



Valuing Teachers and Their Educational Impact

To prepare future generations to serve their nation and lead its advancement, it is vital that their educators are well prepared and can teach diverse student populations effectively. Precisely because of the critical importance of highly prepared educators, equal opportunity to enter the US educator workforce remains a key issue.

There is robust research evidence to buttress a commitment to effective educators for all students, including students of color and Indigenous students, who make up a majority of the US school population.¹

All students need effective teachers, and all aspiring teachers need equal opportunities to become effective.

Conra D. Gist & Travis J. Bristol

Ethnoracially diverse educators have been found to improve students' academic outcomes,² socioemotional development,³ attendance and extracurricular activities,⁴ and sense of belonging.⁵

The history of educator development reveals that this country has not always afforded equal opportunity to all. For example, there were massive layoffs of Black educators during desegregation in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁶ People of color continued to have limited representation in the profession in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.⁷ Biased hiring and evaluation practices and

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persistent disparities in the outcomes of certification testing plagued the profession in the first quarter of the 21st century.⁸

Given the evidence of obstacles that ethnoracially diverse educators in particular have faced,⁹ educational leaders, scholars, and policy groups have launched concerted efforts to expand representation over the past few decades. Strategies have included tailored educator preparation designs such as grow-your-own programs to draw local talent to the profession,¹⁰ scholarships and fee waivers,¹¹ recruitment campaigns,¹² and other state and national policy efforts.¹³

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The Handbook Project

To help practitioners and education researchers understand this research on the impacts on students of effective educators as well as the research on the academic and professional trajectory of educators along the teacher development continuum, we co-edited the *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers* in 2022.¹⁴

With our contributors, we mapped 11 domains of inquiry: recruitment, program design, mentorship, induction and human resource support, professional development, educational impact, minority-serving institutions, intersectionality, pedagogical and leadership practices, retention, and policy. We provided an overview of what researchers know and do not know about these domains as they relate to ethnoracially diverse educators. An important outcome of this project was the creation of a research agenda, clearly anchoring the foundation of work in the current knowledge base, and outlining research topics, questions, and studies for each of the 11 domains.¹⁵

There were common themes across domains:

- the important, positive impact of ethnoracially diverse educators on academic and nonacademic development of students;
- the absence and need for holistic,

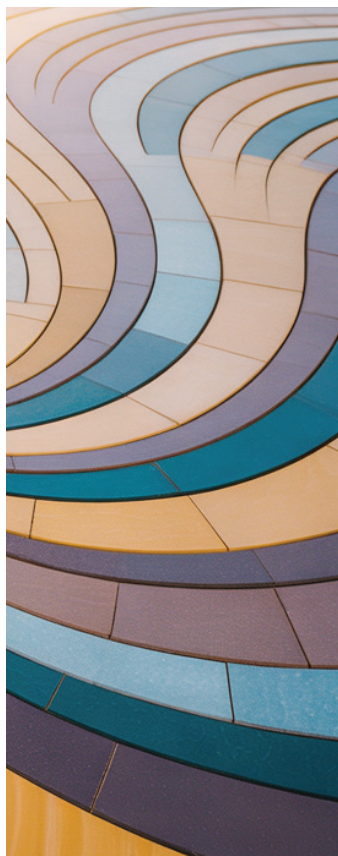
humanistic support for teachers;

- the significant within-group and across-group variation among ethnoracially diverse teachers; and
- the salience of the structural and social implications of race and racism as a perennial challenge for teachers.

We wanted to extend the discussion beyond the academy and researchers, so we developed additional resources geared toward educator audiences. Drawing from the *Handbook's* evidence base, a special report with *Kappan* features educator testimonies and research briefs with key findings and recommendations tailored for practitioners.¹⁶ And because we were interested in exploring the implications for policy, we created a special issue with *Educational Policy Analysis and Archives* that paired educational policy intermediaries with researchers and scholars.¹⁷ Most recently, we partnered with four states to develop state-specific policies based on research from the *Handbook*. These state briefs are the focus of this special issue of the *State Education Standard*.

State Policy Convening

Before discussing the specific learnings from the states we engaged in this project, it is important to note that our efforts were informed by previous efforts aimed at developing the capacity of states to design policy prescriptions aimed at recruiting, developing, and retaining an ethnoracially diverse educator workforce. One such effort was the Diverse Learner-Ready Teachers Initiative, organized by the Council of Chief State School Officers. This 10-state effort included state and local education policymakers from across the country working alongside university faculty and education nonprofit leaders. Subsequently, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education developed inSPIRED, an affinity group for educators of color centered on professional development opportunities and networking.¹⁸ The Illinois State Board of Education focused on supporting institutions of higher education in implementing culturally responsive teacher standards into its teacher



preparation program standards.¹⁹

For this project, we engaged teams from four states to consider the implications of the research to their state contexts: Texas, New York, California, and Colorado. Each team developed a policy brief dedicated to state-specific educator development challenges and generated research-based recommendations tailored to state educational needs. To do this, we coupled the *Handbook* research and collective knowledge systems of cross-sections of education partners (i.e., advocates, researchers, students, teachers, school and district leaders, parents) and education policy intermediary organizations (i.e., Teach Plus, Education Trust, Learning Policy Institute, Latinos for Education, and Scholars Strategy Network). At each state convening, researchers, students, teachers, school and district leaders, parents, and policy intermediaries considered the research we presented in the *Handbook* and applied their own knowledge and experience to contextualizing it for their state.

We cannot negate the current sociopolitical climate in which commitments to research on ethnoracially diverse educators is situated. Since the *Handbook* was published and the state convenings took place, the political context changed. With the election of the 47th president of the United States, his administration renewed a commitment to ensure education entities uphold the Supreme Court's 2023 ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*.²⁰ The decision held that admissions processes that took race into account were done in a manner that violated the Constitution's equal protection clause.

In early 2025, the President signed Executive Order 14151. It directs the Office of Civil Rights at the US Department of Education to ensure the nondiscriminatory obligations of schools and educational entities in keeping with the *Students for Fair Admissions* decision. In a follow-up to the Dear Colleague letter on February 14, 2025, the department articulated the guideline further: "If an educational institution treats a person of one race differently than it treats another person because

of that person's race, the educational institution violates the law. Federal law thus prohibits covered entities from using race as the primary factor in decisions pertaining to admissions, hiring, promotion, compensation, financial aid, scholarships, prizes, administrative support, discipline, housing, graduation ceremonies, and all other aspects of student and academic and campus life."²¹

That said, the ruling also indicates that classifying students based on race is lawful as long as it satisfies strict scrutiny that is narrowly tailored, and not overbroad or underinclusive, to achieve a compelling (governmental) interest. Further, the accompanying FAQ spotlights one compelling interest for the use of race-based preferences, which is "remediating specific, identified instances of past discrimination that violated the Constitution or a statute committed by the specific educational institution in question."²² Such instances must be measurable, permissible to judicial review, and timebound. This language matters for states where there is evidence of violations to equal opportunity to the educator workforce and there is a need to develop state-based policies that provide access to high-quality educators for children.

The goal of this special issue is to provide evidence-based state policy solutions, which must be not only grounded in research but viable and permissible in the current and rapidly evolving education policy context. Given that US Secretary of Education Linda McMahon has pledged to send "education back to the states where it so rightfully belongs,"²³ there is a current policy context for states to become even more central in setting education agendas that are responsive to their K–12 students. States should consequently feel emboldened to develop research-informed policies around the educator workforce. A few states, however, have more specific parameters in which they must operate, and those should be carefully considered on a state-by-state basis. Nonetheless, ensuring the production of nonpartisan education data, statistics, and research remains critically important for advancing evidence-based education policies, especially related to the US educator

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workforce. Thus, we consider research evidence in tandem with the policy environment and recent federal mandates as we describe the policy solutions that emerged across the four states.

Common State Themes

Several common challenges to fortifying the educator workforce emerged in each of the four states. First, all states saw the need to address teacher shortages. Such shortages typically vary based on schools' locations in rural, urban, and suburban communities; disciplines such as STEM and English language arts; and the ethnoracial and linguistic diversity of educators.²⁴ Teacher attrition was also a common theme. Several challenges contribute to it: hostile school working environments; meager pay coupled with a high cost of living; certification hurdles such as required master's degrees, exam fees, and bias resulting in lawsuits; lack of responsive school leadership; and limited career advancement opportunities.

Authors of the New York and Colorado briefs frame recruitment and retention as interrelated domains and essential policy areas for strengthening the educator workforce. The absence of a clear shared state vision for the educator workforce was also noted as a barrier, as was the need to more clearly define diversity to facilitate a shared language for advancing policy.

Common recommendations also emerged. To address financial burdens related to recruitment, several state teams recommended financial incentives such as scholarships and stipends, salary increases, debt relief, housing stipends, waiving certification exam fees, and loan forgiveness. As it relates to teacher quality, several preparation models and potential teacher pools were recommended, many of which are grounded in grow-your-own models. These models include teacher residencies, community-based programs, and apprenticeship programs that encompass community college transfers, education aides, school paraprofessionals, and other community members.

State teams also produced common recommendations to support teacher quality, and by extension, to improve teacher retention. They suggested promoting National Board Certification, providing targeted affinity programs, and offering culturally responsive professional development and mentorship. The recommendations also included training for leadership related to school culture and/or equity; offering teachers online safe-space groups and mental health and wraparound support; providing technical assistance where racial state-mandated equity plans, legal rulings, or civil rights findings of biases were apparent or reported; strengthening data reporting and collection from state, regional, district, and local school systems; and standing up statewide task forces to study and address unequal opportunities to students' access to the teaching profession along the full continuum of educator development systems, and students' access to quality and effective teachers.

State Policy Considerations

Given the current sociopolitical context, policies to ensure students' access to effective teachers in the present—and to the teaching profession in the future—will benefit from a critical educational policy lens.²⁵ State and district officials should feel empowered—now more than ever—to develop state-specific educator workforce policies. Moreover, given Secretary McMahon's policy pronouncements to send education back to the states, state and district officials should not fear retaliation from the federal government but should feel empowered—now more than ever—to develop state-specific educator workforce policies. A critical educational policy lens can assist with this process and ought to include the following:

Examination of policy history. Such an examination explores taken-for-granted assumptions and invites opportunities for questioning and critique. Further, it provides an opportunity for understanding the genesis of policies, the problems they attempted to solve, and the reason the policies have persisted.

Establishment of integrated data systems. Integration of state-level data systems to encompass student, district, educator preparation, workforce development, and certification data would aid in understanding the state of the educator workforce along the teacher development continuum. Access to this data would enable policy analysts to answer important questions related to past and current policies before implementing new ones.

Investigation of policy impact. With the data infrastructure in place, the impact of policies to expand access to the profession and students' access to effective teachers can be better understood. This investigation can engage all 11 domains of inquiry in relation to equal opportunity and shift attention from policy rhetoric to the results of the policy enactment.

Policy development process. As state policymakers consider data, outcomes, and next steps, they should engage and seek multiple perspectives, particularly from those most directly impacted such as teachers, students, parents, and school leaders as well as those from ethnoracially and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

With this framework for anchoring policy development for the US educator workforce in mind, analysts and policymakers can select an aspect of educator development to investigate related to ethnoracially diverse educators. We suggest they consider the 11 domains of inquiry we identified in the *Handbook* as a starting point. They represent an integrated, dynamic system and continuum of support for educators. They can also be grouped into three broad categories:

- **preparation:** recruitment, program design, and minority serving institutions;
- **placement:** human resource development and induction, intersectionality, mentorship, and professional development; and
- **productivity:** retention, educational impact, pedagogical and leadership practices, and policy.²⁶

The *Handbook's* review of the research agenda also may be helpful, as it covers topics, research questions, and needed studies in each domain.²⁷

Ultimately, each state must determine what is most pressing relative to teacher quality and effectiveness in their contexts. There is not one set of policies that will guarantee equal opportunity in educator development systems in all states. Yet all states desire the same thing: ensuring all students have equal access

to quality educators. The policy briefs and commentary herein show what this may look like and how to realize states' commitment to this goal.

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Notes

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