



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR COMMENTARY

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Educator Diversity and the Benefits for *All* Students

By Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

The Connecticut State Board of Education’s 5-Year Comprehensive Plan (2016-21) includes the goals of supporting districts in recruiting and retaining a diverse, effective educator corps, while ensuring that every student has access to excellent educators.

These are important goals. As one recruiter for an urban district told me, finding diverse teachers who are also the most effective teacher available is not an easy task. However, if we are to be successful as a State, we need to find educators who are both.

As part of its efforts, SDE held the first of several workshops on eliminating implicit bias in hiring. Working with the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders, the workshop leaders began by discussing the great disparities in percentages between teachers of color and students of color. In 2015-16, for example, 8.3% of teachers were of color, while 44% of students were. In the “Opportunity” Districts, the lowest performing subset of the 30 Alliance Districts, the percentage gap is as high as 68%.

What are the benefits to our students if, through the State and local districts, we are able to increase the percentages of teachers of color?

According to resources provided at the workshop, for students of color, the benefits are:

- Learning gains, especially when the students are taught by a “same-race” teacher. According to a 2011 study, “Teachers of color do more than just teach content. They dispel myths of racial inferiority and incompetence... Moreover, diversity among teachers increases teachers’ and students’ knowledge and understanding of different cultural groups.”
- Access to “cultural brokers”. These are individuals who bridge, link, or mediate “between groups or persons of different **cultural** backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change”. Where there are few teachers of color among a high population of students of color, there may be a greater likelihood of unrest leading to disciplinary actions, often disproportionately aimed at students of color.

- Reduction of disparity. Having teachers of color has been shown to reduce the disparity between students of color and White students in special education placement, suspension and expulsion, and placement in gifted or enrichment classes.
- A positive role model effect. One study found that the high school dropout rate diminishes by 29% for students who have at least one Black teacher in third through fifth grade.

Perhaps these four bullets are enough to convince people of the importance of hiring educators of color, especially in districts with high numbers of students of color. However, there are also benefits for ALL students when the percentages of teachers of color are increased. While much of the following is from studies of integration at institutions of higher learning, there is no reason to think the points would be any less true in k-12 schools. There are:

- Increased academic gains. Research has found that students in more racially and ethnically diverse student bodies may be exposed to a wider array of experiences, outlooks is associated with smaller test score gaps between students of different racial backgrounds, not because white student achievement declined, but because black and/or Hispanic student achievement increased.

Studies have shown that [the racial achievement gap in K–12 education closed faster](#) during the peak years of school desegregation than they have during more recent times when many desegregation policies were dismantled and replaced by accountability policies.

Learning cooperatively alongside those whose perspectives and backgrounds are different from their own, is beneficial to all students, including middle-class white students, because they promote creativity, motivation, deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

- Strengthened democratic values. Students’ experiences in diverse classrooms can provide the kind of cross-cultural dialogue that prepares them for citizenship in a multifaceted society and in the world which they will enter. Students develop improved civic attitudes toward democratic participation, civic behaviors such as participating in community activities, and intentions to participate in civic activities resulting from different learning experiences.
- Stereotypes are broken down and unconscious or implicit bias is countered. White students in particular benefit from racially and ethnically diverse learning environments because the presence of students of color stimulates an increase in the complexity with which students—especially white students—approach a given issue.

Myths of inferiority are dispelled. Racially diverse educational settings are effective in reducing prejudice, by promoting greater contact between students of different races—both informally and in classroom settings—and by encouraging relationships and friendships across group lines.

CABE’s Diversity Committee, chaired by Don Harris and staffed by Mary Broderick, is charged with encouraging “boards of education, school and district leaders, as well as State Government to continue to consider the importance of diversity and multiculturalism in public education.”

I want to thank SDE’s Kim Wachtelhausen Education Consultant, Bureau of Educator Effectiveness, Talent Office, for her help on this article. Besides much taken from the Century Foundation publication, much more information on the benefits of a diverse student body can be found at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/>.