

Building a Diverse Teacher Workforce

Alyssa Rafa and Maxine Roberts

Hiring and retaining teachers of color is one approach that policymakers can use to support improved academic achievement and opportunities for racially and ethnically diverse students. National data show that while the [student population](#) is becoming more diverse, the [teacher workforce](#) remains largely white and female. While teachers from all races can [inspire student success](#), research suggests that a more diverse teacher workforce could improve student academic, behavioral, social and emotional outcomes — particularly for students of color. State policymakers are taking various approaches to building a diverse teacher workforce and ensuring all students reap the myriad benefits of teacher diversity in the classroom. Some of those approaches include examining data to understand state context, providing financial incentives for teachers and teacher candidates of color, implementing grow-your-own programs, and removing barriers to entry by expanding preparation and licensure pathways.

This Policy Brief provides a summary of key research on the benefits of expanding the racial/ethnic diversity of teachers in K-12 classrooms and features examples of state-level action intended to advance these efforts and ultimately improve students' academic experiences and outcomes. First, this brief focuses on the individuals at the center of the field of education: students.

KEY TERMS

The terms **students of color** and **teachers of color** refer to individuals who identify as African American or Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Latinx, Pacific Islander, or two or more races. For the purpose of brevity in this Policy Brief, Education Commission of the States does not list each of the racial/ethnic subcategories within each of these general groups. Any use of the term **minority** is derived from state bill language when the term is not clearly defined.

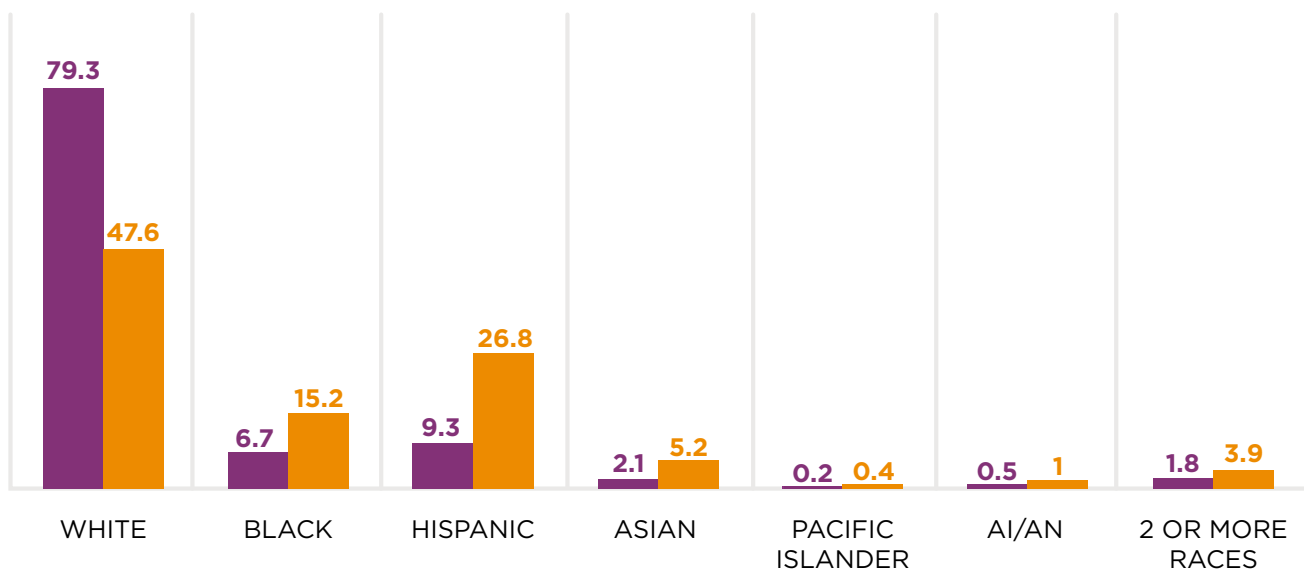
Student and Teacher Demographics

Demographic shifts in the race/ethnicity of students in primary and secondary schools reveal the importance of paying increasing attention to who serves as educators in these classrooms. For instance, [data](#) from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES) from 1995 and projected through 2028 show a steady increase of public elementary and secondary students who identify as Asian, Latinx, or two or more races. The percentage of Black students dropped approximately 1.5 points between 1995 and 2017, and there is no change expected for this group by 2028. Despite the lack of growth for this population, attending to the hiring and retention of Black teachers is important because the numbers of Black students will remain constant for nearly a decade.

These demographic changes contrast with the small increases reported in the distribution of teachers of color in public primary and secondary schools. According to another NCES [report](#), while the [percentages](#) of Latinx teachers and Asian teachers increased between 2003-04 and 2015-16 (3 percentage points and 1 percentage point, respectively), white teachers continued to outnumber their colleagues of color by more than 70 percentage points during the same period. In 2017, individuals who identify as Latinx, Black, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or two or more races made up between 2% and 9% of the teacher population in public schools, while the percentage of students in these racial/ethnic groups was as high as 26.8%. A growing consensus in educational research demonstrates the benefits of a teacher workforce that more closely reflects the diversity of the student population.

STUDENT AND TEACHER DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

 Percentage of Teacher Workforce (2017-2018)  Percentage of Student Population Enrolled (Fall 2017)



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, “The Condition of Education 2020,” <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/>

Teacher Diversity and Student Outcomes

Teachers of color can positively influence all learners in ways that are both academic and non-academic. However, their ability to [serve as role models](#) for students of similar backgrounds and their [high performance expectations](#) for these learners result in improved outcomes in areas, such as [test scores in reading and math](#), [graduation rates](#) and [learners' desires to attend college](#). The advantages from same-race student-teacher matches also extend to higher placement rates into [gifted programs](#), which can benefit students' motivation and academic performance. These encouraging outcomes illustrate the ways that teachers of color support diverse learners' emotional, academic and aspirational needs in K-12 classrooms.

Research also supports the idea that students of color who are in classrooms with teachers of the same race experience conditions that can foster their academic success. For instance, studies show that the presence of teachers of color in the classroom [reduces chronic absenteeism](#), and same-race student-teacher matches affect the severity of discipline that Black students receive in the classroom. For example, [research reveals](#) that when Black students are in classrooms with Black teachers, the disparity in the severity of disciplinary referrals between them and their white peers is [reduced](#).

While the research shows the benefits of demographic matching in the classroom, these outcomes do not imply that mismatches between students' and teachers' races will always hinder success for students of color. Rather, the results from the research presented serve as rationale for boosting efforts to increase the racial/ethnic diversity of teachers, particularly given the current gap between the diversity of student populations and the teacher workforce.

State Action to Improve Teacher Workforce Diversity

Given the myriad benefits of a diverse teacher workforce for all students, education leaders across the country are taking steps to address some of the challenges facing current and future teachers of color. Some common state policy approaches to improve teacher workforce diversity include:

- Understanding and examining state context.
- Providing financial incentives and supports.
- Implementing grow-your-own programs.
- Expanding preparation and licensure pathways.

State Context

Gaining a thorough understanding of the current student and teacher demographic landscape within a state, as well as the diversity of candidates entering and completing teacher preparation programs, can position states to address context-specific issues around teacher diversity. Building and utilizing data and reporting systems can help states monitor progress toward their goals for workforce diversity and adjust programs and investments accordingly, while empowering districts and educator preparation programs to make decisions based on actionable data. Policymakers across the country are attempting to understand and examine their state context by requiring state-specific studies and reporting on data and progress.

Most states collect and report data on the race and ethnicity of educators to some degree. However, according to a [recent survey](#) of state education agencies, only 17 states collect and post teacher diversity data on their public facing websites, while several other states make those data reasonably available to the public upon request.



In 2014, the **Colorado** Legislature [directed](#) the state department of education to study and develop strategies to increase and improve the recruitment, preparation, development and retention of high-quality teachers of color. This legislation resulted in a comprehensive [study](#) outlining Colorado's specific contextual issues and recommendations for the state to address those issues through specific improvements.



Massachusetts publishes [educator staffing data](#) in a format easily accessible to the public, sorted by school or district and disaggregated by race and ethnicity.



[Legislation](#) in **Oregon** directed several departments to collaborate and jointly create a [report](#) on the [Educators Equity Act](#) — including recommendations for, and progress toward, meeting the state's teacher-of-color recruitment goals, in addition to a description of best practices within the state and other states for recruiting, hiring and retaining diverse educators.

Financial Incentives and Supports

One of the most common approaches to addressing teacher shortages of all kinds is to provide financial incentives and supports. Efforts to offset the cost of traditional teacher preparation programs as well as the burden of student debt, which [disproportionately affect graduates of color](#), are some of the most common actions taken by states to encourage diversity in the teacher workforce.

An [Education Commission of the States](#) 50-State Comparison conducted in 2019 showed that 11 states have at least one financial incentive program specific to recruiting teachers of color; seven states prioritize teachers of color for already established scholarship or loan-forgiveness programs; and five states provide incentives for educator preparation programs to recruit and enroll students of color. These financial incentives and supports usually take the form of scholarships, grants and/

or loan repayment programs. In 2019 alone, at least four states enacted legislation to provide for, or make changes to, financial incentive and support programs for teachers of color. In addition to making general changes to financial incentives and supports, two of the bills in 2019 specifically supported teacher candidates or graduates of minority-serving institutions.



Arkansas [appropriated](#) \$150,000 toward the Arkansas Geographical Critical Needs Minority Teacher Scholarship Program and specifically allowed up to 20% of the distributed funds to be used by the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, one of the state's four historically black colleges and universities.



Connecticut [extended](#) eligibility for the teacher mortgage assistance program to include teachers who graduated from a high school in an educational reform district or who graduated from a historically black college or Hispanic-serving institution.



New Mexico [changed](#) the state's teacher loan repayment program in an effort to prioritize applicants who teach in designated high-need positions, including teachers who are minorities. The bill also established a scholarship program for students enrolled in educator preparation programs, with priority given to students who are economically disadvantaged, English-language learners, minority students and students with disabilities.



Wisconsin [expanded](#) the Minority Teacher Loan Program so that a recipient is required to be employed at a school in a district where students of color constitute at least 40% of the district's membership. The program was created to support teacher candidates of color and was previously available for teachers in Milwaukee only.

Grow-Your-Own Programs

Efforts to recruit teachers from local communities — efforts known as [grow-your-own](#) programs — come in a variety of forms and can be geared toward recruiting both high school and college students, as well as expanding opportunities for paraprofessionals and other school staff who have non-teaching degrees. States are increasingly utilizing the grow-your-own model, which [has been an effective](#) strategy for attracting and developing a more diverse teacher workforce. These efforts often include some degree of financial assistance, curriculum and support throughout the life of the program. According to [a recent scan of state statute and regulation](#), at least five states (Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Ohio, Minnesota) explicitly allow or create these programs in law, and [one recent report](#) on state plans under the Every Student Succeeds Act indicates that some states are using Title II, Part A funds to create or bolster existing programs. Colorado and Minnesota recently enacted legislation aimed at creating and funding grow-your-own programs, and Washington and Illinois each have long standing programs they continue to modify to encourage teacher workforce diversity.



Colorado [established](#) requirements for a grow-your-own program that targets students at the postsecondary level who commit to working in the same school or district for three years after graduation in exchange for undergraduate tuition support. The state department of education must report on several aspects of the program, including demographic data, to determine whether the program is effectively recruiting students from underrepresented groups into the teaching profession.



The **Illinois** [Grow Your Own Teacher Education Act](#) was explicitly created to diversify the teacher workforce. The program was [established in 2005](#), and recent amending [legislation](#) changed the administering entity from the Board of Higher Education to [Grow Your Own Illinois](#). Grow Your Own Illinois, based in Chicago, is a community-based program that functions as a partnership among school districts, teacher preparation programs and community organizations. These partnerships help provide supports to teacher candidates as they move through the teacher pipeline.



Minnesota [provided](#) funding for a grow-your-own teacher initiative that targets non-licensed educational professionals, including paraprofessionals and cultural liaisons.



Washington's program, [Recruiting Washington Teachers](#), aims to recruit a diverse group of future teachers through teacher academies at the high school level. Recent [legislation](#) builds on this program by creating the Bilingual Educators Initiative to recruit, prepare and mentor bilingual high school students to become future bilingual teachers and counselors.

Teacher Residency Programs

Supporting teacher residency programs is a somewhat less common approach states have taken to increasing the diversity of their pool of teacher candidates. Teacher residencies are partnerships between districts and universities that support and improve teachers' training to teach in high-need schools and high-demand subject areas. These programs have shown to improve rates of racial-ethnic diversity in classrooms, as [research suggests](#) that teacher candidates of color participate in these programs at high rates. The [Mississippi Teacher Residency pilot program](#) – recently created by the **Mississippi** Department of Education – was designed to recruit, prepare and graduate a talented and diverse group of teacher candidates. The two-year program functions as a partnership between universities and school districts in the state and has been successful, thus far, in recruiting a diverse group of residents. While teachers of color comprise 27% of the current workforce in the state, [approximately 76%](#) of the first cohort of residents in the program identified as people of color. This year, **New Mexico** enacted [legislation](#) to create teacher residency programs through a competitive grant process, awarding grants to public-postsecondary institutions and tribal colleges in partnership with one or more local districts or charter schools. The bill required that the programs must be designed to increase diversity in the teacher workforce, fill high-need teaching positions, and include coursework and guided apprenticeship.

Preparation and Licensure Pathways

Teacher candidates of color often face disproportionate barriers to entering the teaching profession. As noted above, the burden of student loan debt disproportionately affects students of color, perhaps leading potential teachers of color to avoid expensive traditional teacher preparation programs altogether. For those candidates who enter and complete a preparation program, [research demonstrates](#) that teacher candidates of color pass licensure exams at lower rates — leading states to wrestle with how to effectively measure a candidate’s potential while accounting for disparities in test preparation opportunities and outcomes. In an effort to address the barriers faced by teacher candidates of color, state leaders are instituting alternative certification models and considering changes to licensure exams.

Alternative certification programs vary significantly across states. However, in general, these programs can provide a quicker, less expensive pathway into the teaching profession than traditional teacher preparation programs. In addition, these programs often attract a broader and more diverse pool of candidates than traditional teacher preparation programs. Several states have enacted legislation related to alternative certification, and recently, both New Jersey and Connecticut enacted alternative certification legislation specifically related to recruiting and retaining teachers of color.



In 2018, **Connecticut** enacted [legislation](#) requiring the department of education, in consultation with the Minority Teacher Recruitment Policy Oversight Council, to establish partnerships to increase recruitment of teachers of color, monitor innovative methods to attract candidates of color, and support new and existing educator preparation programs that commit to enrolling greater numbers of candidates of color. The bill also required the department of education to develop or review and approve a new alternative route to certification program for specific professionals. In addition, the bill required that any approved program must contain instruction in classroom management and cultural competency. This bill also addressed licensure exams by requiring the department of education to enter into memorandums of understanding with teacher licensure test vendors to provide some test takers with a free retake of the exam under certain circumstances.



In 2019, [legislation](#) in **New Jersey** established a pilot program to recruit male teachers who are members of a racial-ethnic group that has been historically disadvantaged in obtaining access to equal educational opportunities. The program seeks to match the eligible candidates to teaching opportunities through an alternative teacher preparation program. The pilot program focused on placements in underperforming schools.

In an attempt to address the disparities in pass rates on licensure exams while continuing to assess a teacher candidate’s potential, some states have chosen to adopt performance assessments either in lieu of standardized assessments or in complement to them. According to a [recent report](#), **California** and **Connecticut** have instituted performance assessments, which require candidates to create portfolios of work and are intended to provide a more well-rounded picture of a candidate’s ability to teach in the classroom. [Research](#) on these assessments indicate that, while some

disparities in pass rates still exist, they are far reduced in most cases. Additionally, these exams function as learning opportunities for teacher candidates, providing them with a framework to improve their teaching skills.

Policy Considerations

As education leaders work to ensure that students receive the benefits of a diverse teacher workforce, there are several policy issues to consider. In addition to improving upon financial incentive programs, recruitment strategies, and preparation and licensure pathways, states may also consider paying increased attention to retaining current teachers of color, as research shows that teachers of color leave the workforce at much [higher rates](#) than their white counterparts. While some degree of turnover is inevitable, [research suggests](#) that teachers of color are often employed in schools with challenging working conditions and report issues of racial discrimination and inadequate support in the workplace.

To place increased focus on retention efforts, states may consider:

- Studying the retention patterns of teachers of color within the state and districts to better understand the pressures that may be causing teachers of color to leave the classroom. For example, a [study](#) from the **Tennessee** Education Research Alliance provides a detailed analysis of turnover and retention patterns among teachers of color in the state.
- Focusing on diversity, preparation and training of school leadership in addition to diversity of the teacher workforce. Some [research demonstrates](#) that leaders of color are more likely to recruit and retain educators of color within their schools. Ensure that all school leaders are well-prepared to lead a diverse student body and teacher workforce.
- Supporting the development of induction, mentoring and professional development opportunities for teachers of color that respond to their unique needs. Teachers of color are more likely to work in high-need schools and districts. Ensure that they receive the preparation and support they need to succeed in those environments.
- Ensuring high-quality opportunities for in-classroom training and ongoing support and engagement when implementing alternative certification pathways.
- Encouraging districts and schools to implement culturally relevant practices and to understand and address implicit bias in the classroom and workplace.

To improve recruitment efforts, states may consider:

- Using existing data and requiring further collection and public reporting on progress toward teacher diversity goals — from the preparation and alternative certification programs that prepare teachers for the classroom and from districts that hire, employ and retain teachers.
- Requiring teacher preparation programs to publicly report information on teacher candidate outcomes disaggregated by race. Examine the effectiveness of programs and utilize these data to inform future decision-making, including increased funding for programs that consistently produce well-prepared, high-quality candidates.

- Investing in teacher preparation programs at historically black colleges and universities and other minority-serving institutions.
- Continuing to address college readiness and high school graduation rates. Preparing future teachers of color starts before students enter teacher preparation programs.
- Developing, or continuing to support, grow-your-own programs and community-based teacher preparation pathways that both recruit students from high school through college and provide paraprofessionals and other unlicensed staff the opportunity to become teachers.

Learning Opportunities

Facilitate learning opportunities for schools, districts and teacher preparation programs to provide each other with feedback on recruiting and retaining teachers of color. Ensure that teachers of color are represented in those conversations. At the state level, reach out to other state leaders who are tackling the issue. The [Diverse and Learner-Ready Teachers Initiative led by the Council of Chief State School Officers](#) is a collective of states working to address teacher diversity – reach out to CCSSO, Education Commission of the States or other state leaders in the cohort to tap into the knowledge of the group.

About the Authors



Alyssa Rafa



As a policy analyst, Alyssa focuses on various policy topics, including school climate and discipline, accountability and school improvement, and student health. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Alyssa earned a master's degree in international studies from the University of Denver and worked in public health policy. When Alyssa is not researching education policy trends, she can be found traveling, visiting her family or enjoying the Colorado mountains. Contact Alyssa at arafa@ecs.org or **303.299.3691**.

Maxine Roberts



As a principal, Maxine provides expertise on supporting the learning experiences of minoritized students across the P-20 spectrum. She has dedicated her career to advancing system-changing, equity focused initiatives that promote access, persistence and completion for minoritized students in higher education. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Maxine directed after school and college preparatory programs, worked with community college faculty to improve their course outcomes in developmental education and studied the factors that foster success for students of color in community college developmental math courses. Contact Maxine at mroberts@ecs.org or **303.299.3698**.