an important role for school leaders in creating affirming cultures where they can be their authentic selves. They are clear that school leaders can and should actively work to support affirming school cultures. Black teachers want to be heard and have their contributions and expertise valued within their schools. School leaders have the opportunity to elevate the voices of Black educators and ensure that their perspective is included in school-wide decision-making. What can school leaders do? One teacher pointed to ensuring leadership opportunities for Black teachers:

"Bringing teachers of color to the table in a meaningful way, such as allowing us to lead professional development sessions on relevant topics, having a voice of influence on the leadership teams (not attending the meetings, but genuinely welcoming my ideas), and teachers sharing knowledge with each other."—Elementary school teacher

The critical role that school leaders play, however, also means that they can adversely affect the culture of schools. Principals must be committed to an inclusive culture-building process to ensure that Black teachers are able to thrive in antagonism-free school cultures that utilize their gifts and understand the academic and social impact Black teachers have on all students. When principals develop a leadership approach that nurtures cultural differences, encourages courageous conversations around race, and provides learning opportunities that keep everyone abreast of the cultural needs of all staff and students, they can foster school climates that encourage growth, understanding, and acceptance for students and teachers alike.

"Leaders and policymakers have to understand that the goal of culturally affirming schools is not one that can be done in silo by an administrator or depend solely on the relationships of students and families with the educators. For all schools to reach and sustain a culturally affirming culture, there must be an expectation that schools have strong, affirming partnerships within the communities of their students and families; that is a mutual symbiotic relationship that builds pride and strengthens culture."

—TEACH PLUS MASSACHUSETTS TEACHER LEADER CHANTEI ALVES

> *"Prioritize the following: Hire as many POC as possible, select anti-racist curriculum, triple-check your culture policies don't systemically punish Black children, and schedule regular community events that will bring joy to students and families."*
>
> **—ABIGAIL HENRY, CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT NETWORK TEACHER, PENNSYLVANIA**

Condition 3. Curriculum should be culturally responsive and, when it is not, schools should support teachers to make it more inclusive.

A culturally responsive curriculum can be a particularly important condition for affirming Black teachers because it validates the struggles, challenges, and celebrations that have remained constant forces in Black educator journeys, but have been intentionally muted in our textbooks and classrooms. Curricula that are developed to meet the diverse needs of America's students inspire growth mindsets and can help dismantle racist, systemic structures that have plagued the educational system for Black teachers and students.

> *"To me, cultural, racial, and ethnic affirmation is giving me the freedom to use social justice/culturally relevant instruction to empower my students to be critical thinkers. Hispanic/Black History Month was celebrated, but being given the freedom to effectively reach my students through the curriculum is my term of affirmation. I feel valued when it's recognized and respected, rather than questioned and met with apprehension."*
> —Middle school social studies teacher

Black teachers are actively looking for opportunities to integrate culturally responsive curriculum into their daily practice. As one elementary school theatre teacher shared, *"I feel like they recognize that there are different cultures, but I don't feel like we are really thinking about who they are as people. It's deeper than that. I don't really know if it is affirmed and valued. We don't feel like we have enough freedom. What needs to happen is more opportunities to celebrate them [teachers of color]. I do like how they get the opportunity to dress up in their cultural outfits. That is dope. But I think there needs to be more done. I need to do more for my kids to get to their specific nationality/culture in theatre. I need to do better. I have taken strides. Like I teach about Nigerian, Asian, and Latinx culture in a theatre lense."*

When there are not culturally responsive curricula in place in their schools, it is important that Black teachers are supported in implementing such curriculum into their classroom practice. Without this support, Black teachers may feel increasingly alienated and discouraged.

> "To create culturally affirming schools, educational leaders and policymakers should lead from the lens of equity and honor the identities of all stakeholders in their school community, especially those of marginalized groups. This means authentically listening to perspectives that might be different from theirs in order to unlearn many systemic norms that are hurting students of color. It's more than individuals "having a seat at the table;" it's about being able to speak, be heard, and to lead."
>
> **—TEACH PLUS NEVADA TEACHER LEADER SHEILA WEATHERS**

"I feel as if I have to choose to be strategic every day that I step onto my campus to cooperate with team members in my grade level. I have to push back on their ideologies about what they believe about the kids' ability and how inclusive the curriculum we use is on a consistent basis. I feel as if I have to pick my battles and continue to reinforce the point that inclusivity among the curriculum and the instructional techniques we utilize are important."
—Elementary school teacher

When Black teachers have the opportunity to immerse themselves in a culturally responsive curriculum, students of all races are able to engage in multi-faceted conversations and purposeful, social dialogue that begin to improve the achievement and opportunity gaps that impede Black students.

Condition 4. Professional learning for all teachers should be equity-focused and schools and districts should provide Black teachers access to mentoring and affinity groups to support their personal growth.

One widely available lever available to school and district leaders in cultivating affirming school cultures is professional learning opportunities. Black teachers believe more work needs to be done in addressing the quality and tenor of relationships of the adults in schools; this was evident in our conversations with teachers of color in our previous research and even more abundantly clear in these focus groups. Black teachers want their colleagues to learn more about diversity, equity, and inclusion; about the impact of institutionalized racism, both from historical and contemporary perspectives; and implicit bias and the ways it impacts interactions with other teachers as well as students. These teachers recognize that positive, affirming school cultures cannot be willed into existence—building and sustaining healthy relationships takes a significant amount of learning and growth among all actors.

Black teachers want their schools to include professional development for all teachers that focuses on addressing adult behaviors in schools, such as understanding microaggressions and what authentic diversity, equity, and inclusion look like in a school building.

"A lot of folks may not be aware of their biases and this plays a major role in the classroom. As an educator of color, I feel as though I have had to play a role in between students and some staff over these issues. Also, I think PDs around the culture you'll be working with is critical. I know of very few schools that do this, oftentimes there is a huge learning curve for an educator who doesn't share the cultural background of their students. We need to ensure those in front of the classroom can truly teach their students with some level of cultural competence."—Middle school social studies teacher

In addition to professional learning, Black teachers are looking for mentors who can help guide them. Mentorship provides a space for Black teachers to delve into the issues they face in their classrooms, as they learn to seamlessly navigate problematic areas, resolve concerns, and address challenges. As this educator expressed, mentorship is important, particularly in cultivating Black school leaders:

"I think it is very important to have more leaders that look like African American teachers. People need to know they have someone they can connect with to share experiences and build relationships with."—Elementary school teacher

Black teachers also expressed a desire for affinity groups to promote an affirming culture within their schools.

"Allowing staff of color to form affinity groups that build morale, affirm their identities, and mentorship opportunities for Black, indigenous and people of color [BIPOC]. Also embracing that we are not one dimensional individuals."—High school reading specialist

Black teachers are empowered in authentic spaces that allow them to flourish. Schools that are proactive in facilitating mentoring and affinity groups for Black teachers enhance their instructional effectiveness and support their professional growth. Coaching Black teachers through professional development that is specifically tailored to meet their distinct needs is game-changing. It provides Black teachers with the knowledge and support necessary to overcome professional obstacles. Affinity groups allow Black educators to collaboratively address educational issues that negatively impact them, empowering them to create innovative and implementable solutions that will transform education for every student that enters their classrooms.

> *"Take the time to seek input from your students and families that you serve. Implement practices centering one core question, "What can we do to welcome and affirm your presence?"*
>
> **—TOMIKO BALL, CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT NETWORK TEACHER, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

Condition 5. Schools should authentically implement their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

While many schools and school systems are supporting efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, one theme that emerged from our focus groups was that Black teachers were looking for more authentic implementation of these initiatives. Among many Black teachers, there is a sense that diversity and inclusion work is superficial and lacks genuine support. One elementary school teacher in our focus groups said, *"I do feel that [interest in] diversity was there but on a surface level. I felt like it was for show, but I don't feel like it was genuine. I felt that as a Black teacher, I had to hide my culture in a sense."*

Our focus group data shows that Black teachers want to be heard, respected, and valued authentically. Many Black teachers feel that attempts to discuss race or embrace diversity on their campuses fall short. While diversity and inclusion might appear to be encouraged by school leaders, Black teachers working in those same schools feel underappreciated, undervalued, and unable to be themselves. As one elementary school teacher put it, *"I don't feel like my culture or race is valued. I feel that we had to conform to what was comfortable for other teachers and admin. The admin would want the cultural environments to be surface level, and to me that made me uncomfortable. However, I still got my hair braided, long colorful nails, and my black history shirts, because I wasn't going to let anyone intimidate me."*

Black teachers feel affirmed when their school leaders and peers can engage in difficult conversations about race throughout the school year. When cultural diversity is acknowledged only during set times of the year such as Black History Month, Black teachers may feel that the efforts are superficial. As one elementary school teacher shared, *"Schools have been a place where my identity as a Black woman have been superficially valued or affirmed ... for example during Black History Month. I receive positive comments about my 'different looking' hair or African-inspired clothing. But communication norms that are valued in my culture (straight-forwardness, plain-spokenness, elevated tone, passion) are framed as 'unprofessional' or 'intimidating.' My school is definitely not affirming."*

> "When students walk into their schools and classrooms they should immediately have a sense of the mirrors, windows, and sliding doors (to pull key phrases from Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop). We are all looking for a place of acceptance and it is so important that students find acceptance in schools, where they spend the majority of their day. To do this, schools need to have the ability to teach an inclusive curriculum that reflects all cultures so students can see themselves and feel accepted."
>
> **—TEACH PLUS MICHIGAN TEACHER LEADER SHANT'L OLOVSON**

> *"The advice I have for anyone creating a culturally affirming school is to create a mission statement that embodies your belief system. Find like-minded staff that are going to help bring that culture to life in and out of the classroom and execute the vision that you put in place."*
> **—TEADRA GLOVER, CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT NETWORK TEACHER, PENNSYLVANIA**

In order for Black teachers to truly feel affirmed, schools have to make efforts to move beyond surface-level implementation of diversity and inclusion work. Professional development is not being well-utilized by school and district leaders to create culturally affirming schools. Moreover, when there are efforts to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, much of the potential for such professional learning is sapped by diffuse and haphazard implementation. As one high school teacher noted, following through with specific actions after professional development is key:

> *"Almost all of our PD was related to cultural consciousness and transformative pedagogy so it was really progressive in terms of pushing for equity in the curriculum. But there weren't a lot of concrete action steps that we could put into practice and not a lot of things were put into place after the PD, which I think takes away from the value of the PD."*

Part of engaging in authentic efforts to promote an equity-based and inclusive school culture for Black teachers means implementing culturally responsive professional learning that lasts beyond just one session. Black teachers are seeking professional development on equity that shows real results and is distributed equitably to all teachers.
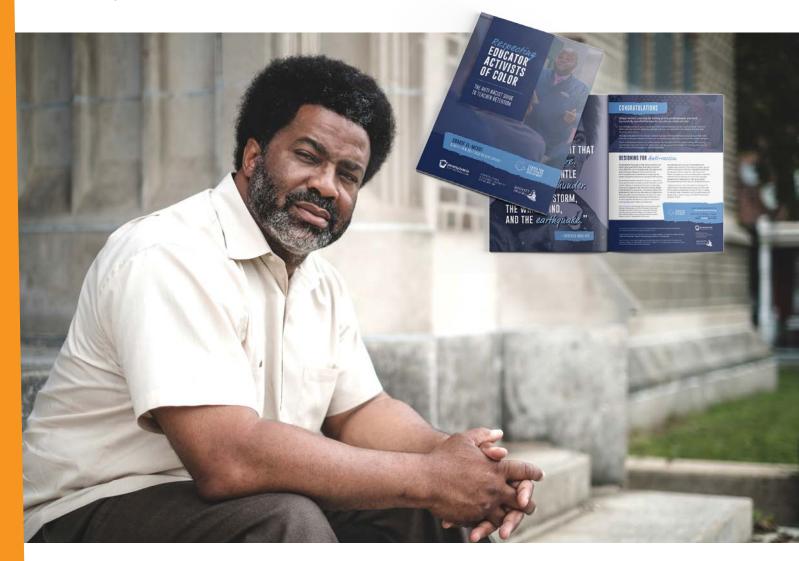
> *"We have been doing equity PD for two years, with a focus on race. The results seem to be scattered. This year, we had affinity groups but as educators of color, we were largely left to our own devices (we just were given a book and had to decide everything else), while energy was clearly expended upon White educators' affinity group curricula, with a wide variety of texts and options. We had to work harder to make our experience of PD worthwhile whereas White educators had more available."*—High school English teacher

One high school history teacher commented, *"Honestly I think the school has done a decent job with the professional development, but the follow-through is not consistent. A lot of times we attend workshops on school culture and diversity, but we never do anything with the information that was presented."*

Recommendations

We learned from Black teachers that they want to be in school buildings where their identities are affirmed in authentic and meaningful ways. These experiences and perspectives underscore the necessity of engaging the entire school community as well as the larger ecosystem of stakeholders, partners, and policymakers.

Building on these perspectives, Teach Plus and the Center for Black Educator Development offer the following recommendations for teachers, school leaders, and district and state policymakers as they work to support more affirming school cultures for Black teachers. In these recommendations, we include links to reports and resources from Teach Plus and others as well as reference activities and worksheets found in "Respecting Educator Activists of Color: The Anti-Racist Guide to Teacher Retention" from the Center for Black Educator Development (2021), which are intended to provide actionable steps educators, educational leaders, and policymakers can take to create more affirming school cultures.

Recommendations

FOR TEACHERS

> ### Recommendation 1.
> ### Authentically reflect on practices and perspectives.

Teachers can begin by reflecting on their practices and perspectives and consider how their beliefs are communicated, either explicitly or implicitly, to their students and their peers. Being clear-eyed about one's experiences, ideas, and potential biases and considering how these can affect one's teaching and engagement with others is a critical starting point for teachers. Moreover, this is an opportunity for teachers to think about how students, families, and other teachers experience their school community.

▶ TAKE ACTION NOW

Take the "**Worksheet 2: Self-Reflection Scorecard**" from the Center for Black Educator Development's "Respecting Educator Activists of Color." This worksheet addresses:

- Hidden biases and prejudices

- Cultural insights

- "Minority" experiences

- Anti-racist praxis

- Building trust through sharing

Then, share "**Worksheet 3: Another Viewpoint**" with a colleague to continue the reflection process.

Teachers should take the time to cultivate genuine relationships with their students, particularly by learning about their respective cultures. Teachers should intentionally build opportunities for students to speak about their experiences and bring in aspects of their community inside of the classroom. Some recommended activities include participating in home visits and attending students' extra-curricular activities. Educators should consider going out into the communities and/or building partnerships with local organizations. Teachers must not only be culturally responsive but responsive to the community as well. Since no school or community is the same, teachers should authentically immerse themselves in their school communities to understand the students and parents they serve, so that they are able to seamlessly include and acknowledge the various cultures of their students in their classrooms.

▶ TAKE ACTION NOW

Learn best practices from "**Worksheet 18: Sample Listing of Cultural Pedagogical Practices**" from "Respecting Educator Activists of Color." This includes:

- Continually find ways to hear from marginalized voices in the school community, including those that are mischaracterized and negatively stereotyped by mass media.

- Build a sense of community at every opportunity in and outside the classroom throughout the day and school year.

- Invite families and community members to take part in teaching, co-creating lessons, sharing stories and different approaches to learning.

- Recognize a wide range of achievements and definitions of success in the school community.

"Students deserve to have decisions made about them by individuals who know, understand, and care about them. My advice for leaders who wish to create culturally affirming schools is to learn about the nuances of various cultures and then listen to and work collaboratively with the practitioners who know the students best—teachers."

—TEACH PLUS ARKANSAS TEACHER LEADER IESHA GREEN

Teachers should recognize that what is taught and how it is taught can have a profound impact on students' perspectives and sense of self as well as their classroom and school cultures. Teachers can play a role in ensuring that their pedagogical practices as well as the curriculum they teach help elevate and embed students' social and emotional development as part of their learning experience.

▶ TAKE ACTION NOW

Learn best practices from "**Worksheet 18: Sample Listing of Cultural Pedagogical Practices**" from "Respecting Educator Activists of Color." This includes:

- Find meaningful connections between required curriculum and students' racial identities, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, expansive empathy, activist agency and worldviews.

- Connect classroom instruction to real-world happenings. Help students grapple with racial dynamics and politically charged events (in ways that are developmentally appropriate). Address the traumatic stress they may be experiencing as a result.

- Practice social activism as a classroom assignment allowing for different levels and types of student-directed engagement.

- Find innovative and measurable ways to hold everyone accountable for their own and each other's learning.

"There needs to be more representation in all areas of school culture. This change needs to happen not only with more teachers and staff who are members of the disability community, BIPOC, and members of the LGBT community but in the curriculum. In many schools, teachers teach an already-made curriculum, so the content must represent our children in every way. From our youth's experiences, the people they love, and the communities they come from and return to, the curriculum must represent freedom, affirmation, and success."

—DONOVAN FORREST, CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT NETWORK TEACHER, NEW JERSEY

Acknowledging race in the classroom helps equip students with the tools and skills to advocate for and question the world around them. It also helps create a culture where everyone understands the significance of race and its impact on society. We cannot continue to ignore race in the classroom because the ramifications are too severe. When teachers openly embrace discussions of race in their classrooms, they empower their students to do the same. This can help cultivate an educational environment that is stimulated and empowered by diversity and does not see diversity as a detriment in the classroom.

Resources

FOR TEACHERS

- "Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Reflection Guide" from New America

- Educator Resources from Facing History and Ourselves

- "Profiles in Education Equity - Sharif El-Mekki: Leading With Equity and Justice" from The Education Trust

- "The Pennsylvania Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education Competencies" from the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium

- "The Opportunity Myth" from TNTP

"Culturally affirming schools are critical to the growth and success of all students pre-k through 12th grade. If leaders and policymakers truly want to create school systems that are culturally affirming, they must first hire and retain teachers of color so that a welcoming and affirming environment can be created. Next, they must ensure that all school systems have curriculum and assessments that are culturally responsive and rigorous instruction that is inclusive for all students. Lastly, they need professional development that continues to emphasize the importance of cultural proficiency in all areas of education and disrupts the antiquated ways of thinking that many educational professionals were raised under."

—TEACH PLUS PENNSYLVANIA TEACHER LEADER ERICA HAMPTON

Recommendations

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

> ### Recommendation 1.
> **Support curriculum and pedagogy that ensure educators are culturally responsive, anti-racist, and intentional about fostering equity in education.**

School leaders must become the cultivators of culture in their districts and on their campuses. One way to do this work is through the use of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. Engaging with culturally responsive curricula supports the learning needed to begin to eliminate barriers that have historically divided and advantaged some groups of individuals while disadvantaging other groups. This approach doesn't teach hate, division, or anti-Whiteness. Instead, it highlights the historical ways that people of color have been marginalized, and the steps that need to be taken to ensure equitable educational access for all.

> ### Recommendation 2.
> **Engage in self-reflective practices as a school leader and support other educators to do the same.**

When school leaders authentically model cultural acknowledgement and acceptance, they increase the trust between school leaders and Black teachers. This, in turn, improves teacher efficacy, teacher retention, and, most importantly, student learning and achievement. Engaging in self-reflection is one important step in this modeling process. Reflection involves not only thinking about past actions and behaviors, but using that knowledge to determine how educators can take action moving forward. One way school leaders can begin the process of self-reflection is to ask themselves questions such as, "What role did I play in this situation?", "How have my biases, beliefs, and ideologies, impacted this situation?", "What do I believe, understand, and know, and what informs these ideas?" Questions like these prompt individuals to demonstrate agency, and empower them to create change, starting from within.

▶ TAKE ACTION NOW

Take the "**Worksheet 2: Self-Reflection Scorecard**" from "Respecting Educator Activists of Color." This worksheet addresses:

- Hidden biases and prejudices

- Cultural insights

- "Minority" experiences

- Anti-racist praxis

- Building trust through sharing

Recommendation 3.
Continually gather disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data from both students and teachers, and use that data to inform changes in curriculum, school policies, and everyday practices.

Data is one tool school leaders can use to help paint a picture of where they are and determine where they need to go. School leaders must be intentional about collecting the evidence necessary to ensure they are creating culturally affirming school environments. They don't have to assume, guess, or jump to conclusions—they can ask. School leaders have the ability to gather data from both students and teachers about diversity, equity, access, resources, and emotional and physical well-being. Data paints a more complete picture of the reality of our schools from many different perspectives and school leaders should gather data from their Black teachers to better understand how to support them, and to measure the impact of any changes they implement in their schools intended to improve school culture. By gathering this internal data, school leaders can begin to take action with what they know and use it to inform professional development opportunities, curriculum, school-related activities, and the equitable distribution of resources.

"When educators are thinking of ways to create a culturally affirming school climate, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. What are we already doing that we can use to value and affirm the cultures and backgrounds of our students? One of the easiest ways to make this purposeful shift is to allow the students themselves to guide the development of the curriculum. As facilitators of the beauty of individual thought, let's use the diverse voices of our students to drive our efforts to be truly inclusive on our journey to truly equitable culturally affirming education."

—TEACH PLUS CALIFORNIA TEACHER LEADER MICHELE LAMONS-RAIFORD

▶ TAKE ACTION NOW

Learn more about how teachers and other stakeholders experience the school culture through "**Worksheet 10: School Culture Assessment**" from "[Respecting Educator Activists of Color](#)." This assessment tool covers:

- Leadership confidence

- Educator-student parity

- Family and community engagement

- Shared beliefs and values

- Cultural pedagogies and content

- Healthy racial identity development

- All-student potential

- Support for educators of color

- Expectations of educators of color

- Fairness and equity for educators of color

- Healing from trauma, including racial trauma and other systemic forms of trauma

- Anti-racist school culture

School leaders should also set a vision for their school's culture and how educators, families, and students will experience the school. To learn more, see "**Worksheet 11: School Culture Vision.**"

Recruiting and hiring are some of the most high-leverage activities that a school leader can do to create and support an affirming school culture; this can start when interviewing teaching candidates. For examples of interview questions, see "**Worksheet 13: Insight Interview Sample Interview Questions**" and to help discernment during the hiring process, see "**Worksheet 8: Checklist for Recruiting Educators and Educator-Activists of Color.**"

The work doesn't end with recruitment, however. Creating affirming school cultures to retain teachers requires listening and understanding them. Collecting and reporting on key data is important—see "**Worksheet 5: Sample Goals and Metrics for Educator-of-Color Retention.**"

Recommendation 4.
Support community building through mentoring and affinity groups.

Black teachers are eager for their schools and districts to support community building efforts, including mentoring and affinity groups. Mentoring has long been used as a system of support among Black teachers. This is particularly significant to the retention of Black educators, because it centers their survival.[20] Through strong connections with other Black teachers, including current practitioners and former educators, community members, and other invested stakeholders, current and pre-service Black teachers have access to individuals who can empower them for a long-standing career in the educational profession.

In addition to empowerment, there is often implicit trust in the lived experiences of Black educators. This trust in essence says, "Let me tell you about my experience, what I have learned, the challenges I faced, the rewards of this profession, and why it's necessary for you to continue as a teacher." While the emotional aspects of doing this work are often overlooked, the number of Black teachers who leave the profession each year, and the number that never enter the profession, suggest that safeguarding the mental and physical well-being of Black educators is essential to their commitment to teaching. What mentors can do for these individuals is to remind them of their purpose, offer self-care strategies, share collective and historical knowledge, and emphasize that they are important for the future of Black children.

▶ TAKE ACTION NOW
School leaders can help cultivate an affirming school culture through community building among Black teachers. Ideas on how to support this can be found in "**Worksheet 21: Checklist for Building Fellowship**" from "Respecting Educator Activists of Color."

Resources

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

- "[Respecting Educator Activists of Color: The Anti-Racist Guide to Teacher Retention](#)" from the Center for Black Educator Development

- "[Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections from Black Teachers](#)" from The Education Trust

- "[Culturally Sustaining Schools: Recommendations from Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows for Retaining Teachers of Color](#)" from Teach Plus Colorado

- "[Making Culturally Affirming Schools a Priority: Lessons from Teachers of Color in a Time of Crisis](#)" from Teach Plus California

Recommendations

FOR DISTRICT LEADERS AND STATE POLICYMAKERS

Recommendation 1.
Prioritize teacher diversity.

School district leaders and state policymakers alike should make clear and visible their priorities for recruiting, supporting, and retaining a diverse teacher workforce. Explicit goals in recruiting and retaining teachers of color, particularly Black teachers, supported through policy and practice, can be influential in cultivating affirming cultures in schools.

Recommendation 2.
Support culturally affirming curriculum and pedagogy.

States should adopt culturally responsive teaching and leading standards and invest in professional learning across districts. State policymakers should encourage schools and districts to adopt high-quality, culturally responsive instructional materials by providing ratings of curricular materials and financial investments in the highest-rated materials. Districts should adopt these materials and invest in teacher-led professional learning to ensure effective adoption. It is critical that Black teachers lead in conversations about effective culturally affirming curriculum and pedagogy. There needs to be a concerted effort to open the lines of communication between policymakers and Black educators/school leaders so that policymakers learn from the teacher experts who will be responsible for executing this work in their classrooms.

District leaders have to implement culturally affirming curriculum with integrity and fidelity across their school communities. This information is so integral in creating embracing and inclusive school cultures that district leaders have to wholeheartedly buy-in to the chosen cultural models and deliver them to campus leaders with the understanding that authentic embedding of these principles is non-negotiable.

Leaders at all levels should be data-driven as they build strategies to build culturally affirming schools. States and districts should explicitly commit to diversifying the teacher workforce in their goals, and plans, and regularly report out on progress. They should collect meaningful teacher diversity data and report on it publicly. This transparency and goal-setting should include:

- **Teacher Diversity & Retention Data:** Districts and states should collect and publish teacher diversity and retention data, and use that data to set goals regarding teacher recruitment and retention.

- **Teacher Preparation Data**: States should collect and report teaching candidate diversity data and hold educator preparation programs accountable for graduating diverse candidates who are well prepared to teach.

- **School Climate & Exit Surveys**: States and districts should require school climate surveys as an indicator in the state accountability system and ensure consistent, comparable data statewide. These results should be publicly available—disaggregated by race and ethnicity—to inform decision makers about the culture and working conditions in schools. States should also require districts to implement a third-party exit survey and disaggregate the data by race and ethnicity. Districts should use this data to inform policy on recruitment, retention, and support of effective, diverse teachers.

Data legitimates the work that has been done. It emphasizes strengths and opportunities for growth simultaneously, which makes it such a necessary tool. State policymakers should use data from Black teachers to inform the decisions they make in order to prevent the selection of ineffective culturally affirming systems that will negatively impact teachers and students across an entire state.

District leaders have a responsibility to be data-driven as well. They are often much closer to the pulse of Black teachers than state policymakers. They should be committed to identifying the best practices in cultural affirmation to establish a solid culturally affirming system that meets the needs of Black teachers. Doing so entails analyzing data from an approximal perspective and understanding that their choices must include the needs and desires of the Black teachers they employ to compose an ascending trajectory for Black teachers and students.

▶ TAKE ACTION NOW

School district leaders can conduct school culture and climate surveys using questions from "**Worksheet 10: School Culture Assessment**" from "[Respecting Educator Activists of Color](#)." This assessment tool covers:

- Leadership confidence

- Educator-student parity

- Family and community engagement

- Shared beliefs and values

- Cultural pedagogies and content

- Healthy racial identity development

- All-student potential

- Support for educators of color

- Expectations of educators of color

- Fairness and equity for educators of color

- Healing from trauma, including racial trauma and other systemic forms of trauma

- Anti-racist school culture

For ideas and samples of the types of data that can be useful, see "**Worksheet 5: Sample Goals and Metrics for Educator-of-Color Retention.**"

"School policies must embrace the individuality of students in a way that ensures students are not asked to assimilate in an effort to make the adults more comfortable. Instead, the adults must remain flexible in their efforts to create learning environments that support students' needs."

—TEACH PLUS TEXAS TEACHER LEADER BRANDI JACKSON

Recommendation 4.
Support and organize coalitions of committed stakeholders.

While the work to diversify the educator workforce remains an ongoing challenge nationally, a promising approach is through "collective impact," with calls for organizations, individuals, institutions of higher education, and other stakeholders to rally around a common goal or purpose. By engaging in a collective approach, educators are able to reach the entire educational ecosystem. It is important to understand that the lack of teacher diversity in schools didn't occur overnight—this is a historic problem rooted in racism, fear, hate, and other exclusionary practices and thus has to be addressed by all educational stakeholders in an intentional and collaborative way. Teachers cannot do this work alone, and they should be supported by a network of committed individuals, organizations, and stakeholders who understand the challenges they face, and can support them in making a difference.

A coalition of committed stakeholders is needed to support school leaders in their efforts to diversify their schools and in recruiting, supporting, and retaining Black teachers. In his "8-Step Process For Leading Change," Kotter highlights the need for a coalition of effective people who are all committed to achieving similar goals and working together to guide, coordinate, and develop the strategic activities to realize these goals.[21] Such a coalition would remind school leaders that there are other committed individuals who are able to assist them in reaching their goals. Kotter posits that the idea that leaders can do it alone is dangerous "because major change is so difficult to accomplish, a powerful force is required to sustain the process."[22] Understanding that the work to diversify the teacher workforce is unsustainable when taken on alone is a crucial first step. Ways to engage multiple stakeholders include:

- **Supporting Diverse Educator Pipelines**: Invest in teacher residencies and other high-quality preparation pathways with strong mentorship and explicit goals for recruiting and retaining teachers of color. Value teachers of color by providing loan forgiveness, service scholarships, loan repayment incentives, and relocation incentives.

- **Developing Strong School Leadership**: Invest in the recruitment, preparation, and development of strong, diverse leaders committed to positive working conditions for a diverse workforce.

- **Supporting Community & Family Engagement**: Organize and fund programs and opportunities for family involvement and community connection.

Resources

FOR DISTRICT AND STATE LEADERS

- "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover" from Teach Plus and The Education Trust

- "Building a More Ethnoracially Diverse Teaching Force: New Directions in Research, Policy, and Practice" A Kappan Special Report from Conra D. Gist and Travis J. Bristol

- "Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color" from the Learning Policy Institute

- "Diversifying the Teacher Pipeline: A Toolkit for Recruiting More High School Students of Color into Pennsylvania Teacher Prep Programs and Schools" from the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium

- "Using Exit Survey Data Effectively: Recommendations from Teach Plus Policy Fellows on Improving Recruitment, Retention, and Diversification of Clark County's Teaching Force" from Teach Plus Nevada

- "Final Report: Evaluation of the Aspiring to Educate Philadelphia Pilot" from Research for Action

- "Tools and Guidance for Evaluating Bias in Instructional Materials" from Region 8 Comprehensive Center

Conclusion

For far too long, the voices of Black teachers have been ignored across the educational landscape. It is time that we design an equitable educational infrastructure that provides Black teachers with opportunities over optics. This begins with listening to Black educators. Our findings show us that Black teachers understand what is needed to create culturally affirming school environments. We must listen, but we also have to take the next crucial step of translating what we learn from Black educators into actionable steps that move us toward sustained recruitment and retention of Black teachers.

It is imperative that we develop a pipeline of inspired Black teachers who are authentically able to express themselves in their classrooms, create innovative programs that enhance their capabilities, and openly engage in courageous conversation with diverse groups of people to create opportunities that will change Black teachers' professional trajectories as well as the academic journeys of their students. Black teachers face an opportunity gap like that of their students. They have the expertise to execute the work but are prevented from accessing the authentic freedom necessary to revolutionize the educational experience for themselves and their students. We encourage and challenge educational leaders and policymakers alike to consider how the voices of these Black teachers and the resulting recommendations can lead to the kinds of school cultures where Black teachers, if not all teachers, can thrive and be their authentic selves.

Endnotes

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16. Question: "Including the 2019-2020 school year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?" (Open response, n = 104)

17. Quotes from teachers include responses to the following prompts: "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?"; "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?"; "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?"; "To better support, retain, and grow teachers of color, what topics or issues should schools address in their professional development?"; "What practices do you feel best contribute to creating a supportive and affirming school culture for teachers of color?"

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing this mission, Teach Plus is guided by the Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success. **teachplus.org**

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CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR BLACK EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT

Launched in June 2019, the Center for Black Educator Development is revolutionizing education by dramatically increasing the number of Black educators so that low-income Black and other disenfranchised students can reap the full benefits of a quality public education. The Center seeks to reclaim power and honor the legacy we inherited from those who struggled to commit the deeply subversive, ultimately liberating, act of teaching. Learn more here: **www.TheCenterBlackED.org**

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