



## RETAINING EDUCATORS OF COLOR: SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE



We all want to recruit more teachers of color, right?

Supporters of this idea range from the right-leaning [Walton Family Foundation](#) to the more left-leaning [NAACP](#).

Yet in a recent [National Education Policy Center](#) brief, Thomas Philip and Anthony Brown, of the University of California, Berkeley and University of Texas at Austin, respectively, urge educators to start by gaining a better understanding of the teachers of color they already have in their schools:

Oftentimes the topic of teachers of color is taken up at the level of recruitment. We argue, however, that educational stakeholders need to seriously consider the experiences of teachers of color that are currently in their schools. Are they happy in their current roles? Do they feel that their talents and abilities are recognized and valued? Can they exercise race-conscious pedagogies that address how race operates in classrooms? Are they supported in expanding the curricular “canon” to include the histories and knowledges of people of color? In exploring these questions, educational leaders can begin to think about the current context of teachers of color as a way to inform how teachers of color can contribute to and fundamentally change schools.

This is in line with the approach taken in a new [report](#) by NEPC Fellow Doris A. Santoro of Bowdoin College, along with Julia Hazel and Alberto Morales of Portland (Maine) Public Schools. Their work highlights the importance of not only understanding the experiences of

educators of color, but also in ensuring that their white colleagues are aware of their experiences.

The report is based on in-depth interviews with 36 educators of color working in the Portland schools, where nearly half the students but just five percent of the teachers are people of color. Although it was created for and by Portland educators, the experiences and recommendations should apply to and resonate with educators in districts throughout the United States where educators of color are underrepresented.

The experiences reported in the interviews shed light on reasons why school districts may struggle to retain educators of color. One interviewee describes ending the school day with the realization that, yet again, she has not spoken with a single adult the entire day. Although she's been at her school for three years, no one has ever bothered to ask her basic questions about her life. Does she have children? What does she do on weekends? Another interviewee describes an environment in which he feels like he constantly has to prove himself to his co-workers, an environment in which he watches other teachers shield children from him as if they are in physical danger simply because he is present.

The goal of the research was not to instill a sense of hopelessness in the Portland district and others like it. Instead, Santoro and her colleagues conclude with a series of recommendations designed to help create an environment that is equitable, welcoming and fair to everyone.

These recommendations include the following three concrete actions that individual white educators can take to help create that environment.

- Get to know your colleagues of color so you can draw upon their areas of expertise.
- Give educators of color opportunities to share this expertise without loading them with “identity-based labor” they did not request—such as writing the school’s diversity statement.
- Since stereotypes and bias impact everyone, do your homework on ways in which they play out in educators’ lives. This doesn’t mean cornering the nearest colleagues of color and putting them on the spot. Instead, start with research to help educate yourself. Reading recommended in the report includes:
  - *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* by Bettina L. Love
  - *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness* by Rhonda V. Magee & Jon Kabat-Zinn
  - *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem
  - *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* by Gholdy Muhammad

The report’s recommendations also include more systemic solutions:

- Account for equity efforts in evaluating all teachers, outlining equity-based and culturally plural norms that are used as evidence of good teaching;
- Collect, disaggregate (by race), and act upon statistics on employee satisfaction, reten-

tion, and requests for transfer; and

- Treat culturally based traits (such as the ability to speak multiple languages) as assets rather than deficits, recognizing and remunerating staff who put them to use.

“Our findings suggest that there are concrete changes we can make as a district, both at the institutional/policy level and at the interpersonal/cultural level to substantially improve the experience of educators of color,” the report concludes.

## NEPC Resources on Teacher Employment and Retention

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