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Retaining Teachers of Color to Improve Student Outcomes

Low pay for teachers has received significant national attention, but having a diverse teaching workforce is also critical for improving student outcomes. A large but often ignored problem in America's education system is the lack of diverse representation among teachers. There are very few male teachers of color in the classroom, and the turnover rate for ones that exist is disproportionately high. Retaining such teachers is a critical element in efforts to narrow the achievement gap and improve student outcomes.

Overview

Recent teacher strikes and presidential candidates' platforms have put the necessity of increased teacher salaries at the forefront of national attention. Average weekly wages of public school teachers have not grown in 23 years; there is a critical need to increase teacher compensation in order to help students receive a high-quality education.¹ Low pay for teachers is not the only issue affecting teacher quality and student outcomes, however. A large but often ignored problem in America's education system is the lack of ethn racial representation among teachers.

There are very few male teachers of color in the classroom, and their turnover rate is disproportionately high. UC Berkeley professor Travis J. Bristol interviewed Black male teachers in Boston Public Schools to learn why they stayed or left their schools. He found that that challenging working conditions are the most cited reason for leaving, and that addressing this atmosphere—such as by reduc-

This brief reviews research by UC Berkeley Assistant Professor Travis J. Bristol. Written by Lisa McCorkell of the Goldman School of Public Policy and Sara Hinkley of IRLE.

ing the emphasis on state standardized testing—is critical to improving retention and improving student outcomes.

Background

Ethnoracial diversity in the teaching profession has been shown to have positive impacts on student outcomes. Having a demographically similar teacher improves learning for students of color.² Further, Black students perform better on standardized exams when they have a Black teacher, and the presence of Black male teachers improves Black boys' schooling outcomes.³ Despite this evidence, there is little diversity among teachers in the United States. In fact, only 20% of American public school teachers are nonwhite and only 23% are male.⁴ This problem is exacerbated by high turnover rates among teachers of color. Teachers of color have a turnover rate of 18.9%, compared to 15% for their white counterparts.⁵ Black teachers have one of the highest rates of turnover, and Black male teachers are leaving the teaching profession at a higher rate than their peers.⁶

In a recent paper—"A Tale of Two Types of Schools"—Bristol turned to the Boston Public School district to search for answers on what causes Black male teachers to stay or leave their schools, and gives recommendations to policymakers for how to address these root causes.

Why Black Male Teachers Leave



In the 2012-13 school year, Bristol interviewed 27 Black male teachers across 14 schools in the Boston Public School district.⁷ Twenty of these teachers were in seven schools that had three or more Black male teachers (who Bristol defines as “Groupers”); the remaining seven teachers were in seven other schools and were the only Black male teacher on faculty (“Loners”). Nine out of the 20 Groupers did not return to their schools the following academic year, while all of the Loners stayed. While this trend may be surprising, Bristol found common themes around why Groupers left and Loners stayed.

Groupers were more likely than Loners to work in turnaround schools or schools that were in the process of becoming turnaround schools. Schools that are designated as turnaround schools are given five years to improve their state standardized testing scores before the state takes over the school. Groupers cited having challenging working conditions as their primary reason for leaving. Five of the nine Groupers that left said they left due to administrative leadership. They felt that their teaching practice was under hyper-surveillance and that the administration was more focused on controlling student behavior and improving test scores than creating a successful learning environment. Three of the nine Groupers left their schools because they felt that teaching was not a good fit for them. The remaining Grouper’s position was unable to be funded for the following year.

All of the Loners returned to their schools the next year. While they were more prone to racist remarks from their colleagues than Groupers, Loners stayed for several reasons. First, they were more likely to work in pilot and innovation schools, which provide for more flexibility in designing curriculum and smaller class sizes. Second, Loners were often concerned about how the needs of the students of color at the school would be met if they left. So while they were often socially isolated, whether due to gender, race, or age, they felt that the racism and

isolation they experienced was preferable to working in a more challenging environment. Bristol remarked, “As Black men living in a country that continues to grapple with the historical legacy of the subjugation of people of African descent, Loners expected to experience racist encounters. The priority, then, for these Black male teachers who were the only Black men on their faculty was to be in an environment that allowed them to teach.”

A common conception is that teachers are more likely to leave schools with high concentrations of students of color and low socioeconomic status.⁸ However, Bristol builds on research that instead points to the poor working conditions in schools as the primary reason for turnover.⁹

Recommendations

Bristol cautions that diversity campaign efforts alone will not increase the number of teachers of color unless their high rate of turnover is addressed. Removing the emphasis of standardized testing in evaluating school funding decisions could reduce the administrative focus on test scores, allowing teachers more flexibility in teaching practice. Bristol’s research demonstrates the importance of such flexibility to teacher retention. With few men of color entering the profession, and a looming teacher shortage, policymakers must be attentive to how existing policies discourage teachers from staying in the classroom.

FEATURED RESEARCH

Bristol, T.J. (Forthcoming). A tale of two types of schools: An exploration of how school working conditions influence Black male teacher turnover. *Teachers College Record*.

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- 7 The Boston Public School district's student population is 41% Latino, 36% Black, 13% White, and 9% Asian, while the teacher population is 62% White, 23% Black, 10% Hispanic, and 5% Asian, with only 5.8% being Black men.
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