

HU(E)MAN CAPITAL: THE NEED FOR MORE TEACHERS OF COLOR IN NORTH CAROLINA

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This policy brief highlights the need for greater diversity among North Carolina's teacher workforce. Although the majority of public school students are people of color, nearly 80% of North Carolina's teachers are white. Following an overview of the problem, the brief reviews the research literature on the benefits of student-teacher racial matching, describes the policy context for teacher diversity in North Carolina and addresses common misconceptions about teachers of color. The brief concludes by proposing four recommendations to increase the supply of teachers of color in the state: 1) adding race to the Teacher Working Conditions Survey, 2) ensuring school districts develop teacher diversity plans, 3) evaluating educator preparation programs on diversity, and 4) developing strategic partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Minority Serving Institutions.

INTRODUCTION

The lack of teacher diversity in North Carolina is a problem. Although it is not new or exclusive to our state, very little has been done from a policy standpoint to fix or respond to it. Roughly 80% of the teachers in North Carolina identify as white.¹ With a majority of students being people of color, there is a significant racial and ethnic disparity between who is teaching and who is learning in our schools. Black students comprise just over one-quarter of students in North Carolina public schools but only 13% of its teachers.² The worst gaps are for Latinx and Asian teachers, who represent 17% and

4% of the students respectively, yet a mere 2.3% and .04% of the teaching population.³ While one's race obviously does not determine whether or not they can teach, the racial identity of teachers matters in a number of ways.

This scarcity of Black and Brown teachers is not a matter of chance. It is not due simply to lack of interest or attraction to the field of education. Instead, it has a lesser-known history and is in many ways the consequence of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate schools.⁴ While many districts across the country

eventually made efforts to comply with court-ordered desegregation by introducing Black and white students into the same school environments, the same did not occur for Black educators.

Thousands of Black principals and teachers were not absorbed into these so-called “integration” efforts and were summarily laid-off.⁵ Scores of expert teachers who had been instructing Black students in all-Black schools for years, endowed with cultural knowledge, and preparing them for success were lost. In North Carolina alone, all the Black superintendents, nearly 500 elementary principals, and over 3,000 teachers were discarded as a result.⁶ Latinx educators endured similar fights for integrated and bilingual education environments followed by massive firings of teachers from that community.⁷ While the historical contexts for the various racial groups are divergent, the pronounced lack of visibility in the profession is a commonality.

The need for a more representative teaching workforce is all the more pressing in the shadow of the current demographics of the state. People of color constituted 92% of the population growth in the country in the first decade of 2000s.⁸ The majority of students enrolled in

public schools nationally are also non-white.⁹ As a matter of pure economics, the state and nation cannot hope to compete in a global society by failing to educate the majority of its students. By 2030, the majority of the working population will be people of color.¹⁰ According to the National Skills Coalition, closing racial inequities in education could translate to an economic benefit of \$2.3 trillion by 2050 for the country.¹¹ The myFutureNC Commission shined a light on the need for the state to increase the education attainment of its citizens.¹² They set a statewide goal stating that 2 million North Carolinian students will receive a post-secondary credential or degree by 2030. Currently fewer than half of working-age Black, Latinx, and Native adults are on path to meet this mark.¹³ Both the opportunity and problem are summed up by the myFutureNC Call to Action, “If we do not come together to redirect our state, we will fail to realize a future in which all North Carolinians can thrive”.¹⁴ Without racial equity, this is virtually impossible.

Increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the teaching workforce in North Carolina is not only necessary as a matter of educational justice, but also the prosperity of our state.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE IMPACT OF A DIVERSE TEACHING WORKFORCE

Education research examining the impact of teacher diversity on student outcomes has found positive effects in several key areas. In addition to short-term measures that are visible within a single school year, like attendance and suspension rates, teacher diversity has also been linked to long-term education outcomes such as graduation rates. Partly due to the availability of ample administrative data on public schools, many educational research studies that examine the role of race were completed using data from North Carolina. As such, in the brief summary of the effects of teacher diversity on school outcomes that follows, several findings carry particular resonance for North Carolina.

Attendance – One of the most important steps in the learning process is being present in school in order to engage with teachers, classmates, and educational materials. When students struggle with attendance, they are more likely to have lower grades, receive lower test scores, and potentially drop out of school altogether.¹⁵ While there are many factors that go into

student attendance, teacher diversity is one that deserves greater attention. A 2019 research study used data from North Carolina public schools to examine the relationship between teacher demographics and student absences and suspensions.¹⁶ The researchers found that student-teacher racial mismatch—observed when students are taught by a teacher from another race—leads to a significant increase in school absences and suspensions. Additionally, the increase in absences due to racial mismatch results in students being 3% more likely to become chronically absent, a term defined as missing at least ten percent of the school year. Another study concluded that teachers have as much influence on student attendance as they do on student achievement.¹⁷ These findings are particularly meaningful considering that the vast majority of North Carolina’s teachers are white while most public school students are not.¹⁸

Suspensions – Suspensions are a crucial factor in academic success because students cannot access learning opportunities when they are barred from the classroom.

Unfortunately, race factors heavily into whether and how students are punished in schools. In North Carolina, Black students were suspended at twice the state average during the 2016-2017 school year which represented an additional 58,000 days of missed school due to out-of-school suspensions.¹⁹ As early as kindergarten, teachers evaluate student behavior differently based on race—both their own and that of the student—resulting in Black students’ behavior being rated more negatively.²⁰ A 2017 research study used data from North Carolina to investigate whether having more Black teachers affected how often Black students were suspended or expelled.²¹ According to the researchers, greater exposure to Black teachers results in fewer suspensions or expulsions for Black students. This was especially true for disciplinary referrals for “willful defiance,” a category that relies on teacher judgment to determine when punishment is necessary. Here again, the underrepresentation of teachers of color has profound consequences on educational outcomes for North Carolina’s public school students.

Gifted Education Identification -

Like similarly-named programs around the country, North Carolina’s Academically or Intellectually Gifted

(AIG) program is designed to offer rigorous academic instruction for students with exceptional abilities in math, reading, or other areas.²² The process for admission into gifted programs varies from state to state, but students are typically identified through some combination of teacher referral and student assessment.²³ According to researchers, both testing and teacher recommendations are sources of bias that keep culturally and linguistically diverse students from entering gifted education programs.²⁴ These findings are reflected in the data—both nationally and in North Carolina—as American Indian, Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students are underrepresented in gifted education.²⁵ Increasing teacher diversity is a promising remedy to this challenge. One study found that a 10% increase in the proportion of Black teachers in a school was associated with a 3% increase in Black students enrolled in gifted education. The same was true for Hispanic teachers and students.²⁶ Researchers point to a variety of factors to explain these findings, the most consistent being the ability of racially matched teachers to recognize a student’s brilliance through the fog of racist stereotypes.

Academic Achievement –

Academic achievement is much broader than standardized test scores, but education policymakers and researchers typically focus on these tools when attempting to measure student learning. Recent studies have found that Black students perform better on academic assessments when taught by Black teachers. Scholars have reached this conclusion across varying grade levels, academic subjects, geographic contexts, and using a variety of research methods.²⁷ While there is less statistical evidence on how student-teacher racial matching affects academic achievement for Asian, Latinx, and Native American students, researchers have identified numerous benefits to racial matching for these groups.²⁸ For example, Latinx high school students were more likely to take Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses when there were greater percentages of Latinx teachers on staff.²⁹ Other studies point to students of color feeling a greater sense of belonging and having higher aspirations when taught by teachers of color.³⁰ Although social-emotional education is often viewed as separate from academic achievement, a discussion of the factors that determine how

well students perform in school is incomplete without acknowledging the role of social and emotional well-being. Increasing diversity among North Carolina’s teachers is a step toward ensuring that all students feel welcome in school and excited about learning.

Graduation & Post-Secondary Aspirations –

In a study of the long-term impact of teachers of color on educational outcomes for students of color, researchers found that Black boys were 39% more likely to graduate from high school if they had at least one Black teacher between grades three and five.³¹ Not only were students more likely to graduate, but they were also more likely to have college aspirations and take college entrance exams after being assigned just one same-race teacher in elementary school.³² These findings were consistent across data from North Carolina and Tennessee and were tested using robust statistical models. The evidence is clear: diversifying North Carolina’s teaching workforce is a great way to produce more equitable outcomes for students of color, and the best way to prepare the next generation of leaders for the economic, social, and civic challenges they are certain to face.

THE NORTH CAROLINA LANDSCAPE

Education is a right in the North Carolina state constitution.³³ In the North Carolina Supreme Court case *Leandro vs. North Carolina*, filed in 1994 and ruled on in 1997, the plaintiffs in low-income rural and urban districts alleged that the state was failing to meet its constitutional obligation to provide all students with the legal standard of a “sound basic education”. In essence, the presiding Judge Howard Manning eventually ordered the state to provide the following things as a remedy: (1) a qualified teacher in every classroom, (2) a qualified principal in every school, and (3) resources to effectively administer education.

Judge Manning would later characterize the lack of progress as “educational genocide” when discussing the glaring disparities in some districts’ high school achievement.³⁴ Over 20 years after the original filing, Judge David Lee took over the case and commissioned nonpartisan research group WestEd to evaluate progress on *Leandro* and produce recommendations.³⁵ In 2020, Judge Lee confirmed the findings that the state was still failing to meet its obligation, particularly among historically marginalized

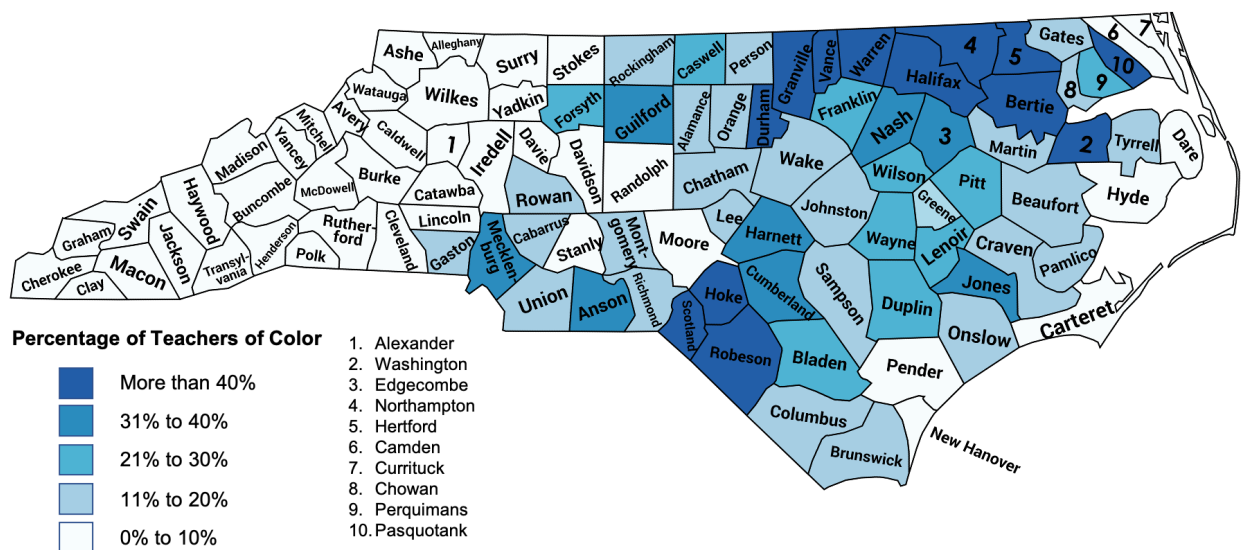
groups like students of color.³⁶ The report was released to the public in December 2019 and offered eight recommendations to address critical needs, the second of which is to “provide a qualified, well-prepared and diverse teaching staff in every school”. The WestEd report more explicitly lays out the priority to “significantly increase the racial-ethnic diversity of the North Carolina teacher workforce and ensure all teachers employ culturally responsive practice” and noted that many of the low-wealth and under-performing districts are majority students of color.³⁷

The North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE) adopted its 2020-2025 Strategic Plan in November 2019, with the guiding principles of “equity” and “whole child” informing the whole initiative. Of particular note, Goal 1: Eliminate opportunity gaps by 2025, includes Objective 6 which states “Increase the number of educators of color in schools across North Carolina”.³⁸ Although the NCSBE does not stipulate a particular course of action, it has committed to disaggregating teacher-race data at the district level and visualizing it as part of a publicly available statewide dashboard.

In December 2019, Governor Cooper signed Executive Order 113 establishing the Developing a Representative and Inclusive Vision for Education (DRIVE) Taskforce.³⁹ Through the duration of 2020, the various appointed members of the statewide task force met to explore well-researched and proven strategies for recruiting and retaining more educators of color in North Carolina. The culminating report and recommendations were released in December 2020, offering a comprehensive vision for increasing racial and ethnic diversity of K12 teachers.

The issue of teacher diversity has continued to be elevated to state-level prominence with the release of a report titled “Lack of a Dedicated State-Level Effort Challenges North Carolina’s Capacity to Increase Teacher Diversity” by the nonpartisan Performance and Evaluation Division of the North Carolina General Assembly. The report prepared for the Joint Legislative Program Evaluation Oversight Committee (JLPEOC) concluded that there has been no state-level effort to increase teacher diversity, but did identify promising practices at the district level, in charter schools, and Educator Preparation Programs that could be emulated.⁴⁰

The Distribution of Teachers of Color Across North Carolina



Map of the Distribution of Teachers of Color across North Carolina. Based on data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Statistical Profile, 2018-2019 school year. Teachers of Color include those who identify as American Indian/ Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and two or more races.

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) are traditionally held accountable for their performance based on a host of various measures.⁴¹ However, a revised model that includes Retention, EPP Performance, Stakeholder Perceptions, and Diversity has been considered by the Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission (PEPSC) and the NCSBE.⁴² The Diversity component would consist of three dimensions: growth in teacher candidates of color, percent candidates of color compared to overall college or university population, and percent candidates of color compared to the state as a whole. While the model would be weighted heavily based on EPP performance, Diversity would share the same weight as the other two components.⁴³ This proposed new accountability model for EPPs has been sent to the General Assembly but has yet to receive final approval.

Despite inaction by the state, organizations like [Profound Gentlemen](#) and [Ladies](#) and [TeachNC](#) have made actively recruiting and developing racially diverse teachers part of their work. [Profound Gentlemen](#) is a North Carolina-based nonprofit that uses a cohort model to develop aspiring male educators of color and increase their

beyond-classroom impact. Its sister organization [Profound Ladies](#) follows the same model, concentrating efforts on women of color. [TeachNC](#) is a public-private partnership between NCDPI, [TEACH.org](#), and [BEST NC](#) created to make the profession more attractive and “increase the quantity, quality, and diversity of teachers entering North Carolina’s classrooms”. The comprehensive website is meant to simplify the process of becoming a teacher by offering a multitude of pathways to learning about and entering the field. Though it only launched in 2019, it boasts a majority of enrollees who identify as people of color.



TOP 5 MYTHS ABOUT TEACHER DIVERSITY

THE MYTH	THE REALITY
<p>Race shouldn't matter when it comes to teachers.</p>	<p>Teachers aren't simply transmitting knowledge to students, they are helping students to understand their place in the world and claim their right to be brilliant. Teachers perform these tasks through the lens of their own racialized life experiences. Students also see and experience race, even when policymakers pretend they do not. For these reasons and the powerful impact that teachers of color have on educational outcomes for students,⁴⁴ a teacher's race absolutely matters— especially in a state as diverse as North Carolina.</p>
<p>Teacher quality will suffer if we focus on teacher diversity.</p>	<p>This argument is rooted in the racist assumption that white teachers are superior to all others. It also calls our definition of “teacher quality” into question. Education research has demonstrated that teacher diversity is a key component of teacher quality.⁴⁵ We must view these two concepts as complementary rather than competing.</p>
<p>White students will suffer if we focus on teacher diversity.</p>	<p>It is only possible to arrive at this conclusion if we view teachers of color through a deficit lens, or we believe that they are lacking in some way. In reality, teachers of color provide unique approaches and perspectives that ALL students benefit from learning.⁴⁶ White students have as much to gain from increasing diversity among North Carolina's teachers as anyone.</p>
<p>Lack of interest in the profession is why there aren't more teachers of color.</p>	<p>Were this the case, the solution would be simple. The reality is much more complicated. There are several roadblocks along the journey for would-be teachers of color in North Carolina—some rooted in historical events and others resulting from public policies. The challenges don't end once candidates reach the classroom. Black teachers report feeling overburdened and undervalued which leads many to exit the profession at higher rates than their white colleagues.⁴⁷ Our goals should be to widen pathways for recruitment and to pave over potholes that lower retention.</p>
<p>It will cost too much money to focus on teacher diversity.</p>	<p>Given North Carolina's current demographics, and the significant impact that teachers of color have on students, it would be devastating to the state's economic, social, and civic health to neglect the need for more teachers of color.⁴⁸ Our ability to prosper as a state depends on our investment in the people who will lead us into the future. A well-prepared, experienced, and diverse teaching workforce will pay dividends beyond measure. Ignoring the need for a more diverse teaching workforce will cost us much more than we can afford.</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Inquire about race on the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey

Much of what we know about the professional experiences of North Carolina's teachers comes from this important survey tool. While we are able to dissect the data by school, district, and years of teaching experience, we cannot currently examine the experiences of teachers of color because the survey does not inquire about respondents' race. This is a missed opportunity to gather valuable information that would allow policymakers, researchers, and school leaders to address the unique challenges facing teachers of color. For example, the 2020 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey results indicate that 7% of teachers feel that teachers are bullied on account of their race or ethnicity, and more than a quarter feel that students are bullied because of race within their own school. It would be helpful for policymakers to understand whether or not race is a factor in why some teachers feel this way. Of course, including race on the Teacher Working Conditions Survey might compromise anonymity in schools where there are few teachers of color. However, continuing to exclude race will make it difficult to address the specific challenges that discourage teachers of color from remaining in the classroom.⁴⁹

2. Ensure every district in the state develops an educator diversity plan

Teachers of color are spread unevenly across North Carolina's 115 school districts. According to the final report from Governor Cooper's DRIVE Taskforce, the gap between the percentage of teachers of color and students of color ranges from 6% in Weldon City Schools to 58% in Asheboro City Schools. While some districts fare better than others, the glaring reality is that teachers of color are underrepresented in every school district in the state. In response, policymakers should ensure that every district in North Carolina develops a plan for increasing diversity among its teachers. These plans should consider points of entry into the teaching profession as well as points of departure that diminish retention of teachers of color. The Tennessee legislature passed a similar educator diversity policy in early 2021 that could serve as a model for North Carolina. District officials might consider a range of strategies such as grow-your-own programs that provide pathways for students to become teachers, partnerships with nearby colleges and universities to place student teachers of color, or financial incentives that compensate educators of color for the often unseen labor they provide on behalf of students.⁵⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Approve an accountability model for Educator Preparation Programs that factors in diversity

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) have a vital role to play in diversifying North Carolina's educator pipeline, but ensuring the hue of the teaching workforce matches K-12 student enrollment is nowhere near the top of their priorities list. That could change if state policymakers adopt a proposed accountability framework that includes teacher candidate diversity as a component of program success. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction currently rates EPPs based on teacher evaluations in the first three years after graduation, the percent of recent program graduates whose students meet or exceed expected annual growth, and the percent of graduates who report feeling well-prepared after their first year of teaching. However, a proposed EPP evaluation model would create a weighted, four-domain framework that includes diversity (people of color, males, first-generation students, Pell Grant eligibility, and urbanicity). Adopting this evaluation model would incentivize EPPs to recruit and retain more diverse students, thereby ensuring North Carolina's educator workforce is equipped to teach the increasingly diverse students who attend our schools.

4. Develop strategic partnerships with North Carolina's Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Minority-Serving Institutions

North Carolina has the second most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the nation, just behind Alabama. Many HBCUs were founded for the purpose of producing teachers, even as they have branched out to more expansive degree offerings. The state is also home to another Minority Serving Institution (MSI) in UNC Pembroke and has several emerging Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). As a result, North Carolina is uniquely positioned to become a national leader in collaborating with minority-serving postsecondary institutions to produce educators of color. Indeed, state leaders have already taken steps in this direction by selecting North Carolina A&T State University, Fayetteville State University, and UNC Pembroke as partner institutions for the NC Teaching Fellows program. However, the need for teachers of color extends well beyond Special Education and STEM, which are currently the only subjects eligible for participation in the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program. Policymakers could significantly increase the supply of teachers of color by providing additional resources for educator preparation programs at minority-serving institutions. Additionally, policymakers could establish a job board for graduates of MSIs that would serve as a resource for school districts hoping to hire talented teachers of color.

CONCLUSION

Education researchers were skeptical about the impact of teachers of color on education outcomes for students of color in the 1990s. Though there was an abundance of anecdotal and qualitative evidence for the profound effect of student-teacher racial matching—and the number of Black teachers was falling drastically—some scholars cautioned policymakers about devoting public resources to recruiting and retaining Black teachers without significant quantitative evidence.⁵¹ Scholars of education have since answered that call by clearly demonstrating the importance of teachers of color for all students using a variety of measures and statistical methods. Yet, some policymakers remain unconvinced.

In the intervening 30 years, the crisis of teachers of color has only worsened. Whereas Black teachers made up 8.6% of our nation's teaching workforce in 1980, that number had fallen to just 6.5% by 2018.⁵² In North Carolina, Black students are 25% of public school enrollment, but Black educators are just 13% of the state's teachers.⁵³ The consequences of this crisis are

evident in a range of educational measures. Black, Latinx, and Native American students are overrepresented in school punishment, underrepresented in gifted education and Advanced Placement courses, are more likely to be chronically absent from school, and score lower on End-of-Grade and End-of-Course exams.⁵⁴ Education research has demonstrated that students of color fare better in each of these areas when taught by teachers of color. For example, when taught by a Black teacher, Black students score higher on standardized tests, have better school attendance, are less likely to be subjected to exclusionary discipline, are less likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to have college aspirations.⁵⁵

Organizations like Profound Gentlemen, Profound Ladies, and TeachNC are doing incredible work to ensure North Carolina's teaching workforce is prepared to educate all of our students. We recommend several steps that state policymakers can take to lead North Carolina forward:

1) adding race to the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey;

2) ensuring every school district in the state develops an educator diversity plan;

3) approving an accountability model for educator preparation programs that factor in diversity; and

4) developing strategic partnerships with North Carolina's Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Minority-Serving Institutions.

These strategies recognize hu(e)man capital as an invaluable resource that must be prioritized if North Carolina is to make good on its obligation to provide equal opportunities for all students.

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