



Diversifying California's Educator Workforce: State Policy Solutions to Advance Equity and Excellence

Overview

California's diverse student population deserves a teacher workforce that reflects and supports its rich racial, linguistic, and cultural makeup. Research consistently shows that students of color benefit academically, socially, and emotionally when taught by at least one teacher who shares their racial, ethnic, or linguistic background. Furthermore, evidence shows that all students, regardless of background, benefit when taught by diverse educators at any point in their journey.

Despite decades of efforts, California's teacher workforce remains disproportionately white, with particularly low representation of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous educators.

This brief outlines key policy levers the next governor, lieutenant governor, and state superintendent of public instruction can use to address this imbalance while also enhancing the overall quality of the educator workforce. These include expanding access to affordable, high-quality teacher preparation; scaling supports that increase retention for teachers of color; and supporting a state-level infrastructure to track and drive progress.

Problem

Research demonstrates that teacher diversity leads to improved academic outcomes, higher graduation rates, and better disciplinary outcomes for students of color. Having a same-race teacher has been linked to increased graduation rates, college aspirations, and stronger teacher-student relationships.^{1,2} For example, Black students are 19% more likely to enroll in college when they have been taught by at least one Black teacher.³ Importantly, all students, including white students, benefit from a diverse teaching staff that brings multiple perspectives and role models into the classroom.⁴

Yet California's teacher workforce does not reflect its student population: in 2023-24, nearly 80% of students in California identified as students of color,⁵ while 54.6% of teachers identified as white.⁶ Linguistic diversity is also important, with more than 2.3 million students in California speaking a language other than English at home, representing over 100 languages statewide.⁷

It is imperative that efforts to expand the teacher workforce also strengthen bilingual programming and infrastructure, ensuring student linguistic diversity is honored and developed. Addressing this gap is a matter of both equity and educational excellence for all students, especially multilingual learners.

Barriers to Entry and Retention

Systemic barriers continue to limit the entry and long-term success of teachers of color. These barriers include:

- **Financial barriers:** High credential program costs, low starting salaries, and limited financial aid deter many potential candidates. Student loan debt disproportionately affects educators of color.
 - **Low compensation for early-career teachers:** Despite California's relatively high average starting salaries compared to other states, the cost of living in many regions makes financial sustainability difficult for new teachers. As of FY 2023-24, the average starting salary for entry-level teachers in California is approximately \$58,409.⁸ Low pay can deter entry into the profession and contribute to early attrition.
 - **Student Debt Disparities:** Black educators carry an average of \$71,600 in student loan debt, compared to \$58,200 for white educators and \$50,900 for Latinx educators. About 31% of Black teachers still owe their full loan balance, compared to just 11.5% of all teachers.^{9,10}
- **Structural barriers:** Traditional credential pathways often exclude candidates from nontraditional or underrepresented backgrounds. Examples include:
 - **Rigid program structures** limit diverse candidates' ability to navigate the system and require full-time attendance and in-person coursework, making it difficult for working adults or caregivers to participate. Additionally, the rigidity of the system limits its ability to meet the needs of the TK-12 education system — for example, the rapid increase in demand for bilingual and transitional kindergarten teachers.
 - **High-cost entry requirements:** The high cost of standardized tests (e.g., teaching performance assessments or TPAs) disproportionately impacts candidates from under-resourced communities.^{11, 12}
 - **Limited geographic access** to credential programs in rural or underserved areas creates transportation and housing challenges for aspiring educators.¹³
- **Cultural barriers:** Teachers of color often face unique professional challenges that contribute to higher rates of attrition. These include:
 - **Isolation:** Teachers of color frequently find themselves as the only educator of their racial or ethnic background at a school site, leading to feelings of professional and personal disconnection.^{14,15}
 - **Inequitable mentorship:** White teachers are more likely to be paired with mentors who share their cultural background and hold institutional knowledge. In contrast, teachers of color often receive less relevant or less effective mentorship due to cultural mismatches or a lack of diverse mentor pools.¹⁶
 - **Racial bias:** Teachers of color report being disproportionately assigned to high-need or under-resourced schools, expected to take on extra responsibilities related to discipline or cultural representation, and more likely to receive biased evaluations or disciplinary actions.^{17,18}

These cultural barriers diminish job satisfaction and professional growth, leading many teachers of color to exit the profession prematurely.¹⁹

- **Compounding Factors:** These challenges are compounded by fragmented data systems and inconsistent state support, which limit California’s ability to scale successful strategies.
 - **Data:** Despite several years of effort, California’s Cradle-to-Career Data System has not yet published the long-promised and awaited data dashboard on Teacher Training and Retention. The California Department of Education has only recently published race and ethnicity data on the credentialed teacher workforce after six years of not doing so, making it difficult for the state to establish goals and measure progress toward them.
 - **One-Time Funding:** All teacher incentive programs funded by the state, including our residency grant program and the Golden State Teacher Grant program, are supported with one-time dollars. And while the state has infused money several times over the past five years, continuing to use one-time funding makes it challenging to make structural, sustainable changes in our educator recruitment programs.
 - **Lack of statewide coordination and goal-setting:** This includes insufficient funding for cross-agency collaboration, limited monitoring and evaluation of workforce programs, and minimal state-level guidance for local implementation. These gaps weaken the system’s ability to make sustained progress.
 - **Ongoing societal and systemic disruption:** The aftermath of the global pandemic, rising concerns over democratic instability, and persistent racial injustices like police violence and immigration raids affect educators, students, and families alike and underscore the critical role of teachers in helping students make sense of and navigate an increasingly complex and unequal world.

Solution

Increase and Improve Teacher Compensation

At the current average starting salary, new teachers in more than half of California's 58 counties would qualify as low-income or very low-income (for a single person) under the California Department of Housing and Community Development guidelines.²⁰ Additionally, teacher wages have not kept up with those of other college graduates, with the gap steadily widening over the past 40 years.²¹ The state should:

- Raise teacher salaries, including those of early career teachers, and ensure teachers have the means to pay off student loan debt and thrive in the communities they serve, and not just survive.
- Increase starting teacher salaries, which would also attract talent into the profession. There is high demand for workers with the education and skills that early career teachers possess, and higher starting salaries will improve the ability of schools to recruit well-prepared teachers.
- Expand other forms of compensation to attract and retain educators, including improving low-cost educator housing, transportation, child care supports, and tax credits.²²

Expand and Transform Educator Pathways

To truly shift the paradigm of teacher preparation and retention, California must make bold, comprehensive investments that position teaching as a sustainable, community-centered, and highly respected profession. The state should:

- Fund the local implementation of credentialed educator apprenticeship programs to provide an “earn and learn” pathway with robust mentorship to become a teacher.
- Fund residency stipends for educators participating in residency pathways and invest in both higher education and local educational agencies (LEAs) to strengthen and increase the availability of the residency pathway.
- Establish and expand new teaching pathways that begin with internships in high schools, lead through community colleges, four-year institutes of higher education (IHEs), and teacher preparation programs, and include streamlining community college to California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) transfer and articulation agreements.
- Fund Grow Your Own programs linking local education agencies, community colleges, and teacher preparation programs.
- Incentivize partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and tribal colleges.
- Eliminate the cost of educator preparation through the development of tuition waiver/forgiveness programs for educators who commit to a minimum number of years of service.

Support Affinity-Based Retention Programs and Inclusive School Climate

New teachers of color often experience isolation and a lack of support. Programs like the Black Teacher Project provide mentorship, community, and leadership development for early-career teachers. The state should:

- Fund scalable affinity-based support models.
- Incorporate such programs into induction systems.
- Expand the use of school climate surveys of students and teachers to gauge school and district sense of inclusion and educator sense of satisfaction.
- Expand professional development that fosters inclusive school and district communities.

Strengthen Data Systems and Accountability

State leaders must ensure California tracks and reports on racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity at every stage of the teacher pipeline. Additionally, the state should hold educator preparation programs accountable for minimizing costs while ensuring quality preparation for all preservice teachers. The state should:

- Require disaggregated data reporting on recruitment, preparation, hiring, and retention at the state, regional, and local levels consistently and use this data to guide targeted investments.
- Ensure that state agencies are consistently providing the necessary data to the Office of Cradle-to-Career Data System to publish and update the Teacher Training and Retention Dashboard.
- Leverage data from the Teacher Training and Retention Dashboard to guide state investments and hold educator preparation programs accountable.
- Establish a statewide coordinating committee to determine and define the state's role in addressing educator workforce issues, including recruitment, retention, and pipelines into the teaching profession, from early childhood education through grade 12.

The next governor and state superintendent of public instruction have a unique opportunity to lead on one of the most pressing equity challenges in public education. Diversifying the teacher workforce will not only improve outcomes for students of color and multilingual learners but also improve outcomes for all kids and strengthen California's teacher workforce as a whole. The recommended policies are evidence-based, fiscally responsible, and aligned with the state's equity goals. With bold leadership, California can ensure that every student sees themselves reflected in the educators who teach, support, and inspire them.

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