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TOMORROW'S TEACHERS ARE WATCHING

How Schools Can Inspire—or Turn Away— the Next Generation of Teachers of Color

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INTRODUCTION

Today's diverse schools require staff who reflect and affirm the cultural identities of all of their students. Teachers who incorporate culturally relevant methods into their daily practice also help to create classroom climates that are respectful, inclusive, and help students to value and understand the cultures of their peers.[1] Studies have shown that the representation teachers of color bring to classrooms encourages students to be themselves and to authentically connect with the teacher and their peers.[2] By retaining teachers of color, students, families, and communities can continue to work together to create a culturally responsive and affirming learning environment. This collaboration amongst all educational stakeholders helps to empower all learners, students and adults, to achieve success in our education system.

The 2019 Teach Plus and The Education Trust report, "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover,"[3] focused on the perspectives of teachers of color and their experiences in our nation's schools. The results from this research pointed to the need to address school cultures and district policies and practices to better grow and retain teachers of color. These needs extend throughout the teacher pipeline. Another Teach Plus report, "Strengthening the Pipeline"[4] leveraged the insights and perspectives from teacher candidates of color to put forth a set of recommendations for increasing diversity within the teaching profession. These two reports underscore a disappointing reality: When it comes to the teaching profession, people of color are dealing with the status quo.

What about students of color? What are their views of the teaching profession? We are a group of Teach Plus Illinois Policy Fellows and teachers across the state committed to building more equitable learning environments for our diverse students. In this report, we extend previous Teach Plus research by hearing directly from students of color on how they perceive the teaching profession, their school environments, and their K-12 experiences. Below, we present our findings and recommendations for policymakers on how to increase the appeal of education as a career choice for young people of color and retain them once they enter the field. In adding the voices of students of color to those previously highlighted, we are elevating the perspectives from aspiring teachers, incoming teachers, and current teachers in the hopes of disrupting the status quo and building a better future for people of color in teaching.

Findings

1. Students of color perceive the teaching profession as unsustainable due to a lack of compensation and support.
2. Exposure to different perspectives in curricula, environments, and the educator workforce has a positive effect on the school experiences of students of color.
3. The motivation for students of color to enter teaching is influenced by the presence or absence of teachers of color in their schools.
4. Students of color point to the lack of diversity and representation in the teaching force as directly contributing to negative school experiences.
5. Students of color want their schools to recognize their individual identities and create systems that support their unique needs.

Recommendations

1. Legislators and ISBE should increase financial support and pathways for entry into the profession for future teachers of color.
2. ISBE should improve current teachers' understanding of culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, and racial harassment.
3. ISBE and local school districts must implement system-wide measures to protect students of color.
4. Schools and districts should develop resources to match diverse students' needs.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the lived experiences and needs of students of color in our state, we formed a partnership with Educators Rising, a nationwide organization working to help the next generation of teachers reach their potential.[5] We conducted focus groups with students of color at the Illinois Educators Rising state conference held at Illinois State University in the spring of 2022.

Our research was driven by the following three questions:

1. How do students of color view the teaching profession and the role that teachers of color, in particular, play in schools?
2. What aspects of the teaching profession do students of color find appealing and what do they believe should be changed/improved?
3. What do students of color believe is necessary to improve their school experience?

We designed a focus group protocol to collect qualitative data to better understand how students of color perceive the teaching profession as well as the extent to which they feel their K-12 experiences are culturally responsive and/or affirming. We heard from 32 students of color. Of these participants:

+ Thirty-four percent (11) identified as Black, 34 percent (11) identified as Latinx, and 31 percent (10) identified as More Than One Race.
+ Sixteen percent (5) were freshmen, 6 percent (2) were sophomores, 28 percent (9) were juniors, and 53 percent (17) were seniors.

1. Students of color perceive the teaching profession as unsustainable due to a lack of compensation and support.

When we asked students of color what they perceive as the positives and negatives of becoming a teacher, the number one deterrent they named was the lack of compensation. Four out of five students in our focus groups mentioned salary as a reason they might not seriously consider joining the teaching profession. One student explained, *"… the pay is not adequate, and I feel like that really draws people off."*[6] Teachers of color take on more debt than their white counterparts; in fact, 56 percent of Black educators have taken on student loans, with an average initial total of $68,300.[7] Alleviating this kind of debt would help students of color consider teaching to be financially viable for their futures. Students of color find it hard to select teaching as a career when they don't believe that it will provide them with financial stability as an adult.

Students of color also understand that the stresses of being a teacher are multifaceted and complex. Multiple students in our focus groups shared examples of stressful situations they saw their teachers handle that are often demoralizing to the educators. One student shared: *"Personally at my school there's been fights with teachers, a lot of rude and inappropriate things being said to teachers. And they just have to put up with it."* Survey responses from teachers support this observation. According to a 2020 National Education Association (NEA) survey, 91 percent of members agree that stress is a serious problem for educators and 90 percent of members say that feeling burned out is a problem, with 67 percent stating it is a "serious problem."[8] These heightened levels of stress among teachers are clear to their students in the classroom; even clearer is the lack of support teachers receive in relieving them. Students of color in our focus groups reflected on how teachers are often their only support in and out of school and how challenging and stressful this responsibility can be on top of a heavy workload.

Finally, students of color shared with us that they did not believe our society regards teaching highly. They recounted examples of teachers being looked down upon or misrepresented and how these stories perpetuate the negative perception of teachers in the media. One student described an event for teachers that went viral in the media, stating: *"I heard this story about how they have [these] dollar showers where teachers go in and try to grab as much money as they can. And, you know, they're trying to make it a feel-good story … when you really think about it you're making teachers, who are teaching your kids the ways of life, you're making them scramble for dollars to be able to buy stuff for the classroom."* The student was referencing a 2021 "Dash For Cash" event at a junior hockey game in South Dakota, where teachers competed to grab as many dollar bills from a $5,000 pile dumped onto the ice to be used for school supplies.[9] Critics of the event spoke out in the media, writing, "It's impossible for me to see those teachers scrambling on their hands and knees as anything other than a terrible metaphor."[10] As their teachers are the ones spending on average $750 out-of-pocket for school supplies, as one report states,[11] and scrambling due to the consistent underfunding of public schools, students remarked how unfair and dehumanizing this can be to watch. Despite the fact that the South Dakota event was widely panned, students of color in our focus groups recognized the negative societal attitudes toward educators.

2. **Exposure to different perspectives in curricula, environments, and the educator workforce has a positive effect on the school experience of students of color.**

Students of color in our focus groups were acutely aware that because of the lack of representation among their teachers and in their curriculum, their school environment fails to accurately reflect the world around them. The primary perspective that students of color are exposed to in our current K-12 system is that of whiteness, curricula that are centered around the White male experience, and teaching that is delivered by a teaching force where 82 percent of staff identify as White.[12] This perspective fails to address the needs, concerns, or interests of our increasingly diverse student body, where 53 percent of students in Illinois identify as students of color.[13] One respondent shared, *"I also believe that this, like the lack of diversity, creates almost blindness to the real world."* This "blindness to the real world" is a disservice and undermines their K-12 experience.

Having teachers of color in the classroom, also known as "mirrors,"[14] benefits students of color and has been linked to higher academic performance, higher graduation rates, and lower numbers of absences.[15] These "mirrors" allow students to build trust and relationships, as one student shared, *"I trust you more because I can relate to you, and you can understand me, but if there's not that many teachers of color then you already feel left out."* Students of color are being left out of their schools and classroom communities due to a lack of teacher diversity. This exclusion is not limited to the adults in the school buildings. The students in our focus groups told us that they did not see themselves in the material they were learning. One student remarked, *"Literally what about us, where are we, where are we in history?"* Illinois classrooms are failing to reflect the experiences and identities of students of color. There is a noticeable lack of representation in staff of color which translates to a curriculum that withholds the narratives of historically marginalized groups of people. This lack of "mirrors" in teachers and curricula is isolating to students of color.

On the other hand, when teachers of color are present, students of color have far more positive experiences, even when they themselves are minorities in the classroom. One student in our focus groups said: *"When I was in first grade, I had my first Black teacher and I went to [a] mostly White school, there were no other Black kids really, maybe like one or two. And having that teacher just really gave me the support I needed as a Black [girl] in a space that was just different."* Research has shown that students of all racial and cultural backgrounds benefit when taught by teachers of color, leading to increased graduation rates, college enrollment, and advanced course-taking for students of color.[16] Relationships and academic achievement suffer when students do not have opportunities to learn from educators of color.

3. The motivation for students of color to enter teaching is influenced by the presence or absence of teachers of color in their schools.

Some of the students of color we spoke with who stated an interest in becoming educators were driven to the field by the desire to fill an absence they had experienced. This absence of teachers of color in the classroom and the consequential inability to build relationships in which these students felt seen and heard motivated them to fill that need for others. When asked, "Do you want to be a teacher?" one student shared: *"Yes. I want to be that representation for children. I want to improve others' experiences from school compared to what my experiences are. It would be amazing to be able to make an impact on someone."* These young men and women of color were cognizant of the impact that representation has on their peers; specifically, they were aware of the impact created by the lack of representation.

It is important to note, however, that being interested in becoming a teacher despite the presence of culturally responsive, affirming relationships within their own K-12 experience is not a common focus among students of color. Research by the Center for American Progress indicates that between 2010 and 2018, enrollment in teacher preparation programs dropped 35 percent, despite enrollment across other bachelor's degree programs increasing overall.[17] Illinois was among the nine states with a "drastic" reduction in teacher preparation enrollment of more than 50 percent. The lack of representation for students of color is viewed as a clear negative, both deterring and compelling those affected, with one student sharing, *"I think a negative is that we don't see enough of us. I didn't have a POC teacher, so I want to be one."* In this case, the drive to serve as a teacher is shaped by the desire to be the "mirror" in the classroom and rectify an experience that many participants never had for themselves.

Students across the United States experience similar gaps in representation. According to a report by The Education Trust, among the 33 states that currently collect demographic student and teacher data, 18 states reported one in 10 Black students attend school without ever having a teacher of color; worse, in 27 states, one in 10 Latino students attend school without ever having a teacher of color.[18] This means that our diverse student body is continually being subjected to a schooling experience that fails to accurately reflect the lived reality of the students. In schools across the state, students of color are entering spaces where their cultural capital is not accepted. Black students enter classrooms where teachers do not understand the nuance of their hair care. Latino students move through hallways where the language they speak and hear daily is absent. Students of color continue to inhabit spaces where the critical elements of their identity are undervalued or ignored. This inhibits their ability to build trusting relationships with their teachers, which impedes their academic success and their interest in teaching.

4. Students of color express that the lack of diversity and representation in the teaching force directly contributes to negative experiences with school.

When students of color talked about why they wanted to become teachers, many had a story about a teacher who was **not** culturally responsive. One student shared: *"A specific thing is that we had like a swimming class type thing when I was in elementary school. And because I'm Black, I'm POC, I can't just go in the water and get my hair wet. So [the teacher] was saying, I can't go swimming if I need all this stuff. So it felt like, "Oh, I can't go play with the other kids just because I have Black hair."* The lack of culturally responsive practices results in misunderstandings, microaggressions, and traumatic

experiences for both students and teachers. Zaretta Hammond, a leader in the field of culturally responsive teaching, defines this idea as "an educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing."[19] Students in our focus groups shed light on this disparity when they shared their negative experiences with teachers who were not culturally competent.

Feeling disconnected due to their teachers' inability to empathize with their lived experiences was a hallmark of many of our focus group discussions. One student explained, *"My schools weren't diverse … and that was negative because a lot of the teachers, they couldn't understand … they couldn't connect to the experiences their students had."* This student went on to explain the impact of a teacher who was not culturally competent. *"... the teacher would make a comment. To them it sounds fine and to everyone else … it is insensitive and it sounds offensive … I think that the lack of diversity makes it much harder for teachers to connect with students."* Another student explained, *"I wish I had somebody who helped me navigate … I've never really met a teacher that saw that and that helped me through that … I would love to be able to pick out those kids that are like me and say, 'I know you're going through something.'"*

5. Students of color want their schools to recognize their individual identities and create systems that support their unique needs.

Many of the students we spoke with agreed that their schools were not recognizing their identities and that their schools were not doing enough to support the varying needs of their student body. Rather than providing one-size-fits-all initiatives, students of color want to feel included and valued by their school leaders, forming connections with their administrators so that they are able to have open conversations about what they need at school. Many students mentioned that their school administrators did not represent the student body. Being able to feel comfortable voicing their opinions to their administrators was very important to the students we spoke with. They want their school leaders to be inviting and open to hearing students' experiences and opinions.

Students of color also want to feel seen at school and to be recognized in their school curricula, school programming, messaging, and general environment. One student mentioned that they wanted their school to provide support in different languages so students and parents could access the many resources that the school has to offer. Offering translated flyers and school announcements makes students feel welcome and affirmed at school. Students also want more tailored support services for a diverse student body to be successful. One student said that because their parents don't speak English fluently, their parents are unable to provide homework support at home. Because of the language barrier, the student said that they have to go out of their way to find teachers or classmates who have the time to provide them with some help on homework when they don't understand something. This student was not the only one in the group that was struggling with the same problem. A few students agreed that these needs are directly tied to their identity, and schools should create programs in schools that are designed to address those needs. Ultimately, students want their teachers to acknowledge their cultures, work together to increase representation, and dismantle bias within the school system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Legislators and ISBE should increase financial support and pathways for entry into the profession for future teachers of color.**

Increase financial support for students of color wanting to become teachers.

When pursuing an education degree, educators of color are significantly more likely to take out student loans. According to the National Education Association, Black educators have taken out significantly more student loans than any other race and/or ethnicity, with 16 percent of Black educators borrowing over $105,000.[20] Alleviating the financial burden of student loan debt can encourage teachers of color to remain in the profession for the long term.

The 2023 Illinois state operating budget includes an appropriation of $4.2M for the Minority Teachers of Illinois Scholarship Program (MTI), more than doubling the 2022 amount of $1.9M.[21] The maximum annual award for a program applicant increased from $5,000 to $7,500 per year, with priority given to applicants with a concentration in bilingual, bicultural education. Despite the additional funding appropriated by the Illinois Legislature in 2022, indications are that there remains additional, unmet demand for this scholarship. Pending a verification that demand still outstrips supply, Illinois should be prepared to increase the MTI allocation.

Create a streamlined application process for all state-level funding opportunities.

While the state of Illinois has several funding opportunities for future teachers of color, students must apply for these opportunities individually via separate timelines and applications and this lack of a streamlined funding process poses another barrier for them seeking an affordable pathway to becoming an educator. This alone may deter potential educators from taking advantage of programs meant to assist them. Eligible future teachers with a demonstrated financial need may qualify for upwards of $19,735 in college assistance between state and federal grant programs, including Illinois Monetary Award Program (MAP), Pell Grant, and MTI, which could potentially give relief to some of the financial stressors students in our focus groups mentioned when weighing the options of pursuing a career in teaching. The state should streamline this process to make it easier for students of color to enter the field.

Similarly to the Common App, the state could create an application platform to support students of color who are interested in becoming teachers. Such a platform could be housed on a website that would allow these students to submit one application to connect them with scholarships, financial aid, mentoring opportunities, and college-specific programs available at the institutions granting them acceptance. Future educators would be able to weigh their opportunities and be connected to multiple funding sources in one central location, rather than tracking them down individually and getting discouraged by the process.

The state should also allot additional funds to sustain and expand programs designed to prepare diverse future teachers to serve as educators in their communities. Early pathways programs provide mentorship, financial aid, academic support, and other resources for low-income students who are interested in becoming educators in their communities.[22] When students return to their alma mater to share their wisdom and experiences as mentors, it empowers their community. Ensuring the success of such programs brings us closer to educational equity.

Shift how teaching is promoted to students of color.

Teacher preparation programs must reframe how they promote the profession to potential candidates. Students need to see evidence of positive guidance and support when deciding to enter such programs in the first place. Colleges, universities, and teacher preparation programs must be intentional about the centering of conversations that highlight the importance of teaching and the impact that teachers have on students and society overall. Spotlighting a variety of educators who more fully represent the current diversity of teachers across the country through individual narratives that center the benefits, joy, and impact of the work that educators do everyday can encourage others to join the profession to experience the same. Students need to see current thriving educators who look like them. When recruiting teacher candidates, we recommend that teacher preparation programs revamp their marketing campaigns to include positive stories from diverse teacher perspectives, while emphasizing the avenues of financial and social emotional support available to teacher candidates of color.

North Carolina offers an example of this type of campaign through TeachNC.[23] The TeachNC website has comprehensive information on teaching in the state, including sections on becoming a teacher, exploring the career, and seeking out tools and resources, with sections targeted to future Latino and Black teacher communities. Streamlining information spanning multiple categories in one central location also makes it easier for those interested in joining the profession to have their questions answered and be connected to resources to assist them on their journey. A similar website in the state of Illinois can become a resource for future teachers of color as they consider why their service to diverse students across the state is urgent and necessary, and learn how to gain the support needed to make this a reality.

Incentivize students of color to return to teach in their communities.

Teacher candidates enrolled in education programs must complete student teaching hours as full-time college students at their four-year preparatory programs. The added workload is demanding for students who are already working full time to pay for undergraduate expenses, and students of color are already less likely to complete a four-year degree than their White peers.[24] Paying teacher candidates of color for their work while student teaching will alleviate financial burdens and encourage more teacher candidates of color to complete their teacher preparation programs. Although there are grants, scholarships, and aid available for student teachers to apply for, they are not guaranteed to every student. Many student teachers do not receive any pay during their practicum experience. The state should allocate funding for paid student teaching experiences for students from districts that are in the lowest two tiers of funding adequacy, if those students do their student teaching back in their home district. More affluent districts who wish to encourage their alumni of color to return to their districts as teachers should encourage them by providing a paid student teaching experience.

2. ISBE should improve current teachers' understanding of culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, and racial harassment.

The growing diversity of today's classrooms and the voices of students in our report show why today's teachers need to be equipped to teach to a wide variety of students. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) took a step in the right direction in 2021 with its approval of the Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards, which teacher and administrator preparation programs will use to prepare future educators to teach diverse students. The standards require these programs to include coursework on implicit bias, historical inequities, student advocacy and representation, and social-emotional learning (SEL) by October 2025. This excludes 132,000 current educators who need professional development to meet the needs of our current students.

ISBE must provide current teachers with the same knowledge and skills to reach and teach all students. Teachers need to know how to create environments that foster SEL when they recognize student strengths, hold high learning expectations for all students, and model not just strong communication skills but also the ability to listen and empathize—all of which are elements of a classroom guided by a culturally responsive teaching approach.[25] By requiring all teachers to engage in rigorous, ongoing professional development, ISBE can help ensure that all teachers grow their skills in culturally responsive instructional practices, SEL, and racial and harassment training and can equitably reach and teach students with a range of backgrounds (e.g., cultural, racial, socioeconomic) and social identities.[26]

We recommend that ISBE require a minimum of 20 hours focused on these skills within the 120 required professional development hours. Districts may elect to require more than the recommended minimum. By dedicating professional development hours for licensure toward improving one's pedagogy, responsiveness, and understanding of students' individual identities, Illinois can cultivate learning environments where all students can thrive, rather than just survive.

Move toward ongoing, participatory diversity, equity, and inclusion training for educators, rather than one-time mandated implicit bias training.

Illinois districts' ongoing work of SEL and cultural responsiveness should be part of the system-level organizational goals that focus on educating and raising awareness about the harmful effects of bias and on creating solutions that yield more equitable outcomes.[27] In 2017, House Bill 3869 amended the Illinois School Code to require in-service training for school personnel on civil rights and cultural diversity, including racial and ethnic sensitivity training and implicit biases.[28] To meet this requirement, school districts often offer a one-time mandated training throughout the school year, but fail to offer ongoing professional development related to this effort. Despite required training with the intention of decreasing implicit bias, research posits that White members of organizations continue to lack understanding of the extent of inequality within their own organizations and society at-large.[29] When one-time training like this consistently misses the mark on reducing bias, it isolates educators of color and leads to continued disparate outcomes for students of color. The Learning Policy Institute produced a

framework of key features of effective efforts that leverage professional development and result in improved student outcomes, naming that effective professional development must be sustained.[30] Illinois' districts can signal their commitment to addressing these root causes of problematic beliefs by expanding from a limited focus on implicit bias to ongoing, participatory sessions incorporating the district's diversity metrics, goals, and plans for addressing systemic diversity issues. The latter provides space for all those within the organization to build intrinsic motivation related to a common goal by creating actionable steps that cultivate learning environments that are just, joyful, and address bias at the root. [31]

3. ISBE and local school districts must implement system-wide measures to protect students of color.

Given the diversity of the student body in Illinois, there is a need for structures and systems that will protect students of color. Schools need to protect students of color by creating policies and procedures for students and staff to report instances of racial harassment. A majority of students in our focus groups spoke of specific moments where they experienced microaggressions during their K-12 education that went unaddressed. Microaggressions can be defined as "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward racial minorities, often automatically or unconsciously."[32] The impact of these subtle forms of prejudice cause feelings of anxiety and hopelessness as well as create negative self-schemas for students who are victims of such actions. One student shared that *"the lack of diversity made me vulnerable to stereotypes and believing them at a young age until I was more exposed to diversity. It affects identity and language when there's a lack of diversity."* When leaders in a school community are not trained how to combat these stereotypes and microaggressions, all students are not able to exist freely at school. Research indicates that many conversations around racism and microaggressions in society often place the onus on the victims of such oppressive actions to "overcome their perceived discrimination," rather on the perpetrators to understand the scope and impact of their actions due to a lack of measures holding them accountable.[33] It is not enough to dedicate future professional development sessions to address these issues through teaching about diversity and inclusiveness alone; schools must empower students by enacting policies and measures to report harm and by establishing consequences for those who perpetuate harm.

Black students today experience as many as five racist incidents per day on average.[34] Illinois' Coalition for Racism-Free Schools[35] is advocating for legislation that would mandate all schools to adopt policies addressing racial harassment, including clear definitions of unacceptable behavior and multiple avenues for reporting harassment. Although federal law does provide significant legal protections against racial harassment, students often do not know how to access them and school officials too often fail to recognize unlawful racial harassment, instead classifying harassing behaviors as bullying or other lesser offenses. Illinois' Racism-Free Schools Act will empower students and other school personnel to recognize and report instances of harm in an effort to remedy the harm done and prevent future incidents.

The Racism-Free Schools coalition notes that acts of racial harassment not only harm students, but also have a negative effect on the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. In addition to psychological and physical harm caused by racist acts, students of color also experience lower academic outcomes and then associate these experiences with school overall. The absence of policies in schools to ensure that people of color feel safe and supported creates hostile educational environments for both students and teachers, which can result in fewer students of color choosing to enter the profession and more teachers of color choosing to leave. Research shows that since the 1980s, efforts to recruit teachers of color have been largely successful, resulting in double the amount of teachers of color entering the profession and outpacing their White counterparts, particularly in high-poverty, high-minority, and urban schools. However, while initiatives have been implemented to retain teachers of color, they experience a rate of turnover that is significantly higher than White teachers, which can be attributed to poor working conditions in their schools.[36] Addressing racist acts including racial harassment in schools is a key component in ensuring that states are able to recruit teachers of color and retain them later on because they feel safe and supported.

4. Schools and districts should develop resources to match diverse students' needs.

School districts should identify culturally responsive and identity-affirming resources and supports that reflect the expressed needs of their student population. Culturally responsive teaching will look different in districts because of the unique student populations that exist within each. Districts must create mechanisms to hear from their communities and then act on that knowledge. Student and family needs across school districts can vary, but all are equally important, valid, and should be acknowledged with targeted levels of support to ensure belonging and success.

To understand what resources they need to offer, districts need to take steps to get to know their students and families. Districts can solicit feedback through targeted surveys, town halls, student/family panels, or a combination of all. By inviting students, parents, and other members of the school community into these spaces, districts can ensure that the needs of their stakeholders are legitimized and that participants feel heard. It is only after gathering this data that districts can take steps to address the unique needs of the individuals their schools serve.

One student in our focus groups expressed, *"Students from every community should feel like they have enough resources and opportunities afforded to them."* Students of color are acutely aware of the fact that some school districts prioritize the needs of one demographic group over another, which leads to a sense of disconnectedness and is not conducive of a learning space where they feel comfortable. This makes it especially important for districts to acknowledge, and reflect the many identities of their students and their families, not only in curricula and teaching staff, but also in school policies, procedures, and resources offered. Knowing that identity includes spans across race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, socioeconomic status, and native language, schools have various starting points for delving into the necessary to to meet the expressed needs of those they serve, and how to move forward if they are not adequately doing so.

Another student expressed, *"Provide support in different languages (flyers, translators, etc.) … making students feel more supported and heard, clubs that are intended for their culture."* Districts could ensure that all school documents are translated and that translators are available to support students and families at school events. The resources needed in a particular district must match the needs of their specific student population, with students, families, and community stakeholders in a feedback loop to brainstorm these solutions and reflect on what changes and improvements are needed.

CONCLUSION

In order to increase the number of students of color entering the teaching profession, we must improve the experiences and perceptions of students of color when it comes to the culturally-responsive and/or affirming nature of their K-12 experiences. Illinois school districts can begin by working in partnership with teacher preparation programs to highlight teachers of color in marketing campaigns, implement early pathways in their communities, and offer financial incentives aimed at diversifying their districts by inviting alumni of color to return to teach with increased compensation. Both state and districts can work toward cultivating environments where students of color feel safe, seen, and understood by ensuring that all in-service teachers are trained in identity literacy through robust, ongoing professional development, soliciting feedback from different stakeholder groups regarding their needs and concerns, using data to implement resources specifically designed to meet those needs, and creating measures to address racial harassment. These actions will result in a more diverse teacher workforce that affirms the individual assets that each individual brings to the classroom, thereby inspiring a new generation of educators to follow their path and do the same.

AUTHORS,

Stephanie Cordero-Gonzalez
Emily Leinss
Marcanthony Martinez

Briana Morales
Maria Onaindia
Ariana Sanders

TEACH +PLUS

teachplus.org/IL   @TeachPlusIL

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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APPENDIX

Discussion questions asked during focus groups

1. "What do you consider characteristics of a good teacher?"

2. "Which of the following best describes your experiences with having a teacher of color: More than half of my teachers have been people of color, Fewer than half of my teachers have been people of color, I have never had a teacher who was a person of color"

3. "Thinking about the teachers you have had in school, was their diversity or lack of diversity positive or negative for you?"

4. "What are some positives and negatives about being a teacher?"

5. "Do you want to be a teacher?"

6. "What should be done to attract more people of color to become teachers?"

7. "What are three things that schools could change tomorrow to make them better places for students to learn?"

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