

4 Ways to Make Your School Better for Black and Brown Teachers

Here's what teachers of color need from their principals



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We need Black teachers. We need brown teachers. We need Indigenous teachers. We need more teachers of color across the board.

More than half of public school enrollees are students of color, but teachers of color comprise roughly 2 in 10 of our teaching force.

Diversifying our teaching force to match the demographics of our students is an imperative shared by many school leaders. Doing so has benefits for students that any school leader would love: higher graduation rates, reduced dropouts, fewer disciplinary incidents, and increased student achievement to name a few.

The organization I lead recently gathered more than 800 Black male educators at our Black Men Educators Convening in Philadelphia. There, our attendees engaged in dialogue and learning that will not only help inform our work at the Center for Black Educator Development but can offer a number of lessons for leaders dedicated to diversifying their teaching force.

1. Focus on retaining the teachers of color you already have. Key to building a more diverse teaching force is creating a culture that keeps and values the teachers of color already on the job, ultimately making schools more attractive for more Black, brown and Indigenous teachers. Building that culture starts at the top and is no small task. But it can be done when leaders lead in a way that supports culturally competent teaching and learning.

2. Build trust and create community. It is essential that leaders establish an ethos of understanding and listening in a school building. Educators must feel safe, seen, listened to, and ultimately empowered in their diverse identities. Deliberate feedback loops are critical to shrink our blind spots—the space where bias is born, fed, and grows. All leaders have them, but the good ones are constantly aware of their own, working to make them smaller. This style should be embraced by the entire leadership team, not just the person at the very top.

Leaders should be asking their staff about their own leadership:

“What should I start and stop doing as a leader?”

“How do you experience my leadership?”

“I thought I did this well, did I? Did I miss something?”

“What can I do better from your perspective?”

Don't wait until exit interviews to start asking colleagues what would make them want to leave. The approach should center the question, "How do I create an environment and experience that will encourage you to stay?" This kind of openness to improvement through self-awareness and reflection fosters dialogue, breaks down resentments, and develops a spirit of shared understanding.

When we asked participants at our recent convening a nearly identical form of questioning, we listened closely to what they felt made the environment safe and welcoming. A consistent theme in our survey results was the palpable feeling of love and acceptance in the gathering. Imagine what would be possible if this were the kind of environment our schools could be for Black male teachers.

3. Identify how teachers of color are singled out in your school. It's one thing to be a minority in a school staff, it's another thing entirely to be minoritized on a staff. Here's what I mean: If all teachers except for the two Black teachers vote a certain way on a policy matter or issue before the staff, being blind to that dynamic further marginalizes those Black teachers. Yes, that's democracy, but it's also precipitously close to majoritarianism.

Leadership can minoritize teachers of color in a number of ways—even seemingly well-meaning actions can be detrimental to creating a culture that truly embraces minority teachers. For instance, Black and brown teachers are often assigned to be the managers of every child of color who faces additional challenges—even students they do not teach directly. Rather than levying an invisible tax on Black and brown teachers through these "extra" assignments, leaders can demonstrate how they value the very real expertise these teachers have by compensating them to provide culturally relevant professional development and coaching to other staff and leadership. This builds capacity in the staff and demonstrates a commitment to an anti-racist orientation. Black teachers often share that they are pushed toward taking on disciplinary roles and not invested in instructionally. A commitment to support their instructional and coaching expertise allows these teachers of color to develop and codify their skills to everyone's benefit.

4. Move beyond the book club and "affinity groups" for teachers of color. Ordering pizza and soda for a monthly meeting of Black and brown teachers is not embracing educator diversity. Here again, our work with Black male educators has given us insights into useful perspectives for leaders to learn from. A theme we heard from many of our attendees was the power of working in a school where Black and brown teachers were supported in building real connections with their fellow educators of color.

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But these connections must be supported by leadership to be meaningful. By allowing the insights and partnership that arise for collaboration between teachers of color to drive policy and change within the school, leaders can improve the experience not just for teachers of color but all adults and students in the building. These empowered networks can be transformative, both for making schools the kinds of places teachers of color want to work but also in ensuring that all learners have the support and care they need to succeed.

Leaders cannot expect to right their ship overnight. Many of these changes take months, even several years, but they're all doable. The key is for a leader to take the first step in partnership with their educators of color—with equal parts commitment, honesty, and humility.

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