We Need Teachers of Color

By Jacob Murray & Jackie Jenkins-Scott

School demographics in the United States are changing rapidly as students become more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and spoken language. Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education predicted a historic first: This fall, a majority of public school students will be children of color. At the same time, our country’s teacher workforce remains remarkably stagnant, with little change in teacher diversity rates over the past decade. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics, or NCES, show that between 2003 to 2011, the percentage of public school teachers of color inched up from just under 17 percent to 18 percent.

Nationally, organizations such as the Center for American Progress, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute have made teacher diversity an essential priority. In our home city, the Boston public school system recently renewed its efforts to raise the number of teachers of color by at least 35 percent—a goal it has pursued since the city’s busing crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. Boston, which has long been a minority-majority school district, now has 87 percent students of color; and 75 percent of all students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Like Boston, almost all urban districts across the country strive to meet workforce-diversity goals. Many have launched regional and national recruitment campaigns, while fewer have collaborated with alternative teacher-education programs to expand the teacher-of-color pipeline. It’s true that recruiting, preparing, and hiring more teachers of color is essential for improving educational experiences for children. But districts must also find ways to keep these teachers. Sadly, retention has proven to be an even greater challenge than recruitment and preparation.

Moreover, in the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown, an African-American teenager, by a white police officer in Ferguson Mo., and the multiple protests, workplace diversity and retention has taken on a heightened significance. Families and students from minority-majority communities and school districts have intensified calls for greater representation of minorities in civic, law-enforcement, and education professions. In other words, teachers and police officers need to reflect the communities they serve and maintain a deep affinity for and with their children and citizens. Diversity-employment policies, diversity training, and even the election of an African-American president are not enough. Until there is a shift in the workforce to match the overall shift in population demographics, racism and racial tension will remain a strong current in this country.

NCES data show that in 2011, 48 percent of the nation’s K-12 public school students were of color.
while only 18 percent of their teachers were, resulting in a 30-percentage-point gap in national teacher-student diversity. In urban school districts, this gap is typically wider. In Boston, for example, it is closer to 50 percentage points.

More research is needed on the correlation between teachers of color and the academic performance of their students. But studies by Betty Achinstein and Rodney Ogawa from the University of California, Santa Cruz, suggest that reducing this gap by increasing the presence of minority teachers in K-12 schools can have a positive impact on the achievement and retention of minority students. Having teachers who more accurately reflect the population of their classrooms results in a number of benefits to students and the school community, including culturally based instruction and higher student expectations. These teachers can also serve in the role of cultural mediators and advocates, helping to counter negative stereotypes and strengthening a district's human capital.

Several notable efforts are underway to recruit and prepare teachers of color for urban schools. Since 2004, the Urban Teacher Enhancement Program, a partnership between the University of Alabama at Birmingham and three urban districts in the metropolitan area, has recruited 20 to 30 candidates a year for area schools. Approximately 70 percent of the program's participants are African-American.

Since 2009, Teach Tomorrow in Oakland, a partnership program in California, has recruited local residents—83 percent of whom are candidates of color—to complete alternative teacher-certification programs and commit to at least five years of teaching in that city's public schools. And over the past five years, Wheelock College (with which we are both affiliated), the University of Massachusetts Boston, and the Boston Teacher Residency have partnered with the Boston district on a federal Teacher Quality Partnership grant to expand the teachers-of-color pipeline. To date, this partnership has recruited and trained 184 teachers of color for Boston classrooms.

As a result of these and many similar alternative teacher-education efforts, including those of Teach For America and the teacher group known as TNTP, the number of teachers of color is growing at a faster rate than that of white teachers. In fact, between 1988 and 2008, the number of teachers of color increased by 96 percent, compared with a 41 percent increase in white teachers, according to researchers Richard M. Ingersoll and Henry May.

But how do we retain our teachers of color? According to the NCES, the turnover rate among all teachers in their first through third years is approximately 23 percent. For teachers of color, attrition rates are equally concerning. So much so that Mr. Ingersoll and Mr. May refer to this retention problem as "the revolving door."

The reasons for attrition among teachers of color vary. Many dislike the idea of top-down management and minimal faculty input, which they encounter particularly in urban, low-income schools. Some face isolation. Others are cast in stereotyped roles. For example, school administrators and teacher colleagues often ask male teachers of color to serve as school disciplinarians, with the assumption that they are better suited to "handle" students of color.

Boston is committed to addressing the attrition problem head-on. With a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Wheelock College Aspire Institute, a national center whose mission is to improve education and social policy and practice, is collaborating with the Boston schools to launch a fellowship program for teachers of color in the next three years. The initiative will enhance the professional experience of 20 new teachers—in their second to fifth years—by fostering supportive, culturally responsive work environments in collaboration with school principals; connecting them
with retired educators of color who will serve as mentors; developing cross-school support networks to decrease isolation; and offering professional, leadership, and self-advocacy skills training.

The fellows will be selected based on their demonstration of leadership potential and skills, a strong commitment to teaching in urban schools, and the ability to promote the success of all students. Ultimately, they will assist the Aspire Institute and the Boston district in identifying factors that can promote retention among teachers of color.

Significantly increasing the number of talented teachers of color in Boston, or in any urban school district, will, of course, take more than three years. However, by working closely with districts to develop new, targeted initiatives, we can reduce persistent teacher-student diversity gaps. We must close "the revolving door" so that our teacher workforce can keep pace with the country's rapidly changing student population.

Jacob Murray is the executive director of the Aspire Institute, at Wheelock College, which seeks to improve education and social services for children and families in Boston. Jackie Jenkins-Scott is the president of Wheelock College.