

Minority Teachers: Hard to Get and Hard to Keep

Why are black and Latino teachers leaving in droves? Because they want more autonomy in poor urban schools, researchers say.

By Melinda Burns
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Recruitment may be up, but teachers of color are changing schools and abandoning the profession at higher rates than whites, researchers say. (The Desktop Studio / istockphoto.com)

“Our teachers should be excellent, [and they should look like America](#),” said the Secretary of Education in 1998, during the administration of President Bill Clinton.

It was an admirable goal, backed by federal money, yet it is still out of reach today despite a ballooning number of minority teachers in the workplace. Too many are going in one door and out the other, researchers say.

“Teachers of color are literally at risk: They’re leaving, and they’re leaving in droves,” said [Betty Achinstein](#), a researcher at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the co-author of *Change(d) Agents: New Teachers of Color in Urban Schools*, a forthcoming book from Teachers College Press. “It’s a deep concern, if we care at all about the imperative to diversify the teacher workforce.”

During the past 20 years, the number of teachers of color has doubled to 640,000, while the number of white teachers has gone up 40 percent, according to a new and unpublished study from the University of Pennsylvania. Yet teachers of color still represent only 17 percent of the teaching workforce, even as the population of students of color has exploded.

Recruitment is up, but it's a revolving door. For the past two decades, the Penn study shows, minority teachers, mainly blacks and Latinos, have been changing schools and abandoning the profession at higher rates than whites. What's more, the turnover gap is widening.

"There's been a victory for recruitment but not a victory for retention," said [Richard Ingersoll](#), a Penn professor of education and an expert on school organization and accountability. "If we want to solve this minority teaching shortage that's been long discussed, then there's going to have to be more focus on retention. We're hiring more minority teachers but also losing more of them. It's like a leaky bucket."

Why the high turnover? The new research from Penn and UC Santa Cruz suggests that teachers of color are leaving because of poor working conditions in the high-poverty, high-minority urban schools where they are concentrated. They want more influence over school direction and more autonomy in the classroom to teach what works.

"Teachers are told, 'You've got to teach to state-mandated standards and in accord with the pacing guides,'" said [Rodney Ogawa](#), a UC Santa Cruz professor of education and the co-author of *Change(d) Agents*, which is based on a five-year study of 18 new teachers of color in California. "It eliminates a lot of opportunities. The teachers, like the kids, have to check their culture at the door. It's like the old cloakrooms where you used to hang up your coat, only it's this 'culture room' where you go and stash everything and then operate as if it's not there. When you go home, you pick up the stuff and leave."

According to the Penn study, more than half of all public school minority teachers are working in high-poverty, high-minority urban schools, compared to only one-fifth of white teachers, though white teachers still make up the majority of teachers in those schools.

Past studies have shown that [teachers of colors are drawn to poor urban schools](#) out of a desire to "give back" to their communities, and they tend to [stay there longer than whites](#). But previous research by Ingersoll found that in 1995 and 2005, minority teachers had turnover rates that were 20 percent and 18 percent higher, respectively, than for whites, which was puzzling.

Ingersoll and May's new analysis confirms that trend and shows that 19.3 percent of teachers of color changed schools or left the profession during the 2008-09 school year, compared to 15.6 percent of white teachers. That means the turnover rate for minority teachers was 24 percent higher than for whites that year.

"The reality is, the minority teachers are not more likely than white teachers to stay in those tough places," Ingersoll said. "They're more likely to get jobs there, but when it comes to the decision to leave, the demographics seem to be a nonfactor. What's really driving the turnover is that these are jobs with problems."

So, even as poor urban schools are under pressure under the federal [No Child Left Behind Act](#) to produce higher test scores, many of the most committed and effective teachers in those schools appear to be giving up on them. Ingersoll and his co-author, [Henry May](#), an assistant professor of education at Penn, are now looking into whether these are the unintended effects of No Child Left Behind.

"You have to give the faculty more input and treat them like professionals," Ingersoll said. "Teachers are like cogs in a machine."

The Penn study shows that white teachers are more likely than minority teachers to leave schools that are having problems with student discipline. Whites also are more likely to leave because of the demographics of the faculty and student body, while teachers of color never leave for that reason. A feeling of powerlessness over both school direction and classroom instruction feeds turnover rates in both groups, but much more so among minority teachers.

Ingersoll and May's study, still in draft form, has been presented for review to the Penn Consortium for Policy Research in Education and the Center for Research in the Interest of Underserved Students at UC Santa Cruz. It is based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the largest and most comprehensive source of information available on school staffing in the U.S.

The shortage of minority teachers in the country is longstanding. People of color represent a third of the U.S. population and 40 percent of students in U.S. public schools. But they represent only 17 percent of teachers. Blacks and Latinos each comprise 7 percentage points of that total, followed by Asians, 1.5 percent; Native Americans, 0.6 percent; Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, 0.2 percent; and others, 0.7 percent.

[U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#) recently [drew attention to the problem](#). "It is especially troubling that less than 2 percent of our nation's 3.2 million teachers are African-American males. On average, roughly 300,000 new teachers are hired a year in America — and just 4,500 of them are black males. It is not good for any of our country's children that only one in 50 teachers is a black man."

There are some bright spots, of course. For example, the California Teachers Corps, a nonprofit umbrella group for 70 alternative teacher certification programs, placed 5,000 teachers in public schools in the present school year, and nearly half of them were minorities, President Catherine Kearney said. Recruitment of teachers of color is on the rise, she said, and most get jobs in urban schools. Alternative certification allows people with a bachelor's degree to teach while they are studying for a credential. The corps provides teachers with two years of training and support, and the retention rate is 80 percent, Kearney said.

"We recruit older individuals who are serving in their own communities, leaders who don't have to learn a new environment and a new culture," she said.

But nationwide, there's an exodus of new teachers, and it cuts across color lines. [Between 40 and 50 percent of all teachers, including whites, leave the profession within five years](#). It may be costing the country [\\$7 billion every year to replace them](#).

According to a research review earlier this year by UC Santa Cruz and the [New Teacher Center](#), a national nonprofit group based in Santa Cruz, [80 percent of new teachers of color work in schools where at least half the students are children of color](#), compared to 35 percent of new white teachers.

And an emerging body of research, highlighted in a new [research review](#) by [Ana María Villegas](#), a professor of education at Montclair State University, and [Jacqueline Jordan Irvine](#), a professor of urban education at Emory University, suggests that teachers of color as a group produce better academic results with students of color than do white teachers. They have higher expectations for minority students and can use their "insider knowledge" to build on students' racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, improving K-12 attendance and college attendance rates.

"Teachers of color are valuable," Villegas said. "When you have had the experience of being 'the other' in a society, not being the mainstream, you bring in some insights as to how kids feel in schools."

To date, more than 35 states have adopted policies aimed at hiring more minority teachers, but there is no national directive.

"There ought to be some kind of federal policy that encourages the recruitment of people of color into teaching, with money behind it so that you can provide scholarships," Villegas said. "If it weren't for people of color, I don't know who would teach in urban schools. The instability in the teaching force would be so much larger. Teachers of color have expressed a commitment to working in urban schools, whereas many white teachers don't feel that commitment."

On the ground, though, it can be hard to survive in those schools. The 18 teachers of color who were interviewed and observed over five years by Achinstein and Ogawa had teaching credentials, master's degrees, commitment and high standards to spare, but they were frustrated by standardized tests and scripted lessons. Some said their supervisors objected when they tried to include anything that was "not in the manual." Others were ordered to focus on students who could improve their test scores, and leave the rest behind. They said administrators watched them closely to make sure they were following "district mandates."

Of the 18, three left teaching and five others changed schools within five years, citing, in part, the negative attitudes of school administrators toward students of color.

"I was really struck by the teachers of color who wanted to use texts that related to the lives of their kids and build on their linguistic assets, and found they couldn't because of school policies and structural barriers," Achinstein said. "They're taking on school roles against their will in ways that perpetuate inequality."

In one vivid example, Achinstein and Ogawa reported the experiences of a new Latina teacher of English as a Second Language in a high-poverty middle school in California. The teacher had grown up in the neighborhood, but she described feeling isolated and marginalized in her job in a "boot-camp-like" environment at school.

In violation of state policy, this new teacher was not assigned to a mentor. She had trouble keeping up with the curriculum because her students needed more time to review. When she attempted to arrange a meeting with parents at a local restaurant, she met with resistance from the school administration. The assistant principal told her she was "not understanding policy and procedure," and began observing her classroom four times a week.

The "double bind" for this Latina teacher became painfully clear during a period of community demonstrations against national proposals to criminalize undocumented workers. Administrators placed the school on "lockdown" with the gates closed and students confined to their classrooms. On one occasion, 300 students walked out anyway. When the Latina teacher tried to enforce school rules and stop them from jumping over a fence, they called her a "traitor."

"I felt bad, and I couldn't do anything to talk to them," she told researchers.

The teacher is still at the same school, but she's studying to be an administrator now.

"She wants to change the system," Ogawa said. "She thinks that perhaps as a principal she can have more influence to change the school and take down the fences."