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### Closing The Teacher Diversity Gap

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## Closing The Teacher Diversity Gap

By Emily Holzknacht

In New York City, 43 percent of boys in the public school system may never have a teacher who looks like them. Recruitment initiatives have brought more men of color into the classroom, but challenging work environments are driving these much-needed teachers to find more profitable work in a less stressful environment.

Nationally, minority and non-minority teachers are leaving the profession at an increasing rate. “Part of the problem is that the endless attacks on teachers and public education have led to fewer people wanting to be teachers. This has hurt the profession and efforts to make the teaching force more diverse,” said Alison Gendar, a spokeswoman for the United Federation of Teachers.

In New York, men of color represent about 8 percent of the teachers, while boys of color make up almost half of the student population. Taking aim at this disparity, the de Blasio administration plans to add 1,000 men of color to the city’s teaching force by 2017 through Men Teach, a \$16 million program that focuses on recruitment and creating a support network for teachers to combat the revolving door of men leaving the profession.

For the program to succeed, it will have to rethink how schools employ men of color in the classroom, teachers say. David Banks, the founder of the [Eagle Academy Foundation](#), a network of public schools in New York and New Jersey aimed at serving young men of color, felt pigeonholed as a disciplinarian when he first started teaching. He was the only young black man on staff. “You’re seen as the guy you can send all the bad kids to and they can control them,” he said. “The reward for doing a good job was they put more troubled kids in my class.”

He thinks male teachers of color fail to receive the support and professional development they need to grow. “The school doesn’t invest in them in a way to make them the best teacher they can,” he said.

Alejandro Avalos, 26, has been teaching history and English to ninth-grade students for the past three years. His family emigrated from Mexico when he was 5, and he grew up in a public school system where many of his classmates spoke Spanish at home, but the majority of his teachers didn’t. “There were teachers that spoke Spanish, but not that many. And even if they did, it was something that I didn’t really hear in the classroom,” he said.

Teaching at Sunset Park High School in Brooklyn, where many of his students were English language learners, he experienced how effective crossing a cultural divide can be when working with students. “Some students, I would find they wouldn’t listen to me when I spoke English, I would switch to Spanish and they would just do it, or they would kind of smile and feel more relaxed and comfortable,” he said.

But he often feels overworked when he is called upon to translate parent- teacher meetings for his non-Spanish speaking colleagues, or asked to serve as an assistant disciplinarian for other teachers. “I have a hard time saying no. And there were definitely times where I felt like a lot of responsibilities fell on me,” he said.

A [November 2016 report by Education Trust](#), a nonprofit organization that advocates for students of color, surveyed 150 black teachers from public and charter schools across the country about their experiences. They found lack of advancement opportunity to be a chief complaint. “Teachers told us that they rarely get an opportunity to advance to teaching courses that recognize them as subject matter experts, such as honors or Advanced Placement. This was frustrating because they want to learn to teach new things and enhance their professional skills,” the report found.

The racial divide between public school students and their teachers is especially marked in urban charter schools, which mostly serve students of color. A 2016 report by the Brookings Institution on [charter schools and segregation](#) observed that black charter students are more likely to attend a highly segregated school than their public school counterparts. “At the national level, 70 percent of black charter students attend intensely segregated minority charter schools (which enroll 90-100 percent students from under represented minority backgrounds), or twice as many as the share of intensely segregated black students in traditional public schools,” it said.

While on a tour of a Manhattan charter school, Banks says he was struck by the racial disparity between students of color and their white teaching staff. “Many black students never see black teachers,” he said. “It sends a subliminal message we’re not good enough to teach.”

Like the Department of Education, some charter networks are working to improve their diversity recruitment. “KIPP recognizes that having a diverse teaching staff benefits the entire school community, and is committed to making diversity a priority,” said Brooke Connolly, a spokeswoman for the 25-year-old charter network with 11 schools throughout the city. She said that men make up 31 percent of their teaching force, and 63 percent of them identify as men of color. KIPP also seeks to recruit from its own alumni, more than 95 percent of whom are people of color, through a teacher residency program called Empire Fellows.

For decades, philanthropic organizations and policy-makers have invested time and money in recruiting a more diverse teaching force, especially men of color. The Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund has been particularly focused on helping improve public education through teacher training and recruitment. In conjunction with the Ford Foundation, it has invested more than \$60 million in minority recruitment programs over the past quarter-century. [A 2001 evaluation](#) of the fund's Pathway to Teaching Careers Program, conducted by The Urban Institute, observed, “A compelling argument has been made that the racial/ethnic gap between teachers and their students deprives all children, but especially children of color, of role models.” The evaluation

also pointed out the shortage of men leading classrooms. “The supply of teachers of color is sparse, and male teachers, especially males of color, are difficult to find,” it found.

Since then, stepped-up efforts to recruit a diversified teaching force have been largely successful. However, these successes have been undermined by the high rate of men of color leaving education altogether. In a [report](#) released in September, the Learning Policy Institute found that though minority teachers were entering the profession at higher rates than non-minorities, they were leaving at higher rates as well. As of 2013, 18.9 percent of minority teachers left teaching, compared to 15 percent of their non-minority colleagues nationwide. This is a jump from 1991-1992, when both groups had a 12.4 percent turnover rate. “In recent years, minority teachers were more likely to migrate from one school to another or to leave teaching altogether. This was especially true for male minority teachers,” their research found.

The report blamed the exodus on minority teachers being placed in schools serving high-poverty urban communities. “The same hard-to-staff schools that are more likely to employ minority teachers are also more likely to have less desirable working conditions. And these less than desirable conditions, our data suggest, account for the higher turnover,” the report found. An [analysis](#) of the Teacher Follow-up Survey by the National Center for Education Statistics found: “About 51 percent of public school teachers who left teaching in 2012–13 reported that the manageability of their workload was better in their current position than in teaching. Additionally, 53 percent of public school leavers reported that their general work conditions were better in their current position than in teaching.”

Men Teach aims to address the burnout problem by focusing not just on recruitment but on retention, taking a more personalized approach. Since this fall it has been working to create a mentorship network between experienced and first-year teachers. Alejandro Avalos is serving as a mentor to two first-year teachers. He thinks the program is on the right track, but it has to contend with teachers who already feel overburdened. “It’s hard to find time when you’re overwhelmed. New teachers are handling so much,” he said. Still, he aims to touch base with his mentees twice a month, in person and over the phone. “It’s definitely not a magic bullet, but it’s a necessary starting point.”

The program also aspires to create a shift in school culture through encouraging principals and other school administrators to join them in their programming, which includes panel discussions, workshops and classroom visits geared towards supporting professional development. Crystel Harris, the director of diversity recruitment for the Department of Education, said the goal is to think about “what we are saying is quality and how we are supporting quality.”

Harris said Men Teach’s recruitment initiatives from less traditional pools have been successful. Its subway and bus ads have been particularly effective at reaching men who may not have a college degree or are looking for a career change. “A lot of them have been thinking about doing it for a while,” she said. Their village pathway program, which helps candidates without a bachelor’s degree work towards becoming a teacher, has seen a flood of applicants. They

currently have 200 paraprofessionals enrolled in the program. “A lot more people apply than we can accept in,” she said.

Still, only time will tell if the city will retain these teachers once the program ends. David Banks, for one, is skeptical. “The question is, is this another initiative? Are we spending a couple dollars before moving on to the next thing?”

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