



*If You Listen,  
We Will Stay:*

Why Teachers of Color Leave  
and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction.....	4
About Our Focus Groups and Case Studies.....	5
Listening to Teachers, Principals, and Other Leaders .....	6
Why Are Teachers of Color Leaving?.....	8
How Can We Get Teachers of Color to Stay?.....	12
Four Things That School, District, and State Leaders Can Do To Retain Teachers of Color .....	26

# If You Listen, We Will Stay:


Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was written to examine the problems teachers of color face as they navigate the profession and to explore the experiences of staff in schools that intentionally attempt to retain faculty of color. There were two modes of inquiry utilized to collect data. First, teachers of color participated in focus groups and answered questions about their experiences in the workforce and what schools, districts, and states could do to keep them in the field. Second, researchers conducted case studies in schools and districts that were selected for their intentionality around retaining teachers of color.

For the focus groups, *five challenges* emerged that teachers of color face in the workforce:

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- 1) *They experience an antagonistic work culture that leaves them feeling unwelcome and/or invisible.*
  - 2) *They feel undervalued because they take on more than their fair share of responsibility but are not recognized or compensated for the work that they do.*
  - 3) *They feel that they are deprived of agency and autonomy in their schools because of an inability to tailor their teaching to the population of students they serve.*
  - 4) *They feel that they are navigating unfavorable working conditions, which lack the supports needed for them to grow as professionals.*
  - 5) *They bear the high cost of being a teacher of color, which takes a toll on them financially and psychologically.*



In the case studies, *five solutions* emerged that could keep teachers of color in the workforce:

- 1) *Schools should be places that culturally affirm teachers of color, i.e., where the goals and values of the school match up with the goals and values of the teachers.*
- 2) *Schools should be places that affirm a teacher's humanity and racial identity allowing teachers of color to feel free to be their authentic selves.*
- 3) *Principals should create schools where they empower and invest in teachers, i.e., by providing pathways to leadership, informal and formal opportunities for mentorship, and the freedom to tailor teaching to the population of students in the classroom.*
- 4) *School leaders should place a premium on building a schoolwide family where it's easy to build relationships, find a mentor, and hold each other accountable.*
- 5) *District leaders need to make retaining teachers of color a priority by emphasizing methods of compensation for the extra work these teachers take on, and prioritizing hiring and placement of teachers of color to build cohorts and reduce isolation.*

*What school, district, and state leaders can do to retain teachers of color:*

- 1) *Value teachers of color by providing loan forgiveness, service scholarships, loan repayment incentives, and relocation incentives for teachers coming into the field.*
- 2) *Collect and disaggregate data (by race/ethnicity) on teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention.*
- 3) *Invest in the recruitment, preparation, and development of strong, diverse leaders committed to positive working conditions for a diverse workforce.*
- 4) *Empower teachers of color by ensuring that curriculum, learning environments, and work environments are inclusive and respectful of all racial and ethnic groups.*

*“Windows and mirrors ... students should be able to see mirror images of themselves leading classrooms. But if they’re students of color, they just get windows and are constantly seeing other people.”*

*– High School Principal, East Coast*

This principal recognizes the importance of having a racially diverse teaching faculty and is working to retain teachers of color at his school — and for good reason. Countless studies show that teachers of color matter for all students, and especially for students of color.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the proportion of teachers of color in the workforce continues to lag far behind the share of students of color in schools across the nation. Today, 51 percent of students in U.S. public schools are students of color,<sup>2</sup> but just 20 percent of teachers are teachers of color.<sup>3</sup>

Schools, districts, and states have made gains in hiring teachers of color in recent years. In fact, teachers of color are now being hired by schools at a higher rate than White teachers.<sup>4</sup> But the issue that continues to challenge schools and districts is how to retain these teachers once they enter the classroom: Teachers of color are now also *leaving* the workforce at a higher rate than White teachers.<sup>5</sup> This has not always been the case. In the late 1990s, teachers of color and White teachers left schools at relatively similar rates. But by the early 2000s, teachers of color started leaving the classroom at higher rates than their White counterparts — 15 percent for White teachers and close to 19 percent for teachers of color.<sup>6</sup> So, while we know we still need to bring more teachers of color into the field, we must avoid masking another barrier to diversifying the teacher workforce — not doing enough to make teaching a profession attractive enough for teachers of color to want to stay in it.

While every step in the teacher pipeline (preparation, recruitment, hiring, induction, and retention) has its importance, this report focuses largely on the retention of teachers of color. Why? First, there is a dearth of scholarship on this topic. Second, it does not matter how many teachers of color join the field if school, district, and state leaders do not do the work to retain them. Teacher turnover hits districts hard; in urban districts for example, the cost to hire a new teacher exceeds \$20,000.<sup>7</sup> However, the impact on districts pales in comparison to that on students. Replacing teachers reduces continuity in the classroom, and, especially in high-turnover schools, filling empty slots with inexperienced or underqualified teachers has a negative impact on student learning.<sup>8</sup> Simply put, schools cannot hire their way out of this issue. Without a dual focus on recruitment and retention, students across the country will continue to lack access to the diverse teaching workforce they deserve.

Recruiting teachers of color only gets them into the building. We must pay equal, if not more, attention to their retention to make long-lasting change in the diversity of the workforce. This is why [Teach Plus](#) and [The Education Trust](#) set out to build upon [prior work](#) to learn why teachers of color are leaving schools, what teachers of color believe would help solve the turnover problem, and what promising practices and strategies exist in schools and school systems that are intentionally working to retain teachers of color.

# ABOUT OUR FOCUS GROUPS AND CASE STUDIES

Teach Plus and The Education Trust, nonprofit organizations committed to equity in education and to improving outcomes for our most underserved students, jointly collected the data discussed in this report. The first part of our investigation involved listening to current teachers of color via focus groups\* led by classroom teachers participating in the Teach Plus [Policy Fellowship](#). Participants included 88 teachers who identify as Black or Latino across five states. Teachers shared their perspectives on the reasons for high turnover; strategies that schools, districts, and states can use to improve the retention of teachers of color; potential professional development topics to improve the retention of teachers of color; and their own experiences and career plans.

The second part of our investigation used a case study approach to surface issues as well as promising and best practices for retaining and supporting teachers of color. Here, we used a convenience sample of two district offices, three traditional public schools, and two public charter schools in various East Coast and Midwest locations. For the case studies, we asked district officials, principals, teachers, and other school leaders about what's being done to retain teachers of color and how their efforts could be replicated across the country.<sup>9</sup>

*\*Focus groups were administered across several states by Teach Plus Policy Fellows and alumni, including: Idalmi Acosta, Patrick Albano, LaNeá Austin, Bridget Bones, Violeta Cerna-Prado, Olivia Corya, Karina Gensicke, Shonterrio Harris, Daniel Helena, Erica Marlaine, Shareefah Mason, Elizabeth Ojeda-Jiménez, Fernanda Pierre, Keisha Rembert, Yadeale Tamru, Shontoria Walker, Dominicca Washington, Gregory Williams Jr., Corey Winchester, and Haley Wing-Suttle.*



# LISTENING TO TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, AND OTHER LEADERS

In this report, the voices of teachers and school leaders highlight the problems teachers of color face in the workplace, affirming previous Ed Trust research.<sup>10</sup> These voices, however, also highlight district- and school-level practices that have proven effective in addressing those problems and helping to retain teachers of color.

In the focus groups, *five challenges* emerged that teachers of color face in the workforce:

- 1) *Experiencing an antagonistic school culture*
- 2) *Feeling undervalued*
- 3) *Being deprived of agency and autonomy*
- 4) *Navigating unfavorable working conditions*
- 5) *Bearing the high cost of being a teacher of color*

From our case studies, we identified *five solutions* (four school-based and one district-based):

- 1) *Create culturally affirming school environments*
- 2) *Affirm teachers' humanity and racial identity*
- 3) *Empower and invest in teachers*
- 4) *Build a schoolwide family*
- 5) *Have a district priority related to retaining teachers of color*

The perspectives and experiences of the educators we listened to lead to *four recommendations* for state, district, and school leaders to do to disrupt the culture of teacher of color turnover plaguing the profession today:

- 1) *Value teachers of color by providing loan forgiveness, service scholarships, loan repayment incentives, and relocation incentives for teachers coming into the field.*
- 2) *Collect and disaggregate data (by race/ethnicity) on teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention.*
- 3) *Invest in the recruitment, preparation, and development of strong, diverse leaders committed to positive working conditions for a diverse workforce.*
- 4) *Empower teachers of color by ensuring curriculum, learning environments, and work environments are inclusive and respectful of all racial and ethnic groups.*

These recommendations may seem straightforward, but the voices of educators shared in this research make it clear how difficult they are to put into practice. Yet, as illustrated in our case studies, *it is possible to do so.*





# PART ONE:

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## **WHY ARE TEACHERS OF COLOR LEAVING?**



## Experiencing an Antagonistic School Culture

*Teachers of color report that their fellow educators, leaders, and other staff often perpetuate unfavorable, even antagonistic, school cultures and climates where they do not feel welcome, much less included.*

Teachers of color often encounter workplaces where they feel silenced and overlooked for growth and development. This feeling of invisibility can be a consequence of working in a school where there is a negative culture and/or climate, i.e., one where teachers of color say they experience bias, or see no representation of people of color in leadership positions at the school or district level, or perceive a lack of investment in students of color from administration.

One teacher said, *"In my experience, there is some implicit bias when it comes to contributing to ideas. I share ideas and they get shut down, but my White peers share the same idea and it is celebrated and implemented. It discourages me. In the classroom, students also see this bias and tend to respond to White authority."*

As one Black teacher explained, they feel that school administrators do not value their input as much as White teachers, yet they feel they are expected to *"...handle it all. The assumption that we represent or understand all other Black people and students."* This teacher continued with, *"Emotionally, it is harder to see students who look like me struggle, while higher up administrators didn't seem to truly care."*

Such experiences are in direct conflict with the identity of teachers of color and undermine their connection to the school. Instead of their identity being an asset, it serves as a factor pushing them out of the profession.<sup>11</sup>

## Feeling Undervalued

*Teachers of color express feeling less valued than White teachers in their schools.*

Teachers of color also feel that at the same time they are being marginalized, they are being asked to take on greater responsibilities and roles because they often share (or are perceived to share) similar demographic backgrounds with their students. This echoes findings from previous Ed Trust research in this area. They believe that their administrators underappreciate their work, particularly the additional work they take on. For example, one Black teacher said, *"The cultural funds of knowledge of teachers of color are generally undervalued, and under-leveraged by White administrators or teachers."*

Ultimately, teachers of color express that they navigate a workplace that renders their identity, skills, and contributions to the school invisible. They deal with these experiences every day and have to operate in a space where they don't belong.

### To the Point

**ULTIMATELY, TEACHERS OF COLOR EXPRESS THAT THEY NAVIGATE A WORKPLACE THAT RENDERS THEIR IDENTITY, SKILLS, AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SCHOOL INVISIBLE.**

## Being Deprived of Agency and Autonomy

*Instead of being uplifted through opportunities for leadership and advancement, teachers of color find themselves deprived of agency and autonomy in their schools.*

Teachers of color report feeling disconnected from the curriculum they are assigned to teach and disempowered to approach their pedagogy in a way that is creative and meaningful for their students. Moreover, they are uneasy with being part of an educational system that perpetuates societal inequities. The focus groups also uncovered similar findings to research about teachers of color leaving the field due to a lack of autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

One teacher said, *"I feel like the curriculum and the way we continue to educate our students is not changing and as a result, teachers of color feel trapped in a system. As an individual of color, I often feel as if I am not always able to make the changes I want as I am forced to operate within a system that seems unwilling to change. Furthermore, I also feel policed as an individual of color. I have to appease the dominant culture in regards to the way I communicate with my students, the way I dress, the assignments I choose to implement in the classroom."*

Indeed, teachers of color feel unable to create their own approach to the content or even adjust it so it resonates with the population of students. They are subject to many rules and policies imposed by school and district leaders that discourage creativity and classroom independence. The autonomy teachers of color seek is not just complete freedom to do whatever they want to do in the classroom. Their wishes are more targeted. Teachers of color want to make sure that their students [see themselves](#) represented in the curriculum and in classroom materials. They want the freedom to use more culturally relevant tools to connect with their students at greater depth. One teacher summed it up like this: *"In other words, the freedom to*

*teach in our own ways is being taken away from us, and we are expected to teach a certain way that takes away from our individuality."*

## Navigating Unfavorable Working Conditions

*Often the schools in which teachers of color work lack sufficient supports and professional learning opportunities and are lacking in resources.*

Teachers of color report that their schools lack structural or resource supports as well as the professional supports they need for continued growth in their career. In one response, a teacher said, *"I think the number one factor in retaining a teacher past five years is support. I think schools need to do a better job of mentoring young teachers, and with respect to teachers of color, pairing them up with other teachers of color would be ideal."*

Another teacher said, *"As a former special education teacher, I left the classroom partly because of the lack of support provided for educators. While I was also pursuing other ambitions, the inequity of resources made it easier for me to make up my mind. Teachers of color need appropriate specific resources to deal with issues we may face: lack of opportunities for vertical growth, personal poverty, and mental health."*

Teachers of color, therefore, face a lack of resources or supports on two levels. Not only are they generally teaching in schools and areas that are traditionally under-resourced,<sup>13</sup> they are also asked to take on additional responsibilities without having access to the resources they need to meet those responsibilities.



## Bearing the High Cost of Being a Teacher of Color

*Teachers of color experience relatively higher costs of their profession when compared with others. These costs can be psychological and financial.*

The last theme that emerged from the focus groups is about how teachers of color perceive their choice of profession to come with burdens that White teachers may not experience. These include family situations, societal and cultural inequities, and higher expectations. For example, one teacher said, *"Teachers of color typically come from families that do not have financial means to supplement the lack of pay from teaching..."*

Another teacher said, *"The difference in my opinion is generational wealth. [As a new teacher,] I barely made \$35,000 before taxes. This as a first-generation college student was not enough to live on especially while also helping my family, which many people of color have to do. Whereas a lot of my friends who are White pocketed salaried money because they were able to get help from parents."*

But this "burden" isn't merely a financial one. One teacher said: *"Many teachers of color come into the profession with the fact in mind that most of*

*the students they are serving identify with them, whether it be through shared experiences or because they too are members of a community of people of color. This puts teachers in a position to become more than just educators to support the students they serve, leading to a burnout at a much faster rate."* Teachers of color are often in the minority among school staff. If the professional community is not intentional about honoring and supporting the unique challenges a teacher of color experiences, teachers are left feeling dissatisfied.

Throughout our focus groups, we heard from teachers that their identity as a person of color comes with added responsibilities, or "costs" that they have to contend with and that are powerful factors that may push them out of the profession. In fact, many of the teachers of color who participated in our focus groups said that they had or were considering leaving teaching, creating a sense of urgency to our research and a need for the field to not just learn why teachers of color are leaving, but to surface practices and policies that create the kinds of schools and districts that don't just welcome teachers of color but nurture them.

## More resources on the "high cost of being a teacher of color" :

### Our Stories, Our Struggles, Our Strengths

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Feb 14, 2018 by Ashley Griffin

#### Perspectives and Reflections From Latino Teachers

America is experiencing a diverse, cultural shift and the teaching workforce is lagging behind. While Latino students make up 16 percent of the U.S. student population, and that percentage is growing rapidly, just 8 percent of the nation's teachers are Latino. And although greater numbers of Latino teachers are entering the classroom, they, like other teachers of color, are leaving the profession at higher rates than their White counterparts.

*Our Stories, Our Struggles, Our Strengths* explores the challenges of Latino teachers, who are:



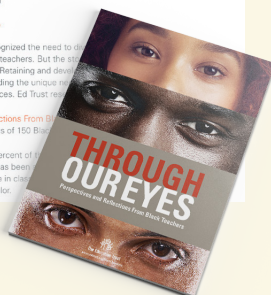
### Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections From Black Teachers

Share this article: [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [o](#) [v](#)

Nov 3, 2015 by Ashley Griffin and Hillary Tackie

Federal, state, and district leaders have recognized the need to diversify the teaching workforce. But the reality is that many are already working to recruit diverse teachers. But the reality is that many are already working to recruit diverse teachers. But the reality is that many are already working to recruit diverse teachers.

*Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections From Black Teachers* explores the challenges of Black teachers, who are:



### The invisible tax on teachers of color



Mount Vernon Woods Elementary School kindergarten teacher Cynthia Walker guides her future charges during the orientation for incoming students and their families on May 3, 2015. (Tim Nigam/Fairfax County Times)

By John King  
May 15, 2016

PART TWO:

**HOW CAN WE GET  
TEACHERS OF  
COLOR TO STAY?**

## Create Culturally Affirming School Environments

Principals working to retain teachers of color in their schools say one of the first things they do is address the culture of the school. They want to ensure that their vision for the school aligns with teachers' personal values and beliefs. Largely, teachers are motivated by seeing their students succeed and grow, both in and out of the classroom. And this seems especially true for the teachers of color we spoke with. A focus on students, what students need, and students' connection to the community and society at large resonate deeply with teachers of color.

To retain teachers of color, leaders tap into teachers' desires to impact students beyond test scores. Some of the most effective principals know it takes more than a high GPA and a top score on a standardized test to be a successful adult, so they focus on the whole child. They also understand that teachers of color want to impact students' social and emotional learning and help develop students into change agents in their communities once they leave school.

One participant expressed, *"And there's just that, like, common ground where I feel like everyone is here to change life trajectories, not just to get the scores, not just to do this, but to make sure our kids are academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally sound and productive human beings in life, and not just a 29 on the ACT."*

One of the principals we talked to said his goal is for students to develop a sense of duty to the community. He said, *"What we're promoting is that you leave [this school] and serve in your community. If you decide to move to Idaho, great. But if you stay in [this community], we expect you to lead and serve. Whatever it is, that you have the idea 'I lift as I climb.'"* The sense of community and investment in students keeps teachers of color in the school because it matches their personal investment in their students.

Teachers of color also have a keen understanding of what students of color will face after graduation, and they want them to be fully prepared. In addition to emphasizing strong content knowledge and commitment to the community, teachers of color value schools that are structured so that students graduate with a strong racial identity. One principal said, *"Positive racial identity has to be an important part of how we approach the work. Like how are students looking at themselves, when we look at all the studies of the negative imagery that they're going to get and how they're being told, this is who you are, these are the constructs, and all those things. So ... what are all the things that we can do to just help them develop a positive racial identity, because we felt like that was one of the best things to undergird whatever it is that they want to do in life."* Teachers cannot build a strong racial identity in their students if they don't have one themselves. So, working in an environment where expressing one's racial identity is important helps retain teachers of color.

Working in a culturally affirming environment also gives teachers of color the opportunity to connect course content to real-life issues happening in the community or across the country. In one example, a teacher spoke about facilitating conversations about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and tying it to the advocacy that students can have in their own community. This teacher said, *"So how do we take this moment and make it impactful and really bring it to our students? So, it could be something as small as organizing a water drive and seeing a truck full of water [and having the conversation about what's happening in Flint, MI], because... these things happen in Black neighborhoods. And if it could happen there, it could happen here."*

## To the Point

**ULTIMATELY, WE FOUND THAT ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS TO RETAINING TEACHERS OF COLOR IS TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS INTENSELY FOCUSED ON THE BEST INTERESTS OF STUDENTS.**

Discussing real-life issues with students gives teachers of color the chance to express their own passions and commitments. And teaching courses on issues related to the lived experiences of underserved communities allows teachers to have an even deeper investment in the type of learning happening in the school. One principal who saw the need for a course on social justice in his school said, *"Kids deserve to be able to take a course, because we know what they're going to be bombarded with outside of the school walls. ... We know what they're going to have to consume in the air about their self-worth and their identity. And so, anything we can do to kind of help with a shield and tools to navigate society, we're going to do that."* These examples show how a commitment to the holistic development of students creates an atmosphere that supports teacher of color retention.

While it's important to demonstrate a commitment to students of color and their success outside of school, it is also important for a school's overall values to align with those of their teachers of color. In our conversation with leaders and teachers, we found that teachers of color stay in schools that have a commitment to equity, social justice, and the dismantling of racism — issues that are not necessarily widely discussed or taught in many public schools. The commitment to these values starts with the school leaders.

Principals noted that the school leader has to be aware of what mindset they bring to the table, because it trickles down to teachers and students. The school culture has to be one where staff truly believe in the

promise of students of color. And that starts with the principal. One principal said, *"I would advise leaders to be really aware of their language and realize that you are messaging constantly, and if you really haven't changed your mind about what you think is possible for Black and Brown kids, your teachers will tell."*

Principals also create a space where they feel comfortable engaging all staff, regardless of race, in discussions about how racism and systemic oppression show up in language choices. One principal described a conversation he had with a White teacher: *"So I had a teacher that was consistently describing interactions with students who he struggled with as aggressive moments, and so we were able to talk to him about the language and the word choice that he was using. 'Are you using the word "aggressive" because it's a Black boy in front of you?' ... It was something he wasn't even aware of, so just making it more in the forefront of a lot of our White teachers' minds and their language, which then makes the community more inclusive for everybody."*

The commitment to equity and justice for students is established by more than just informal conversations. Part of the school's culture is set by staff intentionally using professional development sessions to have uncomfortable conversations about race, social justice, and navigating bias. One principal said, *"We really are focused on having weekly professional learning community opportunities for teachers to get together and to improve their craft and to talk about instruction and having space in that area to talk about social justice issues, to talk about cultural relevancy,*



*to examine even [as] educators of color . . . our own biases and to address that.*" In one of the schools we visited, the principal implemented a formal way to have these conversations by creating "cultural proficiency seminars."

These seminars are mandatory and occur weekly in 45-minute sessions. The teachers have candid conversations about race and bias in their school and have the space to work through discomfort in a safe environment.

Ultimately, we found that one of the most important factors to retaining teachers of color is to create an environment that is intensely focused on the

best interests of students, i.e., their academic, social, emotional, and professional growth. It also helps if teachers' values align with those of the administration and the school overall. One administrative team member said, *"So for me, being a Black woman stepping into that [dean of discipline] role and realizing that on a weekly basis I was suspending so many of my Black boys for things that I thought deserved a conversation. I was fortunate enough to be in an environment with [a principal], where I could say, 'Hey, I get that this may be [the code of conduct], but this is something that we need to change, that would be best for our boys.'"*



## Affirm Teachers' Humanity and Racial Identity

The principals in our case studies are deliberate about creating a space for their teachers to be their authentic selves, meaning teachers have the freedom to be themselves both as individuals and as people of color. Just like students, teachers often are expected to leave “who they are” at the door of the school. They are expected to be just a teacher, devoid of all of the things that make them who they are. However, we talked with principals who celebrated teachers’ humanity and racial identity. One said, *“I’ve met so many people over the past 25 years who don’t feel like they can be — we didn’t call it ‘authentic self’ before. It was just like ‘be you, be yourself.’”*

For teachers of color, finding comfort in being one’s authentic self comes partly from having administrators of color. The same way that students of color benefit from teachers of color, our participants noted the value of administrators of color. One teacher said, *“I think it’s hard, at times, in education, where you find that it’s predominantly White, and the majority of supervisors are White. I think that there are times that you don’t feel as safe or you don’t feel heard.”*

In our conversations, we also heard from teachers who felt they can be “unapologetically Black” or were proud to work at a school that celebrates their racial identity. When discussing why she stays, one teacher said, *“And so that is what I think keeps me and the students engaged in the school because you, again, can be Black authentically every day, and to celebrate it in every type of way — in the classrooms, with teachers, with the content we’re teaching every day, and also with the celebrations we have as well, all for the culture and totally all-out Black.”*

In practice, affirming racial identity can look a number of different ways. But in our case studies, we found two distinct ways in which principals do this, i.e., by creating environments where teachers feel comfortable to express themselves both in the way they dress and the way they wear their hair.

Teachers have the freedom to be themselves because they can wear clothing that affirms their culture. One teacher said, *“Because you have a culture, an environment that invites that welcomes that, and doesn’t shun that. And again, I can only think of my experiences. I’ve been in places where I couldn’t even wear a T-shirt that says ‘I’m Black and I’m Proud’ because I knew I was going to get a call that said, ‘Someone is uncomfortable with that T-shirt.’”*

Another said, *“I had an Issa Rae shirt on: ‘I’m Rooting for Everybody Black.’ And I know in other spaces, I probably wouldn’t be able to wear that without someone saying something.”*

And another said, *“So I went out and got shirts, because I’m like, I could wear it and so now it was a thing of, like, let me go get these shirts. You know what I mean? And it’s actually funny because when I wear it outside, my Black excellence shirts, and all these other kids and people were reading it. So it’s like, where can you go and feel comfortable doing it?”*

In one school, wearing clothing that is culturally affirming takes the form of a building-wide initiative called “Woke Wednesdays,” where teachers and students demonstrate their commitment to consciousness and social justice by wearing certain shirts, all black, or other types of clothing to demonstrate solidarity.





Teachers and leaders also talked about hair as an example of racial identity affirmation. For Black people especially, hair is often a topic of conflict and stress. For years, they have had to alter their hairstyles and texture to assimilate into the culture of corporate America — short close-cropped hair for men and straight hair for women. Moreover, Black women, especially, have struggled to adhere to Eurocentric beauty standards that deem long, straight hair as the ideal. More recently, however, Black people are wearing their hair in its natural state and in styles that allow them to express their culture. And in the schools we visited, teachers and leaders feel comfortable to wear their hair in ways that align with their identity. For example, one leader was in the process of transitioning her hair into dreadlocks, and she felt comfortable to be herself through the process instead of hiding her hair under a wig. She said,

*"Yeah. It means that I can be in the process of trying to lock my hair and look crazy right now and it's OK."*

Teachers also feel free to engage with their students around issues of Black hair. Teachers of color feel validated in knowing that they can be there for their students when they have their own issues with their hair. One teacher expressed, *"It means that we now have young ladies who have cut off their hair and who are going natural, and we make sure that they know that they are absolutely beautiful when they do so."* Another expressed, *"I guess a smaller thing would be, a lot of times now I get students that come to me regarding their hair, like, 'Oh, can you fix my hair for me?' or whatever. Whereas when I worked in other schools where there were White teachers, they would look at them and, you know, like, 'I don't know what to do with her hair.'"*

## Support, Empower, and Invest in Teachers

In a profession where people of color often feel the weight of racist and oppressive school and district policies daily, school leaders who want to retain teachers of color see it as their responsibility to be a support system for teachers of color. This means securing resources for teacher growth, such as professional development (PD) opportunities. It also means assessing teachers' needs and developing sessions that reflect them. One principal revised the entire PD plan for the school to address the needs that teachers expressed over the course of the year. He said, *"So, once we saw that those were trends, we sat down and scrapped everything that we planned on doing for a summer PD and then scrapped what professional development for the entire school year would look like, to make sure that we're feeding our staff and we're giving them what they want. I think that goes a long way in showing them that your feedback is actually valued, taken into consideration, and then implemented. And they've seen it immediately, and I think that's crucial."* Hearing what the teachers want for PD and reacting shows them that the administration is invested in their growth.

School leaders also show their investment by encouraging and supporting teachers to go to conferences that resonate with them as people of color. For example, teachers of color in multiple schools we visited were interested in attending the Black Male Educators' Convening in Philadelphia; so, principals across those schools sent groups of their teachers to that conference. We heard other instances of principals supporting teachers' continuous growth: *"There's a National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Do you want to go? So you should go. We will pay for you to go."* Being intentional around professional development meant principals prioritized items in their budget. One principal said, *"I keep a*

*certain amount of the budget aside for conferences. You can go to a conference. I realize that professional development opportunities in the district are very slim, but ASCD may be a great conference."*

Lastly, teachers recognize how important opportunities for growth are and appreciate them. Professional development experiences help them to remain in the profession. *"One of the things I appreciate is that there's always room for growth. I think that my school has done a good job of providing those opportunities for growth."*

As principals prioritize professional development, they also have to be deliberate about how they spend scheduled time for in-school sessions. Time for PD should be for more than just curricula and classroom management. The school leaders we talked to also saw a need to address issues that relate to race, teacher-student relationships, and social justice. For example, those leaders facilitated intentional conversations about bias, racism, and relationships among all of their staff to support their development. One principal said, *"Well, in the district, three years ago, maybe longer, we switched to... having intentional PDs to develop our staff and to open up conversations that needed to be opened up and help a lot of staff learn how to have those conversations, but also to get people to reflect on their own self and then think about themselves as an educator and think about our school."* We learned that these meetings function as a way for ALL teachers to reflect on their own lives and explore how race, equity, and justice play a role in their teaching. These meetings and PD sessions happen regularly, and while they improve teachers' craft they also help break down barriers among staff to create a safe and welcoming community for all teachers.

Addressing the causes of bias and racism in the school building gives teachers of color a space to be themselves, but also to have White teachers as



## To the Point

**THE SPACE TO TAKE INITIATIVE AND ADVOCATE ON STUDENTS' BEHALF DEEPENS A TEACHER'S INVESTMENT IN THE SCHOOL AND MAKES IT MORE LIKELY A TEACHER WILL STAY.**

partners in the fight for equity and justice for their students. One principal explained, *"But there's a difference between me correcting you when you say something that's offensive because ... I hear it and I know what you're saying, and me sitting you down and saying, 'Look, let's just talk about what it means to have biases and to understand that as humans, whatever neighborhood and area you're raised in, certain things you may have to overcome and work through. And in order to overcome and work through them, you have to face them head on.'"*

Perhaps most important to empowering teachers of color is to build their confidence and capacity to do their best work for the students. According to one principal, his main responsibility is to *"try to remove barriers so that you can run faster, be more effective, be more efficient."* One of the first ways school leaders empower their teachers is by encouraging them to advocate for their students. Teachers are the closest to students, so they see the effect of school and district policies on students, first hand. The space to take initiative and advocate on students' behalf deepens a teacher's investment in the school and makes it more likely a teacher will stay.

Teachers also are empowered by being able to assume leadership roles in the school where they see a need.

This doesn't mean that teachers self-assign titles. But it does mean that principals do not feel the need to exert control over all aspects of the school, and that they embrace distributive leadership models. This is what we saw in our participating schools. One principal said, *"There are so many principals that I know who have egos. They want kids to stay in their places. They want teachers to stay in their place. And for us, it's the exact opposite. You know, we want you to stay in a place that you build, that you create. Your place is how you envision your place."*

Teachers of color benefit directly from this kind of philosophy because they have the space to approach administration and call out issues with the school and advocate for change. One teacher spoke about how he and his colleagues *"have the freedom to really approach any of our vice principals and discuss something that we have a problem with, especially when it comes to teaching our students, because we know our students, we know our families, and we bring our data or our argument to the table. And it's really, it's nothing where, OK, you've got to fill out this form and do this, that, and the other. It's like an open-door policy in the administrative office here."* Here, even if teachers of color don't have a leadership title, they are again more connected to the school and invested in the school's success.







Lastly, teacher autonomy in the classroom is paramount. School leaders who are intentional about retaining teachers of color allow teachers to use their discretion in how they teach their classes (materials, projects, course content). One principal said that they've *"been very deliberate and focused on trying and allowing teachers to be very creative in how they teach. One of the things we say all the time is 'We do school different here.' So, we have textbooks, and we have all the materials. But then a teacher will say, 'I really want to teach from The Hate U Give. I read it; it's a great book.' Bought 30 copies. We bought Pushout. We actually bought Pushout to be a book that we would read together, the staff, but one teacher really took to it. So, he uses it with his class."*

Teachers we spoke to recognized this effort from their principals, saying they could go to their principals and get materials ordered for their classes without using their own money. In an environment where classroom materials can be attached to controversial political debates, teachers of color appreciate having leaders that will invest in materials that are relevant to their students' lives. A teacher expressed, *"if you can come to your leader and say, 'Listen, I need this book,' and she goes, 'Okay, what is it? Got it,' and she knows it's a book that's going to awaken our kids — it's a scary thing to go to an administrator and you ask them a question and they tell you no, and it's something that you really want."*

## Mentor Teachers of Color and Build a Schoolwide Family

Successfully empowering teachers and meeting their needs through professional development does not happen without a commitment to fostering strong relationships between teachers, students, and administrators. When we talk about school climate and culture, it is clear that what is important for students is also important for teachers. In order for teachers of color to feel safe and like they belong, they have to build a strong relationship with the people they interact with daily. Building those relationships fosters trust. And in our case studies, we found that to be true. Principals realized that relationships are extremely important for teachers of color and building a family atmosphere among staff is foundational to retaining teachers of color. Principals noted that they've *"been very deliberate in finding opportunities to really build relationships amongst the staff. ... I tell them all the time, 'You're going to have hard days, and there are going to be days when the children wear you out. And the only reason why you come to school is because you know your colleagues need you. So, let's do those team-building activities.'"*

Several teachers talked about the importance of a family-like culture. One teacher said, *"A lot of us are friends outside of school, hang with each other, do things outside of school. So just that family connection that I have here is truly important to me."* Another teacher said, *"I know, for me, the reason why I've been here so long is because of the family here at [this school]."* And another teacher said, *"We've done some off-site PDs, some just fun escape kind of things, just to try to build up a sense of community so that when you're having those hard moments and you just don't think you can anymore, someone is there that says, 'We still can and we still need to.'"*

## To the Point

**IN AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE CLASSROOM MATERIALS CAN BE ATTACHED TO CONTROVERSIAL POLITICAL DEBATES, TEACHERS OF COLOR APPRECIATE HAVING LEADERS THAT WILL INVEST IN MATERIALS THAT ARE RELEVANT TO THEIR STUDENTS' LIVES.**

Administrators build relationships with their staff by being responsive, transparent, and communicating effectively. One principal talked about intentionally scheduling time with his staff to talk and build a rapport. He said, *"Like [teacher] and I, when school is over we're getting coffee. As soon as Ramadan's over, we're just going to go get coffee. No agenda. You're one of the leaders in this building, you touch many of the teachers, you are a pillar of the retention... Let's connect, you know?"*

We also recognized that teachers see themselves in the students and their parents. And teachers of color can see the commitment to people who look like them in how the school accommodates students and families of color. For the principals we spoke with, it was paramount for all teachers and staff to welcome all people and treat everyone entering in the building with respect. How you view or treat students shows what you think about people who look like them. One example, though it did not come up in this study, is whether or not leaders in schools with large populations of English learners commit to providing translators for families when welcoming parents into the building. Without providing families and students of color with what they need, how can the school support teachers of color?

There are benefits to creating a familial school culture, but there are potential pitfalls too. One principal

remarked, *"Because we can be a dysfunctional family that often has led to complacency and comfortability ... And so it then becomes a blurry line of, this being a safe space for you, true, but this is also your job. This is also a learning environment. At the end of day, this is a business too, and you need to behave as such."*

There has to be lines drawn where people can be comfortable to be themselves and free to interact with one another but still be professional. As one principal said, *"I spoke to the whole professional aspect, the familial aspect, and how I have to really help people to understand professionalism."*

Building strong relationships creates many formal and informal mentorship opportunities for teachers. Informally, when teachers feel a familial bond with a colleague, they feel comfortable enough to go to them and talk through issues they are having. Teachers talked about the importance of having that opportunity to talk to more veteran teachers. One teacher said, *"When you're coming in and you're new, you're dealing with a lot of things. And just someone you can just go to, not just when it deals with the academic part, but just even like if you're having a bad day."*

And the issues teachers face may not be solely in the classroom. For someone who is new to an area, it may be important just to know where to get the best food, go to church, or find a good hair stylist



or barber. *"Where do you go and get a fairly decent lunch? If you don't have someone to tell you, the hospital is probably the best place to go, into their cafeteria, because all of the pizza places aren't the greatest. So, things like that help make life easier. And so, we're going to work on how to pair people up next year with somebody who's been in the building and kind of knows those things to kind of help out."*

This point is especially important in schools and districts where there are fewer teachers of color. These teachers will need many more opportunities to engage with teachers who look like them, teach similar content, and who have probably experienced some of the same struggles (feeling undervalued, antagonistic work culture, lack of autonomy) that a novice teacher will go through over the course of their career. One teacher responded, *"I've been there, when I've been the only person of color. I'm originally from the state of Oklahoma, so there's a lot of opportunities for me to be the only person of color, whether it's in class, whether it's at the job. So, it's intentional for me to say, 'Let me help you navigate these spaces.'"*

Formally, the principals at these schools have found a number of ways to incorporate mentorship into teachers' jobs. The mentoring serves to acclimate teachers to the school culture as well as offer

strategies to help them navigate the profession. There were a number of examples where leaders and teachers spoke about mentorship opportunities for new teachers and how they impacted teachers of color. *"We do something, leader to leader, for our new staff that comes in: They're assigned someone, a veteran teacher in the building, so this person can serve as a resource."* In another instance, the mentorship opportunity was part of the new hire onboarding: *"We did two and a half days onboarding with the new teachers. That's when they came in, we kind of gave them a feel for what the culture was."*

Lastly, it's important to note that it's not enough to simply pair novice teachers with veteran teachers — those pairings have to be done thoughtfully. For example, partnering teachers based on shared content areas can help with issues relevant to what happens inside the classroom. But those aren't the only issues with which teachers of color struggle. When teachers experience bias, stereotyping, and racism, it requires a partner teacher who can help with those problems because they have experienced them first hand. Principals we talked to recognized this: *"We are strategic about picking who that veteran staff member is that is assigned to that person, and we actually have a system where they are required to do a certain number of check-ins."*

## To the Point

**DISTRICTS CANNOT PLACE TEACHERS OF COLOR ON AN ISLAND, LEFT TO NAVIGATE THE WORKFORCE WITHOUT COLLEAGUES WHO HAVE SIMILAR EXPERIENCES AND BACKGROUNDS.**

## Have a District Priority Related to Retaining Teachers of Color

In order to make lasting change, we found that the district has to make retaining teachers of color a priority. One issue is compensation. Although it is not exclusively an issue for teachers of color, having flexibility in compensation came across in our conversations about retaining teachers of color. Another issue is being intentional about where teachers are placed.

To improve compensation transparency issues, one charter network leader talked about making the compensation matrix publicly available so teachers can see exactly how much pay they will receive for various activities. For responsibilities like coaching or after-school coordination, teachers know exactly what kind of compensation is attached to the activity. She said, *"We actually will share with people — and when I say people I mean the entire organization — here's the grid of, if you want to be an after-school program leader, here's how much you'll make an hour."*

The commitment of teachers of color to their students stretches beyond the classroom walls, but their pay typically doesn't reflect all of the work they do for their students. That invisible tax, the extra work and burdens teachers of color take on, should not be just a part of the daily grind of the profession; it needs to be monetized and compensated. In one school, we found that the principal used a creative way of compensating teachers for going above and beyond the call of duty. The principal said, *"Because we believe it's a skill. It's not just magic. There's a particular skill that you bring to the table. I'm acknowledging this skill set that you have. So, I see you, and I want to compensate you for your work."*

This attention and approach to compensation is particularly important because teachers of color tend

to have to take on a lot more financially than others would.<sup>14</sup> Our case studies mirrored what teachers said in the focus groups. As one principal expressed, *"Because I think in our community, like we are ... responsible for more than just ourselves, right? So, I have my salary. I'm a second-, third-year teacher. I'm responsible for grandma. I may be responsible for sister. I may have to help out younger siblings. I want to give things to my students." ... "And when you look at all the studies of Black and Brown folks tend to be one step away from falling behind and being in poverty all over again. It's not different [for teachers]."* Critically, the principal understands this, and the district affords him the autonomy in his school budget to make these kinds of flexible compensation decisions for his teachers.

The other thing that the district can do is to intentionally recruit teachers of color and make sure they are not the lone teacher of color in a school. Past research highlights the challenging experiences of isolation for teachers of color who are the only person of color on staff.<sup>15</sup> Districts cannot place teachers of color on an island, left to navigate the workforce without colleagues who have similar experiences and backgrounds. It's simple: Teachers of color need people who look like them. As one teacher said, *"I think about it like a domino effect. Black teachers often need other Black teachers. If Black teachers at my school are leaving, I'm less anchored to that spot."*

Districts have to honor the fact that schooling cannot be separated from the larger context of history and its impact on people color today. Placing cohorts of teachers of color together in schools can be a beginning step in setting up an environment where they feel welcomed and accepted for who they are, especially in schools where they may be few in number. Intentionality is the best word to sum this up. One principal said, *"I think just really being intentional... and like saying this is a priority, and so when we're looking to fill positions, like I'm going to look at the best candidates. And I'm going to push our HR department to find me teachers of color."*





# 4 THINGS THAT SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND STATE LEADERS CAN DO TO RETAIN TEACHERS OF COLOR

**School, district, and state leaders can disrupt toxic and repressive systems and replace them with welcoming, empowering, and racially affirming spaces for teachers of color. It may not be easy, but it can be done. Here are four recommended actions that state, district, and/or school leaders can take to improve the retention of teachers of color.**



1)

**Value teachers of color by providing loan forgiveness, service scholarships, loan repayment incentives, and relocation incentives** for teachers coming into the field. Compensation is important for all teachers, and it is not just relegated to teacher pay. The research shows teachers of color take on more responsibilities inside and outside of the classroom that often go unrecognized. Therefore, school districts should provide additional financial compensation for expanded duties and responsibilities (e.g., mentorship, translation, etc.), promotional opportunities, and recognition. This would ease the financial burden that teachers of color face as they navigate the profession.

2)

**Collect and disaggregate data (by race/ethnicity) on teacher recruitment, hiring, and retention.** Data should be publicly available and user-friendly. Not only will this data reveal shortages in demographics, but it will also identify areas with greatest potential to transform school climates. School climate and exit interview data should also be collected and disaggregated to fully explore teachers' experiences in schools with support and professional development. There is no way of knowing the perceptions of teachers without asking them about their experiences. With this data, leaders should identify and rectify racial bias in interactions among educators through professional development and ongoing training in cultural competence, racial equity, and unconscious bias. Surveys of teachers should also examine their experiences with race and racism, which would improve school teaching conditions that play a role in the retention of teachers of color.

3)

**Invest in the recruitment, preparation, and development of strong, diverse leaders committed to positive working conditions for a diverse workforce.** Committed and invested leaders are a key component to diversifying the teacher workforce. This means leaders at all levels must reflect on one's understanding of race and racism and engage with how race influences their work. Without an understanding of how racism and systemic oppression play a role in the schooling institution, it's impossible to address the needs of teachers of color. This starts with creating a school culture that nurtures, welcomes, and makes teachers of color feel like they belong. It also means creating the space for teachers of color to be their authentic selves both as human beings and as people of color. Affirming their cultures in the school will also allow teachers of color to build strong, positive relationships with other teachers, their students, and administrators.

4)

**Empower teachers of color by ensuring curriculum, and learning and work environments are inclusive and respectful of all racial ethnic groups.** This means giving teachers the autonomy to tailor their instructional practices and curricula and make them relevant to the students they serve. It is equally important for district and school leaders to eliminate racial barriers to leadership opportunities, including serving on district advisory committees, teaching advanced courses, and mentoring new teachers. Professional learning and development opportunities should be focused explicitly on issues of equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. Leaders can create support networks for teachers of color that provide mentorship, camaraderie, and professional development. Finally, leaders should create a space for teachers to advocate for themselves and their students. By routinely seeking formal and informal opportunities to check in with their teachers about what's working and what's not, leaders can ensure every person in the building feels like they belong and can thrive.

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