

SEL in Action:
What the Field Needs Now

Teacher Wellbeing and Retention of Diverse Educators



Supported by SEL in Action

Understanding teacher wellbeing and retention of diverse educators

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and districts nationwide are scrambling to staff classrooms in the context of what one education researcher has described as “[a chronic and perpetual misalignment of teacher supply and demand.](#)” More than [300,000 public school teachers and school staff left the field between February 2020 and May 2022](#), and in the lead up to the 2022-2023 school year, several states [experienced turnover at its highest point in at least five years](#). In RAND’s 2022 State of the American Teacher Survey, [50 percent of interviewed teachers attributed a desire to leave their job](#) to factors related to the pandemic.

As is so often the case in a system rife with inequity, [teacher shortages have the greatest impact on districts and schools serving high percentages of students of color and low-income students](#). Challenges with retaining educators are not new. Prior to the pandemic, [44 percent of new teachers left the classroom](#) within their first five years of teaching. Historically, these [turnover rates have been](#)

[higher for teachers of color](#) than the national average, in part because of [antagonistic school cultures and a lack of agency in their teaching](#). [This trend is particularly concerning since research clearly demonstrates](#) the positive impact that teachers of color have on all students, especially students of color, and the fact that the teaching force in the United States remains disproportionately white, even as the proportion of students of color continues to rise.

Teachers of color face significant challenges in addition to high job-related stress felt universally, which contributes to their higher turnover rate. Teacher recruitment and prep strategies help attract more teachers of color into the profession, but maintaining and growing teacher diversity requires focusing on teacher retention. According to a report by Teach Plus and the Education Trust, who conducted focus groups with 88 teachers who identify as Black or Latino in five states, [five challenges that teachers of color face include:](#)

1. Experiencing an antagonistic work culture that leaves them feeling unwelcome and/or invisible
2. Feeling that they are navigating unfavorable working conditions, which lack the supports needed for them to grow as professionals
3. Feeling that they are deprived of agency and autonomy in their schools because of an inability to tailor their teaching to the population of students they serve
4. Feeling undervalued because they take on more than their fair share of responsibility but are not recognized or compensated for the work that they do
5. Bearing the high cost of being a teacher of color, which takes a toll on them financially and psychologically

What does teacher wellbeing look like?

Education First conducted interviews with educators across the country about teacher morale and retention, and found that for these educators, teacher wellbeing results from:



- School leadership. Supportive, culturally competent school leadership
- Mental Health Supports. Mental health supports, including experiences aimed at addressing and healing trauma
- Promoting Equity. Authentic efforts to address racism and inequities in schools, including culturally relevant curriculum
- Sense of Belonging. Feeling that students and staff can bring their “full selves” to school, having other teachers of color in their school and having time to collaborate with colleagues
- Teacher Autonomy. Teachers are given time and space to facilitate student learning and space to innovate
- Affinity Groups and Mentorship. Racial affinity spaces and mentorship for professional learning and support
- Shared Decisionmaking. Teachers have the opportunity to weigh in on important decisions that impact them and their students

What is NOT teacher wellbeing?

Teachers noted that teacher wellbeing was not the same as individual-focused notions of self-care that often take the form of one-time perks such as gift cards, time away from work or yoga. Research has also shown that:


- Wellbeing is a collective issue rather than an individual responsibility
- To impact teacher wellbeing, focus on the school environment and professional environment
- Involve educators, particularly those most marginalized, in designing approaches that meet their needs

Is teacher wellbeing an SEL issue and why is it important?

To recruit and retain teachers of color, it is imperative that districts support their social and emotional wellbeing, which is associated with higher rates of teacher commitment and lower rates of burnout and attrition. Improving teacher wellbeing can improve teacher retention, and improving both is associated with better outcomes for students. Teacher wellbeing is associated with:

Better Teacher Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Higher rates of teachers expressing that they enjoy their job ■ Better understanding of classroom dynamics ■ Better modeling and implementation of social and emotional learning practices in the classroom
Better Student Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Higher rates of teacher efficacy, leading to improved academic outcomes for students ■ Skillful use of emotional expressions to promote a positive experience with learning for students ■ Healthy classroom climate ■ Positive impact on social, emotional and academic outcomes
Better School Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improved student-teacher relationships ■ A positive school climate^{1 2}

Recruiting and retaining teachers of color is especially important. Research shows that all students – but especially students of color – benefit when they see diversity in their teachers. We see evidence of the importance of teachers of color, for example:

	<p>In North Carolina...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Black students with a Black teacher in Kindergarten were 18% more likely than their peers to enroll in college ■ Black students with at least one Black teacher by third grade are 13% more likely to enroll in college ■ Low-income Black students were 39% less likely to drop out of high school if at least one of their elementary school teachers was Black
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¹ [Jennings & Greenberg](#) (2014)

² [REL Pacific](#) (n.d.)

In Tennessee...



- Black elementary students with Black teachers had standardized reading and math test scores 3 to 6 percentile points higher than students without Black teachers

Across the country...



- Students of color are underrepresented in gifted programs relative to white students, and this is at least partially attributable to a lack of teacher diversity. Studies have found that, for example, Black students are referred to gifted programs, particularly in reading, at significantly lower rates when taught by non-Black teachers, a concerning result given the relatively low incidence of assignment to own-race teachers among Black students.

What are some recommended teacher retention strategies?

Top six retention strategies, according to a 2022 [RAND survey](#):

1. Ensure that new teachers of color who serve high-need students receive adequate support
2. Better prepare principals to support teachers of color
3. Match teachers of color in their first years of teaching with a mentor teacher of color
4. Offer a peer network for teachers of color
5. Provide more time for collaboration with other teachers; develop retention goals for teachers of color
6. Increase teachers' say in their schools' policy decisions; require ongoing anti-racist training for all school staff

The following policy recommendations are from Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows and are for retaining teachers of color specifically:

- Implement districtwide mentorship programs, diversity dialogues, and affinity groups that support teachers of color in staying in the classroom
- Create pathways to leadership for teachers of color by providing leadership stipends, in-house leadership programs, and ongoing bias and critical race theory training for school administrators
- Provide fair and equitable compensation to make teaching a sustainable career path for all teachers
- Require training for educators that develops their understanding of identity and power, both as part of both teacher preparation and professional learning hours requirements to maintain licensure

Questions for reflection

- How can funders and other key decisionmakers better support districts in implementing and maintaining systems and structures that improve teacher wellbeing and retention, especially for teachers of color? How might they help districts work within their existing systems or successfully disrupt the status quo?
- What current investments help shift mindsets to focus on and improve teacher wellbeing? What additional areas of investments will help shift practices that support more teachers of color coming into and staying as educators?

- What other strategies or ideas to improve teacher wellbeing and retention is philanthropy pursuing?

Suggested further reading

- NPR's Fresh Air on [Classroom Culture Wars & Teacher Burnout](#)
- The American Federation of Teachers and Education Thriving Report [Beyond Burnout](#)
- Teach Plus and the Center for Black Educator Development [Seeing Myself: Students of Color on the Pros and Cons of Becoming Teachers](#)
- Education First blog on [The Critical Role of Teacher Wellbeing in Retaining Teachers of Color](#)