Greater Than Diamonds:
Recommendations on Improving Teacher Diversity in Arkansas from Teach Plus Teacher Policy Advisory Board

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INTRODUCTION

Arkansas is becoming increasingly diverse. While the student population is exploding with racial and linguistic diversity, our educator workforce has not reflected this growing trend. Research has consistently shown that teachers of color have a greater impact in their classrooms, schools, and community and that students of color benefit from having a teacher of color as their educator. These teachers improve reading and math test scores, boost college attendance rates, decrease chronic absenteeism, and increase student engagement for students of color, all while creating challenging academic coursework and positive classroom cultures for White students.[1]

In 2020, youth of color made up 40 percent of the Arkansas public school student population. In the same year, only 12 percent of teachers identified as teachers of color.[2] Out of 262 public school districts in Arkansas, 68 did not have a single teacher of color employed as a teacher of record for the 2020-2021 school year.[3]

We are a diverse group of educators and members of the Teach Plus Arkansas Advisory Board who teach in Central Arkansas, the Arkansas Delta region, and Northwest Arkansas. Students in our state come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, go to school in many educational settings (including school districts and charters), and live in urban and rural communities. We are passionate about ensuring that all students are taught by diverse educators.

The springboard for our interest and research was the 2019 Teach Plus report, *If you listen, we will stay: Why teachers of color leave and how to disrupt teacher turnover*.[4] In order to deepen our understanding of the perspectives of teachers of color in our state and how best to diversify the teacher workforce, we conducted focus groups with educators of color in our state in December 2020. In this brief, we present findings from our research and recommendations for district policy makers and campus leaders on the experiences of teachers of color on campus and for hiring and retention practices.

Findings

1. Teachers of color want to be listened to and valued for their expertise and have opportunities for authentic expression.

2. Teachers of color report an absence of learning opportunities for school leaders and educators to discuss and learn about racial, economic, and linguistic diversity.

3. Teachers of color feel that they do not have sufficient access to leadership roles and the support and resources necessary to grow as professionals as compared to their White peers.

4. Teachers of color point to barriers at the campus and district level when it comes to recruiting, interviewing, and hiring educators of color.

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Recommendations

District leaders and elected boards should:

1. Explicitly commit to diversifying the workplace in their goals, priorities, and intentions, and regularly report out on progress.

2. Value educators by creating schools where leaders listen, empower, and invest in teachers of color by providing informal and formal opportunities for mentorship, leadership, and feedback.

3. Prioritize funding for ongoing and deep professional development on equity, tolerance, implicit bias, and anti-racism for educators at all levels.

4. Develop pathways to leadership for educators by creating and providing stipends for teachers of color to attend district- or region-based leadership mentoring programs.

5. Design and implement requirements and protocols for campus recruitment, interviewing, and hiring practices that engage diverse campus committees and rely on research-based practices.

METHODOLOGY

In December 2020, we facilitated five focus groups with 36 educators of color to elicit information about the recruitment and retention of teachers of color.[5] Twenty-seven participants are current classroom teachers, while nine are retired or currently in a supporting role such as literary specialist. All educators self-identified as a person of color, with Black teachers and Hispanic[6] teachers participating. The teaching experience of participants ranged from one to 26 years, and most of the educators came from cities or small towns across the state. In our research, we wanted to:

+   Understand the experiences and perspectives of teachers of color in Arkansas, including their experiences at the intersection of race and education.

+   Gauge what can be done to attract, develop, and retain teachers of color and to prepare them for the specific educational environment they will face in the South.

FINDINGS

1. **Teachers of color want to be listened to and valued for their expertise and have opportunities for authentic expression.**

Many teachers in our focus groups believe they are not able to bring their true selves to their work environment. *"No district or school I've ever worked for felt like a place where teachers' cultural, racial, and ethnic identities have been affirmed,"* shared one educator from a large school district.

Less than a third of teachers expressed that they currently work in an environment where their identities are valued and affirmed, and overwhelmingly the focus group participants agreed that they regularly do not feel listened to or engaged when it comes to school decision making for school business such as curriculum and continuous improvement work. Educators who feel that their school cultures value their strengths as an educator of color cautioned that while their school's open

culture allows them to share and talk about their expertise as an educator of color, it is not to a great degree. One shared, *"I feel as though my school values culture as far as they can understand it. If it requires them to be uncomfortable in any way, they are reluctant to discuss it,"* and another went on to say, *''Currently, I feel that I'm heard but there's not always follow through on what is best for teachers of color as well as students of color in our school."*

The few educators who did feel their campus culture embraced their full experience as an educator of color indicated the importance of their leadership team in creating this environment: *"My principal not only talks the talk but walks the walk in her commitment to diversity and equity."* A few shared that they specifically moved to the campus because of the leadership. *"In my school, we're blessed to have a principal who tries to understand cultural, racial, and ethnic identities; however, it's [only] a handful of colleagues that I feel understood and supported by when expressing my opinion from racial standpoint. As a result, sometimes my energy gets exhausted to continue implementing new ideas to benefit the idea of equality and unity."*

Beyond this, participants in the focus groups shared that there are few open conversations about race within their school buildings. They also reported being frequently excluded from decision making processes as compared to their White peers. *"In my previous role, I noticed that... White teachers were always invited to do the training and go to campus improvement teams,"* and when teachers of color were invited to leadership or decision-making tables, their voices weren't as acknowledged. One shared, *"I had the opportunity to work on curriculum mapping for the district this year… and when I was voicing my opinion on how to help students… my voice was thrown to the side."*

In many schools and districts, teachers of color go to work each day and teach in spaces where they do not feel valued for their distinct talents and perspectives. The focus group responses indicate the need to invest time and resources to create working environments where teachers of color are actively engaged and affirmed.

2. Teachers of color report an absence of learning opportunities for school leaders and educators to discuss and learn about racial, economic, and linguistic diversity.

Participants indicated that they felt very comfortable talking about race as it relates to student success, but do not believe that their White peers have that same comfort. Though participants indicated that some of their districts offer professional development on diversity, many shared that there was none.

When participants did talk about their experiences with diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development, they shared that it felt like, *"checking a box and not very deep,"* and, *" We discuss trauma, but we don't always have effective services in place. We have professional developments, but we don't always hold people accountable for implementing the learnings."* Others shared that there was more to do to engage their White peers, *"I've gone to many PLCs and meetings about diversity where the White teachers are on their phones, completely tuned out."*

Beyond the lack of sustained and deep professional development, there are few opportunities on campus for educators to learn about racial, economic, and linguistic diversity of students and how that applies to education, curriculum, and the student experience. Teachers of color share that this lack of deep engagement

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about race in particular contributes to the obstacles that teachers have in truly understanding their peers and students of color. *"The overwhelming majority of my students yearn for a sense of belonging. For the last 13 or 14 years of my 18 years in education, I've taught almost exclusively Black and brown students. They continuously share stories and shed tears of how they feel in non majority Black classes or from teacher biases from non Black teachers."* This bias often creates additional pressure for educators of color. As one teacher shared, *"I often find myself with my plate loaded attempting to go beyond my job description to assist students who do not find a sense of belonging in educational settings."*

Although it appears many districts and campuses are attempting to address the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion professional development through formal offerings, the focus groups reveal that these opportunities are few and far between, and when available, lack substance and depth. Because of this, educators, students, and leaders aren't able to authentically talk and learn about issues that impact campus culture and student learning.

3. **Teachers of color feel that they do not have sufficient access to leadership roles and the support and resources necessary to grow as professionals as compared to their White peers.**

Participants pointed to the importance of having educators of color in leadership roles because of their ability to create safe spaces for teachers of color to feel valued and affirmed. Just like the benefits for students of color having teachers of color, leaders of color bring those same benefits for both students and teachers. However, teachers in our focus groups indicated that there aren't many mentorship opportunities provided to support aspiring leaders of color. *"I've seen qualified Black teachers get passed up for leadership positions in the school. Districts need to [provide mentorship to] Black teachers for leadership positions."*

Participants expressed feelings of wanting to be seen as leaders in the profession and not only when it comes to discipline issues for which they stated they are often used. One educator said, *"When I see Black administrators get capped at being Dean of Students and passed up for other roles, that can take a toll on you emotionally and drive Black teachers and administrators away from those roles."* Teachers of color want mentorship and opportunities to be at the decision-making table so they can provide their expertise in all areas they serve within education.

Focus group participants also discussed the financial barriers to entering the profession and pursuing leadership opportunities *"Any discussion of recruiting/ retaining black teachers and teachers of color must begin with a discussion of increasing teacher pay. Teachers who are people of color are more likely to incur student debt, and have less generational wealth than their white counterparts."* Such barriers disproportionately affect teachers of color and are a major factor when pursuing leadership and administrative roles. As one aspiring leader shared, *"I've done the math. I can't take care of my family and get my master's degree in order to become a principal. The money doesn't make sense."* Participants discussed how districts, leadership programs, and state and local funding opportunities should work together to support aspiring leaders of color by explaining, *"they should all allow teachers of color opportunities to lead."*

The lack of opportunities to lead in both formal and informal ways, an absence of mentorship, plus financial barriers to degrees that would open up leadership pathways, were concerns of focus group participants. Collectively, this indicates that attention to leadership pathways for educators of color deserves consideration.

4. **Teachers of color point to barriers at the campus and district level when it comes to recruiting, interviewing, and hiring educators of color.**

Participants celebrated a lot of good work already happening on campuses when it comes to recruiting and hiring diverse educators. Some indicated that principal commitment was clear, *"[my principal] demonstrates her commitment by making diversity and equity key factors in her hiring. I have heard her say that hiring is the most important job she has as a principal. She exercises this "most important job" with a strong commitment to diversity and equity."* Others share that recruitment specialists are being successfully utilized, *"In my current school, I was contacted [for my job]. When you need the best teacher for your community, you need to go out there and get them. They aren't going to fall in your lap."*

However, most participants indicated that there are real barriers when it comes to hiring educators of color. Setting clear goals and actions to hire a diverse teacher workforce was one barrier often mentioned by the focus groups' participants. *"Administrators say they can't find more teachers of color. But I don't see them having an actual plan to recruit, with goals."* Recruitment and interviewing with an inclusive mindset is another barrier participants shared, *"Hiring administrators are saying there aren't any candidates and teachers are saying they aren't looking in the right places or asking the right questions,"* and, *"Hiring managers aren't applying a culturally responsive lens to the process and don't make diversity a priority."*

Further, participants frequently shared that teachers of color on campus don't have a role in the recruitment and hiring process, *"There needs to be more inclusion for the voice of teachers of color during the recruitment and interview process, as well as the hiring and training of new teachers that are not teachers of color."*

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Explicitly commit to diversifying the workplace in their goals, priorities, and intentions, and regularly report out on progress.**

Participants indicated that having leadership at the board, superintendent, and principal level explicitly and publicly commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion goals creates an environment where teachers of color feel more welcoming and there is a positive effect on their overall community. *"Leaders need to be vocal with their commitments and opinions that [diverse workplaces] are important. Leadership statements and being verbally for something sends a positive message and has a positive effect."*

Public commitment to the work of creating a diverse and inclusive educator workforce is a first step in creating an environment where more teachers of color feel affirmed and included. However, these public commitments must also be followed with action plans and regular communication about results. *"I want to see intentionality and action and results [from diversity commitments]."*

Participants demonstrated true appreciation and support for their leaders who came out publicly in support of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work over the past year, particularly after the demonstrations following George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murders in the summer of 2020. However, being concrete as to what that work and

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commitment will look like for the district, and how it will be measured was a focus of our participants. An example of a district commitment to diversity might include setting goals similar to these:

+ At least 80 percent of the recruitment pipeline is comprised of high quality, diverse candidates reflective of our school community and student population

+ 100 percent of all campuses have a diverse hiring committee in place and actively engaged in the recruitment, selection, and mentoring process

+ 100 percent of all hiring managers and diverse hiring committees will receive training on implicit bias and cultural competence

+ The board will be updated quarterly on the number of educators of color interviewed, hired, and promoted

2. Value educators by creating schools where leaders listen, empower, and invest in teachers of color by providing informal and formal opportunities for mentorship, leadership, and feedback.

Having systems and structures in place to support teachers of color already working in a school system is a way to improve campus culture and ensure that teachers of color feel valued and heard. Our participants in the focus groups overwhelmingly stated that they do not feel engaged and listened to fully when it comes to continuous improvement, goal setting, and decision making.

According to one participant, *"one of the best practices for creating a supportive and affirming school culture for teachers of color is giving teachers an open space to be heard."* These can include campus and districtwide mentorship programs specifically designed for underrepresented educators, diversity dialogues hosted by the community or district, or affinity groups led by teachers of color with dedicated time to meet on campus and supported by leadership. This active engagement of teachers of color and, *"creating safe spaces where teachers of color can address issues,"* is critical work of school leadership. Yet many leaders also need support to understand how to create these systems and structures.

Beyond, "being heard" our teachers also want to participate in decision making. Districts should review their decision-making structures and ensure that teachers of color are represented at each point. *"Ask teachers of color their opinion and actually utilize the information."* Incorporate the expertise of teachers of color in district and school planning, instruction, curriculum, and campus-wide improvement projects. Districts should also consider instituting a teachers of color advisory board to allow educators to articulate and express their opinions in a direct line to the superintendent. *"I believe teachers of color need to be listened to at the tables of decision making and allowed to implement their expertise in the schools and classrooms where we serve."*

3. Prioritize funding for ongoing and deep professional development on equity, tolerance, implicit bias, and anti-racism for educators at all levels.

The emphasis by our participants on the need for ongoing and deep professional development for all roles within an education system when it comes to equity, tolerance, implicit bias, and anti-racism content can not be overstated. A majority of our participants felt that this is a real gap in Arkansas education, and the districts that do offer continuing education on the topic do so in a very limited way.

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"Implicit bias training for all staff members should be mandatory," was echoed throughout conversations. Others reflected that, *"All schools should regularly have diversity training [for teachers and leaders] to understand personal bias, white privilege, systemic racism, and equity."*

Funding must be prioritized for this work at the state and district level and reviewed regularly with the board. If a district hasn't conducted an equity audit with regards to its diversity, equity, and inclusion work, we recommend starting there to understand the gaps and proceed with a detailed plan.

4. **Develop pathways to leadership for educators by creating and providing stipends for teachers of color to attend district- or region-based leadership mentoring programs.**

It's clear that educators of color in our focus groups are seeking equitable access to leadership roles, but encounter barriers when it comes to mentorship, funding, and access to programs. Districts should consider creating mentorship programs specifically designed for educators of color, widely share with educators of color state teacher financial incentive program information that are already funded and available, and partner with high quality leadership programs to encourage educators of color to participate and receive leadership endorsement stipends.

In-house mentorship programs - Similar to grow-your-own teacher programs, districts should design and implement aspiring leadership mentoring programs specifically designed to engage and support educators of color. As one educator stated, *"leadership opportunities shouldn't be up to chance of having a principal encourage you to lead."* Instead, in house mentorship programs must take specific actions towards diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Funding and incentives - Participants shared that access to money and incentives is a clear barrier to achieving the certification necessary to be an education leader in the state. Over and over, teachers in our focus groups shared that, *"money and time are too big of barriers."* The State of Arkansas as well as local districts have a number of programs already funded to support aspiring leaders. Districts should make sure that these programs are widely shared and create opportunities to educate teachers of color specifically on these incentives.

Partner with high quality leadership programs - With better mentorship programs, districts will develop a diverse internal leadership pipeline. Districts should actively and authentically engage with high quality leadership programs that prioritize supporting district goals around diversifying leadership.

5. **Design and implement requirements and protocols for campus recruitment, interviewing, and hiring practices that engage diverse campus committees and rely on research-based practices.**

Participants in our focus groups highlighted the clear connection between district leadership, campus culture, and the ability to recruit and retain more educators from underrepresented groups. Clear and concrete talent system goals must be part of this work, along with a plan to achieve them. There is a wealth of information about diversifying the teacher workforce[7] however our focus groups participants specifically mentioned the following:

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- Set clear teacher talent goals for hiring a diverse workforce
- Publicly commit to explicit DEI work around recruitment, hiring, and retention
- Actively reach out to underrepresented groups and consider hiring a recruitment specialist to focus on diversifying the teacher workforce.
- Authentically partner with HBCUs in the state
- Have interviewers from underrepresented groups participate in or lead the process
- Incentivize peer to peer recruitment for educators of color by offering bonuses to educators who recommend teachers of color for employment
- Include specific practices in the hiring process to eliminate selection bias
- Train recruiters, hiring managers, and principals on interviewing and selection best practices for DEI

CONCLUSION

All children benefit from having educators in school who represent their community's racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity. We believe that recruiting and retaining educators of color should be a priority for districts across Arkansas, particularly those districts whose workforce has remained largely White despite shifts in student diversity. Based on our focus groups with teachers of color from across the state, there is clear work that districts and leaders can do to improve their focus on recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce.

Districts should use the experiences of teachers of color in their districts and engage them at the decision making tables to create positive supports for teachers of color, create affirming cultures, and establish systems that improve their recruitment, retention, and leadership opportunities.

Finally, diversifying the teacher workforce is only one aspect of creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive school environment. All three are necessary for organizations to truly achieve their student, educator, and staff goals. Teachers of color want better educational environments for themselves, their students, and their communities. Districts are absolutely able to make these improvements hand in hand with their educators.

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Endnotes

[1] Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute

[2] Arkansas Department of Education. Retrieved from https://adedata.arkansas.gov/statewide/ReportList/State/CertifiedTeacherByRace.aspx?year=21&search=&pagesize=10.

[3] Arkansas Department of Education. Retrieved from https://adedata.arkansas.gov/statewide/ReportList/Counties/CertifiedTeacherByRace.aspx.

[4] Dixon, D., Griffin, A., & Teoh, M. (2019). "If you listen we will stay: Why teachers of color leave and how to disrupt teacher turnover." The Education Trust & Teach Plus. Washington, D.C.

[5] Q1. Please tell us about yourself, where and what you teach and how long you've been a teacher. Q2. Do you feel that your school is a place where teachers' cultural, racial, and ethnic identities are valued or affirmed? Q3. How comfortable are you and your colleagues talking about race, ethnicity, culture, and identity in your school? How does this make you feel? Q4. Let's talk about your students. How are your schools succeeding or failing to create a sense of belonging for your students? Q5. Do you feel your school's recruitment, hiring, and induction practices reflect a commitment to diversity and equity? If so, what practices are working well? If not, what do you think needs changing? Q6. What practices do you feel best contribute to creating a supportive and affirming school culture for teachers of color? Q7. What advice do you have for school leaders who want to create more affirming and supportive school cultures for teachers of color? What should principals in particular be doing on campus? What about superintendents? Q8. Is there anything else you'd like to share with each other when you think about the role of race, ethnicity, and culture in schools? This is wide open, but I wonder if we could focus on Covid for this question as well.

[6] Participants self-identified as Hispanic and not Latina/o/x.

[7] For more information, see the EdFuel Talent Playbook retrieved from https://drive.google.com/file/d/18XIUPnlO1fZycybAOzueHRrw9CVJaSfV/view.

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