

# We've Been Here Before... Or Have We?

**A Call to Action for  
Supporting Teachers of Color  
in the Face of Attacks on  
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Alice E. Ginsberg



RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK  
Graduate School of Education



SAMUEL DEWITT  
PROCTOR INSTITUTE  
*for Leadership, Equity, & Justice*

# Executive Summary

This report examines the impact of proposed anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation and funding cuts under the current Trump Administration on national efforts to diversify the teaching profession. Given that a diverse teaching profession has been shown to support educational equity and achievement for students of color (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Ginsberg, Gasman, and Castro-Samoya, 2022; Gist & Bristol, 2022), we must continue to bring more teachers of color into a profession that remains almost 80% White (NCES, 2020). Over the past three months, I spoke with 13 national leaders in the teacher education field, including professors of teacher education at a variety of institutions of higher education, and changemakers at educational foundations, educational associations, and nonprofit organizations. My primary questions were: 1) What is the potential impact of the Trump administration's attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on efforts to attract and retain teachers of color? 2) What can we do, individually and collectively, to counter current efforts to equate any racial equity pathways or initiatives with "discriminatory practices" in teacher education? and 3) How can we continue to make headway in diversifying the teaching profession rather than losing ground? The title of this report reflects one of my primary findings: That in many ways, attacks on diversity and educational equity are embedded in our country's history, and the corresponding lack of teachers of color closely reflects this history. At the same time, new tactics are being used to stymie educational equity and diversity in the field, which requires a call to action.

- ▶ **“Educational institutions have toxically indoctrinated students with the false premise that the United States is built upon ‘systemic and structural racism’ and advanced discriminatory policies and practices....”**  
– U.S. Department of Education, *Dear Colleague Letter*, February 14, 2025

I was motivated to write this report by the recent backlash against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in K-12 education under the second Trump Administration, including a *Dear Colleague Letter* (U.S. Department of Education, February 14, 2025) that pronounced that: “The law is clear: treating students differently on the basis of race to achieve nebulous goals such as diversity, racial balancing, social justice, or equity is illegal under controlling Supreme Court precedent.” This letter was quickly followed by a series of press releases (February 17, 2025; February 25, 2025) from the U.S. Department of Education and executive orders from President Trump, including one warning that “Institutions that fail to comply may, consistent with applicable law, face investigation and loss of federal funding.” In just seven months, the federal government has tried to close the U.S. Department of Education, while withholding over six billion dollars of previously allocated funding, which could have a devastating impact on afterschool and school lunch programs, school libraries, English language instruction, as well as the teaching profession itself.

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More specifically, when it comes to the issues of teacher recruitment, preparation, and professional development, funding cuts have affected programs designed to fill teacher shortages in high-needs subjects, as well as in low-income, rural, and underserved communities. These cuts also include targeting scholarships and residencies for teachers of color, and other recruiting strategies “implicitly and explicitly based on race” (U.S. Department of Education, February 25, 2025). In February 2025, the federal government revoked over \$600 million in “grants to institutions and nonprofits that were using tax funds to train teachers and education agencies on divisive ideologies.” These included any materials deemed to be on “inappropriate and unnecessary topics,” such as DEI, social activism, anti-racism,

and instruction on white privilege. Some more specific examples of programs that were cut included professional development workshops on “Centering Equity in the Classroom,” materials that “provided targeted practices in culturally relevant and responsive teaching,” and programs “acknowledging and responding to systemic forms of oppression and inequity, including racism, ableism, ‘gender-based’ discrimination, homophobia, and ageism” (US Department of Education, February 17, 2025).

As a teacher educator, educational researcher, and vocal proponent of educational equity for over thirty years, I find these executive orders and funding cuts disturbing and perplexing. Supporting DEI is a low bar for a country purportedly founded on liberty and justice for all.<sup>1</sup> Things felt particularly dire when I started working on this report in late January 2025. Within the first month of the Trump Administration public accusations that educational institutions were “toxically indoctrinating students” while “smuggling racial stereotypes” in the name of DEI put many backs up against the wall, leaving many advocates for educational equity frightened and confused as to what the consequences would be for continuing their work for themselves, their colleagues, their institutions, and their communities.

However, at the same time, I should not be completely surprised. In the context of U.S. education, the term DEI itself might be relatively new, but the tensions underlying it are not. According to Carl Grant and Melissa Gibson, two of the most well-known educators associated with the rise of multicultural education:

<sup>1</sup>I say purportedly here because much of our history clearly says otherwise.

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These questions about diversity, education, and teaching are not new. Despite the youth of the field, its questions are enduring: What do we mean by diversity? What is and should be the role of diversity in American society and schools? Why does diversity matter? Who should teach diverse groups of students? These questions remain at the heart of research, public policy, and debate. Their endurance is reassuring and worrying. Why are we still asking the same questions? Has anything at all changed? (Grant and Gibson, 2011, p. 20)

Here I linger on their last question: *Has anything changed?* I have witnessed many strategic and innovative efforts to level the playing field for students of color and diversify the majority white teaching profession. However, no matter how many times we publicly commit to advancing DEI in education, there remains little agreement about what this means in practice. At times, it even feels like we are working at cross purposes. For example, many people believe that school choice and alternative teacher certification routes are the answer to educational inequity and lack of teacher diversity. In contrast, others believe these same practices will result in greater gaps and deficits for students and teachers of color.

### JOSE LOMELI

Professor, California State University, Fresno



**“This is no longer just a threat, as these cuts are happening right now. This administration is trying to erase over 50 years of progress made since the civil rights movement and events leading up to that movement. A movement that recognized the humanity and contributions made by the hardest working, lowest paying members of our society.”**

Moreover, while there has been a significant increase in research on the positive relationship between teacher diversity, educational equity, and student achievement, most initiatives designed to diversify the teaching profession have been “boutique” in nature, meaning that: 1) they take place in isolated contexts, targeting specific states and school districts but failing to move the national needle; 2) they are grant-funded and thus are time-limited and dependent upon funders’ current interests and commitments; and/or 3) they provide shallow incentives that bring teachers of color into the profession but do not retain them. Bottom line: The statistics around teacher diversity have not budged much in the last few decades. The teaching profession has hovered around 80% white women (NCES, 2024).

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This already tenuous project of diversifying the teaching profession is even more vulnerable, as it is unclear what of the current anti-DEI mandates, executive orders, and proposed legislation will stick and what will be contested or overturned. As Cynthia Tyson, Professor of Education at The Ohio State University and co-editor of *Studying Diversity in Teacher Education*, described it to me:

Right now, I keep calling it a dumpster fire, and a dumpster fire that somebody is pouring gasoline on every day. So, what happens is just when you think, okay, now, this is what we have to deal with, then something else happens. Oh, now we've got to deal with that, and then something else happens. It's a moving target right now. And that's what's making it really hard to strategize.

Tyson is correct that it is hard to strategize about a moving target, but the alternative is to watch an already predominantly white teaching profession become even less diverse. This report thus poses the question: *What is our Call to Action?* I sought to find out by interviewing teacher education faculty members and researchers at a diversity of institutions of higher education, along with educational policymakers and funders, and leaders at non-profits and educational associations.



# Approach

I chose the specific individuals to talk to based primarily upon my professional and personal knowledge of their work and commitment to racial equity in education and teacher education. Between February and June 2025, over Zoom, I recorded conversations with thirteen educational leaders from across the country, including from California, Colorado, Florida, New Jersey, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington, D.C. This geographic diversity was important because, while the federal government represents all fifty states, how federal policy plays out in different parts of the country varies significantly depending upon local politics. I also talked with leaders from different sectors, including faculty members and researchers from a diverse set of institutions of higher education, funders, policymakers, educational associations, and non-profit organizations. Again, this approach was important because there has not been uniformity and agreement about effectively diversifying teaching and promoting racial equity in public education within and across these sectors. My primary questions were: 1) What is the potential impact of the Trump administration's attack on DEI on efforts to attract and retain teachers of color? 2) What can we do, individually and collectively, to counter current efforts to equate any racial equity pathways or initiatives with "discriminatory practices" in teacher education? and 3) How can we continue to make headway in diversifying the teaching profession rather than losing ground? I then coded the transcripts for common themes and recommendations. Everyone I spoke with was told they would not be quoted without their permission. A complete list of interviewees can be found in Appendix A.



**BEN RALSTON**

President, Sachs Foundation

**“We are very unapologetic about the fact that we are not changing our mission. You still have to identify as Black to be a part of our program. We are strong in our belief that we’re allowed to do what we do, and we’re going to continue doing that.”**

# Review of Literature

## RESEARCH ON THE “ACHIEVEMENT GAP” IN K-12 EDUCATION

**D**espite decades of efforts to close the “achievement gap” between students of color and white students, disparities persist impacting everything from reading and math proficiency and standardized test scores to discipline policies and dropout rates, to special education tracking and grade retention rates, to college admissions (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Howard, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006; NCES, 2024; Valencia, 2015). For example, according to the 2024 report by the Southern Educational Foundation titled *Miles to Go: The State of Education for Black Students in America*:

“31% of Black high school students in the U.S. did not graduate in four years, nearly double the overall national average of 18%”  
(P. 12)

As recently as 2019, “more than one in three Black male public school students had been suspended at least once while in school”  
(P. 18)

“Black students are underrepresented in AP courses....While they make up 14.9% of all K-12 students in the U.S., they only account for 9.5% of AP students” (P. 9)

Research on Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American students has uncovered similar gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2022; Howard, 2020; Lee, 2007; Lee, 2022; Valencia & Black, 2022; Vasquez Heilig et. al., 2012; NCES, 2024). For example, according to the *Brookings Institute* over 59% of white test takers met the college readiness math benchmark, compared to under a third of Hispanic or Latino students” (2020, n.p.). Moreover, although Asian Americans are still generally typecast as the “model minority” (meaning that they are academically gifted, especially in STEM fields), in fact there are over 20 different Asian American countries of origin. As Lee notes: “While aggregate data on Asian American students appear to confirm the model minority image, when data is disaggregated by ethnicity a more complicated picture appears” (2007, p.171). The model minority myth does not consider the academic challenges of Asian American students who are from low-income families and/or are English Language Learners. For example, according to the *Pew Research Center*: “26% of Hmong Americans ages 25 and older have a bachelor’s (20%) or advanced degree (6%). Among Asians overall, 56% have a bachelor’s degree or higher” (May 1, 2025, n.p.).

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**CHERYL HOLCOMB-MCCOY**

President, American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education

**“Yes, the climate of fear is real, but we still have the Constitution and civil rights protections. Four months into my tenure, we decided to litigate with the Board’s backing. We’ve already recovered some funds and are pressing on. It was the right call.”**

### *Research on Diversity in the Teaching Profession*

Teachers of color currently make up less than 25% of the overall teaching population in the United States (NCES, 2020). Almost a third of all American schools do not have a single teacher of color. The national percentage of male teachers of color is a mere 6%, and Black male teachers make up less than 2% (Reeves, 2024). Decades of research have pointed to several reasons why teachers of color remain a small part of the profession. These include: admissions and testing policies in teacher education programs that discriminate against candidates of color; teachers of color who are isolated and unsupported in working towards educational equity and systemic change; and explicit and implicit messages that the teachers of color are less intelligent and that diversity comes at the cost of quality (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Carter-Andrews, et. al. 2021; Ginsberg, 2022; Kohli, 2021; Madkins, 2011; Petchauer, 2018; Sleeter, 2017; Woodson & Bristol, 2023).

It should not be surprising, then, that even among those teachers of color whom we do recruit, the turnover rate is significantly higher than for white teachers. According to Carver-Thomas (2018), for example: “While more teachers of color are being recruited than in years past, high turnover rates result from inadequate preparation and mentoring; poor teaching conditions; and displacement from the high-need schools they teach in...” (n.p.). Research has also suggested that teachers of color suffer from an “invisible tax” (King, 2016) where on the one hand they are expected to represent and govern all issues regarding diversity in their schools, and on the other hand, they are met with skepticism about their ability to be objective. As Dixson, et. al., (2023) note: “Recruiting teachers of color only gets them in the building” (p. 4), but that “Ultimately, teachers of color express that they navigate a workplace that renders their identity, skills, and contributions to the school invisible” (p. 9). As one of my teacher education candidates commented regarding her negative experience as a Black teacher:

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Based on the experience of fellow black teachers, I feel like the accepted stereotype of us being hostile, overly opinionated, or challenging to please decides how the administration allows us to use our voice. As black teachers, we are expected to be better capable of grinning and bearing the challenges, and it is less acceptable for me to struggle. (Ginsberg, 2022, p. xv)

Unfortunately, these reflections are not uncommon and are not limited to Black teachers. According to Griffen's (2018) study of the experiences of Latino teachers, for example, "Latino teachers in this study also said they were belittled and at times considered to be aggressive when they incorporated Latino culture or Spanish language in the classroom. Teachers particularly reported being viewed this way when they advocated for Latino students. In addition, Latino teachers said that while they often accepted additional roles, most often as a translator, they were frequently overlooked for advancement opportunities" (p. 2). Griffen further emphasizes that: "Latino teachers in our sample felt that non-Latino educators often make the assumption that all Latinos are from the same country and therefore have the same cultural heritage." (p. 5).

Likewise, Kim and Hsieh (2021) researched Asian American teachers, finding that, despite the model minority stereotype, many of the Asian American women teachers felt administrators and students treated them as exotic and innately passive. Asian American male teachers were seen as nerdy, unmasculine, and perpetually foreign. According to Kim and Hsieh, "The emotional toll of these various forms of marginalization caused some of the Asian American teachers... to distance themselves from their cultural identities" or consider leaving the profession altogether (p.103). Moreover, racial discrimination towards Asian Americans increased significantly during the Covid19 pandemic leading to additional trauma and hate crimes in society generally and in educational settings specifically (Lee, 2022). As schools began the process of reopening, Akiba (2020) and other educators warned that: "In addition to establishing effective anti-infection measures toward school reopening in the U.S., considering the recent resurgence of anti-Asian hate incidents, schools, educators, and other stakeholders should be mindful of the physical and psychological safety of students of Asian descent" (p.3).

These examples are important because even within the category of "teachers of color," their history and experiences in the profession are highly nuanced. Teachers of color from diverse racial, social class, and gendered identities historically came into the profession from different vantage points, and many of them left the profession similarly. This is particularly clear when looking at the impact of segregation and desegregation on the teaching profession as it pertains to different racial groups.

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**CYNTHIA TYSON**

Professor, The Ohio State University

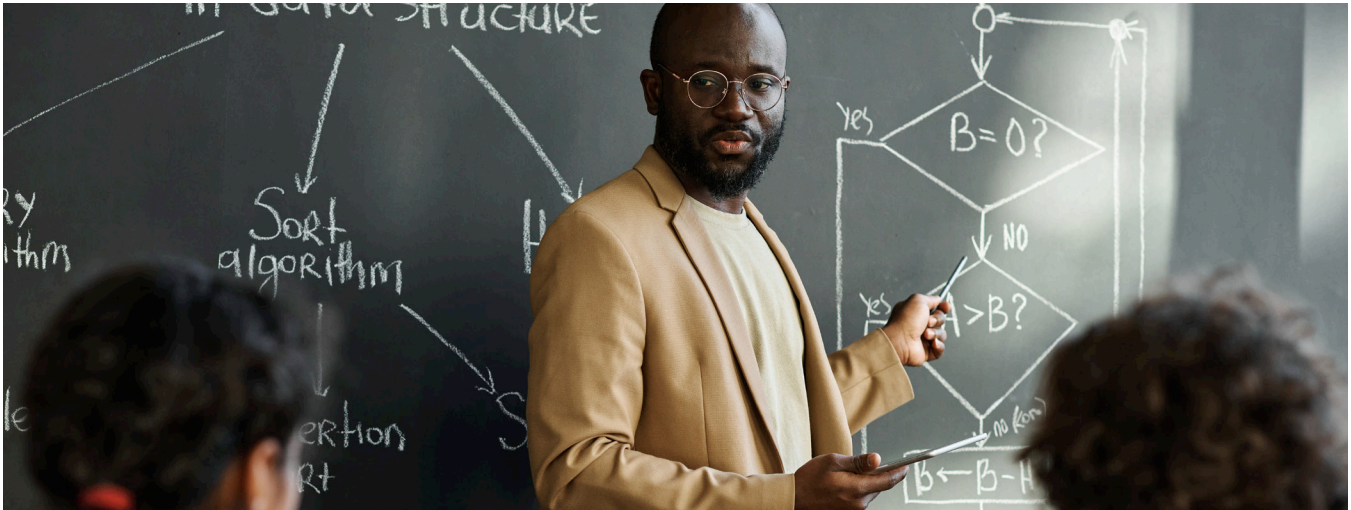
**“I keep calling it a dumpster fire. And a dumpster fire that somebody’s pouring gasoline on every day. So, what happens is just when you think, okay, now, this is what we have to deal with, then something else happens.”**

### *Research on Segregation and the Aftermath of Desegregation in Teachers and Communities of Color*

Looking at the current shortage of Black teachers, who make up less than 7% of the teaching profession (NCES, 2023), it would be easy to assume that teaching has never been a popular choice for aspiring Black professionals. This is not the case. Prior to *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1954), which declared school segregation based on race illegal, there were over 82,000 African American teachers (Tillman, 2004, p. 286). Indeed, most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded as “teaching colleges” (Gasman & Esters, 2024; Osborne-Lampkin, 2023), and teaching was seen as a high-status profession in Black communities as Black teachers were part of a mission to “uplift” the race in the wake of slavery. After *Brown*, however, close to 40,000 Black teachers in southern states left the profession, primarily because White parents did not want them teaching their children and because many formerly all-Black neighborhood schools where Black teachers lived were closed. Between 1975 and 1985, the number of Black students choosing to major in education declined by 66% (Tilman, 2004, p. 286). Without a core of Black teachers and administrators as role models and student advocates, many Black students were subject to negative educational stereotypes and lower academic outcomes under legal desegregation than they were prior to it (Foster, 1998; Orfield & Eaton, 1997; Ahmad & Boser, 2014).

The impact of desegregation based on race did not only affect Black students, however. Students whose families immigrated to the United States and did not speak fluent English, such as Latinx and Asian American students, also found themselves in inferior educational circumstances. Mexican American students, for example, were impacted by another court case—titled *Mendez vs. Westminster* (1947)—in which the court ruled that segregating Mexican American students in California schools based on race was unconstitutional and unequal. Still, segregated schools continued under the rationale that this kind of discrimination was not race-based but rather due to issues of students’ lack of “cleanliness,” “intellectual ability,” and “English

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language ability” (Antman & Cortez, 2022; Ginsberg, 2021). With a majority of White (non-Hispanic) teachers at the helm, Mexican American students were often physically punished for speaking Spanish, even during recess (Ginsberg, 2021). This history reverberates in the present moment, as funding for migrant education and English language programs are being cut, and where forced deportation of non-documented Hispanic immigrants mirrors many of the same historic racist tropes about Hispanic and Latino students. As a result, Latino teachers have been referred to as “cultural guardians” or “lifeguards” whose job is “not just preparing students for postsecondary success but showing them how to navigate through systems and obstacles in society that so often thwart their achievement” (Griffin, 2018, p. 1).

It is also important to mention the experiences of Native American teachers, most of whom were tribal elders who were displaced when Native children were taken from their families and tribes without consent and put in federally run boarding schools, which began in the 1800s and took place up to as recently as the 1960s (Smith, 2004). These schools not only sought to forcibly assimilate Native Americans into mainstream Western, Christian American culture, they were found to be abusive to the children in their care, to treat Native American students as savages, and to actively undermine the wisdom and knowledge of tribal culture and tribal educators, even going as far as to giving children new names. As with Hispanic and Mexican American students, Native American students in boarding schools were prohibited from speaking their indigenous languages. Many students later returned to their tribes feeling like they no longer belonged or were caught between two cultures (Wallace-Adams, 2020). This eventually led to new laws such as Montana’s [Indian Education for All](#), which established the Office of Indian Education and reaffirmed that native teachers should teach Native children in culturally relevant ways. It also led to the expansion of teacher education programs at Tribal Colleges and Universities. However, many of these programs still suffer from enrollment, funding, accreditation challenges, lack of faculty, inaccessible campuses, and difficulty with candidates passing high-stakes licensure exams (Lamb, 2016).

### *Research on Why Teachers of Color Matter*

Another important question brackets the research on efforts to diversify the teaching profession: Why is racial diversity even important? Research has demonstrated that having even a single teacher of color in the classroom can make a massive difference in the academic achievement, engagement, and motivation of students of color. For example, teachers of color have been found to generally have higher expectations of students of color, to use a more culturally inclusive curriculum, to call-out instances of racism and inequity, to challenge cultural stereotypes, to seek stronger connections with parents and community-based organizations, and to agree to work in what are primarily minority and/or hard-to-staff school districts (Au & Blake, 2003; Dilworth & Coleman, 2011; Flores, et. al. 2018; Gist & Bristol, 2022; Jackson & Kohli, 2016; Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Villages & Irvine, 2010).

In their extensive literature review of research on teachers of color, Villages and Irvine, for example, stated: “In brief, by drawing on their knowledge of the students’ cultural backgrounds, the teachers of color featured in the studies reviewed here successfully establish helpful bridges to learning for students who might have otherwise remained disengaged from schoolwork. If used widely in schools, culturally relevant practices hold potential for reversing the persistent racial/ethnic achievement gap” (p. 183). While teachers of color serve as intellectual and cultural role models for students of color, it is also important to note that all students benefit from having teachers of color. We live in a multicultural society where exposure to diverse experiences and viewpoints is critical to learning critical thinking skills and civic engagement (Villages & Irvine, 2010).

# The Impact of New Research on Educator Diversity

The growing body of research on the importance of having more teachers of color has led to several strategic initiatives to bring more teachers of color into the profession and retain them (Gist et al., 2021). These include: 1) scholarship, tuition reimbursement, and mentoring programs, such as [Call Me Mister](#), [Holmes Scholars Program](#) and [The California Mini Corps Program](#); 2) paid residency programs, such as those offered by [The National Center for Teacher Residencies](#), which is designed to attract para-professionals and working students; 3) targeted professional development and networking opportunities such as the [Institute of Teachers Committed to Racial Justice](#) and [The Center for Black Educator Development](#); and 4) teacher of color affinity groups within professional organizations such as the [American Educational Research Association](#) (AERA) and [The American Council of Colleges of Teacher Education](#) (AACTE). More recently, there has been an increase in alternative certification routes, such as [Teach for America](#), [Grow Your Own](#), and non-accredited online degree programs. Lastly, it should be noted that Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) have had an oversized impact on teachers of color, as they graduate over 33% of teachers of color with education degrees, and are known for providing innovative, community-based, and culturally relevant instruction (Gasman, Castro-Samaoya & Ginsberg, 2016; Ginsberg, Gasman & Castro-Samaoya, 2022; Petchauer & Mawhinney, 2017).

These initiatives hold great promise for the future education of students of color, many of whom have never had a teacher who looks like them. With the funding for many of these programs currently under threat, however, many universities, non-profits, and foundations that offer them are changing the names of any programs that have DEI in their title, and are going to great lengths to make sure they are not accused of racial preferences in admissions or of teaching anything that might be deemed unpatriotic or racially divisive. The question of what actual changes we are prepared to make, and where we draw the red line, came up repeatedly throughout my interviews, which I will now discuss in more detail.



**JULIAN VASQUEZ HEILIG**

Professor, Western Michigan University

**“When we erase the voices of educators of color and sanitize curricula to avoid discomfort, we are not promoting unity—we are perpetuating ignorance. A teacher workforce that reflects our nation’s diversity is essential not just for representation, but for truth-telling.”**

# Major Findings

## GOING BACK IN TIME: WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE

**I**t was striking to me that several of the people I interviewed were not the least bit shocked or blind sighted by the current attacks on DEI, reflecting on the history of slavery and segregation, the colonization of Native American communities, the creation of Japanese Internment Camps during WW11, and the widespread resistance to the Civil Rights movement in general. For example, Michael Nettles, Endowed Professor at Morgan State University and former Senior Vice President for Policy Evaluation and Research at Educational Testing Service, shared that:

On the one hand, it is so surprising, but it should not be. The answer to your question is that you hope to wake up to some different reality, but you realize that *you've been there before* and done that. DEI is a decade old, right? I mean the concept of DEI. And so, prior to that, I can go back to the days of court-ordered higher education and desegregation. And the debates and the arguments in court over what it takes to eliminate the vestiges of segregation.

Cynthia Tyson, mentioned earlier, also reflected on the days of legal segregation, noting that: "...folks came together and figured out how to keep school going for their kids in ways that nurtured them, educated them, and prepared them for what they felt was going to happen once they're out. So yeah, we've kind of been here before." Tyson then added:

I'm a black, queer, teacher. I've been here. I've seen cuts. I've worked in schools where there wasn't enough money. When I was a classroom teacher, we didn't have all the things we needed. It was an urban district. It was poor. But if we look historically at where we are right now, as it relates to, let's say, just Black education, we've been here before. We weren't always in the schools in a learning setting that supported anything about us. Women weren't even allowed to go to school. Boys weren't allowed to go to school if their fathers weren't landowners. When we start looking, this is why teaching of the history is so important. Because we can learn from our past, we can learn from the historical markers in the ways that show we were in segregated schools.

Etta Hollins, Professor Emerita at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and co-author of *Preparing Teachers for Cultural Diversity*, noted similarly: "I think we have experienced it before....We've seen this globally before. You know, I mean, it's the impetus for enslavement or transatlantic enslavement. So, you know, some of us are really familiar with that movement and what that movement can do." Hollins talked about her own experience as a student in public school in the South, where the inclusion of the bible, prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance were mandatory, and then reflected on her early experience as a teacher in these same kinds of schools: "When I came into the field it was definitely scripted. And you dare not move off that script. This is so now, too. Yes, it's recycled."

## Major Findings



### AMAYA GARCIA

Director of PreK-12  
Research and Practice,  
New America

**“Those of us who have the ability to keep writing about equity and diversity need to keep writing about it. We keep pushing for teacher diversity to make sure that more students have access to teachers who can help them achieve strong outcomes.”**

Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, President of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, agreed with her colleagues that what is happening is not entirely new, sharing that:

We have a huge challenge of convincing people of color to go into teaching, and that stems from historically being demoted. When we had all Black schools, teachers were historically pillars of the community. Then, when we integrated schools, we demoted those people, and in many ways, that legacy is still with us. Because when I talk to high school students about going into a career in education, they're like, 'No, don't do that'.... So, we're still dealing with those legacies around how many communities of color and historically minoritized communities see the profession. We have to work to turn that around from my vantage point.

Holomb-McCoy further noted, “Decades of research are unequivocal: every child benefits when the teaching force reflects the diversity of our classrooms. Yet today's rhetoric dismisses that truth, as if diversity no longer matters. It feels as though we're being pulled back toward a separate-and-unequal past.”

Even among the early or mid-career scholars I spoke with, there was still a strong sense that we could trace what was happening now backwards in time. Rita Kohli, Professor at the University of California, Riverside and Director of the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice, for example, commented that:

Suppose you look 200 years ago at the inception of the country, which was going through normal schools and the creation of normal teacher education programs. In that case, you were seeing a lot of similar kinds of productions, of teachers who are supposed to be adhering to nationalism and standardization and things like that. And so, I'm not sure that the mechanisms that create and produce teachers have changed very dramatically over time.... there's an ebb and flow of this very surface-level engagement with this that has led to this kind of backlash that we're seeing right now. And so, I don't feel like my lens has changed very dramatically.

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Amaya Garcia, Director of PK-12 Research and Practice at New America, also felt we were “hampering progress,” noting that: “It’s important for teachers to reflect the students they teach, and that representation isn’t just about race. It’s also about shared culture, experiences, and even language. It’s unfortunate that teacher diversity got swept up in the anti-DEI movement as these actions will hamper the progress that has been made in diversifying the teacher workforce.” Garcia also expressed shock at how quickly things were moving now, sharing that: “When Trump came into office and started dismantling the education infrastructure and started targeting teacher preparation grants, I was definitely surprised at how fast it was happening.”

### **SOMETHING FEELS DIFFERENT, BUT WHAT?: NAVIGATING A PERFECT STORM**

Like Garcia, several people I spoke with were concerned at the pace at which anti-DEI efforts were moving, and many also brought up some other ways in which the current moment felt noticeably different from the past. Cynthia Tyson, for example, noted:

I think the only difference now that I see that makes me not as optimistic is that there are so many individuals who see it as part of their mission to take this fight on. So, it’s not just the government that says it’s wrong.... I used to always say the fight is not individual; the fight is systemic. But I think now what we’re seeing is that individuals feel more empowered to take up the systemic mantle for the fight. And that’s what’s very different.



## Major Findings



**MICHAEL NETTLES**

Professor, Morgan State University

**“On the one hand, it’s so surprising, but it shouldn’t be. The answer to your question is that you hope to wake up to some different reality, but you realize that you’ve been there before and done that.”**

For example, Tyson shared a story of a public library in her home state:

They had all of these multicultural diverse books just front, facing everywhere, like in all of the displays, and there was a man in the library that said, ‘I want to talk to the library manager’....He said: ‘It’s against the law right now for you to have all of these books about Black people just out here.’ And the woman said, ‘No, it’s not against the law. This is a library. These are books that we’re featuring throughout this particular area.’ Well, the man said I’m going to report this on that website, and I’m going to write letters. And I’m [Cynthia] thinking, this is an individual who is citing what he thinks is an executive order to ban DEI, and to take this up as an individual in the library. He believed: I’m a citizen, and my tax dollars do not support this, and I’m going to report this.

Stories such as the one above are mirrored by an administration that has even gone so far as to create a portal wherein “students, parents, teachers, and the broader public” can securely “share the receipts of the betrayal that has happened in our public schools” by exposing teachers and educational practices they believe are promoting “illegal discriminatory practices.” The portal promises that: “The Department of Education will utilize community submissions to identify potential areas for investigation” (U.S. Department of Education, February 27, 2025). It seems fair to ask, what constitutes a “discriminatory practice,” as almost anything can be viewed as such depending upon your politics and perspective. We are now encouraging individuals to make judgment calls in areas in which they have no professional expertise, and that may impact thousands of students or even entire school districts. In June 2025, for example, the Supreme Court made a ruling allowing parents to opt their children out of lessons in public schools that contain LGBTQ themes or that go against their religious beliefs (*Tamer Mahmoud, et. al., Petitioners v. Thomas w. Taylor, et. al., 2025*). It raises the question of whether parents will eventually be allowed to opt their children out of classrooms or schools with LGBTQ teachers, or, for that matter, of anything teachers do in the classroom that they personally object to.

## Major Findings

In addition to concerns that new legislation would encourage and empower individuals to report school practices and curriculum, those I spoke with were also concerned about the level of coordination across different sectors. For example, when asked to describe this moment in educational history, Travis Bristol, Associate Professor of Education at Berkeley and Director of the Center for Research on Expanding Educational Opportunity, shared:

So, some of it feels familiar. What does not feel familiar? What feels unfamiliar is that it seems that there are these sort of coordinated forces. So not only are those same people in the organization who would undermine educator diversity work in the past still there, still leading, and are still people's colleagues, but then you also have the Federal government, and you have foundations who have stepped away from some of these efforts. This almost feels like, I don't know, maybe like a perfect storm, if you will.



Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy likewise noted that: “The federal government has stripped away tuition assistance and scholarships that once opened doors for aspiring educators of color. It feels like an all-out assault on education and on educators, on preparation programs, and on the very idea of public schooling.”

Julian Vasquez Heilig, Professor of Education and former Provost at Western Michigan University, also believed that the current attack on DEI is highly coordinated: “We need to be clear-eyed about what’s happening. These aren’t isolated incidents—this is a coordinated strategy. The attacks on the media, the rise of ‘alternative facts,’ the scapegoating of immigrants, and the relentless push against DEI and communities of color—these are straight out of the authoritarian playbook. And they’re following it line by line. If we don’t recognize the pattern, we risk normalizing it.” Heilig further believes that while many nonprofits are stepping in to support researchers who have lost federal funding, this could put their own institutions at risk. According to Heilig: “I don’t believe nonprofits are going to lose their tax status, but let’s not be naïve—the threat is very real. Some nonprofits are already stepping in to fill the void, offering grants to scholars who’ve lost federal funding from places like the NIH or NSF. That kind of courage matters. But we should be honest: when they stand in the breach, they also become targets. That’s the new frontline of academic resistance.”

## Major Findings

The fear of becoming a target, or of inadvertently making allies a target, came up repeatedly in my interviews. For example, while describing a new grassroots effort in Florida, called *Faith in Florida*, where a group of churches created a toolkit for teachers supporting teaching Black history, Cynthia Tyson shared: “I’ve been in touch with some folks who are actually using it, and they love it. But again, they’re trying to keep it very on the downlow. They don’t want to become a target. When you become the face of a project, then you get attacked.” Likewise, Belinda Flores, Professor of Education at the University of Texas, San Antonio and Director of the Academy for Teacher Excellence Research Center, expressed what it felt like to be in the spotlight, but not have control: “So we’re just waiting with bated breath, to see if the shoe drops, and then all of a sudden, we’re told there’s no funding, and unfortunately, we’ve already told everybody, you know. ‘Hey? You know, this is what we expected.’ However, we don’t know what is going to happen down the road, but you know we’re out of control there.”

Even those people who felt they themselves or their institutions were “safe” stressed the importance of acknowledging and protecting those who are not. For example, Amaya Garcia shared a story about her work with the increasingly popular “Grow Your Own” (GYO) programs, which are designed to attract a more diverse pool of teachers into the profession by encouraging paraprofessionals to get teaching certifications. Garcia shared that: “I’ve had to ask myself questions and approach my work in a way that I kind of never thought I would.” Garcia continued that when writing about GYO programs: “If I continue to talk about diversity in this way, if I talk about culturally responsive pedagogy, if I even say the word *diverse* is that going to put GYO programs at risk?” This led her to further ask: “What is the responsibility of people in our positions whose work can directly impact programs? We know that losing these federal and state funds can be catastrophic—it can make a program close—you feel like you have to pause and think about your choice of words to convey the strengths and impacts of these programs.”

The other issue that came up under the theme of “coordinated forces” was the fact that attacks on DEI in education were linked to similar attacks across other sectors, and that cutting educational funding will eventually impact all social services. As Belinda Flores stated:

I don’t know if people understand the extent of what it means *not* to attend to issues of DEI. It doesn’t only have educational implications, it has other implications for health care, medical care, mental health care, etc. Because you always have those that are underserved, and the underserved are the same populations that are underserved for education, underserved for mental health, and underserved for medical health. And so, this approach of “well, we’re not funding anything that has anything, DEI,” has long-term implications beyond the education field. What happens when you cut off the spigot? Who ends up without any water to drink?

While it is beyond the scope of this report to critically examine how current attacks on DEI and funding cuts in education will have a longer-term impact on already underserved communities, Flores’s idea that we must think in terms of broader-based coalitions is reflected in the “recommendations” section.

## Major Findings



**ETTA HOLLINS**

Professor Emerita,  
University of Missouri,  
Kansas City

**“From my perspective, it’s very difficult to build a profession in one classroom, one school district, one teacher, and one preparation program at a time. A shared body of knowledge is the core of what makes a profession all right.”**

### **LOSING GROUND: A CLOSER LOOK AT PRIOR EFFORTS TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN TEACHERS OF COLOR**

Another key finding from my interviews centered on the fact that even before the recent backlash against DEI, many efforts to recruit and retain teachers of color, while well-intended, were already deeply flawed. As Ben Ralston, President of the Sachs Foundation, shared: “I don’t know that I have any great answers, but I think one of the things that’s difficult for me is that before all of these executive orders and bluster and everything like that, the programs trying to diversify the teacher workforce didn’t have that much teeth to them. So, we were losing ground before this all happened.” As Ralston reflected upon the lack of Black teachers in Colorado, where the Sachs Foundation is located:

Right after I started at The Sachs Foundation, the Colorado Trust, which is a foundation in Denver, released data on the number of Black educators in Colorado classrooms. And it was abysmal. You know, the 83% white is true. There are some more specific statistics in that about 1% of our educators are Black here in Colorado, even though the population is about 11 to 12% Black. And then the other statistic, that kind of blew my mind, is that out of 176 school districts in Colorado, 150 of them had 0 black educators.”

In light of these statistics, the Sachs Foundation believed that part of the problem with recruiting and retaining Black teachers in Colorado was not that they weren’t interested in teaching, but that Black teachers in Colorado were unable to live on the low-salaries that were offered to them, in conjunction with the fact that they did not want to be the only one, or one of just a few, Black teachers in their school. Ralston spearheaded an initiative to increase the pay of Black teachers by \$10,000 and to create a cohort program where Black teachers could feel part of a larger community and find mentorship, professional development, and support. As Ralston shared: “That Black identity was the thing that brought this group together. We have relationships with Black educators from all of our other work. We would introduce them to educators who have been in the classroom for 25 years. And so, it just felt like they had a little bit more of that safe community, that supportive space that understands the identity.”

## Major Findings

Constructive criticisms of prior efforts to recruit teachers of color came up in several other conversations. Typically, these criticisms focused on lack of financial incentives to pursue teaching. Several people I spoke with talked about the need for institutions of higher education to step up to the plate and provide more financial support for recruiting teachers of color. Julian Vasquez Heilig, for example, shared that in Western Michigan University's efforts to address the teacher shortage, it was critical that the university had targeted financial aid programs distributed at the departmental level. Reflecting on their process, he shared:

One of the most critical things we did was go straight to university leadership and say: 'If you're serious about solving the teacher shortage—if you want this institution to be respected by the legislature—then it's time to invest in those preparing to teach.' Financial aid decisions are usually controlled at the institutional level, not the college level. So we pushed for a structural shift—an explicit commitment that said: teacher education is a priority, and we're going to back that up with dollars.

While significant, the cost of getting a degree in teacher education, compared to a relatively low salary upon certification, was not the only thing driving teachers of color away from the profession. Like Ben Ralston, Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy believed it was important to look at the conditions under which teachers work. Reflecting on some of the problems that have long plagued teacher diversity, such as a lack of professional respect and control over the curriculum, Holcomb-McCoy stated: "We face a dual challenge: recruiting teachers of color and keeping them. Diversity cannot be a revolving door. We need career educators who are ready for the long haul—but that requires supportive workplaces, meaningful incentives, and genuine professional agency. Too many teachers tell me, 'I know what's best for my students, but the district ties my hands.'"

Holcomb-McCoy also stressed that it was important to pay close attention to those teachers who left the profession, noting that: "If we want teachers to stay, we have to study what actually works and listen to those who walked away. Why did they leave? Their insight is indispensable, especially when once-passionate teachers of color exit disillusioned." According to Holcomb-McCoy: "Our greatest task now is to elevate the profession itself. Without teachers, what future is possible? Some still claim that 'anyone can teach,' as if it's mere babysitting. Teaching is a complex profession worthy of respect, resources, and rigorous preparation."

The idea that teaching is essentially "babysitting" and that teachers go into teaching primarily because they "love children" also came up in my conversation with Cynthia Tyson who believed that many of the teacher candidates she has worked with – even teachers of color – did not come into the program understanding that educational equity was a systemic problem and that teaching was a highly skilled profession. After surveying her students to better understand why they chose teaching, for example, Tyson shared: "When they say things like, 'Oh, I just love children,' I say to them, loving children is not enough. Because you can love a child and miseducate a child, and that child will not be prepared with the competencies that they need to be able to be successful in the next grade level."

## Major Findings

Holcomb-McCoy agreed with the need to better prepare teachers, including more rigorous research on what specific strategies were most effective for informing practice: “Educator preparation must evolve. We have mountains of research that fail to reach practice. At AACTE, we’re identifying the non-negotiable strategies that work, spotlighting programs that succeed, and urging the field to abandon approaches that don’t.” To accomplish this, Holcomb-McCoy has urged teacher educators to work more closely with local school districts, noting that: “Universities must listen, really listen to their PK-12 partners. Districts can’t just say, ‘Send us more teachers.’ They need to tell us which preparation practices yield teachers who thrive. Faculty must see themselves as co-creators in that process.”



Etta Hollins likewise felt that: “When I try to talk to people about the profession, it’s really difficult because where they go to is their own personal practice, or they go to what’s going on in their school, or their school district, or what’s going on in their university-based program. So, in my perspective, it’s very, very difficult to build a profession one classroom, one school district, one teacher, preparation program at a time.” Hollins argued that teacher education needed to rely on hard evidence of best practices, emphasizing that “a shared body of knowledge is the core of what makes a profession all right.” Hollins went on to give an example of the way in which doctors and nurses collect and share detailed files on their patients, noting that this same model needs to be part of teacher education. According to Hollins:

We can retain a child in elementary school without any record of where the child struggled, how the child struggled, and what interventions were attempted for that child. Not only is that true, but the child could be retained solely because they failed in literacy or math, and they have to repeat a whole year of everything else. Because if you actually look at our outcomes, they suffer because of the inconsistencies in our practice.

While Hollins raises the issue of what a shared body of knowledge for teachers would look like and include, others I spoke with were more concerned with what teachers couldn’t say or do.

### PATRIOTISM AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICA

Another issue that came up in my conversations around teacher diversity was whether teachers of color would want to work in schools where they were restricted from teaching ethnic studies and/or anything about American history that was deemed “unpatriotic.” This includes anything that portrays racial groups as victims or disenfranchised. For example, during Trump’s first administration, in a speech on Constitution Day, 2020, where he demanded that schools counter what he called a “twisted web of lies” being taught about systemic racism in America, further calling ideas such as Critical Race Theory “a form of child abuse in the truest sense of the word.” Similarly, in a Presidential Action called “Ending Racial Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling” issued on January 29, 2025, Trump wrote, “Parents trust America’s schools to provide their children with a rigorous education and to instill a patriotic admiration for our incredible Nation and the values for which we stand. In recent years, however, parents have witnessed schools indoctrinate their children in radical, anti-American ideologies while deliberately blocking parental oversight.”

#### TRAVIS BRISTOL

Associate Professor, University of California, Berkeley



“Well, what is patriotism? I love America as a first-generation American. As the son of immigrants, I grew up believing in the promise of America. That is patriotism. It is because this country is diverse, and out of many, we can become one. And so, I don’t know, the perversion of patriotism that the administration is sharing is one that undermines again the promise and the project of America.”

Many professors of teacher education, especially those who were themselves immigrants or first-generation Americans, took offense at this framing of patriotism. Jose Lomeli, Professor at California State University, Fresno, shared: “It really cuts to the core when you’re being told that you’re illegal. Even the word illegal just offends me to no end. You know, this country was built on immigration. I mean, if we just took that immigration order back a couple of 100 years, who would be here really?...” Jose Lomeli and his sister Lilly Lomeli came to this country from a migrant family and are former coordinators of Fresno State’s California Mini Corps Program which supported migrant students and created a pipeline for migrant teachers. In the face of programs like Mini Corps being shut down as recently as July 2025, Lomeli added:

## Major Findings

This is no longer just a threat, as these cuts are happening right now. This administration is trying to erase over 50 years of progress made since the civil rights movement and events leading up to that movement. A movement that recognized the humanity and contributions made by the hardest working, lowest paying members of our society. Migrant Education and California Mini-Corps are no longer receiving funding. These programs are accomplishing what they set out to do, which is to educate and empower the migrant community to participate and contribute more fully to U.S. society. Lilly and I are examples of this with our ability to become educators and tax paying members of society. There are hundreds of thousands of people that benefitted from these programs in the most positive manner possible.

Similarly, Travis Bristol, a first-generation American, shared: “Well, what is patriotism? I love America as a first-generation American, as the son of immigrants, I grew up believing in the promise of America. That is patriotism. It is that this country is diverse, and out of many we can become one. And so, I don’t know, the perversion of patriotism that the administration is sharing is one that undermines again the promise and the project of America.” Bristol spoke about the importance of civic education in schools, which is different than blind patriotism, further sharing that California has a state-mandated ethnic studies requirement: “That project, I think, begins to fulfill the promise of America that we have. We recognize that this country was built on the backs of many people, but particularly enslaved Africans.”

The concern that “patriotism” would turn into whitewashing came up in several conversations. Julian Vasquez Heilig, for example, believed that: “When we erase the voices of educators of color and sanitize curricula to avoid discomfort, we are not promoting unity—we are perpetuating ignorance. A teacher workforce that reflects our nation’s diversity is essential not just for representation, but for truth-telling. The push to label honest accounts of American history as ‘anti-patriotic’ reveals a deeper fear: that a more inclusive, accurate education challenges the myths that power depends on.” Belinda Flores also felt strongly that these kinds of limited narratives about patriotism would hurt both students and the teaching profession more generally:

It is going to have an impact. Where it may have an impact are those who want to teach history courses from an ethnic point of view, like Mexican history, African American history, or black history, or things like that. *They may just say: You know what, this is not worth it.* And then I think it also impacts, not just the public schools. It also impacts people’s thinking about going into teaching at a university because there’s more and more control over what you can say and do. We already had a DEI bashing in Texas in the last couple of years. They’ve made us turn in all our syllabi; we always had to submit them, but for additional scrutiny, we had to submit any kind of policy we had, any kind of handbook we have, let’s say, for clinical teaching. They scrutinized all these materials to see if we favored one group over the other.

Rita Kohli, who runs the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice, also expressed concern about whether teachers would remain in the profession under a cloud of fear: “My work is with teachers nationally. So, I feel like there is a level of fear in the work with the educators I work with. *Can I say this? Can I teach this? Should I do this?...* I do think that it’s less desirable to be a teacher when you have a President that’s dismantling the Department of Education, and less desirable to be a teacher when you work in schools or parts of this country where there’s overt suppression.”

Cynthia Tyson agreed that current conditions would make teaching a less attractive path for teachers, underscoring issues of censorship and funding: “I think it’s the reduced attention to culturally relevant teaching, cultural humility, cultural awareness, but it’s more than that. It’s about putting in place barriers that make it impossible to even do any iteration of it differently. First, we had banned books, right? And so, censorship became the issue, and we rallied around to figure out how we can deal with school boards and censorship and pedagogies that leaned in on using literature that is from diverse places. But now it’s more fundamental. It’s about funding. And it’s about funding across the board in ways that impact students in Special Ed, and other programs.”

Fear of losing funding seemed to be at the core of most of the conversations I had surrounding this report. According to Jose Lomeli: “You know, when you cut one way, you cut a lot of things that you probably weren’t intending to cut. And so, the uncertainty is probably the scariest thing.” As previously noted, if people were not afraid for themselves or their institutions, they still feared doing anything that could make their allies a target. At the same time, however, more than one person I spoke with warned against letting that fear take over. Jonathan Zimmerman, Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, reflected that: “Well, there are several things that are new going on, and the biggest thing that’s new is that the Federal Government is exercising unprecedented control over K-12 schooling. Trump himself, in his indoctrination order, insists on a certain kind of patriotic indoctrination. But what does that actually mean in the 13,000 school districts of the United States? I think again, it’s way too early to tell. We shouldn’t assume the worst. We shouldn’t assume the best.” Zimmerman makes an important point here, which is further reflected in the recommendations section of this report: We can’t let fear of the future stop us from being mindful in the present.



**LILLY LOMELI**

Former Coordinator, Fresno State Mini Corp Program

**“Our students – especially our DACA students – are very scared. But our lawyers go out and do presentations about knowing their rights. Thankfully, the lawyers do a lot of outreach.”**

# What's Next?

**W**hen I asked the people interviewed for this report what general strategies they or their institutions were using to counter attacks on DEI, their responses fell into three categories: 1) Know Your Rights; 2) Control the Narrative; and 3) Build Coalitions.

## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Even though it is easy to be paralyzed by the prospect of being a target or losing funding, the people interviewed for this report felt strongly that educational leaders, funders, and policymakers must not let this stop us from achieving the goals of bringing more teachers of color into the field. They stressed how important it is to remind people that we still have civil rights, and if need be, that we will litigate. According to Ben Ralston at The Sachs Foundation, for example: “We are very unapologetic about the fact that we are not changing our mission. You still have to identify as Black to be a part of our program. We are strong in our belief that we’re allowed to do what we do, and we’re going to continue doing that. We brought in some more big-time attorneys to be like, okay, here we know that we are following the laws that they’ve always been for the 100 years that we’ve been in existence.” Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy also felt strongly that litigation should be an option: “Yes, the climate of fear is real, but we still have the Constitution and civil-rights protections. Four months into my tenure we decided—with the Board’s backing—to litigate. We’ve already recovered some funds and are pressing on. It was the right call.”

Amaya Garcia agreed, “The courts are going to be central to all of this. I think it’s just a matter of understanding what the different rulings mean and seeing how they play out.... For example, the States that sued about the TQP [teacher quality partnership] grants, the Supreme Court ruled that these grants could be terminated. So, we have to prepare ourselves for the wins and the losses.” Michael Nettles believes that civic engagement and voting will also be central to protecting educational equity, noting: “My best hope is that some of the active people will persuade the administration at the State and national levels, and already we’ve seen them pull back on some things that people push back on. But there’s a lot of that that has to be done before 18 months. I think 18 months is too long.” Likewise, Lilly Lomeli shared that while DACA students in her teacher education program are “really scared,” there are attorneys who are supporting their students. According to Lomeli: “They [the lawyers] go out and do presentations about knowing their rights. They are doing a lot of outreach.”



**JOHNATHAN  
ZIMMERMAN**

Professor, University of  
Pennsylvania

**“Trump himself, in his indoctrination order, insists on a certain kind of patriotic indoctrination. But what does that actually mean in the 13,000 school districts of the United States? I think again, it’s way too early to tell. We shouldn’t assume the worst. We shouldn’t assume the best.”**

## CONTROL THE NARRATIVE

While the narrative that the current administration is pushing is one of negativity and fear, most people I spoke with stressed that we can still have control over how we message the impact and importance of our work to diversify the teaching profession and to support DEI in education more generally. For example, Amaya Garcia noted, “We have seen the erasure of DEI initiatives and practices in corporations, higher education, and K-12 schools. And so, finding a way to promote and advocate for teacher diversity can be complicated when there is so much pushback and active work to dismantle DEI. Those of us who have the ability to keep writing about equity and diversity need to keep writing about it. We keep pushing for teacher diversity to make sure that more students have access to teachers who can help them achieve strong outcomes.”

Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy likewise noted, “The current administration has excelled at sharp, resonant messaging fueled by racist tropes, and sometimes by empty promises. Education must reclaim that narrative space. We need to speak to communities, legislators, and local media, showing how educator preparation shapes every child’s future and why diverse teachers matter to *all* students. We have to be helping community members see the connection between what we do in educator preparation and how it’s connected to their children and their children’s future. The research shows that we need diverse teachers who look like the kids that they’re teaching. All children, not just Black and brown children, need to see diversity.”

Travis Bristol spoke of the importance of reminding the American public that the work we are doing to protect civil rights and promote DEI in education does benefit all students and is, in fact, “part of the American project.” According to Bristol:

I think that one of the priorities is that we have to remind the American public, individuals, teachers, and families that this work that we’re doing is really part of the American project, right? That, and I think you know that every time I get up and speak, I just say that what this administration is doing is undermining the promise of America and the

## What's Next?

American project. And I think that what's important here is staying the course. This is a reminder that the promise of America is being undermined, and so are ideas around diversity, equity, and inclusion—and that's why I don't say DEI, right? I spell it out—that these are central to the American project of *E pluribus unum*.

Like Bristol's insistence on spelling out DEI, Michael Nettles has asked whether we should stop using DEI entirely when discussing educational equity and teacher diversity. According to Nettles: "Last week, a legislator said that the author advocating for the elimination of DEI, the problem was that people labeled it wrong. It should have been diversity, excellence, and inclusion." Whether changing "equity" to "excellence" would make a significant difference is unknown. However, Nettles raises a good point: DEI has become an all-inclusive trope that no longer serves us. Zimmerman also weighed in on this: "I think we should be watching....So, just because Trump is attacking DEI doesn't mean that everything that happened under DEI was good. And when we stop saying that, then he's won, then he absolutely won. Right? When we stop being self-critical because we're afraid of him."

## BUILD COALITIONS

Everyone that I spoke with brought up the importance of building coalitions. As Cynthia Tyson so eloquently said, "I think in higher education we're going to have to team up with community efforts and support them in ways that we never have before." Amaya Garcia agreed: "I think that is the role of the coalitions...still continuing to stress and raise awareness of the importance that teacher diversity has on student success." Belinda Flores likewise noted that: "You have the U.S. Department of Education saying something about DEI, and you have other national organizations saying other supportive comments about DEI, but if we all come together, united, you can make a greater impact."

Many people also underscored that, in addition to building coalitions, we need to identify and support those with the power and privilege to lead the challenge to recruit and retain more teachers of color. Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, for example, noted: "If leaders project fear by scrubbing websites and self-censoring, then those they lead will follow suit. Courage must come from the top." Julian Vasquez Heilig also shared: "It always comes down to leadership. Whether it's the president, the provost, or the department chair, what's needed most right now is courage. Structural change doesn't happen through silence or neutrality—it takes moral clarity and bold decisions. And stakeholders—faculty, students, alumni—have to demand that courage. Those who control the purse strings in higher education have to decide: are we protecting status quo politics, or are we investing in justice?"

# Discussion: What Does It All Mean?

Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways from this project was that it is impossible to separate this moment from the larger history of U.S. education and long-standing initiatives to create educational equity and recruit and retain teachers of color. What this means in practice is complex, given that there is no complete agreement on why the teaching profession remains predominantly white. Some believe, for example, that it is directly related to the low pay and low status of the profession at a time when people of color have more choices and pathways open to them. Others call attention to the fact that teachers of color feel isolated and frequently experience microaggressions, outright prejudice, and insulting questions about their abilities and value. Others think that teachers of color are especially disheartened and demoralized by attempts to ban books, curb the teaching of ethnic studies, and conform to teaching narratives about race that are historically inaccurate and/or whitewashed.

The fact that, to some extent, we've been here before does not have to deflate and immobilize us. It gives us perspective and allows us to reflect on some of the larger systemic issues that need to be addressed before we can realistically expect to see a more diverse teaching profession. There remain many reasons to be hopeful that we will one day have a teaching profession that is representative of the students they teach. At the same time, it is critical that we recognize what narratives are either new or rebranded in ways that we were not prepared for, such as the fact that, according to the Trump administration, anything race-related is inherently discriminatory and that everything DEI-related is inherently bad. Specifically, we must remain critical of efforts to: 1) dismantle the Department of Education and many of the national civil rights it protects; 2) empower individuals to "tell on" their teachers with whom they don't agree and to have them investigated; 3) defund educational programs – such as school lunches and after school programs – that will have an outsized impact on people of color and people in low-income communities; and 4) threaten institutions of higher education, foundations, and non-profit organizations with loss of funding or non-profit status if they hold fast to their public commitments to DEI.

Put simply, now is not the time to be stopped by fear or complacency. Once you start down the road of self-censorship, what is your red line, and how far are you willing to go? Moreover, returning to Cynthia Tyson's analogy of the dumpster fire that someone is pouring gasoline on daily, it is hard to strategize against a moving target. But strategize we must, so I end this brief with some actionable recommendations based on my research.

## CALL TO ACTION

### **ESTABLISH INDEPENDENT FUNDING CONSORTIA TO PROTECT TEACHER DIVERSITY INITIATIVES**

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With federal and some state funding under attack, a coalition of foundations, philanthropists, and teacher preparation programs could pool resources and create an independent fund to support scholarships, residencies, and mentoring for teachers of color. Working together, they might create a “Diversity in Teaching Emergency Fund” to support programs currently losing funding, but with long-term sustainability goals and multi-year commitments that expand beyond the current political climate. One of the added benefits of having such a consortium is that no one institution becomes an independent target, and each member can contribute based on their own resources and expertise.

### **CREATE A NATIONAL TEACHER DIVERSITY POLICY WATCHDOG**

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Fragmented and rapidly shifting policies make it hard for educators to keep up. As noted in this report, many students, teachers, and teacher educators do not know what their rights are and/or are unable to distinguish between a press release, an executive order, and a court-ordered legal mandate. A centralized entity could track policy changes, disseminate legal guidance, and provide rapid response support. We could establish a teacher diversity “policy watch” center that issues alerts and policy briefs and hosts webinars for faculty and leaders navigating anti-DEI policies without losing mission focus. This approach would also speak to the need to create coalitions among and across sectors.

### **INVEST IN EXIT INTERVIEWS AND LONGITUDINAL TRACKING OF TEACHERS OF COLOR**

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Much of what we know about the experience of teachers of color is anecdotal. While rigorous research on this topic continues to expand, a lot of this research does not provide us with large-scale, longitudinal data. Such data on why teachers of color leave the profession (or never enter) is essential to improve retention strategies. We could fund statewide or institutional-level studies to track teachers of color through their preparation, licensure, and into the classroom. Then, we could use findings to inform program redesign and institutional accountability efforts.

### **EXPAND AND PROTECT “RACE-NEUTRAL” PROXIES THAT SUPPORT DIVERSITY GOALS**

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In an anti-DEI climate, some effective practices may be rebranded or reframed (e.g., targeting first-generation students, rural communities, and multilingual learners) while serving diverse candidates. We could train institutions in legally sound practices to support diversity under race-neutral language. We could host legal webinars, develop toolkits, and create model programs for rebranding without mission drift. To be clear, we are not suggesting that we acquiesce to narratives that all DEI initiatives are inherently prejudicial or wrong. At the same time, however, we must be cognizant

## Discussion: What Does It All Mean?

of the legal and financial consequences of continuing to use terms like DEI. It is also important to recognize that there has been little agreement as to what DEI means in theory and practice, and we must not be afraid to look at DEI initiatives through a critical (but constructive) lens.

### **DEVELOP CAMPAIGNS TO ELEVATE TEACHING'S STATUS**

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The profession's low pay and status remain deterrents, especially for students of color with other professional pathways. As suggested throughout this report, it is critical that teaching is not equated with "babysitting." We must be vocal that the teaching profession relies on evidence-based best practices, differentiated learning, and skilled practitioners. We could launch a national campaign that showcases successful, diverse teachers, highlights teaching as intellectual and civic work, and promotes pathways for professional growth.

### **INSTITUTIONALIZE STUDENT VOICE IN TEACHER PREPARATION AND RETENTION**

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Students of color are often the strongest advocates for having teachers who look like them. Their voices can drive institutional change and justify resource allocation. We could include students of color in hiring committees, program design, and recruitment marketing. Moreover, we can support programs that attract students of color to the teaching profession at an early age (such as pre-apprenticeship programs) and participatory action research with students of color.

### **LAUNCH A NATIONAL REPOSITORY OF CENSORED CURRICULA AND TEACHING TOOLS**

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With states and districts censoring curriculum, many teachers are left without tools or afraid to act. We could develop a secure, password-protected, cross-institutional repository (similar to the Zinn Education Project or Rethinking Schools) of historically grounded, culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy aligned with current legal guidelines. It is important to note that each state currently has very different restrictions, and such a repository would need to be highly sensitive to the differential risk factors for teachers across the country.

#### **BELINDA FLORES**

Professor Emeritus, University of Texas at San Antonio



**“I don’t know if people understand the extent of what it means not to attend to issues of DEI. This approach of ‘Well, we’re not funding anything that has anything DEI’ has long-term implications beyond the education field... What happens when you cut off the spigot? Who ends up without any water to drink?”**

# Conclusion

**I**t is discouraging that the teaching profession remains predominantly white, especially as the students in our schools are becoming increasingly diverse. On the one hand, we must recognize that long-standing issues continue to challenge efforts to bring more teachers of color into the profession. On the other hand, more research than ever confirms why this goal is important for students of color and all students. Currently, in the face of losing critical funding and countering attacks on anything remotely “race-based,” the scholars, leaders, organizations, and funders that support this work must be more vigilant than ever. We must mobilize our leadership, build coalitions, change the narrative, and, if necessary, litigate. As Holcomb-McCoy said, “Our work is never finished. The hits we’re taking are real, and fatigue is understandable, but this is precisely the moment to summon more energy, mobilize together, and face the road ahead because our students’ futures depend on it.” In conclusion, I quote Jose Lomeli, who reminds us that sometimes we must keep going in the face of uncertainty and resistance: “Clearly everybody’s scared, because uncertainty needs that sort of, you know, that feeling, and we’re no different. We don’t have answers other than just that we’re just going to go forward until we cannot go forward anymore.” This report is intended as a “step forward,” and I hope that others will pick up the mantle.

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**ALICE E. GINSBERG** is Associate Director for Research at the Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity and Justice and The Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions. A professor of teacher education, qualitative researcher, and curriculum developer, Alice is the author of eight books, including: *Embracing Risk in Urban Education* (2012), *Transgressing Teacher Education* (2022), and *For the Love of Teaching* (2023, with Marybeth Gasman and Andres Castro Samayoa).

# Appendix A: People Interviewed for this Report

**TRAVIS BRISTOL** is an associate professor at the University of California’s Berkeley School of Education and the faculty director of the Center for Research on Expanding Educational Opportunity.

**BELINDA FLORES** is a professor emeritus in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas at San Antonio and the founder and principal investigator of the Academy for Teacher Excellence Research Center.

**AMAYA GARCIA** is the Director of PreK–12 Research and Practice with the Education Policy program at New America, and a national expert on Grow Your Own (GYO) educator preparation programs and policy.

**JULIAN VASQUEZ HEILIG** is professor of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology, and former provost, at Western Michigan University.

**CHERYL HOLCOMB-MCCOY** is the president and CEO of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

**ETTA HOLLINS** is professor emerita and Ewing Marion Kauffman/Missouri Endowed Chair for Urban Teacher Education at the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

**RITA KOHLI** is a professor in the Education, Culture, and Society Program at the University of California, Riverside, and Director of The Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice.

**JOSE LOMELI** is a professor in the Kremen School of Education and Human Development at California State University, Fresno.

**LILLY LOMELI** is a coordinator with the Education and Leadership Foundation, overseeing a tutoring program specializing in mentoring and English Learner services for Fresno Unified School District students. She was a former coordinator of the California Mini Corps Program at Fresno State.

**MICHAEL NETTLES** is the endowed chair of predictive analytics and Psychometrics, Department of Psychology at Morgan State University, and a former executive senior vice president of the Educational Testing Service.

**BEN RALSTON** is the Executive Director of the Sachs Foundation.

**CYNTHIA TYSON** is a professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Ohio State University.

**JOHNATHAN ZIMMERMAN** is the Howard and Judy Berkowitz Professor in Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

# We've Been Here Before... Or Have We?

A Call to Action for Supporting Teachers of  
Color in the Face of Attacks on Diversity,  
Equity, and Inclusion

