

A Root Cause of the Teacher-Diversity Problem

Having just earned a teaching degree from Pennsylvania's Millersville University, Rian Reed set out in 2011 to find a position working with special-needs students. Born and raised in a suburb outside of Philadelphia, she had built an enviable academic record, earning induction into the National Honor Society in high school and speaking at her university commencement. She sought to use her leadership skills and creativity in a classroom in her own community. So Reed, a biracial woman who identifies as black, applied to work in her hometown school district.

"I thought I would serve as a role model for young female students of color, giving back to them more than what I had received," she said. But according to Reed, the district didn't even offer her an interview.

The dearth of black teachers across the country is [well-researched](#) and [extensively documented](#). Nationally, [federal data](#) shows more than eight out of 10 (81.9 percent) teachers are white, while fewer than one in 10 (6.8 percent) are black. These statistics stand in sharp contrast to [student demographics](#) in U.S. public schools, where 47 percent of children are white and 16 percent are black. The number of black teachers would need to more than double—from just over 230,000 to roughly 542,000—if their share of the educator force were to match that of black students relative to the public-school population. A growing body of evidence suggests that black teachers [benefit](#) black schoolchildren, and that students of [all races](#) prefer teachers of color, adding urgency to efforts to resolve the disparity.

Until now, much of the policy debate on teacher diversity has centered on filling the pipeline—[expanding the pool](#) of black students graduating from college and entering the teaching profession. But a [new working paper](#) from researchers at Northwestern University suggests the presence of an overlooked and particularly troubling obstacle to boosting the number of black educators: racial discrimination and bias in school-district hiring practices.

Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, a professor of social policy and economics, and her co-author Cynthia DuBois, used the ruling in and outcome of a decades-old desegregation lawsuit in Louisiana—*Moore v. Tangipahoa Parish School Board*—as a case study to evaluate whether certain changes to hiring practices can substantially increase a school district's share of black teachers. "This was a pretty stringent court order [and] we wanted to understand what happened as a result," Schanzenbach explained, referring to a directive that the Louisiana district adopt new, affirmative-action hiring practices. "How quickly was it able to change? And, ultimately, how did that impact student achievement?"

In 1975, the U.S. District Court of Louisiana in New Orleans issued a consent decree meant to desegregate faculty in Tangipahoa Parish, instructing the school board to fill vacant teaching positions with qualified black applicants until the share of black teachers in the district aligned with that of black students. But for 35 years, that court order had sat dormant, "largely ignored by the district and unenforced by the court," the authors write. It wasn't until 2010 that the court issued a ruling reaffirming the consent

decree. Under the new plan, not only did Tangipahoa Parish have to ensure its teaching force was racially representative—it also had to explain its rationale every time a qualified black applicant wasn't chosen for an open position.

The court had good reason to reinforce this long-standing desegregation order. Over a 10-year period prior to the new court-ordered mandate (1998 to 2008), Tangipahoa had, on average, hired a smaller portion of black teachers (19.8 percent) than had [other school districts in Louisiana](#) (24.1 percent). What's more, its overall teacher workforce included fewer black educators (17.1 percent) than the rest of the state (23.2 percent.) After the court-ordered criteria went into effect in 2010, the number of black teachers hired in Tangipahoa spiked dramatically. And by 2014, new hires in the district were significantly more likely to be black (32.2 percent) than new teachers hired statewide (21.7 percent). In turn, the difference between the district and state in the share of the total teacher workforce identified as black closed to within 2 percentage points (19.9 percent vs. 22 percent)—a shift that the researchers attributed not, say, to white teachers retiring but rather to the surge in new black teachers spurred by the hiring policy.

The influx of African American educators was able to shrink the black-student-to-black-teacher ratio even as the share of black students slowly increased over the same timeframe. In fact, the new policy reduced the “representation gap”—defined by the authors as the difference between the share of students that are black and the share of teachers that are black—by between 3 and 4 percentage points. The policy also resulted in a greater share of black teachers employed at predominately white schools, which tended to have few black teachers before the court intervened.

And the value of this policy, it seems, wasn't just a matter of optics. Since the paper was released, Schanzenbach has obtained additional race-specific data that reflect notable achievements for black students. After the court order was implemented, the black-white achievement disparity in test scores narrowed by 5 percent. While it's difficult to assess causation, this improvement, Schanzenbach theorized, happened “just from hiring different teachers within the pool of applicants.”

DuBois, a native of Tangipahoa Parish and an emerging scholar who co-authored the study but passed away earlier this month, surveyed teachers in the district to provide more context on the quantitative data. Some 81 percent of participants reported that they heard about job openings through word-of-mouth, describing a “decentralized, accelerated, and insular hiring process” that resulted in uneven access to employment opportunities for black and white teacher applicants in the rural-Louisiana school system.

DuBois also found that a rejection of the court-ordered affirmative-action policy—61.5 percent of teachers had a negative view of the hiring preference—rarely translated into how a teacher viewed the new hires at his or her school or the teacher quality in a given department. Just over 46 percent of teachers gave the newly hired black teachers a “completely positive” review, and an almost identical share gave a “mixed” review. About 60 percent said the quality of teachers in their department was rising.

With the marked increase in the share of black teachers and other positive shifts in the district, Schanzenbach recommends that school systems consider expanding the recruitment pool and encouraging individual campuses to develop systematic, consistent ways of interviewing teachers. She noted: “School districts should look at their hiring and say, ‘Are we really doing what we can here to diversify our teacher force? Maybe we should have a rule that says we interview at least one candidate [of color].’” Districts and policymakers, she continued, would benefit from taking the initiative to reform their hiring protocol and avoid subjecting themselves to a plan dictated by a court.

One school district in Pinellas County, Florida, is putting such changes into practice. Part of its [comprehensive plan](#) to eliminate racial disparities in student test scores is a vow to increase the percentages of black teachers and administrators, bringing their numbers more in line with the district’s [black-student](#) population. As [reported](#) last year by the *Tampa Bay Times*, Pinellas County aims to grow the black-teacher pool by an average of 1 percent annually, to a total of 18 percent in the next 10 years. To keep tabs on the district’s progress, the number of qualified black-teacher applicants and hires will be tracked, although no hiring quotas are in place.

Even without quotas, though, districts are bound to struggle in their efforts to improve their teacher diversity if they disregard the prospect of pushback when considering affirmative-action hiring policies. Valerie Hill-Jackson, a clinical professor in teacher education and the director of educator-preparation programs at Texas A&M University, said Schanzenbach and DuBois’s paper offered a sobering reminder of the teaching force’s racial realities, as well as of the challenges inherent in diversifying the profession through hiring changes. “Most of our [public-school] teachers are white, female, middle class, and Christian. We have to be cognizant of and prepared for detractors,” Hill-Jackson said. “We can’t legislate hearts.”

To overcome the resistance to race-targeted hiring policies, she said, school districts need to have a long vision for how to move the discussion around affirmative action in teacher hiring from a “quota-pushing perspective, to an asset-and-excellence perspective.”

“This isn’t pie in the sky, kumbaya,” Jackson said. “Whether our kids are growing in math, science, or language arts, it works to have [nonwhite educators] in front of the classroom.”

After being spurned for the job in Pennsylvania, Rian Reed interviewed in 2012 for a position as a special-education teacher in Prince George’s County Public Schools in Maryland. She was hired immediately. Whereas her skills and experiences may have been disregarded elsewhere, she said it was clear to her that Prince George’s schools, in a majority-black county, saw her worth.

RELATED STORY



[The Burden of Being a Black Teacher](#)

“If student success is a priority [as] it should be, school districts must consistently reevaluate their hiring practices to ensure that they have a culturally diverse staff, [and] not just through quotas,” Reed said. Rather, she added, it’s incumbent on districts to foster “a systemic culture of valuing teachers of color” if they want to ensure they provide an enriching education for all children in the long run.

As for the policy implications to be drawn from the analysis, Schanzenbach said the paper raises complex questions that defy easy answers. The indication “that qualified black teachers are not hired today just because of the color of their skin is crazy, and we should be having a conversation about that—not just about getting more African Americans to major in [education] and get a teaching certificate, but about our understanding of [implicit bias in hiring](#),” she said.

Indeed, relatively little is known about the extent to which such bias influences schools’ staffing decisions. Getting a better grasp on the scope of the problem could be key to further refining hiring policies so that they ensure greater student success. And as Schanzenbach concluded, the gains would extend beyond classrooms and schools. “We’ll also have a more just society.”