



AFT New Jersey, AFL-CIO

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Teacher Diversity

Senate Higher Education Committee, Senate Education Committee

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Public schools should serve all students equally, regardless of race, creed or cultural differences. Research shows that children in historically underserved communities benefit academically if they have teachers who look like them. We need to make sure they get the teachers they need.

For years the American Federation of Teachers has recognized the urgent need to recruit and retain more people from underserved communities to teach, but there are challenges to recruitment and retention. In the midst of a widespread teacher shortage, teachers of color are even scarcer. Those who do make it to the classroom, leave the profession at higher rates than white teachers. Then, children of color end up with mostly white teachers.

There are several AFT-led programs that use a “grow your own” approach to preparing a more diverse workforce through tactics such as assisting paraprofessionals and other members of the school community to become teachers.

Research shows that all students, schools, districts and communities benefit from a more diverse teaching force:

- Teachers of color tend to have higher academic expectations for students of color, which can result in increased academic and social growth.
- Students of color benefit from having teachers from their own racial and ethnic groups, who can serve as academic role models and who have greater knowledge of their heritage and culture.
- Positive exposure to individuals from a variety of races and ethnic groups can help reduce stereotypes and implicit bias and promote cross-cultural social bonding.
- All students benefit from being educated by teachers from a variety of races and ethnicities, as it better prepares them to succeed in an increasingly diverse society.

AFT is working to replicate successful diversity programs that have been developed by locals across the country based on this “grow-your-own” model to expand the ranks of teachers. The closer teachers are to the students’ own communities, the more successfully they will connect and engage with them. Frequently, paraprofessionals—usually teacher aides—are already members of the community, and they have a demonstrated interest in education. Since their pay rates can be low, funding assistance as well as tutoring or mentoring can be just the push they need to enroll in a teacher education program.

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Parents have also been successful candidates in grow-your-own teacher preparation programs. Some start as frequent classroom volunteers, become classroom assistants, and then, with support from a grow-your-own program, enroll in education classes.

Here are several brief descriptions of programs across the country developed through labor-management collaborations:

- A teaching magnet program supported by the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers engages high school students interested in education and includes field experience for seniors, many of whom continue their teacher education and return to teach in Pittsburgh public schools.
- A program in Oklahoma City helps paraprofessionals become teachers and will soon recruit and mentor high school students as well; it is the result of a partnership between the AFT affiliate, the Oklahoma City Federation of Classified Employees, and Langston University.
- A New Mexico paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline, spearheaded by the Albuquerque Educational Assistants Association, uses state funding to pay for paras teacher education.
- The United Federation of Teachers' Success via Apprenticeship program connects the New York City Department of Education and the City University of New York to prepare graduates of career and technical education high schools to become CTE teachers.

While these programs are successful in recruiting a diverse workforce, there also needs to be supports in place to retain these diverse educators. All too often teachers have expressed the need for more planning time, timely access to resources (materials and human), in-time hiring to allow for training and prep, more and better induction programs, mentors, coaches and opportunities to observe master teachers.

A mentorship or support group extending beyond the first year is needed for continuous professional growth and confidence. Having support immediately when you are hired to assist in the mountains of paperwork, classroom setup, reviewing educational materials/district policies and lesson planning before the school year begins would guarantee more success for educators and their students.

We should make a real effort in recruiting more male educators in lower grades. Most elementary and preschools are primarily female. Except for administration or physical education teachers, some students may not have male educators until the 4th grade.

My final thoughts are on what and how teacher diversity needs to be promoted. It needs to be clear that all schools should have a diverse teaching community demonstrating inclusion, acceptance and tolerance.

Recruiting and hiring a diverse workforce is not an excuse to lower the teacher prep standards. While our students need to be engaged with a diverse teaching force, we also have to guarantee all students the teacher in front of them is a qualified educator who went through a rigorous educational program for that privilege.

New Jersey needs more highly qualified, effective educators to reach our students of every race, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity. This is not meant to exclude anyone, but to have an inclusive teaching staff to best meet the needs of our students.