

Do Districts Actually Want Black Male Teachers?

It certainly doesn't seem that way

Opinion by Rann Miller

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When it comes to Black male teachers, the question shouldn't be, "Do we need to hire more?" We know Black teachers, both men and women, are vital; they are particularly critical to the education of Black and Brown children. They also enhance the education experiences of White children. The question shouldn't be, "Are there any Black male teachers out there to hire?" It is true that Black male teachers only make up 2 percent of the teaching population. According to an analysis by Howard University's Ivory A. Toldson, however, the job of primary school teacher is actually the first choice of profession among college-educated Black men.

The question that we need to ask is this: "Are Black male teachers actually wanted?" And if not: "Why don't more districts want Black male teachers?" The answer to those questions will help those serious about increasing the number of Black male teachers.

A few years ago, University of Pennsylvania professor Marybeth Gasman argued that universities fail to hire Black professors because they simply didn't want them. "I have learned that faculty will bend rules, knock down walls, and build bridges to hire those they really want (often white colleagues)," she wrote, "but when it comes to hiring faculty of color, they have to 'play by the rules' and get angry when any exceptions are made." I argue the same is true with respect to K-12 school districts: If they wanted to hire Black male teachers, they could. But Black male teachers should be hired for the right reasons, with their success in mind.

Black male teachers, and Black teachers in general, tend to teach at low-income school districts populated by Black and Latinx students. That matters when you consider that teacher turnover is higher for Black teachers than for White teachers. The districts that do want Black male teachers are often revolving-door districts. One recent North Carolina study researching this phenomenon found that Black teachers tend to "work in hard-to-staff schools that serve a larger proportion of students of color or underperforming students, have poorer school supports, and are in lower [socioeconomic] communities." It is true that these districts are challenging, but that is not why Black teachers leave.

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I was one such teacher to leave the profession.

I was tired of being looked to as a disciplinarian. I was exhausted by the mandates of no-excuses and the confines of a curriculum and instructional techniques where I had little to no say. I loved my students, but it wasn't enough.

Valuing and supporting teachers after they are hired is often more important than simply hiring them in the first place. Too many districts instead offer little to no support for Black teachers, overutilize them for disciplinary purposes, and do not respect them for both their content knowledge and instructional skills. White educators often treat Black teachers as though their perceived "specialty" dealing with Black student behavior is their most important contribution. This approach suggests that many school and district leaders privately believe that Black teachers are only suited to teach Black students—even though we know that White students benefit from having Black teachers.

In my six years teaching history in several charter schools in Camden, N.J., I was usually the only Black male teacher and sometimes the only Black male in my building at all. My schools didn't

provide any specialized support for an individual like me, only universal supports. But my colleagues and my administration would look to me to support them with discipline and achieving student buy-in for unpopular school-wide initiatives.

I was never looked to for content knowledge. I was never tapped to write curriculum. I was rarely, if ever, called upon to lead professional development. I had to practically demand that I do those things and when given the opportunity to do them, my contributions were rarely built upon—unless it had to do with showing White people how to "control" Black and Brown children. In my experience, there were some White educators who actually wanted me in the building, but they were often completely oblivious to how the school served as a White institutional space.

Nationally, folks are doing great work encouraging more Black men to enter the teaching profession, such as the Fellowship of Black Male Educators in Philadelphia. But districts that desire to not only have Black male teachers but to keep them should support Black teachers with competitive wages. They should create an infrastructure of specialized professional learning communities and professional development. They should offer opportunities for Black male teachers to lead conversations surrounding curriculum, instruction, and discipline.

That such systems and infrastructure aren't universal suggests that many districts simply wish for their teaching force to remain mostly White. It is the largely White leadership of school districts who must hire—and work to keep—Black male teachers. They are the only ones who can truly answer, "Are Black male teachers actually wanted?"

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<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/09/25/do-districts-actually-want-black-male-teachers.html>