

The NASBE Interview

*This interview was adapted from a conversation between Paolo DeMaria, NASBE's president and CEO, and a panel of speakers during a session titled "Teachers as Drivers of Excellence" at NASBE's Legislative Conference in March 2022. **Christine Benson** is a member of the Illinois State Board of Education. **Sharif El-Mekki** is director of the Center for Black Educator Development at the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders. **Willis Walter** is dean of the Virginia State University's College of Education. **Ryan Saunders** is senior policy advisor at the Learning Policy Institute.*



How can we make the teaching profession something people aspire to?

Christine Benson: First of all: Empower teachers. Value relationships. Value your teachers. Every kid, every day—perseverance. When I was appointed to the state board in Illinois in 2019, this was a discussion we had initially: How do we get people interested in becoming a teacher? Number one: We don't talk about it enough. We don't celebrate it and sometimes don't encourage it. I read a recent article in the *Chicago Tribune* that talked about parents not encouraging their children to go into education, but also teacher parents not encouraging their children to go into education.

My specialty is in administration leadership. I presented school finance workshops across the state and taught at St. Francis University's school of finance, and I serve as a chair of the Illinois State Board of Education's Finance Committee. So you can bet I love data and numbers. *In God we trust, but give me the data.* Yes, there are the gut reactions you have to some things, but the data are telling.

Quality of education in Illinois is determined by zip code. Many of you have that same situation: The main focus of resources to supply schools is done via property tax values. That contributes to the whole discussion of equity; it contributes to the discussion of structures in place and biases.

But here's the good news. Illinois enacted a historic school funding reform in 2018. They call it EBF—evidence-based funding—and they based it on the adequacy model rather than the general state formula. It increased the adequacy of school funding, but it also took care of equity of its distribution. This was major.

Since that time, the state has increased its investment in public education by more than \$1 billion, and 99 percent of that increased investment has gone to our underfunded schools. Simultaneously, the teacher workforce has grown every single year since we added that money. We've added more than 5,000 teachers to the profession since enacting that funding reform.

Now we have an influx in federal pandemic relief funds. We added another 5,600 teachers this year alone. From 2019–20, enrollment in teacher prep programs rose more



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than 11 percent. But we know what's around the corner because we've seen those demographics of people leaving the profession and entering prep programs. We know it's coming, so we're trying to put things in place now so that we're ready, and we're also taking care of the short term.

We still have more than 2,100 unfilled positions, but when we talk about teacher shortages in Illinois—which isn't a term I like to use, because I don't think it's very accurate yet—we're talking about an extremely localized, contextualized problem. Our statewide vacancy is at 1.5 percent. That means those unfilled positions are concentrated in hard-to-staff schools. We're talking about our rural schools, our special education schools, our underfunded schools, and our chronically low-performing schools. We're talking about a problem that's deeply rooted in equity, so our solutions need to be just as deeply rooted in equity. Because if they aren't, then our solutions won't reach those schools impacted by recruitment and retention policies. We're approaching the teacher pipeline efforts through this lens of equity for our districts and of opportunity and access for our candidates.

Historically, we've had the highest unmet demand in special education and bilingual education. We've dedicated \$5.6 million of our ESSER state set-aside in grants to districts to implement research-based strategies to improve the retention of special education teachers. This grant is prioritized to districts that have low special education teacher retention rates and/or special education vacancies.

In bilingual, we've had students in some school districts with 100 languages. We launched a \$4 million grant to recruit more bilingual educators, and these funds will help us provide that financial support for educators currently working as teachers on a short-term license as they pursue their full bilingual licensure or educators with a full license who wish to add that on to their ESL endorsement.

What promising practices expand the diversity of the profession?

Sharif El-Mekki: I'm from Pennsylvania. I work at the Center for Black Educator

Development. Before that, for 26 years I was a teacher and principal. What attracted me to the profession was Dr. Martin Ryder talking about the connection between education and racial equity. I wanted to be a lawyer, but he said, "Activism in the classroom could have a real impact." That fueled me for 30 years. What I also noticed was that the pipeline into teaching was pretty dry.

A few years ago, Pennsylvania had a 60 percent decrease in teachers being certified, which preceded the pandemic by over a decade. We have dozens and dozens of teacher prep programs. But in 2017, there were four Black men certified in the whole state. Only two of them ended up in the classroom.

At the Center for Black Educator Development, we recognize that creating a Black teacher pipeline that's sustainable, highly effective, and predictable is key to elevating a profession, because who are we elevating it for? It's not just theory. Many of our students are students of color. Elevating the profession means them seeing themselves as part of this educational system.

We were supporting Black men in Philadelphia. They were from all over the country—South Carolina, California, New York—but they were working in Philadelphia. We had mentors to support them, and some were saying, "We're thinking about leaving the profession." I was like, "No, you can't. There are less than 2 percent of you in the profession already. Let's get together." As a practitioner, I felt obligated to provide support. But what we recognized was that not a single one of these 17 Black men, including myself, was approached, invited into the profession, tapped on the shoulder, either in high school or in college. They were invited into the profession once they graduated from their program.

When we asked our colleagues—most of them White women—the average response on when someone engaged them about teaching or leading a classroom was third grade. Some adult was having a conversation with third graders—classmates of ours—about leading a classroom. That chasm speaks to the need to elevate and amplify what it means to lead a classroom.

Are there other effective strategies that have promise?

EI-Mekki: We're seeing some great grow-your-own programs, some great engagement. Illinois just invested \$17 million in Freedom Schools, and that's core to our work. Building a national pipeline for us is a 12-year process. That means we need visions that extend well beyond a board member's seat in their chair or a superintendent's time. For us, it's not a school district or a school board but a consortium of people saying, "This is important for us. This is important for our region. This is important for our state."

We launched in 2019, and already we have 24 Black educators who came from our program and are working as teacher residents or teachers of record in Philadelphia. The reason for that is, our vision is a 12-year process: engagement and support in high school, engagement and support in college, and then the first four years of teaching.

We're moving to Detroit as our first outside-of-Philadelphia expansion, and we used a Freedom School model as our teacher prep program. These high school students have a paid apprenticeship teaching first, second, and third graders, being coached by our staff in out-of-school time, and with that is a teacher academy.

We've written curriculum for a three-year sequence. Tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders can take this as an elective. As part of the elective, you're teaching one on one, but it's not about Horace Mann, John Dewey, and B.F. Skinner, which is typically how teachers are trained to teach students of color. They learn European educational theory, White America behavior theory, child psychologists. But what did Dr. Carter G. Woodson say about teaching Black children? What did he say about training teachers? What did Lucy Craft Laney say? These are Black educational theorists who are widely successful in developing teachers, developing a pipeline and finding success, capturing what they've done, using the teacher academy model as well as paying. We got criticism for that: "Why are you paying high school students to learn how to teach?" Because it's that important.

Dr. Walter, what's happening at Virginia State University's college of education? Are you seeing the kind of enrollment you'd like? What partnerships are helping nurture students going into the profession?

Willis Walter: We're not seeing enough. Freedom School is an important part of that mechanism because it makes education fun again. It shows future educators the hopes and dreams and drive you need to have to be involved and engaged.

For us, we're selling a mission. Growing up in Chicago, where I became a parent liaison, a teacher, then an administrator in urban and rural settings, every situation was different, but the one commonality was you had to care about students. We miss that in our standards: We don't look hard at the disposition it takes.

The DOVE program (Developing Outstanding Virginia Educators) is our dual enrollment connection. We're also doing GROWS (Gaining Real Opportunity With Students) to bring high school students to campus for a week in the summer to see what college is all about and learn how to be an educator and navigate those barriers, those assessment pieces, long before they become educators.

And they need a living learning community around them. All our students are on the same floor and can talk about some of these barriers and issues. They're also supported by extracurricular activities. Some of our students had never been to a play. We took a whole busload to see *The Lion King* in Richmond. Even though we're a historically Black institution, we serve all students, and we wanted to make sure all the students understood what other students might see in that kind of play, how it connects to them.

Are expectations for teachers aligned with what the science is telling us?

Ryan Saunders: The Learning Policy Institute partners with NASBE and other national organizations in our Teacher Licensure Collaborative. Its broader vision is to dig deeper into expectations for teachers and what we envision for teaching based on the science of learning

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and development. A lot of our standards were written and revised 10, 15, 20 years ago, and there's a lot they don't reflect about what practicing teachers should be able to do to support all students—from culturally responsive pedagogy, to social-emotional learning, to trauma-informed practice. To support that whole-child vision, standards are a first step; ultimately the standards run through your whole system. They support how preparation programs design their programs, how induction and mentoring programs are designed, and professional learning expectations throughout your system.

We started with 15 states to think about how to revise those standards. The panelists have all highlighted how that work is a long-term project. It's not "We revised our standards last year. I think we're done." It's "How are we supporting preparation programs to ensure they have the investment, financial support, and capacity to bring those practices into their programs?"

In Sharif's example, those high school students are getting coaching, collaboration, and mentoring at the earliest point in their careers. Then they get four years of induction. That's fantastic. That's not guaranteed to most teachers. That's a short-term challenge every state in this room is going to face. You've got new teachers who need coaching, collaboration, connections to other new teachers, and the chance to watch good teachers do the work. They may not get that, and they're twice as likely to leave the profession for that reason. In the short term, those are the teachers you want to think about.

You've also got the investment of getting individuals into preparation. I saw an example of paying high school students to get into residency pathways. That should not be an exception to the rule; that should be a commitment at the state level and a commitment at the national level. Ultimately, it gets back to the data that Dr. Benson was talking about. Do you have access to the data that shows you the routes [by which] your teachers are coming into the profession? Do you have data on how frequently those individuals are leaving and what the timeline is? Can you track and say, "We know teachers coming through this preparation route are staying longer than teachers in this route, so we should be investing and encouraging teachers to come through those types of routes"?

Right now, in the 15 states we're talking to, most candidates are coming through routes that do not include clinical practice experience or the chance to work in a classroom under the tutelage of a mentor. They do not include a connection between that coursework to the classroom. Sometimes in certifications, you're getting maybe five or six credit hours each year to keep that license, but no one talks about what that coursework should be. No one talks about how coherent that coursework is. Is it connected to what you're doing in the classroom?

Walter: And are those pathways congruent when you start talking about gender and ethnicity?

Dr. Benson, how does this factor into the way the Illinois state board and department engage?

Benson: The National Council on Teacher Quality has a triennial report on educator supply and demand. We've used that heavily to understand demographics, enrollers, completers—all the things that you're talking about. But we found that waiting every three years was not good enough, so we utilized ISBE.net, where we devised Illinois Educator Preparation Profiles. The data told us where we need to grow, and one of these areas is in teacher diversity. We have a pilot of 26 programs creating recruitment and retention plans for teachers of color. These plans will be required for all prep programs next year. We're working on an invitation to hire subject-matter experts with a track record in this work as consultants, because we know a lot of these institutions do not have people with this expertise.

We also have a research base in place on residency because it leads to higher retention. Teachers feel better prepared on day one with those supports in place. You remember when COVID hit and we shut down. Think of all those in teacher prep who were ready to go into their clinical experiences. How are they going to get that?

We did a grant program in partnership with our two unions—Illinois Education Association and Illinois Federation of Teachers—acting as mentors for those student teachers out on a limb so they could get back into the program where

they're so needed and then following up that first year when the teacher goes out, where you have the highest dropout rate.

Dr. Walter, talk about the misalignment. What can we do to get everyone on the same page?

Walter: First, we need to look at the education pipeline preK-20. In our state, we moved our undergraduate pipeline to include teacher education again, after 15 years of only master's level teachers, which changed the equity in our system as well as led to our teacher shortage. We said, "As universities, you can start having undergraduate teacher education programs." That also affects principals, assistant principals, the curriculum and instruction specialists.

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation changed its standards to be more inclusive, to say, "There are multiple ways in which you can demonstrate this skill or standard." However, many states have not picked up that ball and run with it. That allows for those barriers to remain—even when the standards have adjusted to get around those barriers and focus on things that are more congruent with being a quality educator.

Looking at the work we did with the Wallace Foundation in developing a principal pipeline, many of the issues were relevant to the teacher pipeline. You can't have quality principals if you don't have quality educators. It makes it difficult to recruit and retain quality minority educators, especially at the principal leadership level, if you don't have quality teachers in the pipeline.

What conditions need to be created for those teachers to want to teach for a long time?

El-Mekki: I don't think we're talking about this enough. A lot of people are trying to recruit diverse educators, but many of them sound like they're on safari. "Look at that elusive Black man. Let me capture him for my school." They haven't thought one second about what retention looks like.

When Dr. Martin Luther King talked about integration, he also would say, "I fear that I'm integrating my people into a burning house." In many ways, we're inviting teachers into burning

school houses. If you're not thinking about the ecosystems, the mind-sets, what's happening in systems to support retention, then you don't actually have a recruitment plan. Because if any recruitment plan doesn't involve a retention effort that's robust and sustainable, it is not a recruitment plan.

People pretended that we had Black teachers in our pockets. They were calling and filling our inboxes: "We need a teacher tomorrow." We're like, "I don't have a teacher in my back pocket, but I do have a model that you can build that will support your ongoing efforts but that includes retention." Eventually, we designed a retention toolkit. We built it for HR and talent; principals, coaches, and supervisors; and leadership teams, which include principals. In that ecosystem, people are thinking, "It's not just the principal we want to retain." There's a consortium of people saying, "This is good for our school. This is good for our district."

We'd ask many of our districts, how do you engage people who are dissatisfied? They said, "Oh, we have exit interviews." Let's ditch the exit interviews. We can look on their Facebook page to find out why they're leaving. How about insight interviews? Ask them, "How do you experience our leadership? How do you experience being in our building? What supports aren't you asking for that you need? What should we start, stop, and continue doing as school leadership teams, as principals, as HR accountants?" Suppose that's the norm. If you're going to do that, then you should also think about the trust and community that you have to build in order to get honest answers. Let's be intentional to ensure that recruitment efforts are matched with a stronger retention plan.

Saunders: Virginia was shifting its teacher evaluation system away from the decade-ago focus on test scores and incorporating a culturally responsive/sustaining element. But they were also exploring how to redesign the whole system of professional learning and retention around principles of supporting and keeping people versus a precedent that was set around evaluation systems. If I were to think about the system as a whole across the country, that piece of trust has been eroded, and there's a lot of working back from that.

At the same time, your evaluation system should not be your professional learning system

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or your professional support system. And your principal shouldn't be the only one running that [evaluation], because they've got other things to do. Yet most state systems rely on them, so you end up getting checked boxes.

We encourage broader vision. How are you redesigning your professional learning system to better support teachers and keep them in? If we want to retain teachers of color and bring them in, how are our systems supporting them?

It's creating that feedback culture that's outside the evaluation. You've got other teachers visiting your classroom and you're coaching. That's a safe space that allows for that kind of growth and could make a huge difference.

Saunders: Especially when we think about the practices we want teachers to develop. They may not have gotten that in their preparation, so we need systems to build them up through their careers.

Walter: Plus, if the majority of your teachers are being prepared through an alternative system, not your traditional system, then what is that saying about your traditional pathway? And what assurances do you have in the alternative pathway that it is being monitored at the same level as your traditional process?

What does good in-service professional development look like, and who's doing good work?

Walter: Our state does give us funding for clinical practice grants that allow the universities we work with in some of the surrounding communities to provide the professional development that the community is seeking. That way, you are pairing professionals with those in the community who know where the rubber meets the road.

Our state also gave to certain universities to build a UTeach program to make sure that individuals of color have access to programs that would support their becoming science and math educators. Grants like that, as well as our residency grant, give the opportunity

for professional development and partnerships with school districts in a different way than in the past. It allows us to make sure the needs of regions are being met.

EI-Mekki: Often bureaucracies seek to become more efficient, but in actuality they become less—with this cookie-cutter model, where they're saying, "This is the efficient way to do things." But then they end up having to hire or rehire because they had this cookie-cutter model. Some districts we've been working with are saying, "Yes, we have induction, but we recognize that teachers of color may need some nuance in that induction."

As Dr. John King and others say, what's the invisible tax on male educators of color or teachers of color in general? What do they experience? Are they supported in a regular induction? Are they supported in regular professional learning? Are they supported in a regular teaching model? Who's coaching that teacher of color who's leaving the classroom? Who's supervising that teacher of color leaving the classroom? Who's on their board? Who's leading the school? Then what's the intellectual genealogy of the people who prepared them to teach?

Every year, we have a Black male educators' convening. It's open to anybody, but we're particularly elevating the Black male experience and but also giving them toolkits. What is that ecosystem that you're working in? We've had districts say, "We want affinity spaces," but there's no budget connected to it, there are no policy changes connected to it. We're interested in affinity spaces where we're a part of a feedback loop. It's not just us talking in our group chats or at the barber shop, but we're giving the feedback that's not only going to make our spaces better but very likely make every student's experience better because teachers of color were in those seats. Not only do they remember the experience in those seats, they're getting microaggressions from colleagues and supervisors as professionals. And they're trying to protect the students in those seats. That's a trifecta. Then [district leaders] say, "We'll order you a pizza, just sit around a table and talk." Are you going to change anything? "No." Are you going to implement things? "No." Do we have leadership we can lean on? "No." Then we don't need your space. ■