

# HIRED & HEARD

Teacher of Color Recommendations for Creating  
Diverse Teacher Workforces and Inclusive School Cultures



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# INTRODUCTION

Teachers of color make up less than 20 percent of the teaching workforce and leave at twice the rate of their White counterparts.<sup>1</sup> In Texas, over 115,000 Black and Latino students attend schools with no same-race teachers.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, almost 37 percent of White students attend schools without a single Black teacher and 13 percent attend schools without a single Latino teacher.<sup>3</sup> This lack of diversity impacts all students. Students of color perform better and are more likely to attend college when taught by a teacher of the same race, and “students, regardless of race, express favorable perceptions of the abilities of teachers of color to captivate their attention and clarify information.”<sup>4</sup>

*“From preparation, recruitment, and hiring to welcoming and mentoring, everyone has a role in creating a school community that values diversity, encourages educators to learn from one another, ties the school to the community, and fosters teacher retention.”*

Lack of diversity also impacts school cultures. Teachers of color tend to have negative experiences with antagonistic school cultures that directly conflict with their identities, undermine their connections to schools, and contribute to them leaving the profession.<sup>5</sup> Although recent studies have demonstrated a nationwide increase in teacher diversity, they also show an increase in the turnover for teachers of color.<sup>6</sup> To truly understand and solve school diversity and culture challenges, policymakers must listen to the teachers of color who are directly and often negatively impacted by their policy decisions.

We are a diverse group of 60 demonstrably effective Texas teachers and Teach Plus Policy Fellows committed to effectuating change in education policy by advocating for ourselves and our students. Over 70 percent of our cohort are teachers of color working in schools with still-developing inclusive school cultures and workforce diversity. For this report, which builds on Teach Plus’ national To Be Who We Are report,<sup>7</sup> we wanted to explore what teachers of color suggest for how Texas schools and districts can better support teachers of color.

## Findings

1. Teachers of color feel their identities and experiences are not affirmed in school cultures.
2. Teachers of color feel singled out by the type and scope of their teaching and administrative assignments.
3. Teachers of color feel their voices are not incorporated into school policies and practices.

## Recommendations

1. Provide frequent, teacher-informed DEI trainings that feature teacher of color voices and lead to productive conversations that foster inclusive school cultures.
2. Incorporate teacher of color perspectives into school and district recruitment, school climate, and professional development policies to establish a diverse teacher workforce.
3. Establish mentoring programs and affinity groups to create safe spaces for teachers of color to share challenges, develop solutions, and build community.

# METHODOLOGY

In 2020, Teach Plus teacher leaders conducted virtual focus groups with teachers of color from across the country. Next, Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows examined responses from 68 participants who indicated they were current Texas teachers and distilled their experiences and suggestions into this report's findings and recommendations.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Teachers of color feel their identities and experiences are not affirmed in school cultures.

Previous Teach Plus research has shown that “teachers of color ... thrive in school environments that have school cultures that affirm their identities.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, not all Texas schools have established these affirming school cultures, which leads to many teachers of color leaving the classroom. Teachers who participated in our focus groups reported feeling unwanted and unappreciated in their schools. One teacher wrote, *“Sometimes we feel tolerated and used rather than a contributing thread in the fabric of our educational systems.”*

Teachers of color also feel their hard work goes unnoticed, with one respondent stating, *“my school seems to not understand the need to give positive feedback and value teachers of color. It often seems that we have to prove our value or skills.”*

Additionally, teachers of color feel their colleagues and administrators view them as angry and problematic due to their cultural characteristics. *“... 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.”* These factors lead to school cultures that do not affirm teachers of color, causing many to leave the profession. Any attempt to retain teachers of color must begin with addressing school cultures.

### 2. Teachers of color feel singled out by the type and scope of their teaching and administrative assignments.

Teachers in our focus groups, regardless of how they feel about the cultural climate of their schools, say they are assigned additional roles as disciplinarians, translators, and cultural representatives. These assignments often result in limited opportunities and increased workloads for teachers of color.

Black teachers in our focus groups report that their colleagues and administrators view them as campus disciplinarians. One teacher who describes feeling like the *“handler of Black students,”* states that it is *“a familiar role”* she has been *“forced into.”* The perception of Black teachers as disciplinarians often leads to schools assigning them students with behavioral issues and academic deficiencies. According to one teacher, *“Our classrooms are overwhelmed with a disproportionate number of students with challenges, it is no wonder that teachers of color are leaving the classroom. Also, the expectation is that we should perform at an equal rate as the other campuses within our feeder or zone, with those who do not have the demographic nor challenges that our students come with everyday.”*

Black and Latino teachers report being the sole representatives for cultural celebrations and activities on their campuses. *“All of the Black activities should not have to come from me,”* says a Black teacher. Teachers express a need for all faculty, staff, and administration to engage in meaningful, culturally affirming efforts. One teacher says, *“the school community celebrates culture in a superficial manner. More participants can result in a greater understanding and appreciation for different cultures.”* She continues, *“We need to help our kids see everyone, all cultures, race, ethnicity and identities by teaching them this and showing them about our world and ourselves - we need to help each other to celebrate each other and not just have certain people do all of the heavy lifting.”*

Several Black and Latino teachers also reported feeling like they are the only people that communicate and build relationships with students and families of color. One teacher states, *“If it weren't for myself and other bilingual teachers building rapport and good relationships with our families, no one would ever know.”* Schools often use bilingual teachers to translate for non-Spanish speaking administrators and colleagues. Another teacher explains how she plays the role of *“facilitator,”* communicating messages to families of color by writing, *“Because of my cultural/racial/ethnic identity, some students, colleagues and supervisors feel at ease with being themselves or connecting with me as an ambassador or bridge between cultures. However, they often want that 'bridge' to be one way and they want me to be the 'messenger' for 'the other side'. I would like to be seen as a facilitator of two-way communication instead of a vehicle for 'you fix them because you understand me.’”*

### **3. Teachers of color feel their perspectives are not incorporated into school policies and practices.**

*“I was not valued for my background or teaching experience, that equity piece was missing.”*

Many teachers feel that *“school[s] seem to not understand the need to ... value teachers of color. It often seems that we have to prove our value or skills.”* Teacher demographics have not caught up with student demographics.<sup>9</sup> One possible explanation is that schools do not have equitable practices in place that support teachers of color.

Even in schools with improving staff diversity, our teacher respondents expressed feeling tokenized. One teacher summarized that schools *“do not completely reflect a commitment to diversity and equity. They do hire a diverse group of teachers but that's as far as it goes.”*

The same issues arise and persist in bilingual schools. *“In my district hiring bilingual teachers is seen as a necessary evil because the district mandates it.”* Some teachers even believe that bilingual schools *“prioritize bilingual teachers from Spain over any other country which is very uncomfortable and... biased.”*

Current hiring practices have allowed districts to “check the box” by hiring teachers of color but overlook the need to establish equitable environments that value teachers of color thoughts, feelings, and ideas. This philosophy creates a revolving door through which teachers of color constantly enter and exit the profession. As one teacher wrote, *“we need to work harder to celebrate others and actually.... accept diversity instead of just trying to meet the status quo.”*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Provide frequent, teacher-informed DEI trainings that feature teacher of color voices and lead to productive conversations that foster inclusive school cultures.**

*"I don't think [my campus] offers any PD that reflects a commitment to diversity, or if it's offered, it's only for a limited number of participants. These PDs need to be offered and required for all teachers so that both students and teachers can have welcoming work/school environments."*

School staff and administration need culturally responsive training to ensure that all students are successful, especially when Texas' teaching force does not reflect the increasing diversity of the state's student population. Campuses should establish culturally responsive cultures by ensuring that all faculty, staff, and administrators participate in frequent diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training that centers teachers of color voices and leads to productive conversations that increase inclusivity for teachers and students of color.

## DEI Training for Staff, Faculty, and Administration

Establishing inclusive school environments is everyone's responsibility. Campus leaders who take DEI seriously should ensure that all members—faculty, staff, and administration—participate in DEI professional development to understand equity and its effect on student success. When administrators attend DEI sessions, examine their biases, and are open to feedback, they demonstrate its importance to their faculty and staff and the positive effects the training will have on students. Each school department must take part in shaping a culture of inclusivity on campus. *"I think school leaders should educate themselves, then make it a habit to educate every teacher in their school about the issues that educators of color face and how to maneuver those situations. It should not be something that happens once at the beginning of the year and then never again."*

## Frequent DEI Training

Teachers want more DEI training. One teacher wrote, *"We need way more professional development opportunities on diversity and equity. We usually get it right before school starts, but we never really have it again until the following school year."* When teachers are offered frequent and consistent DEI training throughout the school year, they are more apt to implement what they learn in their classrooms. Facilitators can lead these DEI sessions through professional learning communities or in smaller groups throughout the year. Planning and executing frequent DEI professional development not only equips teachers with the knowledge, skill, and techniques necessary to connect with and support students of color but also emphasizes the urgency to establish equitable practices that benefit all students.

## Featuring Teachers of Color

Professional development should feature teacher of color voices to promote inclusivity and better serve students of color. As one teacher stated, *“Districts and schools need to hire well-known authors, state, and national speakers well versed in the Black and brown community to provide PD for educators.”* When DEI training centers teachers of color, they produce better outcomes by prioritizing and leveraging the lived experience of those who most understand the challenges students of color face.

## Candid Conversations

Campus leaders must create an inclusive environment for the whole school community, including faculty, staff, administration, and students. As one teacher stated, *“Check the temperature on your campus to see if your campus culture is welcoming and inclusive.”* One way to create inclusive school environments is to engage in intentional, high-quality conversations with teachers of color to ensure they feel supported and affirmed in their identities. When campus leadership is aware of faculty and staff DEI concerns, they can create meaningful action plans to address them. Campuses can also collect data from families, students, faculty, and staff through third-party surveys to gauge inclusivity on campus and solicit potential solutions. These conversations should be the starting point in developing and offering DEI training to a campus community.

### **2. Incorporate teacher of color perspectives into school and district recruitment, school climate, and professional development policies to establish a diverse teacher workforce.**

*“Physical diversity doesn't matter when voices aren't being heard. School leaders need to learn that wanting diversity means they have to accept that diversity should have a voice.”*

Teachers of color make up less than 20 percent of the teaching workforce and leave at twice the rate of their White counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Although Texas' teacher workforce is more diverse than the national average, the state still does not have a teacher workforce that is representative of its population.<sup>11</sup> Schools and districts should intentionally establish a diverse teacher workforce to ensure the teaching profession is attractive to people of color and mitigate teacher of color turnover.

## Teacher and Student of Color Ratios

As one teacher states, *“There has to be an intentional attempt to seek a faculty that reflects the student population and an inclusive faculty.”* Campuses and districts should set hiring and retention goals that improve faculty and staff diversity. According to *Diverse Teachers Matter*, developing a racially diverse workforce has long been cited as crucial to improving student performance, especially among Black and Latino youth.<sup>12</sup> Teachers in our focus groups identified several ways for districts to prioritize teacher diversity.

## Diverse Hiring Panels

*“Teachers [of color] need to be a part of every hiring committee.”*

Teachers of color should have a voice in the hiring process through diverse hiring panels. One teacher explains, *“Our district applicant pool certainly has more diverse groups. It really is an administrator's choice of who is selected for the initial 5 candidates to be interviewed. There isn't any transparency on the selection criteria for the face-to-face interviews.”*



Including teachers of color on hiring panels has several benefits, including reducing the impact of racial biases against candidates. As one teacher wrote, *“sometimes... African Americans are over interviewed due to an uncertainty of their qualifications.”* Another benefit of including teachers on hiring panels is that candidates receive more accurate student, curriculum, and workplace information which they can use to make more informed career decisions that ultimately affect campus and district turnover. Finally, including teachers on hiring panels empowers them through a leadership role that allows them to utilize their skills, knowledge, and experience to combat racial biases, better inform teacher candidates, and increase school workforce diversity.

## Improving School Climates

*“Address the issue of color and [the] current climate. Ignoring it at this point is not beneficial.”*

School climate also impacts teacher of color retention. As one teacher explains, *“I have been at a school where the teacher retention was low because the teachers of color did not feel valued. They didn’t hire many of us and when we were hired, we weren’t treated as if we were valued. This caused us to leave, which affected the students who really needed us.”* Additionally, campuses should offer culturally relevant professional development to all staff to establish an inclusive environment conducive to teacher retention. One teacher opined, *“I think our district needs to directly address race with the administrators first...That PD can then be had with the staff...”*

## Professional Development

Campuses and districts should establish systems that incorporate teacher voices into professional development planning. Even sending teachers a survey on PD programming can impact its effectiveness.<sup>13</sup> When allowed to share their views on the topic, many teachers expressed that their schools do not provide professional development *“that reflects their commitment to diversity and equity,”* which would allow *“both students and teachers to have welcoming work/school environments.”* An important note is that teachers in our focus groups did not limit their desire to be consulted on professional development decisions to matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion. An effective system would embrace teacher voice across all professional development areas, including instructional delivery, classroom management, and more.

Districts should create and implement policies to recruit, support, and retain teacher leaders of color, including establishing diverse hiring panels and providing culturally relevant professional development to create inclusive environments.

### **3. Establish mentoring programs and affinity groups to create safe spaces for teachers of color to share challenges, develop solutions, and build community.**

In Texas, Black and Latino students make up 65 percent of the student population, while Black or Latino teachers make up about 37 percent of the teaching workforce.<sup>14</sup> As one might imagine, this can be isolating for teachers of color and affects their willingness to be themselves and share their challenges. Schools and districts should provide opportunities for teachers of color to work together outside of their subject and grade-level teams. Specifically, mentoring programs and affinity groups would benefit teachers of color in building community while providing safe spaces to elevate their concerns and potential solutions.

## Equity-Focused Mentoring Programs

Schools and districts can support teachers of color and increase the likelihood of retaining them through supportive mentoring partnerships that provide opportunities for teachers of color to grow and feel supported. Schools and districts should implement mentorship programs to retain teachers of color, who often work in areas of racial isolation. Specifically, focus group participants prefer accessible mentors of color holding leadership positions. As one teacher wrote, *“Teachers of color need to be mentored by leaders of color. We need to see people that look like us in leadership.”*

A missed opportunity in existing mentorship programs is a lack of focus on non-instructional issues that matter to teachers of color. According to one study, few mentorship programs center equity and social justice issues.<sup>15</sup> The Black Teacher Project,<sup>16</sup> designed to develop and support Black teachers, utilizes mentorship as a tactic to achieve liberated learning and retain Black teachers. It is an example of a program that embraces the unique and inherent lens of teachers of color to reimagine schools.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Dr. Desmond Blackburn, former CEO of the New Teacher Center, estimates that structural support such as coaching and mentorship can save \$1M in recruitment and early-stage development costs that districts can leverage to retain teachers of color.<sup>18</sup>

## Safe Spaces and Affinity Groups

Teachers of color need a safe space to express their concerns without being judged. According to a landscape analysis of race-based affinity groups in education, the opportunity to make connections and build community is a critical element for teachers of color.<sup>19</sup> Affinity groups allow same-race teachers to share a comprehensive awareness of challenges that affect educators of color. As one teacher articulated, *“We need to be allowed to express our feelings and thoughts about the topic of race and inequalities. Opportunities need to be created for controversial topics to be discussed and addressed.”*

In addition to sharing challenges and developing solutions through mentorship programs and affinity groups, teachers of color should regularly engage school and district leadership to elevate their collective concerns and recommendations. As part of a comprehensive feedback loop, school and district leaders should review recommendations from affinity groups yearly to determine appropriate next steps and accurately measure progress on initiatives that support teachers of color.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers in our focus groups pointed out several opportunities to improve campus conditions for teachers of color. Schools and districts should incorporate teacher of color perspectives into recruitment, school climate, and professional development policies; provide frequent DEI training that features teachers of color voices for all staff, and establish teachers of color mentoring programs and affinity groups. By addressing these issues, schools and districts take an essential step toward fostering inclusive cultures and creating diverse campus and district workforces while ensuring teachers of color can support one another and build community in safe spaces.



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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 affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. [teachplus.org](https://teachplus.org)



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## ENDNOTES

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