



## What Can We Learn from the Perspective of Black Teachers?

By Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

Connecticut, like many states, is attempting to increase its teachers and administrators of color. This has been a concern for many years and the State, as well as CABE and other organizations, is working harder than ever to ensure that it finally happens.

On October 20<sup>th</sup>, the Governor signed PA 16-41, *An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force*, which, among other actions in this area, requires the establishment of a Minority Teacher Recruitment Policy Oversight Council in the State Department of Education (SDE), requires SDE to conduct an annual survey of students on the effectiveness of minority teacher recruitment programs and requires SDE to “report annually on the effectiveness of minority teacher recruitment programs using results-based accountability methods.”

The CABE *Ad hoc* Committee on Diversity has also been examining these issues, including diversity and cultural competence on Boards of Education. CABE and CAPSS have also examined diversity as part of our efforts on ensuring a high-quality Superintendent pipeline and on our joint Demography and Diversity Committee.

Why is raising the number and percentage of our educators of color so important? Among the many reasons:

Now, and in the years to come, our student population is becoming more diverse.

We need role models for our students of color. This is one of the research findings that is so important for our children. And, it’s not only about teachers, it’s about school leaders and district leaders, including school board members.

We need role models for ALL our students. It is good for them to see people of color in leadership positions. That’s the world they will enter.

Research shows that there is a better chance of districts developing policies and programs that will help students of color when there are school board members of color on their boards.

One of the biggest issues in ensuring that there are teachers and administrators of color in our districts is ensuring they stay, assuming, like with any employees, they are qualified and meet the standards set by their school districts.

## Teachers Speak Out

To understand the obstacles to retaining black teachers, The Education Trust, a well-known and highly credible organization that “promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels--prekindergarten through college” published *Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections from Black Teachers*.

The “brief” used focus groups of teachers of color to develop its findings. National statistics set the context: “teachers of color represent only 18 percent of the teaching population in the U.S. (Black teachers are 7 per cent).”

As a comparison, the most current *Condition of Education in Connecticut: 2014-2015*, an SDE publication, states that only approximately 8 percent of our teaching force is nonwhite (Blacks amount to 3.5%). Our nonwhite students comprise approximately 42% and that number is expected to continue to grow.

So what did Black teachers in the focus group say?

Teachers described the many ways they believe they benefit students and are experts. “They had high expectations for their students, passion for teaching, and the capacity to empower students with knowledge. Many of them felt they were ‘called’ to be in the classroom.”

They felt they taught Black students well, “but found themselves restricted to *only* teaching Black students”; that they were asked to be disciplinarians instead of having gained respect for their work in classroom management; “they put in extra time and effort, but weren’t heard in staff meetings”; and “had to ‘tone down’ their personalities to be seen as professionals.”

They felt they were being “pigeonholed by peers, parents, and administrators into specific roles based on these strengths, thereby limiting and diminishing their capabilities. Without the acknowledgment of (or the chance to build) the pedagogical and subject matter expertise essential to their profession, they felt they lacked opportunities for advancement and were undervalued and unappreciated.”

The teachers also felt:

- “they had an easier time building connections with students, especially Black students, because of perceived cultural and experiential similarities. They said this immediate, surface-level connection with many Black students helped those students trust them and feel safe in their care.”
- that they empathized “with students’ out-of-school experiences differently than do caring, White teacher colleagues. Their empathy often combined with other strengths necessary to provide a quality education to children.”
- they were often seen as subpar educators. According to the teachers, “the assumption that Black teachers are best to teach Black children creates a subtle — and obviously

inaccurate —undercurrent that Black teachers do not have the ability to teach all children.”

- a sense of obligation to teach Black students beyond the academic curriculum. Because of this, “they experienced additional professional and personal stressors.” The heightened sense of obligation, and the stress that went with it was intensified by their limited representation in the teaching workforce and the field of education.
- when they attended professional development, it often did not cater to the kinds of schools they worked in or the kinds of issues they faced. “This lack of adequate resources and support often led Black teachers to navigate challenges on their own and rely on whatever they had to in order to serve their students.”

## **My Takeaways**

The study did not provide recommendations for handling these concerns. However, it certainly behooves all of us in Connecticut working toward the State Board’s goal of ensuring our “teachers and leaders collectively reflect the rich cultural diversity in Connecticut and are culturally responsive instructors” to consider ways in which we can ensure that our teachers of color receive the support they need.

We need to overcome stereotypes; understand our teachers’ circumstances and needs; provide additional, tailored professional development; and, realize what a terrific asset that a diverse teaching staff brings us.

Such thoughtful consideration will provide a real benefit not only to teachers of color, but to students of color and, in the long run, all the rest of our students, too.

*The Education Trust research paper can be found at <https://edtrust.org/resource/eyes-perspectives-reflections-black-teachers>.*