



Why Teacher Diversity is Valuable for America's Students — And What Should be Done to Promote It

Peter Jones, University of Alabama at Birmingham

Although U.S. teachers come from increasingly diverse backgrounds, state and district officials must do more to recruit and retain teachers of color to ensure equal educational outcomes. Researchers, educators, and school administrators have come to understand that racial diversity among teachers has important effects on students — influencing aspects of their performance ranging from test scores to their ability to get jobs. When students of color learn from teachers of their own race, they achieve higher test scores, lower dropout rates, and higher college enrollment. White students also benefit from teachers of color. In short, diverse faculties in kindergarten through high school contribute to positive results for all students.

Although programs aimed at increasing teacher diversity have had some success, the gap between the backgrounds of teachers and students persists. In Alabama, for example, teachers of color are highly concentrated in some regions but nearly absent in others. To improve education for all students and further racial equality, educators need to identify ways to draw nonwhite teachers into new schools and regions. To accomplish this, teacher training programs must recruit more prospective teachers of color and schools must improve recruitment and retention of such teachers.

Teacher and Student Bodies in the United States

Although teacher diversity has slightly increased since the 1980s, nonwhite teachers remain concentrated in certain states, regions, and districts. In the 2011-12 school year, African Americans made up 12 percent of inner-city Alabama teachers but only six percent of those working in rural areas. In public schools during that same school year the vast majority of teachers were white even though white students made up only half of public school population.

The imbalance between teacher ranks and student bodies also differs across states, districts, and schools. In California, for example, nearly three quarters of students are nonwhite whereas only a little over one quarter of teachers are nonwhite. Meanwhile, students are becoming more diverse nationally. In the most recent data available from the 2015-2016 school year, nonwhite students represented 52 percent of public school enrollees, and by 2024, that proportion is expected to grow to 54 percent.

Teacher Diversity in Alabama

Alabama is a compelling example of the challenges that must be faced to improve regional teacher diversity. Compared to the U.S. average, Alabama has nearly three times the percentage of African American teachers. But this masks big variations across schools and districts. Based on state administration data from the 2012-13 school year, nearly three-fourths of Alabama school districts had a less diverse faculty than the state average, because most teachers of color were employed in only a quarter of Alabama schools. In contrast, another quarter of school districts in Alabama had five or fewer African American teachers in the entire district, while one in ten had only a single black teacher or none at all.

Most of Alabama's teachers of color work in schools in the Black Belt region — a region originally named in the 19th century with reference to its rich soil. But the moniker remains and is now more commonly associated with the region's large African-American population and low levels of economic opportunity. State administrative data do not allow researchers to match specific student bodies to sets of teachers, but on average Alabama's African American teachers work in schools where nearly two-thirds of students are black — well above the statewide Alabama average of 35 percent. In contrast, white teachers, on average, teach in schools where the African American students comprise one quarter of those they teach. In the Black Belt

region, black teachers work in schools with 85 percent African American students while white teachers work in schools with 60 percent African American students.

What Determines Where African American Teachers' are Located?

African American teachers are more likely than white teachers to teach in schools with higher poverty levels and percentages of black students, but the regional location of schools is the most significant predictor of assignments for African American teachers. Outside of the Black Belt region, African American teachers are clustered in cities, but within the Black Belt region, teachers of color work in both cities and rural areas, but not in suburbs or small cities and towns.

African American teachers are more likely to teach in schools with higher proportions of black students, both in urban areas outside of the Black Belt and in all parts of the Black Belt region. In addition, these teachers are more likely to work in poorer schools with more students per teacher. As both African American and white teachers earn additional credentials (master's degree or higher), they are more likely to work in schools with lower percentages of African American students. This means African American students are less likely to have better-credential teachers of color simply because they are more likely to be in schools with fewer resources that do not attract or retain more educated teachers overall.

The Way Forward

Geographical factors rather than concerted efforts to promote diversity explain why Alabama has more schools with substantial proportions of black teachers, especially in areas where most students are black. Nevertheless, this state like others should take a number of steps to ensure educational and racial equity — first and foremost by boosting resources for regions with underfunded schools. This step would improve instructional resources for schools with majorities of African American students and improve the working conditions at schools most likely to employ black teachers. State and district officials must also do more to recruit and retain African American teachers everywhere — and especially in parts of the state where they are currently scarce. Teacher training programs could make extra efforts to attract minorities — and, subsequently, school districts that lack diversity could work to hire newly minted minority teachers. Without such efforts — in Alabama and nationwide — unequal instructional experiences will only become more entrenched, depriving all students of the advantages of learning from diverse and truly racially integrated teams of teachers.

Read more in Peter Jones and Eugenia Toma, "Teacher Diversity in Alabama," *Association for Education Finance and Policy* (2018).