

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ State Boards Seek Increased Educator Diversity

By Woody Exley

Over half of U.S. public school students are children and teens of color, yet only about 8 percent of their teachers and administrators are people of color. Convinced that teacher and leader diversity is an essential component of an equitable education for all students, state boards of education have adopted a variety of strategies to attract, train, and hire diverse staff.

“Black and Latino students tend to achieve when they have teachers who look like them,” said Shuana Tucker, chief talent officer at the Connecticut State Department of Education. A study by four universities demonstrated that black students with at least one black teacher were more likely to graduate from high school and to attend college than those with no black teachers.¹ “And it’s important for white students to see capable people of color in positions of authority, especially for those who have never encountered a black or Latino professional,” Tucker said.

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, 25 states have launched initiatives to encourage people of color to enter the teacher pipeline, a substantial increase from 19 states in 2017.² Connecticut, Massachusetts, Kentucky, and North Carolina are four examples of how states are addressing the need to recruit and retain more educators of color. They have taken significant steps that may provide a roadmap for other states intent on increasing educator diversity.

CONNECTICUT

The Connecticut State Board of Education in 2016 adopted a comprehensive, five-year plan that introduced several strategies to bring greater diversity to the educator workforce. During the 2016–17 school year in Connecticut, 45 percent of students were nonwhite while nearly 92 percent of certified staff were white.

Their strategic plan included a modest but realistic and attainable goal of increasing the percentage of educators of color from 8.3 to 10 percent by 2021. Another goal called for hiring 1,000 certified educators of color in five years.

Reinforcing this effort, in January 2019 Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed a bill aimed at increasing the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. “It’s really important that kids have folks they identify with,” he said at a back-to-school event in September 2019 with then commissioner of education Miguel Cardona, now U.S. secretary of education. “I want role models,” Lamont said. “I want people that young people can look up to and say, ‘This could be me.’”

By 2019–20, educators of color had increased to 9.6 percent, and school districts had hired 1,300 educators of color. Meanwhile, nonwhite students had increased to 48.9 percent.

Developing a pipeline of teachers of color starts during K-12, Tucker said. One program to interest students in education careers is Educators Rising. New Britain High School introduced the national program to Connecticut, and it has since expanded to nine other

school districts in the state. A majority of participants are students of color, Tucker said. Many go on to enroll in teacher preparation programs, and some are already teaching.

“The Educators Rising course definitely helped me to decide what I want to do,” said Ramona Hall, a former New Britain student now at the University of Connecticut, where she hopes to be admitted into the teacher preparation program. As part of Educators Rising, she volunteered at local elementary and preschool programs.

Connecticut has long offered alternative routes to teacher certification, some of which graduate large numbers of persons of color. These programs attract paraeducators and career changers, all of whom must have a bachelor’s degree. Its Alternate Route to Certification provides an accelerated, hybrid approach to enable professionals from various occupations to become teachers. Also, the Capitol Region Education Council manages a program in which residents spend a year in a classroom with a mentor teacher while taking courses at area universities.

Another alternative program, Relay Connecticut, began in 2016 enabling aspiring educators with bachelor’s degrees to work toward their certification while employed in roles such as paraeducators. In 2020 Relay began offering master’s degrees and took the name Relay Graduate School of Education. Over 74 percent of Relay graduates identify as people of color. Paraeducators make up 45 percent of currently enrolled students, and the rest are employed as school support personnel.

Another initiative, Connecticut Troops to

Teachers, has guided veterans toward teacher certification. Funded by a Department of Defense grant, the program has provided counseling and support to veterans looking to change careers.³ About a third of the 123 veterans in the program in the past three years have been people of color.

One of them is Patrice Olson, an African American Air Force veteran of 20 years with bachelor's and law degrees. She is student teaching and working as a paraeducator in an elementary school in Canton, Connecticut, while working toward her teaching certification at Relay. Another is Erving Rivera, an Army veteran who learned about the program when pursuing his bachelor's degree. The program helped Rivera line up funding for a graduate degree, and he went to work as a paraeducator in New Britain while pursuing a master's in special education at Central Connecticut State University.

The department created a guidebook for districts, several of which are using it in pilot diversity projects.⁴ It also leads diversity initiatives, including one in which the Talent Office supports a cohort of eight districts that are developing workforce diversity plans, Tucker said.

"We're also taking a regional approach," Tucker added. "Three districts have joined with us in collaborating with diverse educators from each of the New England states to develop guidance and resources for increasing workforce diversity throughout the region."

Connecticut has six regional education service centers, each of which has convened groups of diverse local educators to come up with creative ways to recruit and retain minority teachers. The centers have encouraged districts to create their own diversity programs and share their experiences with other districts. These programs have included partnering with teacher preparation programs, redesigning marketing materials, and providing scholarships.

Focusing on bilingual and special education, the department brought together teachers last November to identify ways to attract candidates to teach in these shortage areas. They sought to reduce barriers to certification and advocated for legislation to remove unintentional barriers. The Talent Office is supporting a bill to enable the Connecticut Higher Education Supplemental Loan Agency to subsidize loans for minority students and teachers.

Another department initiative, TEACH-Connecticut, promotes teacher recruitment and helps candidates apply to educator preparation programs. "We reached our goal of supporting 175 future teachers in 2019–20," Tucker said. "This service has been one of the most impactful we have offered. Over half of those we've supported have been persons of color. We're seeing record-breaking interest from potential future teachers."

The department is cooperating with several universities on Next-Gen, a program to provide undergraduates experiential learning in public school classrooms that goes beyond student teaching. Some schools have expressed interest in hiring these students for summer programs to mitigate learning loss from the pandemic.

Diversity was the focus of two virtual career fairs held in 2020. Invitations were sent to recent college graduates, Hispanic organizations, and students at historically black colleges and universities as well as certified teachers of color who were not actively teaching.

MASSACHUSETTS

The Bay State has set a goal of increasing its share of teachers of color to 26 percent by 2030, up from the current 8 percent. The State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education believes that the state's big imbalance between teachers and students of color makes an ambitious goal essential, said Amanda Fernández, who heads the board's Educator Diversification Committee. Forty percent of Massachusetts students are students of color.

"In 14 of our school districts, over half of the students identify as Latino, whereas Latinos account for only 3 percent of the state's public school teachers," Fernández said. She also heads Latinos for Education, which is collaborating with a coalition of 54 organizations to recommend legislation on educator diversity.

Massachusetts Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley created the Center for Strategic Initiatives in November 2019 to lead educator diversification and equity efforts at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Ventura Rodríguez, senior associate commissioner, leads a team of nine charged with partnering with stakeholders to develop strategies that advance educational equity for Massachusetts students, particularly those traditionally

or currently underserved. For Rodríguez and his team, the work of increasing educational equity begins with ensuring that the department's policies and practices truly support all students.

Department staff and partners engaged in 16 hours of antiracism training during October 2020, he said. The training focused on foundational concepts. "We will launch a second round of training in March 2021 with a focus on using the training to support examination of policies and practices," Rodríguez said. "Our state board also engaged in training this January and has committed to a second session later this spring."

As in Connecticut, the Massachusetts department's work to promote diversity is multipronged and includes

- launching agency-supported racial affinity groups,
- developing a Racial Equity Framework for department use,
- examining hiring and promotion practices,
- including a racial equity goal in staff evaluation, and
- developing a climate and culture assessment.

One focus is breaking down financial barriers to teaching. The Teacher Diversification Pilot Program offers tuition assistance to support enrollment in educator preparation programs. The grant also supports paraprofessionals and others in preparing for the state licensure examination and also defrays the cost of the examination.

The department's InSPIRED Fellows program taps in-service professionals who are committed to increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the teacher workforce to encourage high school and college students to pursue teaching as a career. In addition, the program supports retention by bringing the diverse fellows together in an interdistrict network. Before the pandemic, staff and fellows visited more than 300 students of color on their campuses to elevate and promote the teaching profession.

A department-sponsored Diversity Network provides high-quality professional development to districts to help staff encourage recruitment and retention of minority educators. In another effort aimed at retention,

the department cultivates relationships among teachers and administrators of color through a statewide affinity group. It also supports school and district efforts to provide professional development focused on cultural responsiveness and bias. Through its Teach Mass and aMAZingEducators campaigns, the department highlights the benefits of teaching in the Commonwealth.

The department's Influence 100 program is focused on increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of superintendents, creating more culturally responsive districts and leaders, and promoting better outcomes for students. Participating districts select high-potential leaders for a two-year fellowship to prepare them for superintendent roles. Cohorts of approximately 25 aspiring leaders attend monthly training and receive ongoing support with a particular focus on leading for equity. In the program's first two years, close to 90 percent of the participants were people of color.

NORTH CAROLINA

In its recent strategic plan, the North Carolina State Board of Education established a goal of increasing teachers of color significantly by 2025. The board has created an action framework around this goal.

According to Deanna Townsend-Smith, director of board operations and policy, one focus is teacher certification. "We're collaborating with the Southern Regional Education Board in a study of the teacher licensure process," she said. "We're looking at how we might change some practices and policies that are barriers to entry for teachers of color."

Governor Roy Cooper set up a task force to set goals and plans for increasing diversity. State board members served on the panel, along with educators from across the state. Their recommendations, published in January 2021, will guide the state board and the legislature as they adopt policies and practices.⁵

The task force considered several issues:

- addressing the rising cost of college,
- revising the state's professional teaching

standards to include antiracist and culturally aware language,

- creating a dashboard to track progress toward goals, and
- developing advanced pathways tailored to teachers of color, including financial and logistical support for obtaining certification.

KENTUCKY

The Kentucky General Assembly charged the Kentucky Department of Education with implementing plans to increase the number of educators of color in 1992. Partnering with the Education Professional Standards Board, the Kentucky Board of Education, the Council on Postsecondary Education, and colleges and universities, the department originally focused on its Minority Educator Recruitment and Retention scholarship program, which has since ended. In recent years, the state's strategy has shifted, with a new Kentucky Academy on Equity in Teaching spearheading its initiatives for the recruitment, professional development, and retention of teachers of color.

"A diverse educator workforce can help improve student achievement and educational attainment, making this investment a critical priority," said state board chair Lu Young. "Providing all students with equitable access to effective, experienced, and diverse educators will help to ensure all graduates are prepared to be successful members of a global society."

To increase recruitment, the state is supporting partnerships between school districts and universities through a competitive grant process to establish grow-your-own pipelines. High schools are being encouraged to offer the Teaching and Learning Career Pathway and Educators Rising programs to inspire their students to pursue teaching careers.

"More than 60 percent of America's teachers work within 20 miles of where they went to high school," Young said. "Current students in every community will provide most of the future teaching workforce. There are no better recruiters for the profession than current educators themselves."

Because certification tests can raise barriers

to entry, Kentucky is also focusing on helping students succeed in teacher preparation programs and achieve certification. Plans include a grant program to support the development of teacher residency programs as an alternative pathway to certification. Residents will work under the supervision of a mentor teacher while completing coursework and certification prerequisites during evenings, weekends, and the summer.

To reduce attrition among teachers of color, which tends to be higher than for teachers in general, Kentucky is supporting district induction programs to accelerate the professional growth of new teachers. The state is financing the program with federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding.

To help school administrators develop equitable, effective recruitment strategies and retention practices, the Kentucky Department of Education is collaborating with the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy and the Principal Partnership Project. The department also plans to partner with the Council on Postsecondary Education on training modules to promote cultural competency and equity.

Woody Exley is a member of the Connecticut State Board of Education.

NOTES

1 Seth Gershenson et al., "The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers," Working Paper 25254 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, revised February 2021). See also Nicholas W. Papageorge, Seth Gershenson, and Kyung Min Kang, "Teacher Expectations Matter," Working Paper 25255 (Cambridge, MA: NBER, 2018).

2 Hannah Putman and Kate Walsh, "State of the States 2021: Teacher Preparation Policy" (Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, 2021).

3 The Department of Defense decided to discontinue funding for the program as of May 2021.

4 Connecticut State Department of Education, "Creating a District Plan to Increase the Racial, Ethnic, and Linguistic Diversity of Your Educator Workforce: A Guidebook for Hiring and Selection" (Hartford, CT: Author, n.d.), https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Talent_Office/Workforce-Diversity/Documents.

5 DRIVE Task Force, "Developing a Representative and Inclusive Vision for Education: Final Report and Recommendations" (Hunt Institute, January 2021), <https://hunt-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Hi-DRIVE-Final-Report.pdf>.