

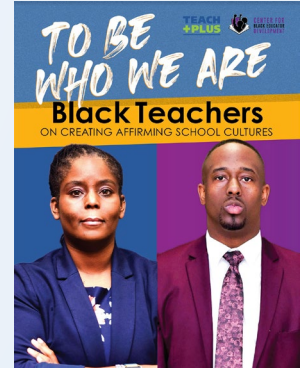
Building Community and Amplifying Voices: Ready to Lead Fellows and the Struggle for Equity



teachplus.org/TX

Students of color comprised 73 percent of Texas' public school population during the 2020-21 school year.¹ The most critical issue related to these changing demographics is the need for educators of color. Research indicates that students of color are more likely to attend school regularly, perform better on standardized tests, and be suspended less often when they have at least one same-race teacher, transforming the topic into an equity issue.² Additionally, educators of color are crucial because of their capacity to reevaluate and reimagine school culture, climate, and curriculum.

In the 2019 report "[*If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover.*](#)" Teach Plus and the Education Trust found that teachers of color experience a lack of agency, unwelcoming culture, unfavorable working conditions, along with financial and psychological pressure, leading to burnout and departure from the profession.³ In Texas, a group of talented educators are fighting these inequities by empowering teachers, providing mentorship, and affirming teachers of color through Teach Plus' Ready to Lead Fellowship.



ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Teach Plus' mission 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 pursuit of this mission, Teach Plus is guided by our 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.

READY TO LEAD FELLOWSHIP

The Ready to Lead Fellowship launched in February 2020 to diversify Texas Teacher pipelines by encouraging talented and passionate individuals in middle school, high school, and college to enter the profession through high-quality educator preparation programs. Teach Plus believes empowering teachers and candidates through affinity groups will lead to more diverse teacher pipelines and more effective educator preparation programs for the following reasons:

1. Increasing the quantity and quality of interactions between diverse candidates and teachers leads to increased institutional knowledge;
2. Increased institutional knowledge leads to increased retention of diverse candidates, and through their experiences, more informed and effective educator preparation improvement advocacy;
3. More informed and effective educator preparation improvement advocacy leads to better instruction and more successful diverse candidates.

This process has the added benefit of becoming a cycle when affinity group candidates become teachers and begin joining and leading their own affinity groups, sharing knowledge and extending opportunities for future candidates.

READY TO LEAD FELLOWS

Ready to Lead Fellows, compelled by their experiences of feeling undervalued and silenced, are uniquely equipped to confront educator preparation and teacher workforce diversity challenges by developing communities focusing on amplifying voices of color. Through Teach Plus' intentional once-per-month coaching and planning sessions, Ready to Lead Fellows equip themselves to make an impact in their local communities using localized strategies.

After months of planning and pre-work, the Ready to Lead Fellowship officially launched in February 2020. At our kickoff event in Houston, five Fellows convened with Teach Plus staff to discuss theories of action, development of personal and project SMART goals, and potential recruitment strategies for their interrelated but distinct projects. Fellows then returned to their home districts to further develop and execute their project plans and recruitment strategies.

As a group, Ready to Lead fellows have accomplished the following:

- + Engaged 86 teachers across five affinity groups, executing their varied recruitment strategies despite having to refine their tactics amid the COVID-19 pandemic;
- + Collected and analyzed demographic data on campuses in San Antonio and El Paso to determine project target areas;
- + Engaged Black male educators through a monthly reading series and other events in Dallas ISD;
- + Raised awareness of high-quality educator preparation programs for Hispanic high school students in Laredo;
- + Organized students, parents, and officials to increase retention of teachers of color in Katy ISD.

As you will see in the following profiles, Fellows have used social media, movie screenings, virtual panels, article and book discussions, along with yoga and mindfulness gatherings and other strategies to connect people and build community despite launching during a global pandemic.



+ Maria Martinez



My name is Maria Martinez, and I have been teaching Biology and Biomedical to 9th and 10th graders for five years. I became interested in the educator preparation program and teacher diversity through first-hand ACP program experience, where I observed gaps in the system. I had the opportunity to experience being a first-year teacher from an EPP program and going through the struggle that no one prepares a teacher for—the real world.

The name of my project was Hispanic STEM Educational Leaders of Tomorrow. Our goal was to create a STEM pipeline program at Harmony Public Schools to motivate and encourage Hispanic high school students to pursue a STEM teaching career, increasing the recruitment of underrepresented Hispanic STEM teachers in Texas.

I targeted Hispanic high school students to transition them into STEM teaching careers because one of the gaps seen in Laredo, Texas, is the low graduation rates for minority students. Minority students make up about 75% of the total student population in Texas, with Hispanics representing 52.2%. Unfortunately, Hispanics only represent 26% of the total teacher population. Despite the positive impact that Hispanic teachers can have on their communities, the numbers remain relatively low. An affinity group is the best choice for impacting our issue because we can accomplish more with a shared mission and vision.

Our initial goal was to partner with Universities across Texas through their recruitment offices and education departments to share information about educator preparation programs with local high students. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented these partnerships but did establish other ones with the Texas Association of Future Educators (TAFE), Region One Education Services, and TAMU College of Education / ACP. Together, we worked to solve the current Hispanic teacher gap by fostering supportive relationships to increase graduation rates of Laredo Hispanic High school students and ease transitions to Education Preparation Programs (EPPs) in Texas. These partnerships advanced our cause by providing online resources such as webinars, virtual sessions, and guest speakers. Additionally, our partnerships created conversation and brainstorming opportunities to understand teacher workforce diversity across Texas. Unfortunately, our partnerships were not sustainable due to COVID-19 and virtual learning requirements, although they can be replicated when the pandemic wanes.

While the COVID-19 pandemic created many obstacles, our group still shared educator preparation program opportunities with local high school scholars and established connections with local universities and agencies, creating a different image of teachers of color. Our next steps include developing additional concrete actions and strategies to continue working towards the affinity group's mission and vision.



My name is Rickey Townsend, Jr. I am a proud educator, entrepreneur, and Dallas, Texas, native who has been teaching mathematics to middle and high schoolers for over six years. My passion for educator preparation was amplified when I graduated from Dallas Teacher Residency (DTR) in 2017 after sacrificing a teacher's salary to ensure I was fully prepared to be a dynamic educator.

I established Real Talk 2 Percent to increase the excitement about Black Male Educators joining the profession while providing personal and professional support for the holistic development of Black men. We, Real Talk 2 Percent, believe in providing a safe and shared space for Black Male Educators (BMEs) to show up as their authentic selves, honor equity of voice, and support one another beyond our scheduled events and meetings. When creating the name of our affinity group, we considered two questions:

- + How do we have a real, unfiltered conversation among Black men in education to work toward solutions?
- + How can we highlight Black men in education to increase representation?

While committing to the heart work on behalf of BMEs, I found it highly challenging to partner with organizations in North Texas because intentionally recruiting and retaining BMEs is foreign to the metroplex. I was, however, able to have an initial conversation and brainstorm with the Dallas ISD, Black Male Initiative program, which focuses on recruiting Black men into their district. Additionally, I met with Dallas College, which is establishing a program for Black and Brown community college students to obtain four-year degrees in teaching. Both Dallas ISD and Dallas College are doing exceptional work to increase and support Black Male Educators.

BMEs in North Texas could expect monthly intellectual enhancement opportunities during our program year through collective reading and discussion of scholarly articles to gain practical insight on building up BME's holistic perspectives and teaching practices. We hosted eight events for aspiring, pre-service, current classroom teachers and administrators, and nonprofit leaders to cultivate a safe and supportive space. We spoke at five speaking engagements to highlight the dire need for recruitment and retention of Black Male Educators. We also had one check-in event, "Socially Distant, but Not Dismantled," with 25 registrants to monitor the mental health of the Black men in education in response to feedback that some teachers' administrators were only checking in on the progress as a teacher, but not their humanity.



+ Aletha Williams



My name is Aletha Williams, and I teach Chemistry at Katy ISD. I became a teacher to expose students to more teachers of color in the science field. However, I didn't realize we needed more teachers in the profession across all subjects until I joined Teach Plus, which sparked my passion for increasing teacher workforce diversity in Texas. To that end, I established the Katy ISD Change Agents to accomplish the following objectives:

- + Utilize community partnerships to recruit and retain teachers and administrators of color.
- + Train all staff members on culturally relevant pedagogy.
- + Create a team of students to advocate for student code of conduct changes that reflect all students.
- + Create a race, equity, and inclusion department to support parents, teachers, and students.

We targeted parents, teachers, community leaders because they experience district issues first-hand and are the most qualified to identify potential solutions. We went with an affinity group approach because I felt the structure would help individuals honestly express their district concerns.

Parents Teacher Organizations were particularly crucial to our mission. Through their board memberships and connections, we successfully advocated for district-level policy changes that increase teacher diversity. Specifically, we wrote and met with board members, attended board meetings, wrote and published opinion pieces, and met with the superintendent. Our next steps include conducting focus groups with community stakeholders to gather data that supports the need for a Race, Equity, and Inclusion department.

My name is Coral Zayas, and I'm a science instructional support specialist and former middle school dual language teacher. I have been teaching since 2013 and became interested in educator preparation programs because I didn't have the most effective alternative certification experience. I am interested in teacher workforce diversity because I have unfortunately experienced a lack of diversity across several campuses. However, I also had the privilege of working at schools with solid educator diversity and noticed a significant difference in campus culture and student achievement. These experiences made me want to spend my time on projects that aim to establish teacher workforce diversity that matches our student diversity in the state.

My project was called Austin Avanza. Avanza means "forward" in Spanish, and Austin is our region. Our goal was to establish a supportive community of teachers of color to work together and support new teachers of color.

We targeted educators of color and their allies in the Austin metro area because I wanted to establish a space where all educators could learn from and support one another while potentially branching off to have mini-groups. As Austin Avanza demonstrated, an affinity group can work outside the lines of a single district and cross borders to become a welcoming space to work together to make positive change in our communities.

We partnered with local colleges and non-profits with common interests. They advanced our cause by connecting us to new individuals and groups in the region, which expanded our work. Our partnerships would have been sustainable if we had stayed in Austin, but I am currently transitioning to support Adelante Crowley. However, I believe our partnerships can be replicated and strengthened, as many groups were eager to partner and support one another's work.

Austin Avanza had many successes. We created an educator spotlight series, had events for Hispanic and Black History month that spotlighted educators, and hosted events with Raise Your Hand Texas to help connect educators to legislatures. We planned and executed mental health events for educators and completed a year-long book study on educator resilience.

We also had challenges. Since meeting once per month was becoming difficult, we focused on hosting events and engaging a broader audience. This strategy ensured we always had new educators to connect with and worked much better for educators' schedules. The result was a small connected community of educators focused on educator wellness and supported one another for the past year, helping all of us persist through the COVID-19 pandemic.



PROGRAMMATIC TAKEAWAYS

Ready to Lead Fellows fight inequity by executing strategies tailored to their communities. However, a careful review reveals that Fellows are most effective when they establish safe spaces for teachers of color and develop community partnerships that advance equity. Affinity groups are crucial to Ready to Lead Fellows because they organize critical stakeholders and provide opportunities for honest communication in a solutions-oriented environment. Community Partnerships provide additional routes to impact by leveraging other organizations' reputations and credibility to support worthy Ready to Lead goals.

NEXT STEPS: READY TO LEAD 2.0 AND 3.0

Ready to Lead Fellows strategically support educators of color and amplify their voices, but many challenges remain. Fellows will continue to fight systematic racism, challenge non-inclusive curricula, establish mentorship programs, advocate for student enrichment opportunities, build community partnerships, and develop educational leaders to advance equity.

Ready to Lead could have an even greater impact by recruiting, selecting, and training even more teachers to establish affinity groups in current and new target areas. Growing the fellowship requires additional time, energy, and funds, but the potential return cannot be overstated. Increasing the number of educators of color in the teaching profession and ensuring they are sufficiently trained through high-quality educator preparation programs positively impacts student outcomes.⁴ Schools, districts, state leaders, and educator preparation programs should identify and implement strategic policy changes to increase diversity and better prepare teachers. In the meantime, the next group of Ready to Lead Fellows will take on the challenge by executing localized strategies to create partnerships that advance the cause.

ENDNOTES

1 https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&_program=adhoc._addispatch.sas&major=st&minor=e&charsln=120&linespg=60&loop=1&countykey=&debug=0&endyear=21&selsumm=ss&key=TYPE+HERE&grouping=e+&format=W

2 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-importance-of-a-diverse-teaching-force/>

3 https://teachplus.org/sites/default/files/downloads/teachers_of_color_retention_.pdf

4 <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/recruiting-and-retaining-teachers-of-color-why-it-matters-ways-to-do-it/2020/06#:~:text=All%20students%20benefit%20from%20having.more%20likely%20to%20attend%20college>