

Completing the Cycle: Supporting and Retaining Teachers of Color in Houston

INTRODUCTION

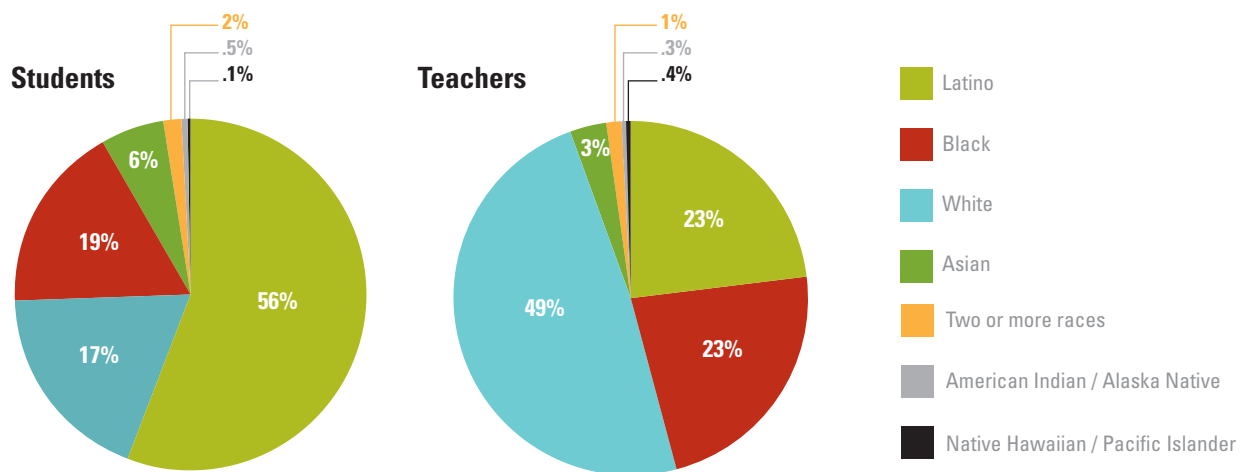
For decades, research has shown that the most important school factor in a student’s success is the teacher.¹ More recent research shows that students of color are more likely to have better academic performance, improved graduation rates, and to attend college when taught by teachers of color. Furthermore, a diverse educator workforce benefits all students, with reports of students feeling more cared for and academically challenged by teachers of color.²

However, more teachers are leaving the profession. In a recent survey,³ 70% of teachers in Texas stated they were seriously considering quitting teaching in 2022, up a staggering 17% from just four years ago. Texas teacher attrition has risen to 12%,⁴ up from a decade-long 10%, with teacher retirement numbers increasing by 1,000 from the previous year. The supply of teachers will need to increase to meet the demand of the state’s 5.4 million public school students, about a fifth of whom reside in Harris County.⁵

Teacher vacancies and high turnover are not new challenges, particularly for schools and school systems that predominantly educate students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. High turnover creates instability: new teachers face a steep learning curve, and as they gain more experience, they can influence coherent instruction, student motivation, and student absenteeism.⁶ Given the unfinished learning that has resulted from the pandemic, students need more high-quality teachers. Now is the time to address this crisis by embracing the teachers who stay despite the challenges: teachers of color.

In Texas from 2010 to 2019, a significantly higher proportion of Black and Latino teachers stayed in education, regardless of how they became teachers.⁷ Compared to 32% of White teachers from university certified programs, only 15% of Black teachers and 18% of Latino teachers left the profession nine years later. And compared to 46% of White teachers from alternative pathways, 36% of Black teachers and 32% of Latino teachers left the profession.

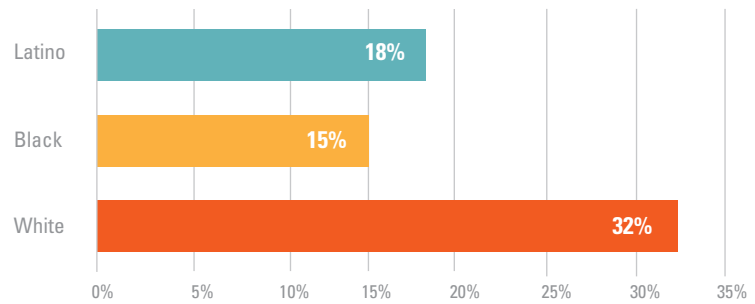
Comparing Teachers of Color and Students of Color in Harris County



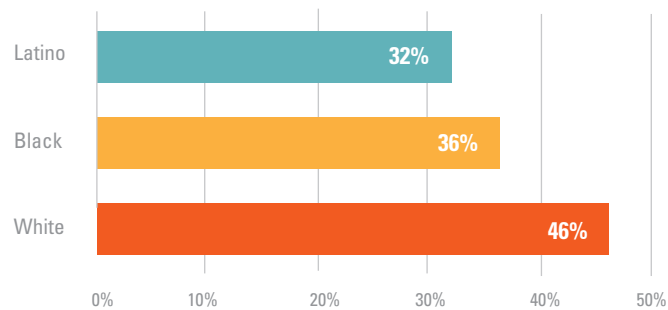
Source: Ed Trust analysis of 2018-2019 TAPR data



Teachers Leaving the Profession University Certified Programs (2010-2019)



Teachers Leaving the Profession Alternative Pathways (2010-2019)



Source: *Texas Educator Preparation Pathways: Developing and Sustaining the Texas Educator Workforce (2022)*, The University of Texas at Austin and Educate Texas

Districts are not attracting and retaining teachers of color at a high enough rate to keep up with their student diversity. About 77% of students in Harris County are students of color, while only 48% of the teaching staff are teachers of color. Moreover, 56% of students in Harris County are Latino, but only 23% of the teaching force is Latino. With new census data now showing Latinos as Texas’ and Harris County’s largest demographic group, these data points show Texas needs to diversify the teacher workforce to meet the changing demographics of the state and county. But it’s not just enough to hire more teachers of color; state and district leaders need to complete the cycle by supporting and retaining them.

While teachers nationally have identified salary as the most significant incentive to keep them in the profession, a recent survey showed that teachers of color consider greater leadership opportunities and professional development to be higher priorities.⁸ We spoke to Houston-area educators of color to find out what keeps teachers of color in the classroom, and what schools and school systems can do to empower, support, and retain more teachers of color.

“We have to talk about retaining before we talk about attracting. Because you can attract, but if they leave the profession, it’s a constant revolving door... More energy should be spent on retaining teachers and should be the main focus.”

— Black Pre-K special education teacher and former elementary school teacher

METHODOLOGY

The Education Trust in Texas (Ed Trust) and Teach Plus Texas (Teach Plus) recruited Houston-area teachers of color from their respective networks to participate in focus groups. Each teacher answered 15 questions over 90 minutes, in person, to shed light on their classroom and campus experiences as Houston-area teachers of color. In all, 13 Houston-area teachers of color representing nine districts with over 90 years of combined experience provided valuable insights for this project. Our participants wished to remain anonymous, and comprised the following:

- **8 Black, two Asian, and two Latino teachers, plus one multiracial teacher**
- **10 female and three male teachers**
- **Four language arts, five science, and four math teachers**
- **Four high school, six middle school, and three elementary school teachers**
- **10 public school and three public charter school teachers**

The teachers were compensated for their time. After facilitating focus groups, representatives from Ed Trust and Teach Plus met, reflected, discussed, and synthesized participants’ views, experiences, and ideas. Based on these reflections, Ed Trust and Teach Plus developed this report and used quotes from the teachers.

KEY THEMES & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Houston-area focus groups of teachers of color revealed five key themes highlighting their lived experiences and correlating policy recommendations for each theme.

1. Supportive Leadership

Implement a multi-measure principal evaluation that includes teacher retention data broken down by race and ethnicity, along with demonstrated cultural competence.

2. Equitably Compensated Roles and Leadership Opportunities

Invest in opportunities for teachers of color to grow and develop in their abilities and their qualifications for leadership roles, including paid advancement pathways, mentor programs, professional development, and continuing education opportunities.

Implement a multi-measure teacher evaluation system that actively interrogates for potential bias and accounts for the full scope of teachers' responsibilities and other contributions.

3. High-Quality and Relevant Curriculum

Adopt high-quality and culturally relevant curricula and instructional materials and develop teachers to effectively use them.

4. Interconnected Student Supports

Invest in supportive personnel and professional development to meet students' social, emotional, and academic needs.

5. Rich Instructional and Cultural Mentorship Opportunities

Invest in induction and mentoring programs that provide targeted support to teachers of color, especially early in their careers.

"Every single thing that can go wrong is always your fault. You have to always find some new creative way to fix all the problems that are happening."

— Black middle school math teacher

1. Supportive Leadership

Teacher of Color Experiences

Throughout our focus groups, teachers of color shared that they do not feel welcomed, seen, or heard by their school administrators. Specifically, several teachers expressed demonstrating solutions-oriented approaches toward issues affecting their classrooms, only to be rebuffed by their administrators. One teacher shared that dealing with administrators is equivalent to an additional school and district advocacy role where teachers of color feel responsible for navigating campus politics on behalf of their students and colleagues. Focus group teachers attribute much of these experiences to administrators who do not prioritize students or administrators' intentional or unintentional indifference toward teachers and students of color.

"It is a feeling of 'it's all on you, it's all on the teachers.' Well, I don't believe that's true. It starts from top [to] bottom — you have to be the example at the top. As the principal, show us your support. How do you treat us? Do you welcome us?"

— Latina elementary school English language arts teacher



What Teachers Need

According to our focus groups, the quality of school administrators is the most important factor in retaining teachers of color. Other factors that demonstrate a commitment to teachers of color include administering anonymous climate surveys, intentionally acknowledging teacher of color contributions, and creating an environment where seemingly uncomfortable but productive conversations about school culture and the teacher of color experience can take place.

“Administrators need to really try to understand the social emotional of what is going on with the staff because each community deals with things differently; really take the temperature.”

— Black high school science teacher

Because school administrators play an important role in teacher retention,⁹ they should cultivate a safe, supportive, and inclusive school climate. Districts should hold school leaders accountable to ensure they recruit and retain teachers that reflect the diversity of their student body and create structures and an environment that disrupt racism and inequities.

“A lot of teachers are leaving the field because of poor school leadership. Principals are allowed to stay in schools for three to five years and continue to be toxic or provide poor leadership to teachers. Where are the checks and balances for administrators?”

— Black Pre-K special education teacher and former elementary school teacher

Recommendation

Implement a multi-measure principal evaluation that includes teacher retention data broken down by race and ethnicity, along with demonstrated cultural competence.

2. Equitably Compensated Roles and Leadership Opportunities

Teacher of Color Experiences

Teachers of color often take on additional responsibilities beyond those that other teachers have. Called an “invisible tax,”¹⁰ examples include becoming “voluntold” to be campus disciplinarians or translators, while also serving in mentorship roles. These additional responsibilities are often unofficial, and as a result, uncompensated, even though they require the same time and energy as official (and usually compensated) roles. Further, because these roles are unofficial, schools have not invested in developing teachers’ skills in these crucial areas.

“I’m resentful of the fact that I feel taken advantage of. I would feel a lot better about my 7a.m. to 7p.m. workday — which is not uncommon — if I got more money. I want to be acknowledged, rewarded, and appreciated for the work that I do.”

— Black middle school history teacher



“Why are we killing ourselves in this job, where we’re not being validated, acknowledged, or awarded on any level? For what?”

— Latina high school English language arts teacher

What Teachers Need

Defining and enforcing the scope of work on behalf of teachers of color is the most important retention factor within campus administrators' control. Schools and administrators should officially acknowledge the extra responsibilities teachers of color have, while supporting teachers of color as they take on formal school leadership roles.

"We need opportunities to show our leadership, to feel like we are growing in this profession - whether we are in the classroom or may lead to other leadership positions outside of the classroom within the education field. Those pathways to leadership are what will keep teachers in the field."

— Asian middle school English language arts teacher

Additionally, school administrators set the tone for appreciating teacher of color contributions on campus. One way to demonstrate appreciation for teachers of color is to equitably compensate them for all their campus contributions including their cultural proficiency and literacy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, salary is not the No.1 issue for teachers of color who remain in classrooms as they, according to our focus groups, are usually motivated by other values such as doing meaningful work and giving back to their communities. In the report, *Voices from the Classroom*,¹¹ teachers of color identified leadership pathways as the most effective way to attract and retain diverse and talented educators.

"I really did think about quitting or moving to another campus, and all I wanted was one leadership opportunity."

— Black middle school science teacher

Recommendations

Invest in opportunities for teachers of color to grow and develop in their abilities and their qualifications for leadership roles, including paid advancement pathways, mentorship programs, professional development, and continuing education opportunities.

Implement a multi-measure teacher evaluation system that actively interrogates for potential bias and accounts for the full scope of teachers' responsibilities and other contributions.

3. High-Quality and Relevant Curriculum

Teacher of Color Experiences

Teachers of color in our focus groups mentioned a lack of high-quality curricula that are responsive to and representative of their student population. As the professionals closest to students and most knowledgeable of their needs, teachers of color often find themselves creating, modifying, or discovering completely new resources needed to deliver compelling, effective instruction. Oftentimes, these teachers are forced to spend their personal time and money to locate effective instructional materials. Further, some teachers feel more pressured and stressed by having to navigate political forces when incorporating relevant resources into their instructional delivery.

"I'm in the dual language program. With a new administration... there's always a 'No, we can't.' The work is always on the teachers, so I feel like we're the only ones that have to find the mentor texts or culturally responsive texts. But it all falls on us, so there's that time that I just don't have or that's taken away from my family just so I can come up with relevant lessons to teach in the classroom. You get burned out; you get tired of talking to the administration."

— Latina elementary school English language arts teacher

What Teachers Need

Rigorous and culturally relevant materials simplify differentiation and create opportunities for students to access grade-level content while saving teachers time, energy, and money. When these materials and resources are unavailable, teachers struggle to meet their students' needs. However, it is important to note that high-quality and relevant curricula are merely a tool and not a substitute for excellent instructional delivery and curricular flexibility. Teachers also demand professional development and training to utilize instructional materials in skillful, flexible ways that best serve the needs of their individual communities, schools, and students. Given that a lack of professional autonomy is one reason many teachers of color give for leaving the classroom,¹² equipping and empowering teachers to use curricula and instructional resources is an important retention strategy.

"We have to empower Black students, but we also need to empower Hispanic students. I don't think that African American History should be an elective; I don't think that Mexican American history should be an elective; they should be included in U.S. history. We are all Americans and we all contributed to the building of this nation."

— Black middle school history teacher

Recommendation

Adopt high-quality and culturally relevant curricula and instructional materials and develop teachers to effectively use them.

"Teacher support looks like figuring out what's going on with this kid. Maybe the child needs their medication. That needs to be addressed. Being a teacher is hard, but you love it. We just need help."

— Black middle school history teacher

4. Interconnected Student Supports

Teacher of Color Experiences

Teachers of color are more likely to work in communities experiencing hardships, they often take the blame for underperforming students and schools while attempting to single-handedly support the social, emotional, and academic development of students. Our focus groups revealed that teachers of color are often attuned to their students' social and emotional well-being, illuminating a desire for training and systems of support to improve students' academic performance. Additionally, teachers of color feel unsupported because school counselors and other professionals are not assigned to their school, or the school counselors are completing tasks unrelated to student well-being.

"The pandemic opened more of a window into students' family and home lives. It made me realize how much students need someone who cares about them and how drastic their lack of resources can be at times."

— Latina elementary school English language arts teacher



What Teachers Need

Trained professionals such as school counselors,¹³ psychologists, and social workers should provide school-based mental health services. Many students come to school with several challenges, and the complexity of those have been exacerbated due to the pandemic. A student's first line of communication is usually their teacher, so teachers need to be able to refer students to school-based supports. Teachers and school staff should work in conjunction with school counselors and social workers. Additionally, they need training on trauma-informed practices, and access to programs and materials that provide additional support.

"I tried to forge really strong ties with the wraparound specialist. I don't feel comfortable going outside of my scope and practice to be a therapist to my students ... I didn't want to do it alone, and I didn't think I would be doing a service to my students nor myself doing it alone. So, I strengthened the non-academic ties in the school to ensure I could provide that safety net for my students."

— Latina high school English language arts teacher

Recommendation

Invest in supportive personnel and professional development to meet students' social, emotional, and academic needs.



"I needed and still need someone of my culture to help me traverse the cultural landscape as a mentor but not just as an instructional specialist teaching in the classroom but almost like a cultural specialist ... I had to cobble that together for myself, reaching out to people for help. It's something I think would have made my life richer, easier, and lighter, if I had that from the start rather than starting out the year feeling a little bit lost."

— Latina high school English language arts teacher

5. Rich Instructional and Cultural Mentorship Opportunities

Teacher of Color Experiences

Teachers of color find it challenging to connect with effective mentors through official or unofficial channels, especially in the bilingual, science, technology, engineering, and math subject areas. Several teachers mentioned being disappointed when other teachers speak negatively about students of color, bolstering their arguments for mentors of color. Where mentorship opportunities exist, they may not be intentionally implemented with clear goals and objectives and fail to establish dedicated time for mentees and their mentors to connect, plan, and review feedback. Experienced teachers of color are offered less support than their incoming peers and early-career colleagues.

“Instructional specialists are overwhelmed with the turnover, so they can’t offer that kind of support to those who are staying. They’re like, ‘Okay, you’ve been here, you’re good.’ It’s like triage, we have to help those who are coming in new [to the school] and those brand-new teachers.”

— Black middle school math teacher

What Teachers Need

Teachers of color in Houston desire mentorship from more experienced teachers and leaders of color in their schools. Additionally, teachers in our focus groups would embrace opportunities to become mentors to support other teachers of color on their campuses. Mentorship not only supports teachers in their lesson planning, instructional delivery, and assessment skills, but also aids in developing their sense of belonging on campus. Ideally, these mentorship responsibilities are shared between two people: one instructional mentor and one cultural mentor. The instructional mentor should provide honest feedback that isn’t tied to official evaluations while the cultural mentor engages through informal check-ins while sharing school-based institutional knowledge.

High-quality induction and mentoring programs — especially those that provide support specifically for teachers of color — are known as an effective strategy for supporting and retaining teachers of color.¹⁴ Districts and schools should offer differentiated induction, mentorship, and professional development that addresses the unique challenges of teachers of color.

Recommendation

Invest in induction and mentoring programs that provide targeted support to teachers of color, especially early in their careers.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of color in our focus groups demonstrated a laudable, stalwart commitment to their students. They remain in their classrooms despite suboptimal leadership and support, a lack of resources, and career trajectories that do not intentionally develop their skills or compensate them equitably. Unfortunately, this commitment to students is no panacea, as demonstrated by teacher of color retention data. School, district, and state leaders should take action to ensure teachers of color do not have to choose between their students and their personal, professional, and financial well-being.

Policymakers can support teachers of color by responding to the unique yet pervasive challenges our focus groups revealed. Schools and districts should invest in teachers of color by establishing mentoring programs that address school-based instructional and cultural challenges while also providing opportunities for teachers to gain additional qualifications and be assigned leadership roles through paid advancement pathways. Additionally, districts and the state should adopt culturally relevant curricula, provide high-quality, relevant instructional materials, and invest in school counselors, social workers, and other professionals to produce positive student health and academic outcomes. Finally, schools and districts should ensure their systems are equitable, effective, and unbiased by implementing teacher and principal evaluations that account for cultural competence along with other traditionally overlooked roles, qualities, and contributions.

Retaining teachers of color can help solve the current staffing challenges that Texas schools are facing. Although recruiting more teachers of color is a great start, it is not enough: State, district, and school leaders must complete the cycle by supporting, developing, and ultimately retaining them.



END NOTES

This report was authored by Antonio Sangueza Jr., Houston Policy Manager for Teach Plus; Isaiah Nins, Policy Intern for The Education Trust; Judith Cruz, Texas Assistant Director – Houston Region for The Education Trust; Jonathan Feinstein, Texas Director for The Education Trust, and Teach Plus Texas Teacher Network Fellows Yvonne Morgan and Lauren Smith. We appreciate the participation of the Houston-area teachers who offered their perspectives for this report.

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