



Overcoming Barriers for Colorado's Educator Workforce

Supportive school cultures and mentorship can help turn the tide.

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While half of public school students in Colorado identify as students of color, 85 percent of the state's teachers are White, predominantly monolingual English-speaking women. During the 2024–25 school year, approximately 70 out of 178 school districts had no teachers of color. Sixty-two percent of Colorado school districts do not employ a single Black male teacher, and 47 percent have no Latino male teachers. The student-teacher diversity gap is rampant in all demographic regions.

Many of Colorado's school districts serve a student body with a wide range of racial, linguistic, and ethnic

diversity. For example, the student population in Aurora Public Schools, a large district located close to Denver, is 86.7 percent non-White, yet nearly 77 percent of the district's teachers are White, female, and monolingual English speakers.¹ In Deer Trail 26J, a very small, rural district, 44 percent of the students are Latine, while the entire teaching staff is White.

In 2024, the Colorado Measures of Academic Success showed significant academic achievement gaps for students from historically marginalized communities when compared with their White peers.² This gap has been in place for decades. Increasing the

recruitment and retention of ethnically and racially diverse educators would improve student academic performance in Colorado. Access to teachers of color and Indigenous educators narrow achievement gaps, enhance student engagement and sense of belonging, and boost graduation rates.³

Given Colorado's shifting demographics and persistent academic disparities, state policymakers must meet student needs by increasing educator diversity and ensure that equity, representation, and cultural responsiveness are front of mind in education policymaking.

Challenges and Opportunities

Institutional racism and hostile work environments thwart Colorado's efforts to recruit, sustain, and retain a diverse educator workforce.⁴ The Office of Civil Rights has investigated racial, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination against students, families, and teachers in several districts.⁵ In a report by researcher Sharon Bailey, Black educators expressed concerns about hostile work environments in Denver Public Schools. One participant shared,

African-Americans in [Denver Public Schools] are invisible, silenced, and dehumanized, especially if you are passionate, vocal, and unapologetically black. We can't even be advocates for our kids. It feels a lot like being on a plantation ... there is a lot of fear and black folks are pitted against each other.

Black teachers also noted that White teachers held low academic expectations for Black students.⁶

Denver Public Schools has a limited number of Spanish-speaking bilingual educators, and Latine school leaders identified a "glass ceiling" due to hostile work environments, according to the Multicultural Leadership Center.⁷ This finding echoes a long pattern in the district and aligns with challenges faced by teachers of color nationwide.

Recent complaints reflect growing tensions between equity programs and civil rights interpretations. For example, Jeffco's 2022 affinity groups faced allegations of racial exclusion.⁸

Denver Public Schools' Black Excellence Resolution survived review by the Office of Civil Rights, but the review prompted program adjustments to avoid perceived racial preferences.⁹ In the current political climate, with attendant restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion language and policies, states and local districts in Colorado and throughout the country must remain vigilant in advocating for a diversified educator workforce with well thought-out strategies for recruiting, sustaining, and retaining educators who reflect and support their community and their needs.

Despite these challenges, Colorado advocates have shown commitment through legislative champions, some bipartisan support, and community-led efforts aimed at fostering teacher diversity. Further, Colorado's public and private education communities are working tirelessly to effect change.

The University of Colorado Denver's School of Education and Human Development recently convened Colorado legislators, school administrators, classroom teachers, research faculty, and community members to offer suggestions on ways to address recruitment, sustainment, and retention of teachers of color in the state. We developed recommendations for policies and practices to recruit and retain teachers of color based on that feedback as well as national research.¹⁰ Interestingly, stakeholder groups did not significantly differ in their recommendations based on their group identification.

Recruitment. A lack of enforcement (e.g., funding, measurement, and accountability) by the Colorado Department of Education plagues efforts to diversify the educator workforce. And while legislators and education leaders share widespread agreement that recruitment is vital to diversifying the educator workforce, this shared language has failed to produce a strategy to recruit more diverse educators across the state.

Additionally, Colorado's own recruitment recommendations lack alignment and cohesion. According to stakeholders, alignment and cohesion require better coordination between state-level policy implementation and district-level action, and the lack

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of policy enforcement via funding, measurement, and accountability fails to address the issue.

Retention. The Colorado convening invited stakeholders to consider retention strategies for educators of color. Their recommendations focused on five strategies:

- funding and financial support;
- effective and responsive leadership within a supportive school culture;
- individual mentorship and intentionally collectivist support systems;
- policy efforts informed by educators of color and accompanied by structural changes that reduce barriers to the profession; and
- intentional and embedded protections that simultaneously improve working conditions (e.g., advisory bodies and wraparound services).

State legislators should invest especially in mentoring and funding and financial support, which are likely to produce significant increases in the state's educator workforce.

Representation and Mentorship.

During the 2020–21 school year, 56.6 percent of Colorado educators remained at their same school, 11.8 percent planned to leave teaching, and 52.4 percent of Colorado schools had vacancies or hard-to-fill positions listed.¹¹ Colorado still struggles to fill these vacancies across the state. Colorado stakeholders highlighted the need for racial and cultural representation, coupled with critical mentorship, to build community, camaraderie, and ongoing learning in the workplace.¹²

Only 76.5 percent of Colorado educators reported mentorship opportunities available for early career teachers, which is less than the national average (81.4 percent).¹³ Additionally, only 61.9 percent of teachers received release time from teaching to attend professional development activities in general. Teachers of color, in particular, benefit from mentorship and community-building initiatives. Without structured programs that encourage teachers of color to enter the profession and provide space for professional growth, recruitment will continue to decline.

Colorado has passed a number of bills to retain a diverse educator workforce. House Bill 21-1010 identifies valuable retention strategies (i.e., culturally responsive pedagogy, focused professional learning for school leaders and teachers, and educator affinity groups—strategies consistent with the broader literature base).¹⁴ House Bill 18-1412 funds legislation to retain educators, and Senate Bill 19-190 created a teacher mentor grant program, which provides training and stipends for teachers who serve as mentors. In 2023, the governor signed legislation to establish a Teacher Degree Apprenticeship Program, which offers an educator pathway for high schoolers through local community college and school district partnerships.

Colorado stakeholders, however, elucidated that the unique needs of teachers of color should drive any financial support. According to the Learning Policy Institute, Colorado is among the least attractive states for becoming a teacher, regardless of demographic.¹⁵ The starting salary of educators is \$38,170, compared with the national average of \$44,530, with fewer school resources per pupil (\$11,840 per student per year versus \$14,300 nationwide) and a higher student-to-teacher ratio (16.3:1 versus 15.4:1 nationwide). The average cost of living in Colorado in 2024 was \$53,373 per year for one person, and buying a typical home cost \$529,219.¹⁶ Student loans also add to the burden. Around 60 percent of the nation's full-time public school teachers have taken out student loans, and those in the teaching profession are 30 percent more likely to have a second job compared with other workers.¹⁷

At the convening, stakeholders identified additional possibilities for policies that provide direct-to-educator funding to reduce student loan debts and offer healthy wage increases, supportive and adequate housing stipends, and state-sponsored loan forgiveness programs. Such policies would address two crucial features of failed retention efforts. First, high housing and living costs in Colorado (particularly in population-dense areas, such as metro Denver) are prohibitive for many educators of color, even after district wage increases over the past several years. Colorado educators,

on average, experienced a 1.1 percent wage increase in 2022–23, the lowest wage increase for educators across the nation, compared with a national average of 4.1 percent.¹⁸

Second, many educators of color accumulate a higher student loan debt. According to the Education Data Initiative, Black college graduates have much higher student loan debt than their White peers, while their salaries tend to be lower. Nationwide, multiracial students have higher average student loans, and Latine graduates are more likely to delay major life decisions (e.g., family planning) due to student loan debt.¹⁹ In Colorado, policy change must address the disincentives constructed by a lack of an educator funding prioritization by the state legislature.²⁰

In total, high living costs and insufficient teacher wages make the profession unattractive, especially for candidates from diverse backgrounds. Wage increases, debt relief, housing stipends, and incentives like loan forgiveness could make teaching a more viable career for an educator workforce that reflects the needs and demographics of the state's children and families.

Recommendations

Addressing the recruitment and retention of teachers of color in Colorado requires a multifaceted approach informed by community stakeholder input and national research. By focusing on school climate, economic incentives, policy alignment, mentorship, and leadership development, the following proposed solutions aim to dismantle systemic barriers and create a more inclusive, supportive educational environment.

- **Policy Implementation and Enforcement.** Inconsistent enforcement hinders the effectiveness of existing policies. The Colorado State Board of Education must work with local superintendents and school boards to ensure that policies can be enforced at the local level.
- **Accountability and Effectiveness.** The recruitment and retention of diverse educators can be tied to School Improvement Plans as well

as superintendent and principal evaluations. Strengthening these aspects ensures that policies achieve their intended outcomes.

- **Economic Barriers.** Colorado's state superintendent, in collaboration with local superintendents, can partner with members of the state legislature to advance policy initiatives that include wage increases, debt relief, housing stipends, and incentives like loan forgiveness to make teaching a viable career.
- **Grow-Your-Own Programs.** The state legislature can support the development of grow-your-own models, which would require teacher training programs to partner with community-based organizations to support high schoolers, community college students, and community members to become educators.
- **Alignment and Cohesion.** Working with the Colorado Department of Education, the State Superintendent's Office and local leaders can support strong coordination of policy implementation at the state and local levels, ensuring alignment and follow-up on initiatives.
- **Funding and Financial Support.** State policymakers can support long-term, sustainable funding for retention policies that do not rely on educators to secure grants; loan forgiveness programs specifically for teachers of color; and housing support, similar to military benefits, that subsidize apartments for early-career teachers to help them save and integrate into the community.
- **Leadership and School Culture.** School leaders play a crucial role in shaping culture and making teachers feel supported. Training programs should focus on developing culturally sustaining leadership practices for principals; accountability measures and anti-bias/implicit bias; and knowledge of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. States can also develop support structures or teachers of color.
- **Mentorship and Support Systems.** Teachers of color need continuous support, including mentoring from induction throughout their



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careers. State leaders can create cross-district support groups that can meet online for anonymity and broader reach, and principals should support teachers facing challenges from difficult or discriminatory interactions with families.

■ **Policy and Structural Changes.**

State leaders can explore waivers for fees related to transferring certifications or tests from other states and develop advisory panels to incorporate educator voices in policymaking and safe spaces, such as online groups, for teachers to seek advice, vent, and share job opportunities.

■ **Conditions and Protections.**

Teachers of color need wraparound services that address their needs, from housing to mental health, and advisory bodies to ensure continuous feedback loops.

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Notes

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