

# From Pandemic to Progress

Eight Education Pathways for COVID-19 Recovery

FEBRUARY 2021

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## *Diversifying the Teacher Workforce*

One of the most consequential challenges facing public schools today is the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among teachers. Just [19%](#) of the teacher workforce is from a racially or ethnically underrepresented background, and only 7% of teachers nationwide identify as Black.

This lack of racial and ethnic diversity among teachers has important implications for our students. [Research](#) shows that students of color make greater academic gains when taught by a teacher of color. One [study](#) found that Black elementary students taught by Black teachers had reading and math test scores three to six percentile points higher than those not taught by Black teachers. Another [longitudinal study](#) concluded that Black students assigned to a class with a Black teacher at least once between grades 3 and 5 were less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to aspire to go to college. Students of color are also [less likely](#) to be chronically absent or suspended when they learn in classrooms led by teachers of color.

**In the wake of COVID-19, the educator workforce should better represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the student population across the country.**

*From Pandemic to Progress* puts forth eight ambitious but achievable pathways that leaders and policymakers can follow to rebuild education – and student learning and well-being – as the country begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. To read more from this series, visit [www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress).

We know it is important for all students, regardless of their race, to see teachers of color as content experts who are leading in their classrooms and schools. [Research](#) suggests that not only are teachers of color role models but also their presence decreases the sense of alienation that students of color can often experience in schools. To be sure, we cannot place an undue burden on teachers of color to serve as role models, pedagogical experts, and mentors — especially since many of these additional responsibilities are often uncompensated. However, there is clear evidence that teachers of color can influence students in the classroom and beyond.

Since the Biden administration has committed to increasing investments in K-12 public schools and [prioritizing teacher diversity](#), state and district leaders should seize on this momentum and direct some of this investment to better support teachers of color. With strategic investments and policy change, federal, state, and local policymakers have the opportunity to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the educator workforce and support all students' success in the process.

### **Future efforts to increase teacher diversity should complement and build on past work.**

While there have been efforts at the state and district levels to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the teacher workforce, these efforts typically focus on one part of the educator pipeline — recruitment — and ignore efforts to keep educators in the classroom and advance the careers of educators or are small in scale. Teacher preparation programs, for example, have focused on recruiting candidates of color through “grow your own” programs, which typically [recruit](#) current [high school students](#) who are interested in becoming teachers. [Teacher residency programs](#) have also focused on increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of their teacher residents.

A new federal administration and the potential for increased federal investment in K-12 education presents an important opportunity for federal and state policymakers to recommit to fully supporting the teacher diversity pipeline, especially to support and retain teachers of color. This includes increasing financial investment in minority-serving institutions, teacher compensation, public accountability for diversifying the educator workforce, and intentional professional development opportunities for teachers of color.

### **Federal policymakers should increase financial investments in minority-serving institutions.**

Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) include historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, Tribal colleges, and Asian American- and Pacific Islander-serving institutions. MSIs have produced leaders across the country, including our first Black and Asian vice president, Kamala Harris. These institutions also serve as a significant source of potential educators of color, with [more than](#) one-third of Black, Asian American, and American Indian/Alaskan Native teachers receiving their education degrees from MSIs. Increasing the federal investment of MSIs and their teacher preparation programs would help ensure we continue recruiting future generations of teachers of color.

MSIs are [chronically underfunded](#) at the state level and cannot easily rely on other alternative sources of funding, like tuition increases and private endowments. The size of [HBCU endowments](#) lag behind those of non-HBCUs by 70%. The recent Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act [directed](#) \$1.4 billion in financial investments to MSIs and colleges and universities serving low-income students. Federal policymakers should build on this one-time investment and increase its financial support of teacher preparation programs within MSIs with ongoing appropriations.

### **State policymakers should increase teacher compensation.**

Teacher salaries are lower than those offered to other college graduates, with beginning teachers [nationally earning](#) about 20 percent less than individuals with college degrees in other fields. Nearly [one in five public school teachers](#) have second jobs during the school year, and in a few states, average teacher salaries are so low that a mid-career teacher as a head of household for a family of four [qualifies](#) for five or more government benefits. If we want to support more teachers of color entering the field and have them make a livable wage worthy of the career, overall compensation must increase. This is especially pressing because the racial wealth gap [persists](#) for Black and Hispanic college graduates.

Because of COVID-19 and its anticipated impact on sales and income tax revenue, pay raises for teachers will be in [jeopardy](#) in upcoming state legislative sessions. But not increasing teacher pay during a period of [increased stress and workload](#) experienced by teachers would likely have long-term consequences for schools. Salary increases can help with [recruiting](#) teachers of color as well as [retaining](#) them.

### **State and district policymakers should create public goals around recruitment and retention of teachers of color and release annual, accessible data about progress toward these goals.**

We measure what we value. To prioritize teacher diversity efforts, state education agencies should work with stakeholders to create public, transparent goals for school districts to improve the racial and ethnic diversity of teachers. Currently, only a handful of states publish goals for diversifying the workforce. For example, the [Teach Arkansas campaign](#), an effort of the state department of education, includes a [goal](#) to “increase the number of minority teachers in public schools by 25 percent in 5 years.”

State and district policymakers should also publish accessible teacher diversity data. Currently, only about [half the states](#) in the country share school-level, annual demographic data about the teacher workforce in their state report cards. Some states, like [Delaware](#), even publish these data for various roles, including teaching staff, support staff, and administrators. As states build more sophisticated longitudinal data systems and collect more data, they should also publish more information about hiring and retention rates of teachers of color. Publishing this information sends an important signal to stakeholders, like higher education institutions, districts, and schools, about the priority placed on both recruiting and retaining teachers of color.

### **State and district policymakers should Invest in professional development for teachers of color.**

Effective professional development opportunities can reduce the racial isolation experienced by teachers of color, help with retention efforts, and even increase learning conditions for students. Recruitment is just one part of the pipeline to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the teacher workforce. Once teachers of color enter the classroom, they must be supported and receive the professional development they need to thrive.

Opportunities like mentorship programs and affinity programs can help teachers of color develop tools to better navigate their schools, [including](#) how to identify racial microaggressions and strategies for countering or coping with them. Evidence from a Boston affinity group for male teachers of color [suggests](#) that participants learned strategies to improve learning conditions for students, such as [culturally](#) sustaining pedagogical practices. Research also suggests that [mentoring](#) and [reducing racial isolation](#) help with retention efforts.

Some states are taking on these efforts. In 2019, for example, lawmakers in Minnesota created the [Teacher Mentorship and Retention Grant](#) to support teachers who are new to the profession or district, including teachers of color. The grant is designed to help school districts implement mentorship programs, including [affinity spaces](#) for teachers from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. In 2020, the state [invested](#) approximately \$700,000 in the program. Other states should also consider how to direct financial investments for professional development that is tailored to the needs of teachers of color.

### **All students must see teachers of color leading their classrooms.**

The coming years present an important opportunity to ensure that our classrooms are led by teachers who reflect the diversity of the students they serve. To make measurable progress on diversifying the teacher workforce, federal, state, and local policymakers need to pursue a range of policies that tackle the entire teaching pipeline. These policies will not only help recruit future teachers of color but also ensure they remain in the classroom and thrive in welcoming, affirming spaces.

To read more from this series, visit [www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress).

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to the Walton Family Foundation for their financial support of this project, to Super Copy Editors, and to Five Line Creative for graphic design. Any errors in fact or analysis are the responsibility of the author alone.

## **About the Author**

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## **About Bellwether Education Partners**

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.