

Proactive and Practical Pathways to Increasing Staff Diversity in Schools

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Take a moment and examine the mission statement and school goals of your local school district.

There is a good chance these mention meeting the educational needs of all students and reducing the achievement gap. However, if we look at achievement data trends, it is hard to argue with Gay's (2010) assertion that, "...students of color have not been achieving in school as well as they should (and can)..." (p.1).

While not a panacea for closing the achievement gap, research suggests that expanding teacher diversity to more closely align with changing student demographics contributes to positive outcomes for students of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Rafa & Roberts, 2020). Adding to that, Nevarez, Jougatanos, & Wood (2019) argue that while "teacher diversity symbolically conveys a message of hopefulness that diverse students can see themselves in professional roles" culturally responsive teaching by all staff is essential to student success

(p. 24). It is incumbent upon school leaders then, to find ways to attract and retain a highly-qualified, diverse workforce, while simultaneously supporting a commitment to pedagogy that uses "cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively "if the mission of public education is to be truly achieved (Gay, 2010, p. 106).

In 2017-2018 the demographics of teachers in American public-school classrooms was relatively homogeneous, at 79% white and 76%

female (Hussar, et al., 2020), figures that have remained relatively stable for decades. However, the student population continues to diversify with students of color now filling the numeric majority of K-12 student desks across the nation (Hussar, et al., 2020). While school district recruiting efforts rightly emphasize hiring those with proven pedagogical skills and content knowledge, research touts the benefits in increasing teacher diversity (Nevarez, Jouganas, & Wood, 2019; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Progress has been slow to manifest itself and is undermined by a low percentage (21%) of new recruits to the profession who are teachers of color, coupled with high rates of teacher turnover (Nevarez, Jouganas, & Wood, 2019).

Steps to a More Diverse Educator Workforce

Indeed, in recent decades a majority of US states have adopted policies, and many districts have taken up efforts to reduce this “cultural chasm between teachers and their students” (Villegas & Irvine, 2010., p. 175). For individual district leaders looking toward this goal, it might prove helpful to critically examine the processes involved in staff recruitment, hiring, induction, and retention, as well as offering opportunities that require staff to contend with implicit bias in recruitment and hiring practices.

Recruitment and Hiring

If the process of hiring has not been audited to ensure it is compliant with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) requirements, this is an important first step, as is a careful examination of the demographics of recent hires to elucidate related trends. Also a district must appoint and train Civil Rights Coordinators and designate an Affirmative Action Officer to oversee compliance with Title VI, and Title IX in all personnel and employment Practices; their involvement with this internal audit is critical.

To audit the hiring process, start with an examination and update of job descriptions that form the basis of postings. Review postings not only for compliance but to ensure they

genuinely encourage all to apply. Consider what media has been employed to reach a truly diverse candidate pool. Consider proactive recruiting, which goes beyond posting in the usual places. Reach out to college career offices to establish a rapport and to find out how to attend various events remotely or on campus. Look for opportunities to form formal partnerships with institutions of higher learning or other organizations targeted on growing your own students into future educators (Gist, Blanco, & Lynn, 2019). Consider building locally-funded programs that help paraprofessional staff members gain the necessary credentials to enter the classroom. Indeed, some states have already submitted plans to use Federal Title IIA funds for this purpose (Rafa & Roberts, 2020), so it is possible that New Jersey will follow suit.

Continue by creating uniform criteria to screen applications. Ensure that the interviewing committee has access to everything. It is also important to examine the makeup of hiring committees to ensure that multiple voices are represented and that all have been provided with training on how to conduct a consistent and legal interview process. Provide committee members with a job-appropriate rating scale, along with targeted open-ended interview questions that are designed to elicit candidates’ experiences and qualifications for the posted position. Ensure that all questions are considered acceptable under the EEOC/ADA guidelines. Direct the committee members to review all documents and to stay attentive throughout all interviews. Be sure that all interview materials are collected and kept confidential. Although only one candidate may be selected, review the process for communicating with the other candidates, as they may be eligible for future vacancies.

Induction, Mentoring, and Retention

Once a candidate has been hired, a quality initial induction and orientation program, followed by protracted skilled mentoring support can help ensure a low turnover rate among new staff (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017).

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Mentoring has been a requirement for New Jersey’s school districts since 2003. Periodic examination of these practices is also important to ensure they support the long-term retention and growth in cultural competency among new educators. Look at your mentor plan, and conduct an internal audit of all related processes. Launch school climate surveys. Take a close look at the demographics of teacher leadership and administration in your district. Consider implementing a leadership academy to expand the internal pool of candidates who can move through the hiring pipeline for different leadership positions over time. Conduct a needs assessment among teaching staff to ascertain their level of cultural competency, and over time support their continued professional growth, so that they can successfully prepare students with the knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively as citizens of a pluralistic society (Gay, 2010, p. 21). Beyond working within your own organization, consider exploring options for collaboration with others to pool resources and ideas.

CJ PRIDE: One NJ Consortium’s Efforts toward Strategic Recruitment of Diverse Educators

In the early 2000s, eight school districts in the central region of New Jersey joined together into a consortium known as the Central to Jersey Program for the Recruitment of Diverse Educators (CJ PRIDE). Both authors of this article are active participants. This organization’s

mission is to work collaboratively to attract diverse candidates to fill teaching positions in their districts. Initially the organization's main focus was its annual diversity recruitment fair, but in recent years the consortium has grown to more than 40 districts, located throughout much of New Jersey's geographic footprint. CJ PRIDE's focus has

subsequently expanded into several areas: networking with coalitions and Colleges -- including attempts to connect with several Historically Black Colleges and Universities; providing input to the New Jersey Department of Education on licensure and diversity barriers (such as fees and testing requirements); advocating for expanded licensure pathways and

flexible residency requirements with the state Legislature; presenting at multiple venues to raise awareness of diversity barriers; and cultivating the beginnings of a "Grow Your Own" program through a CJ PRIDE College Scholarship. CJ Pride looks forward to connecting with additional districts as they pursue their mission to help diversify the educator workforce.

Resources

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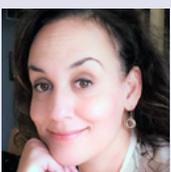
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About the Authors



Dr. Jennifer Sharp is the Director of Personnel with the Freehold Regional High School District (a CJ Pride member district) where she coordinates hiring, induction, and retention practices, including its Mentoring Program and Aspiring Administrator Academy. A former middle school Social Studies Teacher, high school Assistant Principal and Principal, Dr. Sharp is now in her twenty-eighth year in K-12 education in New Jersey. Follow her on Twitter @Sharpie2470



Charity Comella is the Director of Human Resources and Affirmative Action Officer for the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District. Overseeing all hiring practices and regulatory compliance measures, she has a strong background in public and private sector organizations. A former teacher, reading specialist, staff developer, supervisor, and school administrator, she has over twenty years' experience in public education. Mrs. Comella is the main facilitator of CJ PRIDE (Central to Jersey Program for the Recruitment of Diverse Educators) where she collaborates with school leaders, including Dr. Jennifer Sharp, with the aim to increase diversity among staff.