



# Create a Cu



1 2 3 strategies to correct the historical challenges of recruiting and retaining Black teachers

BY SHAWN JOSEPH AND KMT G. SHOCKLEY

The last year has made Americans who care about issues of race, social justice, and equity again try to make sense of the lack of respect for Black lives. Now, it is again time to address the lack of intentional design, planning, and resources dedicated to educating Black minds. Courageous, committed leaders must now stand in that gap—the gap in educational service to Black children and educators—and be intentional about serving Black children, teachers, and principals.

# Cultural Shift

Issues of racism and institutional barriers to success for Black people are finally getting national attention as a result of the senseless murders of Black men and women throughout the country, particularly George Floyd's killing at the hands of Minneapolis police in May 2020. The fact that Black students, teachers, and leaders have died a silent death in American schools for decades without a commitment to improvement can no longer be overlooked.

School systems must move beyond superficial, rhetorical discourse to begin thinking, planning, and acting with a sense of courage, moral purpose, urgency, and accountability on behalf of all staff and all children.

## A DISCONNECT IN DIVERSITY

Current data speak to the challenges that we, as a nation, face to ensure that schools' diversity reflects our student populations, particularly for Black students and faculty. Data from the 2017–2018 school year from the National Center for Education Statistics reveal that Black students made up 15 percent of America's public school enrollment, but only 6.7 percent of teachers and 10.5 percent of principals are Black. That's a slight decline from the early 2000s, when Blacks represented 8 percent of public school teachers and 11 percent of principals.

There are a number of factors that might contribute to Black teachers leaving the profession. "Black teachers experience both professional and personal challenges that devalue or 'other' them," says "Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections From Black Teachers," a 2016 article published by The Education Trust. "Not only are their expertise and professional contributions dismissed, but they often experience negative treatment and lack of individual or personal recognition from their colleagues."

Limited student financial assistance, reliance on standardized testing, and a lack of mentoring for Black teachers have contributed to the limited numbers who enter and remain in the profession, L.C. Tillman explains in "(Un)Intended Consequences? The Impact of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Decision on the Employment Status of Black

Educators." Many Black educators also choose to leave the profession for more lucrative careers.

Similarly, the shortage of Black leaders can be linked directly to factors such as shortages of Black teachers entering the leadership pipeline; limited mentoring, recruitment, and retention in leadership preparation programs; and the social isolation of being relatively underrepresented in certain regions of the country. In addition, the majority of Black leaders are employed in large, urban school districts that are underfunded, have scarce resources, host significant numbers of uncertified teachers, and experience student underachievement.

School boards and superintendents who are serious about tackling inequity in their school districts have the power to correct the historical challenges of recruiting and retaining Black teachers and leaders. They can take three actions immediately:

### 1. SYSTEMATICALLY TEACH BLACK CULTURE

After attending and working in historically Black colleges and pursuing research agendas that focus on the experiences of Blacks throughout the world, the authors are convinced that one major problem in American education—and particularly in the education of Black children and in supporting Black teachers and administrators—is a lack of knowledge and understanding of Black culture.

The challenges described above are rooted in racism and ignorance about "others," which leads to bias. One of the major ways to address disparities in hiring, promoting, and retaining Black teachers and administrators is through acquisition of authentic cultural knowledge. Instead of focusing mainly on racial problems that plague education, authentic cultural knowledge about different ethnic groups creates more accurate portrayals of their members.

Instead of promoting tolerance, in other words, we should promote knowledge that respects the fact that groups such as Black people have a historical and present-day legacy that is awe-inspiring. And to make it authentic, that cultural knowledge should come from the perspective of cultural historians within that culture; they are able to promote knowledge about the group from its own perspective.

One example of a school leader who intentionally works to instill cultural understanding and respect in faculty and students is Courtney Wilkerson, principal of Sousa Middle School in Washington, D.C. She anchors the school's professional development in cultural knowledge to reduce ignorance and implicit bias, and her leadership team promotes acquisition of authentic cultural knowledge to strengthen efforts to recruit, retain, and support Black administrators, teachers, and students.

"The first part of the work requires personal transformation and reflection, where one is willing to acknowledge their own white-supremacist mental constructs in order to boldly attack any system, structure, or policy that reproduces any form of oppression for Black children,"



## Sample Mission Statement

Here's an example of language clarifying an inclusive vision for Black teachers, excerpted from an Equity and Anti-Racism Resolution adopted by the Reading School District in Pennsylvania.

*NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT:*

*The Reading School District Board of Directors stands in solidarity with the Black community and other historically underserved and marginalized groups in our schools, community, and nation to condemn this violence, racism, disregard of human dignity and life, and apathy regarding inequitable experiences and outcomes.*

*The Reading School District Board of Directors commits to its own work as individuals and our collective work overseeing the District in continuing to become equitable and anti-racist in core values, beliefs, behaviors, actions, practices, and policies.*

*The Reading School District Board of Directors will recommit itself to promoting equity within and across our schools, in conversation and partnership with students, families, staff, and community stakeholders.*

Read the whole statement at [www.readingsd.org/Page/2501](http://www.readingsd.org/Page/2501).

Wilkerson says. Over five years, she has seen improvement in attendance, satisfaction, and achievement for Black students, as well as in community feedback.

## 2. MAKE SPACE FOR BLACK VOICES

A second strategy for school leadership is to offer a supportive space where school, community, home, and other stakeholder voices can come together to create policies and solve problems in the field.

For example, Montgomery County Schools in Maryland adopted a structured process called “study circles” under superintendent Jerry D. Weast in the early 2000s. This communicative process facilitated conversations about race among teachers, administrators, students, and families. The goal was to find ways to better understand each other’s cultures, break down barriers to student success, and create action plans for improvement.

“There is no reason we can’t attack this problem,” Weast says. “I knew 20 years ago that white teachers—who were 80 percent of my teaching population—needed specific knowledge about the cultures they served. We cannot be afraid to discuss the fact that American schools were created to serve wealthy white students, then poor white students, and then we separated races and provided unequal schools for Black children. We may have integrated, but we did not change the hearts of the masses. Only education for all teachers on culture and a relentless focus on high expectations for all kids can improve outcomes at scale for all kids.”

## 3. CLARIFY THE SCHOOL’S MISSION

A final strategy for school leadership teams is to intentionally communicate mission and vision statements that are inclusive of Black students, and to aggressively work to create a critical mass of Black teachers within schools and school districts. Black teachers often feel isolated and devalued, and creating structures to integrate their perspectives into the culture of the school and district demonstrates a level of respect and agency that improves their cultural experience.

Clarifying the school’s mission or vision statement creates the conditions Black teachers and school leaders need to speak up without creating the concern that they are interested only in issues related to Black students. It makes their inclusion and input on all school initiatives an ongoing expectation.

School districts have found success in recruiting university partners with expertise in Black culture to design cohort master’s and doctoral programs that promote learning about specific cultures. Prince George’s County Public Schools in Maryland is one example; it has formed strategic partnerships with Bowie State University and Howard University to increase the faculty’s capacity to work with Black students and better understand Black culture as it relates to education.

Prince George’s County Public Schools CEO Dr. Monica Goldson, who received her doctorate from Howard, praises the program’s commitment to addressing issues of social justice that superintendents encounter daily. “The future of our nation rests on how well we meet the specific cultural and academic needs of African American and Latino students,” she says, “and how well we train school district leaders and administrators to increase educators’ capacity to meet those needs.”

The calls for racial and social justice can’t be ignored at this moment in history, and concrete action is what will make a difference. Teach and learn about Black culture, create structures to give Black teachers and administrators more voice, and clarify mission and vision statements while working to develop a critical mass of Black teachers and administrators. Then, your school will be able to begin to correct the historical challenges associated with recruiting and retaining Black educators. ●

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