

IT IS
TIME
TO BE **BOLD**

& **DIVERSIFY** OUR
TEACHING FORCE:

A Call to Action from
California Educators of Color

**TEACH
+PLUS** | 

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the importance of investing in a sustainable, diverse teaching workforce. But what kinds of investments are going to have the greatest impact in California? As California educators and Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we set out to answer this question.

We serve in various school districts across the state and we strive to provide high-quality, rigorous, and culturally responsive educational experiences to all of our students. While we as individual educators are doing our part, we believe there is a systemic problem of practice that undermines this work, the lack of teacher diversity. This issue hurts students and educator effectiveness in our state. As teachers with 38 years of combined teaching experience, across different subjects and grade levels, we have the unique ability to provide meaningful feedback on improving educator diversity to policy-makers.

Studies consistently show that teachers of color matter for all students, especially for students of color. Research tells us that a “diverse teaching workforce allows teachers to connect with a variety of students, and allows teachers to collaborate and learn from each other to benefit all the students they serve.”¹ Additionally, researchers have concluded that students of color not only have increased academic benefits when taught by a teacher of color, but they also experience social and emotional benefits.

While policy-makers have attempted to find solutions to diversifying the teaching workforce in California, we believe it is important to better understand teachers' opinions on this issue. With this in mind and building on the [previous work of Teach Plus Policy Fellows](#), we administered a survey to gauge teachers' thoughts on research-based policy proposals aimed at improving teacher diversity in California. In this brief, we give voice to many educators who are on the frontlines and provide recommendations for policy-makers to help ensure that every student in California has access to diverse educators.

BACKGROUND

With only 21 percent of California's students identifying as white in 2021-22, it is imperative that California continue to build a more ethnoracially diverse teaching workforce.² The most recent California state data (2018-19) shows that approximately 61 percent of public school teachers identify as non-Hispanic white. While students who identify as Hispanic/Latino made up nearly 56 percent of the public school population, only approximately 21 percent of California public school teachers were Latinx.³

The origins of this mismatch in the ethnoracial make-up of our students and educators can be traced back to the segregation of public schools. When *Brown v. Board of Education* mandated the desegregation of public schools in the South, it rendered no protection for the 82,000 Black educators in U.S. segregated schools, and these teachers were regarded as unfit to teach white children.⁴ In the 10 years following the *Brown* decision, roughly 38,000 African American teachers in southern and border states lost their jobs.⁵ Furthermore, neither the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the federal deregulation guidelines of 1966, nor any subsequent legislation included language regarding the retention of African American teachers in schools.⁶ The cumulative impact of the unintended consequences handed down from federal regulations, disproportionately

stringent hiring and firing practices, demotions,⁷ involuntary transfers,⁸ workplace hostility and discrimination, contract nonrenewal, and increased professional certification standards⁹ has led to the shortage of Black teachers nationwide.¹⁰

There has been a long history of intentional and unintentional policy that has pushed and kept educators of color out of our classrooms. Nevertheless, research has shown that the recruitment, support, and retention of an ethnoracially diverse teacher workforce has a positive impact on student engagement, learning, exclusionary discipline, and other outcomes for not only students of color, but all students.¹¹ A report from the Learning Policy Institute identified the benefits for students of having diverse teachers as “higher test scores, higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates, lower suspension rates, and more interest in post-secondary education.”¹² To realize the promise of an ethnoracially diverse educator workforce and address the damage that has been done over decades, it is critical that state and local leaders take bold action to recruit, support and retain a workforce of diverse, effective educators.

Existing Initiatives to Address Educator Diversity in California

The importance of educator diversity is not new to California leaders. Over the last five years, California has launched a number of initiatives to try to address the educator diversity issue.¹³ They include:

- + Funds for prospective teachers and teacher candidates through programs such as [California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program](#) and the [Golden State Teacher Grant Program](#).
- + Temporary [waivers](#) of assessment and credential fees.
- + Investments in new pipelines into the profession through the [California Teacher Residency Grant Program](#) and the [Golden State Pathways Program](#).
- + Support for current teachers through professional development funds like the [Educator Effectiveness Grants](#) and professional growth incentives through the [National Board Certification Incentive Program](#).
- + Advertisement and positive promotion of the importance of educator diversity.

Even though the state has initiated a number of programs that research tells us should help with diversifying the educator workforce, as teachers, we haven't seen these changes in our own schools.

While California is moving in the right direction, it may not be fast enough. Teacher program enrollment is low, and some districts are having difficulties filling teaching positions. We need bigger and bolder actions that will actually shape the behaviors of current and prospective teachers of color. As a first step, teachers in our state need to hear about the various ideas being considered across our districts and by the state and see what we as educators feel would best help us grow and support our students. To this end, we created a research protocol to explore teachers' perceptions of a range of these ideas that California leaders could implement to support and sustain a diverse educator workforce.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the experience of teachers of color in California, we conducted focus groups with 41 teachers from across the state. Each of the focus groups were facilitated by a Teach Plus Policy Fellow over Zoom, with a supplementary opportunity to complete the questions online through an Alchemer form. Focus group participants were asked a series of questions related to a range of policy proposals described below, as well as their employment experiences.

Ideas for Focus Groups to Explore

In June, EdSource highlighted the efforts of LAUSD, the second largest district in the country, in recruiting Black educators as part of the “Black Student Excellence through Educator Diversity, Preparation and Retention” resolution.¹⁴ These resolutions are necessary, yet do not adequately address the full complexity of the issue. While our schools and districts are recruiting more teachers of color than in years past, their efforts, alone, are not adequate. There are still many barriers to the recruitment and retention of teachers of color, such as low salaries, lack of financial support to complete programs, and inadequate support and mentoring systems. Our team compiled research reports, analyzed the current publications on this topic, and came up with a set of potential proposals and initiatives to put before our peers. In gauging educators’ opinions on the efficacy of these ideas, we hope to help the policymakers understand the root causes of California’s teacher diversity problem and develop smart solutions. The ideas we shared were:

- + **Implement statewide initiatives to fund teacher preparation programs aimed at low-income and minority teachers.** Teacher preparation programs are expensive and act as barriers for many of the populations that we want to see represented in the profession.
- + **Exempt teachers from state income taxes.** There is a lot of discussion about increasing teacher pay, and teacher pay being insufficient. A quick way to ensure that all teachers receive a raise would be to make them exempt from state income taxes.
- + **Reduce/eliminate student debt for teachers - loan forgiveness.** In many ways, the state acknowledges that teacher compensation is limited. If the state cannot guarantee an increase in pay, then it must do what it can to remove structural barriers to entry, and in turn reduce teacher expenses.
- + **Implement home-buying programs/rental assistance/subsidy.** According to the real estate listings and data site [Estately](#), teachers can only afford three percent of the houses in Los Angeles. The skyrocketing house prices and barely livable salaries are among the reasons for teachers burnout.
- + **Provide free/reduced tuition for college students studying to become teachers.** An undergraduate degree and completion of a teacher preparation program are required in order to become a credentialed teacher; both demand sufficient funds to pay for tuition, books, and living expenses. Having financial support can often mean the difference in a student’s ability to become a teacher.
- + **Expand and target mentoring supports for new and developing teachers of color beyond traditional induction.** A key to retaining teachers of color is the creation of supportive mentoring partnerships beyond traditional induction. These would allow teachers of color to grow and feel supported.

+ Increase benefits such as free healthcare, childcare credits, and tuition assistance.

According to the California Department of Education, the average salary for a teacher in the state was \$79,128 in 2017. However, starting salaries are generally between \$42,000 and \$49,000, depending on the size of the school district. Benefits like healthcare and childcare credits would be particularly impactful for early career teachers.

Of the 41 participants in our focus groups, 56 percent identified as Asian/Asian American, 20 percent as Latinx, 5 percent as multiracial, and 2 percent identified as Black/African American. The range of teaching experience among the teachers surveyed was from 2 to more than 20 years.¹⁵

We shared the different ideas with the focus group participants and asked them to identify the three options that they believe would have the greatest impact on creating a sustainable, diverse educator workforce. We then asked them to discuss why they believe their choices would be the most impactful. In our analysis, we explored those discussions for consistent themes that reflected not only the top choices but why they are important. The analysis below reflects those themes.

In addition to asking participants to assess the potential impact of these ideas, the protocol also asked the participating educators to identify any additional work responsibilities that they have taken on within and outside of their district. We hoped to use this information to paint a more complete picture of the work responsibilities of many teachers and how they utilize opportunities outside of their classroom duties to generate sufficient income.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

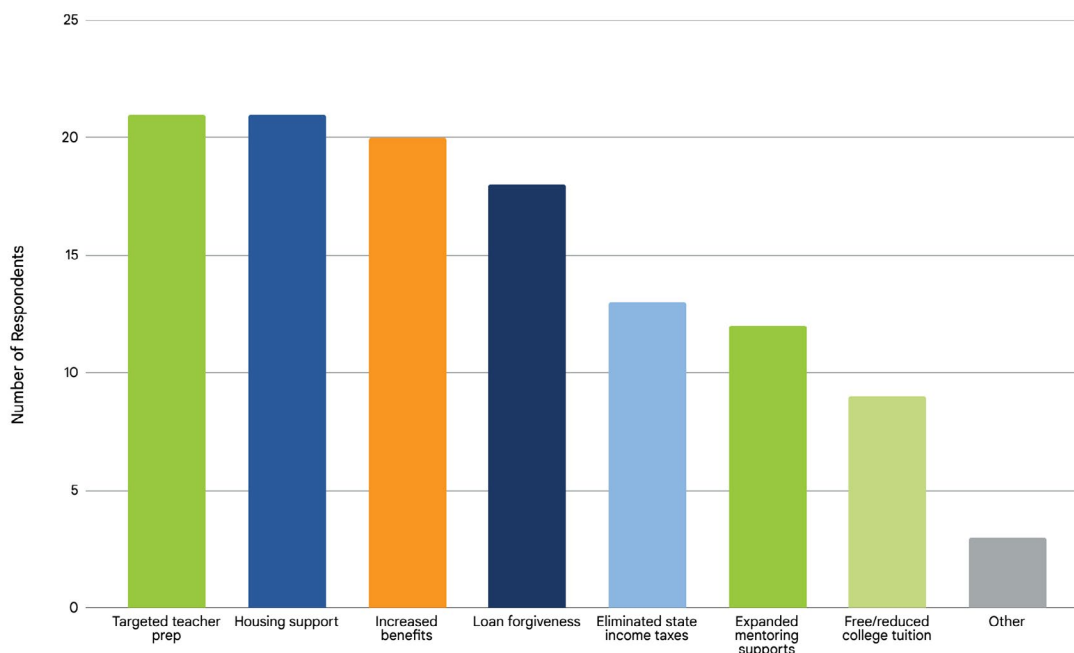
Ideas Ranking

When asked to select the three ideas which would have the greatest impact on creating a sustainable, diverse educator workforce, respondents saw value in all of them but some emerged as most consistently valued by participants. The three ideas that received the most attention with around half of the respondents identifying them as impactful were¹⁶:

- + Statewide initiatives to fund teacher preparation programs aimed at low-income and minority teachers.** (21 respondents)
- + Home-buying programs or rental assistance for teachers.** (21 respondents)
- + Increased benefits such as free healthcare, childcare credits, and tuition assistance.** (20 respondents)

The ideas all fell into three key categories: (1) investing in targeted preparation and support for educators of color; (2) investing in robust benefits and wraparound supports for educators; and (3) increased compensation. Statewide investments in targeted teacher preparation falls squarely into category one and housing assistance and increased benefits sit in category two. We had also put forward loan forgiveness and eliminating state income taxes as mechanisms for increased compensation. 17 respondents selected loan forgiveness and 13 respondents selected eliminating state income taxes.¹⁷ In addition, respondents proposed raising the minimum teacher salary.

Most Popular Ideas for a Sustainable & Diverse Educator Workforce



While the choices of impactful ideas send important signals, there is even more to be learned from the participants' discussions of why they think their selections would have the greatest impact on the educator workforce. Participants repeatedly discussed the cost of entering the profession as a barrier to both recruitment and retention of teachers of color. *"Teachers of color are at an economic disadvantage that makes it very hard not only to afford the preparation, but once they get into a job it is impossible to afford housing. Many end up having to get a second job, or end up looking for a better paid career as they need to pay up their loans, and also try to have a decent living,"* shared one participant. And another reiterated, *"Debt for teachers is an issue that both stops students from entering teaching and leaving teaching."*¹⁸

And although the prioritized ideas may have varied, all participants discussed the high cost of living in California as a barrier to recruiting and retaining a sustainable, diverse teacher workforce. As this teacher shared, the high cost of living has implications tied to many of the proposals. *"It's hard to live in this expensive state, and live and commute to the district of work. It's even harder to be a teacher when carrying so much debt when starting off in the workforce."*¹⁹

Beyond the fiscal considerations, many participants in the focus groups also discussed the importance for teachers to feel valued and supported. As one educator shared, *"I think that an important part of retention is giving them the appropriate support needed throughout their first couple of years. Many teachers leave after their first or second year and with more support and mentoring programs that are not induction related (more paperwork), I think more teachers would stay. I think it would be beneficial for teachers to have mental support from other teachers."*²⁰ They saw the importance of that value to be signaled not just from within the school culture but more broadly from the general public. *"I think the culture of education is such that the general public views the profession as something that is undervalued and underpaid, so I think the options I selected above would help counter this attitude and encourage more people to want to join the teaching profession,"*²¹ shared one participating teacher.

Additional Responsibilities

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (27 educators) reported that they take on additional responsibilities within their school or district.²² Respondents explained that they took on those additional tasks both for additional income and to contribute to school culture and address student needs. One respondent shared, *“I take on the added responsibilities because I need the additional money from the stipends to meet the high cost of living,”* and another said, *“Part of [it] I do get paid for, but a lot of it I do not get paid for, so some of it is for monetary reasons, but for the most part, it is to feel more connected to the campus, the community and the students.”*²³

One-third of respondents (14 educators) stated that they work outside of their district.²⁴ All of them do it for greater income, as one said, *“Coaching, tutoring, camp counseling. We don’t get paid enough as teachers to completely exist on a teaching income.”*²⁵ Imagine how much greater impact they could have had in the classroom if they could have focused on teaching and not on extra positions to make ends meet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the educators in our focus groups send clear messages to California policymakers that they must take concrete action to reduce the financial burdens many teachers face and invest in sustainable, supportive strategies if they want to recruit and retain a diverse and impactful teaching force. The focus groups reinforced that it is even more important as educators in California are experiencing unprecedented challenges to their mental and physical health. Building on our experiences and what we heard from the focus group participants, our recommendations address these challenges head on:

- 1. State leaders should address the high cost of entry into the profession and ensure more sustainable compensation by increasing beginning salaries so they are indicative of the skills, knowledge, and work performed by educators inside and outside of the classroom.**
- 2. State leaders should incentivize local leaders to invest in comprehensive compensation packages that include critical support for educators like housing and childcare.**
- 3. State leaders should invest in strategic retention strategies like fostering teacher leadership opportunities and career support to recognize and respect teacher expertise.**

1. State leaders should address the high cost of entry into the profession and ensure more sustainable compensation by increasing beginning salaries so they are indicative of the skills, knowledge, and work performed by educators inside and outside of the classroom.

In addition to the lack of diversity in our educator workforce, research has shown that the educator shortage crisis is impacting districts throughout California. A report from the Learning Policy Institute, based on a fall 2021 survey of a sample of California districts, found that two-thirds of the districts surveyed faced an increased number of vacancies over pre-COVID-19 years and experienced greater challenges in filling these positions.²⁶ The number of vacancies continues to grow, while applicants for open positions decline. Reflective of the survey findings that investing in targeted preparation programs is an important lever for reducing barriers to entry for educators of color, California has invested in new pathways into the profession, like the [California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program](#) and [California Teacher Residency Grant Program](#). Nevertheless, the message of our research called out that the solution had to be more than just new programs. Survey respondents highlighted that many can no longer bear the burden of teaching. One participant stated: *“The burden of having student loans while also earning less as a professional makes teaching not worth it as a career path for many. Many low-income people of color are likely to choose other careers.”* California should continue to advance policies, like the Golden State Teacher Grant program, that reduce the cost pressures of teacher preparation. Additionally, student loan forgiveness programs would not only help retain teachers of color who wish to benefit from this program, but would also help in attracting teachers of color who are unsure about whether or not they want to enter the profession.

It is important to note that the level of education that the state requires teachers to have, as well as pursuing more professional development and additional advanced degrees to seek higher pay, is costly, and often the payout is not enough to entice new talent to pursue teaching over other higher enumerated careers. With two-thirds of our respondents doing extra work outside of school hours to supplement their income, they are a clear example of the pay penalty for being teachers. The Economic Policy Institute calculates that teachers suffer a penalty of 23.5% less pay than similar professionals.²⁷ California can lead the charge for equitable wages for educators with strategic policies that increase wages to bridge the pay gap between teachers and other comparably skilled and educated professionals.

2. State leaders should incentivize local leaders to invest in comprehensive compensation packages that include critical support for educators like housing and childcare.

With over a third of surveyed teachers urging that there be greater compensation, respondents discussed that compensation can take varied forms - from mortgage assistance, better healthcare, child care credits, and loan forgiveness. Programs such as student loan forgiveness, home buying and rental assistance, and increased benefits such as childcare credits, free healthcare, and tuition assistance greatly reduce the financial burden teachers are faced with in our state. Expanding these types of benefits, coupled with an increase in salary, would be a powerful punch to the teacher shortage. With

California housing some of the most expensive in the nation, it should be no surprise that a common response on the survey was a call for higher wages and better access to housing. Many teachers are torn between loving where they teach and finding a place that would allow for financial sustainability. Government programs that would provide teachers with affordable housing would increase the retention of teachers who would otherwise feel that they must move out of state. Affordable housing options would also allow teachers to live in the communities in which they serve making them even more integral to the community. And expanding childcare credits can be very impactful. The California Department of Education estimates that the average monthly cost of childcare is \$700 a month. For working families, the reduction of this cost is huge.²⁸

3. State leaders should invest in strategic retention strategies like fostering teacher leadership opportunities and career support to recognize and respect teacher expertise.

While most of the ideas considered in our research were tied to fiscal barriers, we heard from many of the educators of color that the lack of support and sense of value were a deterrent to staying in the classroom. Allowing educators to have a voice in decisions regarding their profession is empowering. Empowered educators have the ability to create learning environments that are collaborative and support student achievement and growth. A survey respondent believes, *“If they want to recruit more teachers, they need to pay teachers more and recognize their contributions.”* The local school districts throughout California should develop practices of including educators in decisions regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and use of instructional resources. Several teachers in our focus groups mentioned that there are negative public perceptions of entering the teaching profession because the pay is so low. Raising salaries and similar compensation can change that perception.

Further, as the state seeks to grow a diversified teacher workforce, it is important to build and validate the experiences of teachers of color. California should ensure that our curriculum is one that is inclusive and multi-dimensional, including but not limited to race, gender, gender expression, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. The impact of a positive feedback loop of representation would mean that when there are teachers of color in class, both students of color and white students benefit. More students of color seeing themselves represented would be more students willing to go into grow-your-own programs, and see themselves represented in the workforce. Teachers of color often feel isolated by neither seeing themselves in the material they are teaching, nor feeling represented in often overwhelmingly white faculties.

We also want to focus on how to keep teachers in education. Many teachers surveyed felt that they would benefit from extra support. With many new teachers quitting after their fifth year, it is imperative to support teachers to enter the profession as well as stay in the profession. While this was not the most popular response, it was still mentioned. Mentorship allows teachers to collaborate and support younger teachers.

CONCLUSION

Teacher preparation program enrollment is low, there is a teacher shortage in California, and our teachers do not represent our diverse student population. After having analyzed the responses to our survey, the top ideas were to create statewide initiatives to fund teacher preparation programs aimed at low-income and minority teachers, reduce/eliminate student debt for teachers, increase home buying programs as well as rental assistance, and increase benefits such as free health care, childcare credits, and tuition assistance. Any one of these ideas turned into policies would send a clear signal that our state leaders are serious about investing in building and sustaining a diverse educators workforce.

Legislators must take action. We must work to keep teachers in the classroom, and foster a diverse teacher workforce for the benefit of all Californians

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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



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- 15 The focus groups included 41 total participants. Of the 41, 8 respondents had less than four years of teaching experience, 14 participants had 4-9 years of teaching experience, 7 participants had 10-15 years of teaching experience, and 12 participants had more than 15 years of teaching experience. 21 participants identified as Asian-American, 8 identified as Hispanic or Latino, 7

identified as White, 2 identified as more than one race, 1 identified as Black or African American, and 2 indicated Other.

16 Question: Below are a list of teacher-identified proposals that could help improve both the recruitment and retention of teachers of color in California. Which of these options do you think would have the greatest impact on creating a sustainable, diverse educator workforce? Please select your top three options. Responses (n=41) "Creating statewide initiatives to fund teacher preparation programs aimed at low-income and minority teachers." (21 responses) "Exempt teachers from state income taxes" (13 responses) "Reduce/Eliminate Student Debt for Teachers - Loan forgiveness" (8 responses) "Home Buying Programs/Rental assistance/subsidy" (21 responses) "Free/reduced tuition for college students studying to become teachers" (9 responses) "Expand and target mentoring supports for new and developing teachers of color beyond traditional induction" (12 responses) "Increased benefits such as free healthcare, childcare credits, tuition assistance" (20 responses) "Other" (3 responses)

17 *ibid*

18 Question "Why do you think your selections would have the greatest impact on the educator workforce?" (Open Response)

19 *ibid*

20 *ibid*

21 *ibid*

22 Question "Are you currently taking on any additional responsibilities within your school district in addition to your regular contractual teaching responsibilities (ex: tutoring, summer school, stipended committees, etc.) If so, why?" (Open response)

23 *ibid*

24 Question "14. Are you currently taking on any additional responsibilities outside of your school district in addition to your regular contractual teaching responsibilities (ex: part time work, private lessons, etc.)? If so, why?" (Open response)

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