

# Sharing Our Stories

Perspectives from Teachers  
of Color in Tennessee

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## ► About

The Tennessee Educators of Color Alliance (TECA) is an education non-profit that was founded in 2017 by Dr. Diarese George, a former high school teacher in Clarksville, Tennessee. The mission of TECA is to amplify the voice, presence, and support for educators of color while remaining student-centered and solutions-oriented. It is our belief that all students benefit from teachers and administrators of color, especially since of these educators were once students of color themselves. Because of these shared experiences, educators of color are able to speak to the systemic inequities that students of color face. Many of Tennessee's policymakers do not look like or represent the majority of students in our schools and TECA believes in elevating teacher leaders of color to be policy advocates for their students.

## ► Introduction

In 2016-17, 37 percent of Tennessee students identified as students of color but Tennessee teachers of color made up just 13 percent of the workforce.<sup>i</sup> Teachers of color in the state are also racially isolated. For example, more than a third of Tennessee districts do not have any Latinx teachers and about a quarter of districts do not have a single Black teacher.<sup>ii</sup> This also means that there are thousands of students in the state who do not have a single teacher of color in their entire K-12 schooling experience.

“**As much as I think it's important for my black students to see a black teacher in the classroom, especially in this climate, it's important for my white students to see a black man or woman in a leadership position.**”

This matters because all students should be able to see teachers of color leading in the classroom and serving as role models. There is also considerable research about the impact of teachers of color on student achievement. Black teachers are more likely to have high expectations for black students and are also more likely to identify black students to gifted programs.<sup>iii</sup> Exclusionary discipline rates for black students also decrease when they are exposed to black teachers.<sup>v</sup>



Despite the critical role that teachers of color play in our school systems, they are often marginalized. Their experiences often mirror the experiences of students of color, since both groups face systemic issues of racism and oppression. Worse still, many of the decisions that impact teachers and students of color are made by those who have no experience in those communities. The perspectives of educators of color are often reduced to statistics or soundbites, without honoring the work these educators are doing every day to fight systemic oppression.

**“The first day of school, there were about 75 Caucasian teachers and I was the only African American teacher and I walked up. One of the teachers said, ‘oh, what bus do you drive?’ and I was like, ‘I don’t drive buses.’ Then she said, “does your kid go here?” and I said, ‘I don’t have any children.’ and she said, ‘what are you doing here?’ I was like, wow, this is going to be an interesting year. Fast forward many, many years later and I still get that feeling in my district.”**

This report aims to elevate the voices of the thousands of educators of color across Tennessee who serve our students. Better understanding these voices and the unique opportunities and challenges teachers of color face could help our state ensure that we are truly advocating for the best interests of students and teachers. This report could also help start or move along conversations within schools and districts about the ways in which we are helping or hindering teachers of color from meeting their full potential. Finally, we also offer recommendations from teachers of color about how to better support them. This report would not be possible without the educators of color across the state who participated in our focus groups. We are grateful to them for sharing their perspectives and hope that through this report, we are able to lift up their voices as well as the rest of the educators of color across the state.

# ► Methodology



In August and September 2018, TECA conducted focus groups with teachers of color in four cities- Nashville, Memphis, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. Approximately 25 teachers of color participated in the focus groups. The research questions that guided the discussions centered on school culture, hiring, and supports for teachers of color, and are included below:

- **Does the racial and ethnic diversity of teachers within a school influence its culture?**
- **What challenges do teachers of color experience, especially in racially isolated or segregated schools and districts?**
- **What unique perspectives do teachers of color bring to their work?**
- **How can schools and districts better support teachers of color?**

The focus groups recordings were analyzed based on these research questions and certain themes emerged. The rest of this report discusses key themes as well as policy recommendations to better support the unique needs of teachers of color.

# ► Summary of Findings



- Many teachers of color report feeling racially isolated in their schools.
- School leaders, especially those from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, play a strong role in supporting teachers of color.
- Black female teachers face specific challenges related to both their gender and systemic racism in schools.
- While many teachers of color report feeling unsupported by their schools, they do note enthusiasm and support from families and other community members.
- The recruiting and hiring process for teachers is insular and does not allow for diverse candidate pools.
- Teacher preparation programs often do not equip teachers from all backgrounds with practical skills, especially related to having culturally competent conversations in schools.

# ► Discussion

## Many teachers of color report feeling racially isolated in their schools.

Most of the teachers in our focus groups reported being one of a handful or the only teacher of color in their school building. Even in schools with a large percentage of students of color, there was a wide gap between the racial and ethnic representation of teachers and students. The gap was especially wide for black male teachers and Latinx teachers. The only exception to this gap was in Memphis, where more than half the teachers in the district are teachers of color.<sup>vi</sup>

This racial isolation in the rest of the state had profound implications for focus group participants. Teachers reported feeling isolated and tokenized by their administrators. One participant shared that she often felt like “the black spokesperson” for her school. Because of this racial isolation, teachers shared that they felt typecast into certain roles. For example, several of the Latinx teachers in the focus groups reported that they were only recruited to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) or Spanish. Several black teachers in the focus group viewed their ability to build positive relationships with students as a double-edged sword because it was the strength of these relationships that also made them more likely to be considered disciplinarians within their schools.

**“It’s crazy to work at a school that is 90 something percent black but as far as the core academic subjects, last year, there were three black teachers who taught core subjects. We hired a black male English teacher this year and the only other core black male teacher, I thought he was going to do a back flip because he was very excited to see someone who looked like him in the classroom.”**



# School leaders, especially those from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, play a strong role in supporting teachers of color.

Researchers have found that principals of color tend to recruit and retain more teachers of color<sup>vii</sup> This pattern was evident in our focus groups as well. Many teachers reported being hired by administrators of color. One teacher noted that administrators of color tended to consider more than test or evaluation scores when hiring teachers. This focus on multiple measures, including assessing leadership skills and the ability to build relationships with students, was often part of the hiring process for administrators of color.

**“It’s difficult for a person of color to even get a leadership position in a school, like a department head or team leader. For an African American to become principal, you have to jump through hoops and work harder. The non-person of color only has to jump through one hoop or they know someone.”**

Focus group participants also reported the important role that school leaders played in creating a supportive environment for teachers. Strong school leaders provided actionable feedback to teachers, celebrated successes, and developed good relationships with families and community members. However, many of the teachers in our focus groups struggled with ineffective school leaders and this often impacted their desire to remain in the classroom.

Teachers in the focus group also discussed the lack of leadership pathways for teachers of color and how they couldn’t see themselves as principals. Teachers discussed the invisible barriers they face in being considered for teacher leadership opportunities like teacher fellowships and administrative roles. One common barrier that was cited was the lack of a professional network that could support them in applying for fellowships or other leadership opportunities. Another barrier was the lack of awareness about opportunities that were available to teachers who were interested in pursuing both formal and informal leadership roles.





## Black female teachers face specific challenges related to both their gender and systemic racism in schools.

While most of the teachers in our focus groups reported experiencing challenges due to their race or ethnicity, these challenges were especially complex for black female teachers. Black women discussed having to navigate their identity as both a person of color and a woman in schools that weren't often welcoming. Many reported that they were often the only black women in their schools or communities and they were acutely aware of how they were representing themselves. Teachers shared that they often experienced microaggressions, including comments about their hair or their clothes from coworkers, but many were hesitant to report these comments.

**“Our staff is predominantly white women. I am the only black male. Only three are teachers of color. When I asked my principal why that was the case, she said, ‘I can never find the right one.’ My response is that we don’t all fit in the same bucket.”**

One particular challenge for black women was a fear of being vocal or sharing concerns with their coworkers or administrators because they did not want to be labeled “angry black women.” Some teachers also discussed the need to code switch so that they appeared less “threatening” in their schools. These experiences often left black women feeling tired and emotionally drained. Some teachers also noted how their experience as black women often mirrored the experience of young black girls in their classrooms, especially as it related to discipline. As one teacher described it, “I think a lot of our African American female students are picked on or are referred because of the look on their face. You’re assuming they’ve done something incorrect or they’re angry.” These experiences of black women led to feelings of increased isolation in their schools.

**“In some of the communities I work with, I am the only black woman they interact with. When I got braids, I had to answer a lot of questions about my hairstyle from coworkers. I feel like I’m the black spokesperson for my school.”**



## While many teachers of color report feeling unsupported by their schools, they do note enthusiasm and support from families and other community members.

Many of the teachers in our focus groups reported feeling unsupported by their coworkers or administrators. They described having their guard up at school and wanting to maintain a professional demeanor with other teachers. However, these same teachers shared that they developed strong relationships and built buy-in from families of color at their school. Several teachers noted how many families would request for their child to be placed in their classroom, so that their student could have a teacher “who looked like them.”

**“I had a parent come to me on the first day of school tell me, my daughter is so excited that she's going to have an African American teacher for the first time and she's in fifth grade!”**

Focus group participants attributed the ability to build relationships with students to a shared sense of belonging and being able to identify with students of color since they were once students of color themselves. A few teachers also reported putting more of their money into supplies and other materials for their students, because they felt a “responsibility” for the wellbeing of these students.

**“Teaching has its challenges. When you feel like teaching isn't enough and the actual time in the classroom or the structure of the classroom doesn't really seem to be enough to connect with the students, teaching can have its limitations. But I think the buy in from the community and the vested interest from the community is what keeps me in the classroom.”**

# The recruiting and hiring process for teachers is insular and does not allow for diverse candidate pools.

Most of the teachers we interviewed shared that their school or district did not do a good job of recruiting a diverse candidate pool for jobs. One challenge noted here was the lack of diversity among teacher preparation programs in their community. A few teachers shared that they were reluctant to join the teaching profession because they did not see themselves as teachers and did not have any teachers of color growing up. Other teachers also reported feeling stereotyped during the interview process, especially if the principal previously had a negative experience with a teacher of color.

**“Our staff is predominantly white women. I am the only black male. Only three are teachers of color. When I asked my principal why that was the case, she said, ‘I can never find the right one.’ My response is that we don’t all fit in the same bucket.”**

Teachers also shared that the hiring process at their school and district was often a black box and lacked transparency. Some did share that race played a role in their hiring while others said that since teaching applications do not often allow candidates to indicate their race or ethnicity, it was hard for them to know what role, if any, that race played. Most teachers did report that regardless of how many degrees or qualifications they possessed, they had to constantly prove their credentials and that they were content experts.

Some teachers of color also shared that there is often a microscope placed on the hiring practices of principals of color to ensure that these principals are not playing “favorites” or only hiring teachers who look like them. One teacher shared that principals of color, especially black principals often feel pressure not to hire a person of color because they do not want to further the perception of, “oh you’re just bringing your people in here.”

**“In the beginning, you have to prove yourself. You have to put all your degrees up so that everyone knows I can do my job.”**





## **Teacher preparation programs do not often equip teachers with practical skills, especially related to having culturally competent conversations in schools.**

A majority of teachers in our focus groups shared that the preparation they received in their teacher education programs did not prepare them for their roles. Teachers especially struggled with how to use data to make instructional changes as well as the role of the teacher evaluation system in helping develop their craft. Most of all, teachers complained about the disconnect between what they learned in class and the practical reality of teaching. As one teacher noted, “we had to write papers about Piaget and Vygotsky but what does that look like in inner-city Memphis or North Memphis?” Discussions on race, equity, and inclusion, were also either superficial or non-existent in many of the programs attended by our focus group teachers.

Teachers also struggled with the lack of mentorship they received, both during their time in a teacher preparation program as well as a new teacher in a school district. Several teachers expressed the need for mentors who weren't there to evaluate them but to provide intentional support and ensure their success.

# ► Recommendations

While we commend state and district policymakers for elevating the conversation on teacher diversity, our focus group findings show that we still have much work to do. There is an urgent need to focus not only on recruitment efforts but also better supports for current teachers. While we would caution against generalizing the findings from our focus group to all teachers of color in Tennessee, there are some recommendations that could help the state better meet its goal of recruiting and retaining a diverse teaching workforce.



## Recommendation

# ONE

Create networks of teachers of color so that they can learn from each other.

To help reduce professional and racial isolation, we recommend that districts create professional networks for teachers of color or affinity groups. Depending on the demographics of the school or district, these affinity groups could focus on specific races or ethnicities or include all teachers of color. These networks should be structured and allow teachers to tackle problems of practice in their learning communities, either at the school or district level. Creating more intentional spaces where teachers of color can learn from and network with each other would help them feel better connected and reduce feelings of isolation. These networks should also serve as a space to celebrate the hard work of teachers, including by lifting up promising practices from teachers.

## Recommendation TWO

Develop mentorship programs for teachers of color.

We recommend that schools and districts intentionally pair student teachers as well as new teachers of color with experienced mentors of color, when possible. These mentor teachers of color should receive professional development on how to provide feedback and coach teachers as well as culturally relevant instructional practices. These mentor teachers should also earn compensation or other incentives such as extra planning time for supporting new teachers in a district. Districts should also consider how to incorporate mentorship into new teacher

academies within districts, with a focus on making induction a year-long emphasis rather than a single, one-time event. Teacher preparation programs must also play a role in ensuring that student teachers are thoughtfully paired with mentor teachers who will help them navigate their identities in the classroom. This will involve more closely working with primary partner districts in recruiting, selecting, and developing mentor teachers.

**“For teachers of color, we need to shadow another teacher of color, just to figure out how to navigate in a school that is mostly white, and I’m the only black teacher in my grade level. How should I handle that, because that is my reality now? How do I earn my respect?”**

## Recommendation THREE

Expand leadership pathways for teacher leaders of color.

**“I don’t see any upward mobility in my district for African American males. My district is a good old boy system.”**

Teachers of color bring unique strengths to their roles but are often not viewed as content experts or professional leaders in the way that many of their white counterparts are. We recommend that districts and the state place an intentional focus on recruiting and supporting teachers of color to take on these teacher leader opportunities, with the goal of making the number of teacher leaders of color mirror the percentage of students of color in these districts. Tennessee is also home to several teacher fellowship opportunities and these fellowships should also set intentional, public goals around teacher leaders. In addition to these recruiting goals, fellowships should structure their programming to better support teacher leaders of color, including affiliation groups based on race or ethnicity.

## Recommendation FOUR

Support school leaders in developing culturally competent school environments.

School leaders are critical to the success of teachers and our interviews with teachers make it clear that we must better support these leaders. We recommend that the professional development offered by districts and the state to school leaders better reflect the experiences of working in diverse school settings. Principals should receive support on how to have culturally competent conversations including the role of systemic inequities in widening opportunity gaps for students and teachers of color. Principal preparation programs should ensure that faculty members are involved in K-12 schools in their partner districts, to better understand the challenges and opportunities in leading schools. Our interviews also clearly indicate that principals need more support on promising practices in recruiting, hiring, and supporting a diverse staff. The state should identify and share local as well as national promising practices to create a more inclusive interview and hiring process.

## Recommendation FIVE

Develop more relevant curriculum in teacher preparation programs.

Many teachers in our focus groups noted the disconnect between what they learned in their teacher preparation program and their experience in the classroom. Some of the major gaps identified among teachers was the lack of curriculum on the TEAM teacher evaluation system, building relationships with parents, and communicating effectively with different groups. Teacher preparation programs should solicit feedback from their graduates to better understand specific gaps in their programs and how to improve supports for teachers. Another priority for teacher preparation programs should include increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the teaching faculty. This increase in faculty diversity could help in recruiting more candidates of color to teacher preparation programs and also supporting the development of more culturally relevant curriculum.

**“We need to include more people of color in every level of leadership, starting with the central office and all the way down to schools.”**

# ► Conclusion



As our public schools become increasingly diverse, we have a moral obligation to ensure that these schools better reflect the diversity of our students. However, any conversation about diversity must focus not only on recruiting but also better supporting teachers of color. Bringing in new teachers of color into a system that doesn't support or celebrate them will only exacerbate challenges related to satisfaction and retention. Our report illustrates that creating safe, welcoming spaces for teachers will require actions from multiple partners including schools, districts, the state department of education, and preparation programs. If we get this work right, we can create more safe, welcoming spaces for both teachers and students of color. We hope that this report is just the beginning of a conversation about inclusion and representation that lifts up and honors the hard work of teachers of color across Tennessee.

**“We are often required to do more but we are not celebrated.”**

<sup>i</sup> Tennessee Department of Education Releases Report on Educator Diversity. August 15, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/news/2018/8/15/tennessee-department-of-education-releases-report-on-educator-diversity.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Gershenson, Seth et. al. (2017). The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers. Retrieved from <http://ftp.iza.org/dp10630.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Grissom, Jason and Redding, Christopher. (2016). Discretion and Disproportionality: Explaining the Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color in Gifted Programs. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2332858415622175>

<sup>v</sup> Lindsay, Constance and Hart, Cassandra. (2017). Exposure to Same-Race Teachers and Student Disciplinary Outcomes for Black Students in North Carolina. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0162373717693109?journalCode=epaa>

<sup>vi</sup> Data Downloads and Requests. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/education/data/data-downloads.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Grissom, Jason and Bartanen, Brendan. (2018). School Principal Race and the Hiring and Retention of Racially Diverse Teachers. Retrieved from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/vu-my/wp-content/uploads/sites/2824/2018/06/20020716/grissom-bartanen-principal-race-and-teacher-hiring-and-turnover.pdf>



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