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Governance Brief

African-American Students in Focus, Issue 3

Supporting African-American Teacher Retention

By Dr. Malika Hollinside

Introduction

California schools are experiencing a serious teacher shortage.¹ While recruitment is an important aspect of this challenge, the California Teachers Association (CTA) affirms that retention continues to have a major impact on the shortage. This issue is particularly acute in certain school districts—about half of new teachers in California’s urban, low-income, and high-minority districts leave the field within five years.²

While teacher attrition is a problem in general, African-American teachers depart the profession at higher rates than teachers of any other ethnic group.³ This leaves California schools with a less diverse teaching force and deprives many students of the opportunity to interact with professionals who can enhance their educational experiences. In addition, there is growing evidence of positive outcomes for students whose teachers reflect their culture and language backgrounds, particularly for African-American students. Therefore, finding ways to retain teachers from diverse backgrounds is an important strategy, both for addressing the teacher shortage overall and for closing opportunity and achievement gaps.

This brief is informed by findings from a review of existing research and by a new 2017 survey of 100 African-American teachers in California. Together they shed light on the importance of African-American teachers to all students—and their particular importance to African-American students. The brief also provides information on the reasons that California’s African-American teachers leave the profession; factors that contribute to their retention; and strategies that county offices of education, school districts, and schools can employ to increase retention rates. The African-American teacher perspectives shared in this research can help governing boards, school administrations, teacher preparation programs, and other organizations develop workplace conditions that support African-American teachers, as well as their non-African-American peers.

This brief will answer the following questions:

- » What is the impact of African-American teachers on student outcomes?
- » What does data show about African-American teacher attrition?
- » What factors contribute to the retention/attrition of African-American teachers?
- » What are some strategies for school boards to support the retention of African-American teachers?

Impact of African-American Teachers on African-American Student Outcomes

There is strong and growing evidence that African-American students benefit in a number of ways from learning in classrooms with African-American teachers. They serve as role models, uphold high expectations, implement culturally responsive teaching, share understanding of students’ backgrounds and cultural experiences, and form strong connections with families and communities. In addition to delivering high-quality academic instruction, African-American teachers can help students learn how to navigate racial inequity and injustice in ways that can influence their experiences and improve their life outcomes.⁴

Evidence indicates that African-American teachers have a positive impact on African-American students’ outcomes. For example, a 2017 study found that male African-American students who experienced at least one African-American teacher in their third- to fifth-grade years had lower probabilities of dropping out of high school and higher intentions of attending college.⁵ Some of this impact is attributed to the

role of expectations. A 2014 study found that 10th-grade students whose teachers had higher expectations were three times more likely to graduate from college than those with teachers who had lower expectations,⁶ and a 2015 study found that African-American teachers have significantly higher expectations of African-American students than teachers who are not African-American.⁷

With the largest gap in the nation between the proportion of students of color and teachers of color, California students have fewer opportunities than their peers across the country to experience teachers who reflect their diversity.⁸ In California's K-12 public schools, approximately 68% of teachers are white⁹ but only 24% of students are white.¹⁰ A predominantly white teaching force presents conflicting messages to all students about professional opportunities and roles for people of color. Students of all ages and backgrounds need to see examples of people of color in professional realms in order to counteract harmful stereotypes. Education stakeholders in California can help by prioritizing support for African-American teachers and acknowledging that, as highly skilled educators, they are not only important to African-American students, but to all students.

Decline in the U.S. and California African-American Teacher Pool

Across the country, attrition (teachers who leave the profession) has been a major factor in the shrinking African-American teaching force over the past two decades.¹¹ Nationally, the attrition rate is higher for African-American teachers than for white or Latino teachers. In 2012–13, 10% of African-American teachers left the profession, compared to 8% of Latino teachers and 7.5% of white teachers.¹²

California's African-American teacher pool has declined as well, decreasing significantly in the last 15 years from 15,640 during the 2001–02 school year to just over 12,000 during the 2015–16 school year. And while the total number of teachers fluctuated during this period, the proportion of African-American teachers in California gradually declined from 5.1% to 4%.¹³

New Research Study Sheds Light on Attrition

While African-American teachers have diverse backgrounds and experiences, research identifies recurring themes related to their decision to stop teaching. African-American teachers cite lack of voice, autonomy, trust, and career-growth opportunities in schools as influencing their desire to leave the field.¹⁴ Numerous studies have also pointed to workplace conditions and high levels of job dissatisfaction as reasons why African-American teachers abandon teaching for other careers.^{15,16}

A 2017 survey of 100 African-American teachers and administrators in California expands the understanding of why African-American teachers stay or leave the profession.¹⁷ The survey analysis revealed that negative workplace factors were key reasons why African-American teachers are more likely to leave the field. The analysis also illuminated practical considerations that can help California's education stakeholders, school administrations, and board members improve the retention rates of African-American teachers. See the full survey analysis at <http://bit.ly/2vaMTVe>.

School Workplace Factors that Impact African-American Teacher Retention

School Administration: The degree of support from, relationships with, and management styles of school administrators.

Decision-Making Influence: The amount and type of influence that teachers have over curriculum, pedagogy, discipline, and other decisions in the school.

Autonomy: The amount of freedom that teachers have to choose and implement curriculum, pedagogy, discipline, etc.

Career Advancement: The availability of opportunities for upward mobility such as promotion, specialist positions, professional development, etc.

Cultural Responsiveness: The ways that administration and faculty confront and address racial issues, e.g., through dialogue and professional training, etc.

School Climate: The norms, values, processes, and overall characteristics of the school.

Cultural and Racial Bias: The ways that teachers feel they are discriminated against or treated differently because of race, ethnicity, and/or culture.

Cultural Incongruity: The misunderstandings that can occur when the overall school culture is not aligned with the racial and cultural needs of the students and teachers.

While all of these workplace factors can affect the retention of teachers overall, several seem to have greater impact on African-American teacher retention and attrition. For example, research has shown that the retention of all teachers improves when school leadership establishes a supportive and safe school culture and climate. However, evidence

points to the particular importance of several of these factors for African-American teachers: inclusion, recognition, trust, autonomy, cultural sensitivity, and upward mobility.¹⁸

The Significant Influence of School Administration

Among the identified workplace factors, the 2017 survey analysis cited school administration as the most significant factor in predicting African-American teachers' desire to remain at their schools. This is logical given that school administrators make decisions every day that are vital to creating a supportive school culture where communication, inclusion, equity, and respect are central. Some of these findings apply to all teachers, while others may have a stronger impact on African-American teachers.

According to the teachers surveyed, African-American teachers are more likely to remain in schools when administrators:

1. **Are supportive.** African-American teachers often work in the most challenging school environments with the highest-need students. These teachers need support, flexibility, and empathy from administrators. New teachers in these environments need the particular support of induction programs, teacher mentors, and additional training. Unfortunately, many of the African-American teachers surveyed did not have such supportive administrators, reporting negative experiences with administrators who exhibited oppressive, unsupportive, untrusting, exclusionary, and disrespectful characteristics.
2. **Accept the existence of covert and overt racism.** Many African-American teachers felt that administrators and colleagues did not accept or understand the ways that racism impacts teachers and students of color, and were disappointed that administrations did not address these issues. Several teachers reported experiencing both overt and covert racism on a daily basis in their schools, including the racist attitudes of their teaching colleagues toward African-American students. Teachers also expressed that schools rarely provided effective professional development in cultural competency and responsiveness, and they often reported that their administrators were ill-prepared to confront and resolve racial tensions at school.
3. **Appreciate expertise, efforts, and successes.** All teachers need to be acknowledged and valued for their experience, innovation, and intellect. Many African-American teachers reported feeling overlooked and underappreciated and commonly reported isolation and disenchantment as a result of not feeling appreciated in their schools. They reported that rather than being valued for their work and expertise, they felt valued only to the

"In some schools I felt that I had a voice in not only my class, but the school policies and decision-making...but I've had more times when that's not the case over the years...The key I find is with conscious leadership...and those leaders have to have the 'power to lead'...that's when I see growth, that's when I see like mindedness, that's when I see real school happening"

—Study Participant

extent that they were able to "control" or monitor the discipline of African-American students or contribute to multicultural events and activities.

4. **Value teacher inclusion and input in decision-making.** African-American teachers reported being excluded from school decisions about curriculum, policy, professional development, and pedagogy. Even African-American teachers with graduate school degrees felt that they had little voice. Teachers were especially frustrated when schools failed to utilize information from African-American educational theory and practice. Several teachers were also disillusioned at how little attention was paid in the curriculum to the contributions of African-Americans and other people of color.
5. **Provide autonomy and trust.** Many African-American teachers said their administrators did not trust them to create and implement the curriculum, pedagogy, and policy that they believed was in the best interests of their students. Even veteran teachers reported often being asked to prove their professional qualifications. Some teachers felt that they were deterred by administrators who were afraid that they might challenge common school culture and tradition and change the status quo.
6. **Support the cultural needs of faculty, students, and parents.** African-American teachers often mentioned the tendency of administrators and faculty to 'not see color' and avoid issues of race, culture, and ethnicity in schools. Teachers also reported a lack of sufficient contemporary or accurate portrayals of African-Americans and other people of color in the curriculum. Participants also mentioned their frustration with administrators and faculty who did not understand the history and culture of African-Americans and insulted the cultural characteristics of their students and parents.
7. **Provide opportunities for upward mobility.** Career advancement is highly important to teachers. Although African-American teachers in general rate salary low as a factor in their intention to enter and remain in the

field, several of the male teachers who took the survey mentioned salary as the driving force behind their desire to obtain positions in administration or other better paid specialist positions in education. However, very few participants said that they had extensive opportunities to obtain a specialist position in the profession.

8. **Establish and uphold strong connections with students, families, and communities.** The most positive and common idea that African-American teachers expressed was the importance of the relationships that they form with their students, particularly with African-American students. Most of the teachers said that their connection with students, parents, and the community was the most important factor in their love for teaching. Many teachers said, however, that school administrators both intentionally and unintentionally avoided parents and did not engage with students, families, and/or the community.

Considerations for Board Members

Understanding how school conditions and administrator attitudes and actions impact the retention of teachers is very important for board members as they set the vision and establish standards for professional development in their schools. As community leaders, board members can work with their superintendents and other staff to ensure that all schools have supportive workplace conditions and that administrators receive the necessary support to be strong instructional leaders to ensure that more teachers remain in the profession. Exploring answers to the following questions can help board members better understand and support the recruitment and retention of African-American teachers.

Questions about Current and Pre-Service Teacher Demographics

- » What are the ethnic/racial demographics of teachers in our county, district, and schools?
- » Are the numbers of African-American teachers reflective of our student population?
- » What are the attrition and retention rates of African-American teachers in our schools?
- » What are the ethnic/racial demographics of candidates in the teacher-preparation programs that send teachers to our schools?

District or County Office of Education

Strategies. Board members should ensure that their district or county office of education **collects and analyzes data annually**. This should include data on teacher and student diversity, an assessment of teacher retention and attrition rates, turnover costs, and diversity data from credentialing programs.

Questions about Retention of Current African-American Teachers

- » What are the needs and concerns of African-American teachers in our schools?
- » Are we investing adequately in professional development, mentorship, and support for new and veteran African-American teachers?
- » What training do we provide administration and staff to support their understanding of and strategies for working with African-American students and families?
- » What opportunities for career advancement do we provide to our teachers? Have African-American teachers moved into positions through career advancement in our schools?

District or County Office of Education Strategies.

Board members should ensure that their district or county office of education invests in teacher support, career ladders, and cultural competency training.

- » **Teacher support** can include induction programs, professional development based on teacher feedback and needs, development of African-American teacher networking groups, and mentors for new teachers.
- » **Career ladders** can include career pathway programs and the promotion of strong African-American teachers to higher levels and salaries.
- » **Cultural competency training** can include professional development for school staff to address and resolve teacher and student experience of overt and covert racism.

Questions about Recruitment of New African-American Teachers

- » Are there successful pipelines for recruiting and retaining African-American teachers? How might we support the expansion of these pipelines?
- » What incentives and strategies do we provide to attract African-American teachers to our schools?
- » What incentives and support do we provide for current African-American non-teaching staff to get the training and education required to teach in our schools?
- » Are there teacher-preparation programs that have a good record of recruiting candidates who are diverse and who remain in the classroom that our schools should partner with?

District or County Office of Education Strategies.

Board members should ensure that their district or county office of education invests in teacher recruitment and credentialing. This can include annual recruitment events, college visits, and paying for credentialing expenses. Surveyed teachers reported that the financial burden and required testing of credentialing programs were deterrents to entering and remaining in the classroom and advancing professionally. Investing in recruitment can also include building “grow-your-own” programs, which encourage and support high school students, college students, and professionals from other careers to pursue a teaching career in their communities.

Conclusion

The retention of African-American teachers in California’s K-12 public schools is critical for many reasons: they improve the performance of African-American students; serve as role models; and bridge the relationship between students, families, communities, and schools. Moreover, African-American teachers are essential in their role as activists who acknowledge and combat the widespread effects of oppression and racism in the lives of students of color.

Governance teams have the responsibility and authority to make decisions that can support diversity in schools—a change that is good for staff and students. If stakeholders and administrators gain better understanding of the conditions that impact the ability of African-American teachers to thrive and remain in the profession, then they have an opportunity

to improve those conditions in their schools. These changes can lead to more African-American teachers entering and remaining in the profession, resulting in a more diverse and effective teaching force and better overall student outcomes, particularly for African-American students.

CSBA Resources

African-American Students in Focus, Issue 1: Demographic and Achievement Profile of California’s African-American Students (April 2016)

African-American Students in Focus, Issue 2: Closing Opportunity and Achievement Gaps for African-American Students (April 2016)

Endnotes

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Dr. Malika Hollinside is a CSBA doctoral fellow from CSU Sacramento's Doctoral program. She is also a high school teacher with Pacific Charters Institute and the Creative Director of Sisters of Nia, Inc.