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Abstract

For several decades, shortages of minority teachers have been a big issue for the nation's schools. Policy makers and recent presidents have agreed that our elementary and secondary teaching force "should look like America." But the conventional wisdom is that as the nation's population and students have grown more diverse, the teaching force has done the opposite —grown more white and less diverse.

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The Minority Teacher Shortage: Fact or Fable?

By **Richard M. Ingersoll and Henry May**, *Phi Delta Kappan*

September 1, 2011

For several decades, shortages of minority teachers have been a big issue for the nation's schools. Policy makers and recent presidents have agreed that our elementary and secondary teaching force "should look like America." But the conventional wisdom is that as the nation's population and students have grown more diverse, the teaching force has done the opposite—grown more white and less diverse.

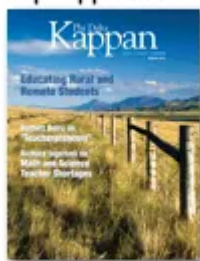
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The result, we are told, is that minority students in the nation's schools increasingly lack minority adult role models, contact with teachers who understand their racial and cultural background, and often qualified teachers of any background, because white teachers eschew schools with large percentages of minorities. The minority teacher shortage in turn, we are told, is a major reason for the minority achievement gap and, ultimately, unequal occupational and life outcomes for disadvantaged students. In short, the minority teacher shortage is a civil rights issue.

The main source of this shortage, conventional wisdom holds, is a problem with the teacher supply pipeline. Too few minority students enter and complete college, and those who do have an increasing number of career and employment options aside from teaching. Moreover, when minority candidates do seek to enter teaching, this view holds, they encounter barriers—in particular, teaching entry tests, on which minority candidates have lower pass rates. The result is the minority teacher shortage.

The prescription, understandably enough, has been to try to recruit more minority candidates into teaching. In recent decades, numerous government and nongovernment organizations have tried a variety of minority teacher recruitment programs and initiatives, including future educator programs in high schools, partnerships between community colleges and four-year teacher education programs, career ladders for paraprofessionals in schools,

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and alternative teacher certification programs. Support for these efforts has been substantial. For instance, beginning in the late 1980s, the Ford Foundation, along with the DeWitt Wallace Readers' Digest Fund, committed over \$60 million to minority teacher recruitment and preparation programs. Many of these initiatives have been designed to bring minority teachers into schools serving predominantly minority student populations, often in low-income, urban school districts. Some of these initiatives have been designed specifically to recruit male minority teachers, who are often considered to be in the shortest supply. Today, over half the states have some sort of minority teacher recruitment policies or programs in place. Have these efforts been successful? Has the teaching force grown more diverse? And, if not, why not?

A couple of years ago, with support from the Flora Family Foundation, we set out to answer these questions. We analyzed two decades worth of data from the late 1980s to 2009 from a large U.S. Department of Education national survey of teachers and administrators. We didn't focus on the contentious question of whether minority teachers are better at teaching minority students. Rather, our objective was to use the best national data available to ground the debate over the extent of shortages. We asked:

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- Have the numbers of minority teachers been going up or down? What changes have there been, if any, in the numbers of minority students and numbers of minority teachers in the school system, and how does this compare with white students and teachers?
- Where are minority teachers employed? Are minority teachers more likely than white teachers to be employed in schools serving high-poverty, urban, and high-minority student populations?
- How does minority teacher retention compare to that of white teachers, and has it been going up or down? We were surprised by what we found. From the viewpoint of the minority teacher shortage and of the efforts to address it, there is both good news and bad news. (For a detailed research report, see Ingersoll & May, 2011).

Recruitment and Employment

The data clearly show a persistent a gap between the percentage of minority students and the percentage of minority teachers in U.S. schools. For instance, in the 2008-09 school year, 34% of the nation's population was minority, and 41% of all elementary and secondary students were minority, but only 16.5% of all elementary and secondary teachers were minority. But the data also show that this gap has persisted in recent years largely because the number of white students has decreased while the number of minority students has increased. It is not due to a failure to recruit minority teachers.

Since the late 1980s, the number of elementary and secondary teachers has dramatically increased. This is especially true for minority teachers—whose numbers have almost doubled—from about 325,000 to 642,000. Growth in the number of minority teachers outpaced growth in minority students and was over twice the growth rate of white teachers. So, while there is still not parity between the proportions of minority students and minority teachers in schools, the teaching force has rapidly grown more diverse. This was also true for male minority teachers. Teaching has long been a predominantly female occupation and in recent decades has become increasingly so. But this varies by race/ethnicity. Over the past 20 years, the number of white male teachers increased by only 18%, but the number of minority male teachers increased by 92%. Currently, males represent about 24% of white teachers and of minority teachers.

Moreover, minority teachers are overwhelmingly employed in public schools serving high-poverty, high-minority, and urban communities. Minority teachers are two to three times more likely than white teachers to work in such hard-to-staff schools. Hence, the data show that in spite of competition from other occupations for minority college graduates, and in spite of apparent barriers to entry, efforts over recent decades to recruit more minority teachers and place them in schools serving disadvantaged and

minority student populations have been very successful. This has been something of an unheralded victory. While commentators and researchers have tended to discuss the minority teacher shortage in dire and pessimistic terms—often accompanied by calls for more funding and support—the data show that such efforts and expenditures have worked very well. This is the good news.

Retention

While minorities have entered teaching at higher rates than whites over the past two decades, minority teachers also have left schools at higher rates. Overall, the data show that minority teachers' careers have been less stable than those of white teachers, and included more job transitioning. In recent years, minority teachers were more likely to migrate from one school to another or to leave teaching altogether. This was especially true for male minority teachers.

Some turnover and departure of teachers from their jobs, of course, is normal, inevitable, and beneficial. For individuals, departures that lead to better jobs—in teaching or not—are a source of upward mobility. For schools, departures of low-performing employees can enhance school performance. For the education system as a whole, some teacher career changes—such as moving from one school to another, or leaving classroom teaching for other education-related jobs—do not represent a net loss of human capital.

However, from the viewpoint of those managing schools and those seeking to employ more minority teachers in schools, none of these types of departures are cost-free. All have the same effect: They reduce the number of minority classroom teachers in the organization. One consequence of such turnover, our analysis reveals, is that it undermines efforts to address the minority teacher shortage. Data show that at the beginning of the 2003-04 school year, about 47,600 minority teachers entered teaching; however, by the following year, 20% more—about 56,000—had left teaching. These data convey an image of a revolving door: too many going in one door and out another. This is the bad news.

Why do minority teachers leave schools at higher rates? Strikingly, while the demographic characteristics of schools appear to be highly important to minority teachers' initial employment decisions, this doesn't appear to be the case for their later decisions about whether to depart. Unlike for white teachers, a school's enrollment of poverty-level students, its minority-student enrollment, its proportion of minority teachers, or its location in an urban or suburban community weren't strongly or consistently related to the likelihood that minority teachers would decide to stay or depart. This also appears to be true for the largest subgroup in the minority teaching force — black teachers. In a companion study, a doctoral student of ours, Robert Connor (2011), focused specifically on black teachers, comparing them to white teachers. His findings on turnover were similar to those in our study.

What does matter when minority teachers decide whether to stay or depart are school working conditions. The same hard-to-staff schools that are more likely to employ minority teachers are also more likely to have less desirable working conditions. And these less desirable conditions, our data suggest, account for the higher rates of minority teacher turnover.

In other words, the data indicate that minority teachers are employed at higher rates in schools serving disadvantaged students, but also depart at higher rates because these same schools tend to be less desirable as workplaces. The tragedy is that the success of minority teacher recruitment efforts has been undermined. Even more striking was what we found when we looked at which conditions were most correlated with minority teachers' departures. Salary levels, the provision of useful professional development, and the availability of classroom resources all had little impact on whether they were likely to leave. The strongest factors by far for minority teachers were the level of collective faculty decision-making influence in the school and the degree of individual instructional autonomy held by teachers in their classrooms. Influence and autonomy, of course, are key hallmarks of respected professions. Schools that provided more teacher classroom discretion and autonomy, as well as schools with higher levels of faculty input into school decision making, had significantly lower levels of minority teacher turnover.

What Can Be Done?

In supply and demand theory, any imbalance between labor demand and supply can be referred to as a shortage, in the sense that too few individuals are able and willing to offer their services under given wages and conditions. From this perspective, the problems many schools encounter retaining minority teachers can technically be referred to as a shortage.

However, in the context of minority teachers and schools, the term shortage is typically given a narrower connotation—an insufficient production and recruitment of new minority teaching candidates in the face of increasing minority student enrollments. These differences in terminology and diagnosis have crucial implications for prescription and policy. Increasing teacher production and recruitment has long been the dominant strategy for diversifying the teaching force and addressing the minority teacher shortage. And nothing in our research suggests that bringing new, qualified minority candidates into teaching is not worthwhile. Indeed, our data show that this approach has had remarkable success. In the two decades since the late 1980s, the minority teaching force has increased at over two and a half times the rate of the white teaching force.

But the data indicate that new teacher recruitment strategies alone do not directly address a major source of minority teacher staffing problems—turnover. This is especially true for minority teacher recruitment efforts aimed at male teachers, because male minority teachers have especially high turnover. Indeed, the ballooning of the minority teaching force is all the more remarkable because it has occurred in spite of the high turnover rate among minority teachers.

More than 56,000 minority teachers left teaching in 2004-05, including about 16,000 who reported that they left to retire and 30,000 who reported that they left to pursue another job or career or because of job dissatisfaction. Improving the retention of minority teachers recruited into teaching, by addressing the factors that drive them out, could prevent the loss of the investment and also lessen the need for more recruitment initiatives. All of this suggests that we should develop teacher recruitment and retention initiatives together. Recruitment alone has not solved either the problem of minority teacher shortages or of filling positions in hard-to-staff schools. In plain terms, it makes no sense to put substantial effort into recruiting candidates to teach in schools serving disadvantaged students, if those schools are not desirable workplaces.

These findings also have implications for education accountability reforms. In preliminary analyses (Ingersoll, 2007), we have found that in some states and school districts, implementation of school and teacher accountability initiatives has been accompanied by decreases in teachers' classroom autonomy and schoolwide decision-making input—the very working conditions strongly associated with minority teacher turnover. Hence, depending on how they're implemented, accountability reforms may have the unintended and unfortunate consequence of increasing minority teacher turnover and minority teacher staffing problems. These issues are worthy of further investigation—a project we are now undertaking. Again, this suggests the need for balance in reform—accountability and professionalism must go hand in hand. In other words, it does not make sense to hold somebody accountable for something they don't control or have input into, nor does it make sense to give someone autonomy and control over something for which they aren't held accountable. Both of these changes are necessary.

Our findings support the view that school organization, management, and leadership matter, and they shift attention to discovering which policy-amenable aspects of schools as organizations—their practices, policies, characteristics, and conditions—are related to their ability to staff classrooms with minority teachers. The data suggest that poor, high-minority, urban schools with improved working conditions will be far more able to do so. To be sure, altering these conditions would not be easy. However, unlike reforms such as teacher salary increases and class-size reduction, changing some conditions, such as teachers' classroom autonomy and faculty's schoolwide influence, should be less costly financially—an important consideration, especially in low-income settings and in periods of budgetary constraint.

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