"Worn & Weary"
Black Teachers' Storied Experiences and Recommendations around their Attrition and Retention in Philadelphia Schools

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Introduction

The United States' educational system continues to face a teacher diversity problem--the shortage and loss of schoolteachers of color, and Black teachers specifically, has gained increased national attention and concern over the last decade (Rinke & Mawhinney, 2019; The Education Trust, 2016)**.** Research for Action (RFA) has found stark disparities in the rates of students of color and teachers of color across Pennsylvania schools, including in Philadelphia. Several reports have documented that the *percentage* of Black teachers has declined in the School District of Philadelphia. RFA's recent analysis also indicated a notable decline in the *number* of Black teachers in Philadelphia's public schools, finding nearly 1,200 fewer Black teachers in the combined district and charter sectors today than there were two decades ago. Black teachers are the only group of educators experiencing declining numbers in Philadelphia schools, with teachers of all other racial or ethnic subgroups increasing in numbers or holding steady over the past two decades.

With support from the William Penn Foundation, RFA sought to further examine and understand Black teacher attrition and retention in Philadelphia, and promising strategies and initiatives that can promote the retention of Black teachers in the city and elsewhere. In totality, the project includes qualitative research that centers the perspectives of a small sample of current and former teachers in the Philadelphia area who identify as Black—which is the focus of this report—and a national scan of select teacher diversification initiatives and the particular strategies they employ.

The present report shares the storied experiences and actionable recommendations of a sample of 30 current and former Black teachers, organized by salient themes, providing clear and direct insight into factors that contribute to Black teacher attrition as well as ways to retain current teachers. This study makes key contributions to the existing body of knowledge on Black teachers' experiences (e.g., The Education Trust, 2016) by focusing on attrition and retention in specific, expanding on and enriching recent research findings pointing to the disproportionate attrition of Black teachers in the unique context of Philadelphia, gleaning the perspectives of former as well as current teachers, and acknowledging and presenting Black teachers as experts on this topic—including sharing their recommendations on efforts that would help promote Black teacher retention in Philadelphia and in general.

Overall, the current and former Black teachers in our sample explained how the cumulative impact of racism—systemic and interpersonal, as well as racial microaggressions—serves as a major

barrier to retention.[1] Their experiences of these various forms of racism intersect with and compound the challenges recorded by many teachers in urban districts—including ineffective leadership and unequitable resource allocation—making an already demanding job often feel untenable. Current teachers also shared some of the elements that sustain them as they persist in teaching despite the many challenges, such as their love for the profession and desire to see the fruit of their hard work. Finally, participants shared recommendations for retaining Black teachers in Philadelphia, including strengthening school leadership, increasing opportunities for teacher mentorship and advancement opportunities, and ensuring public school funding is equitably distributed.

Below we describe our methodology, present findings regarding the unique challenges faced by Black teachers, discuss what sustains and retains Black teachers in the profession, and share their recommendations for increasing Black teacher retention. We conclude with reflections on the implications of these findings and opportunities for future research to further inform policies and practices that best support Black teachers.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of Black teachers leaving the School District of Philadelphia. Specifically, it focused on three research questions:

- How do current and former Black teachers understand the attrition of Black teachers from the teacher workforce in Philadelphia?

- What systemic factors—from the school to District to policy level—do they perceive as contributing the most to Black teacher attrition in Philadelphia?

- What specific supports, systems, and resources are needed to improve retention and curb attrition of teachers of color and Black teachers in particular?

Recruitment and Sample

To recruit current and former Black teachers for this research, RFA disseminated recruitment materials to local networks focused on teaching, specifically, and education, more broadly. Individuals interested in participating in an interview or focus group on the topic completed a short questionnaire to provide information about their current and past teaching positions, teaching tenure, and gender identity. A purposive sample of 30 participants was developed that reflected diversity in terms of length of time teaching, teaching experience in traditional public schools and charter schools, and—to the extent that was feasible given the respondent pool—gender identity. As mentioned above, the sample also included a mix of current and former teachers, to garner the perspectives of those who had remained teaching in classrooms in Philadelphia and those who had left. Our background research for this project highlighted both the many different definitions for "former" teachers,[2] and how difficult it is to recruit former teachers once they leave the formal institutions of education (Mawhinney & Rinke, 2017). As such, we relied on respondents' self-definitions as current or former teachers rather than prescribing a set definition and received fewer responses to our outreach efforts from former teachers – because they are harder to recruit and because they are less likely to be connected to the networks we leveraged for recruitment. A total of

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[1] Of note, most of our sample consisted of long-serving teachers who persisted despite these challenges and were still teaching at the time of this study. See the section "Factors that Sustain and Retain Black Teachers" for more on why they persist.

[2] The various definitions of "former teacher" include teachers who left K-12 classrooms irrespective of whether they remain in schools, teachers who left schools altogether, and teachers who left the formal educational system entirely – either to pursue another profession or for retirement.

eight self-identified former teachers participated in our research, including teachers who left the classroom for retirement, for other positions in the school system (e.g. school principals), and for other education-related positions outside the formal educational system.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed an exploratory research design that included:

- Hourlong virtual background interviews with local experts on Black teacher diversification efforts to collect background information and input on the study design.

- Hourlong, virtual interviews and focus groups with current and former Black teachers, where we heard from them about their experiences teaching and why they may have considered leaving, were planning to leave, or had already left the profession, as well as the supports necessary to sustain Black teachers.

With consent from research participants, focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews and focus groups were then transcribed to facilitate the qualitative coding process. We adopted a hybrid coding approach, in which we developed a set of deductive analytic codes informed by the research team's learnings from the literature and the data collection process, and then added new codes and refined existing codes in an inductive process informed by the interview findings. The final code list was organized into eleven overarching "parent" codes as well as child codes; sample parent codes included "challenges of the profession"; "systemic racism"; and "what sustains teachers."

The research team coded all interview transcripts in a qualitative analysis software (Dedoose). Team members then authored analytic memos that synthesized data excerpts corresponding to each code, arranging data within memos into thematic groupings. Within each memo, researchers then drafted high-level findings reflecting frequently cited themes in the data and compared findings across memos to determine which themes were the most salient. In the analysis of the data, researchers also attended to any relationships between participants' reported experiences and demographic factors such as the neighborhood of their school or their teaching status at the time of tine interview (i.e., current or former).

Findings

The current and former Black teachers who participated in this study were asked to talk about their experiences teaching; whether and why they had considered leaving teaching, and what kept them in the profession (current teachers); why they had left (former teachers); and their perspectives on why Black teachers were leaving teaching in Philadelphia. They were also asked about the kind of supports that might help facilitate retention and sustain Black teachers. Participants provided rich reflections, interpretations, examples, and recommendations in relation to their experiences as Black teachers practicing in Philadelphia schools. In the following sections, we present common themes that emerged across participants pertaining to unique challenges they face in the profession and barriers to retention, as well as the factors that contribute to their retention, and their recommendations for educational administrators and policymakers.

Challenges Faced by Black Teachers in Philadelphia

Unsurprisingly, participating Black teachers described common challenges experienced by urban teachers at large (see Kohli, 2018; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019; Rinke & Mawhinney, 2019), including insufficient resources, inadequate pay, the impact of school and District policies, frustrations with school administration and leadership, and racialized work environments. More importantly, our **participants specifically and clearly articulated how various forms of racism significantly**

intersect with and compound those existing challenges and create additional ones; making an already demanding job often feel untenable. They further highlighted the lack of support and appreciation from leadership, attributed at least in part to racism, as a critical challenge for Black teachers. In their accounts, many participants expressed that they "just couldn't take it anymore."

Racism was threaded throughout many of the challenges the teachers described, including the less tangible but pervasive experience of racial microaggressions, defined as the subtle, "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minori[tized] group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). The racialized experiences underscored both the ways in which these challenges are unique to Black teachers and the systemic nature of racism in the educational system. Several teachers explicitly expressed that the core of the school system itself has racism embedded in it. As one teacher stated, *"it's racism by design*." As another explained, *"the environment itself, the racism that permeates in the School District of Philadelphia, it's just not worth it."*

When reflecting on Black teacher attrition – whether it is why they left the teaching profession, why they were preparing to leave, or why many of their peers have left – teachers mentioned the cumulative impact of all these various challenges working together. One participant summarized this cumulative effect of challenges weaved into various forms of racism, and the tremendous toll it takes on Black teachers:

> *Just the level of racism, blatant to passive, just the different things that are done to, I guess, to break you down. I mean, just being in a school system each day and to see the things that are placed on African American teachers, we get the hardest students to deal with, with no supports. And then also even if you are qualified to be in leadership positions or be in positions where you can offer mentorship or some assistance to teachers who are new to the school District, that's overlooked because of you being African American.*

In the next sections, we present a set of common challenges discussed by the current and former Black teachers in our sample, organized across six overarching themes. Though we present each theme separately, they overlapped in participants' accounts of their experiences as they relate to Black teacher retention and attrition, with ineffective and unsupportive leadership as an especially salient theme in our interviews that was commonly linked to other challenges in participants' accounts of their experiences.

Ineffective and Unsupportive Leadership

Challenges with leadership serve as a critical factor in Black teachers' desire or decision to leave the profession. In line with existing research and literature on Black teacher retention (for example see DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, Jr., 2016; Duncan, 2019; Mawhinney, Baker-Doyle, Rosen, 2021; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019), our participants consistently stated that poor leadership and lack of administrative support from principals and assistant principals served as a significant challenge or barrier to their success. Several former teachers emphasized that an unsupportive, disrespectful, or unskilled school administration is a key contributing factor to why teachers leave.

Participants were primarily concerned with administrators' lack of responsiveness when teachers shared concerns and asked for their support. This includes a lack of support from administration in dealing with the other challenges discussed in this report, like insufficient school resources and difficult student behavior. An exasperated veteran teacher shared how over time, she's given up on

her school leadership and relies on herself instead, *"I know not to count on them. You know what I mean? I don't count on them…"* One teacher shared how Black teachers in particular need more robust support from leadership, considering the added burden they are made to carry (see the subsection below on "The 'Invisible Tax' on Black Teachers: Added Duties and Expectations"):

> *There's got to be much more built into the school year, into each week, that provides teachers with the supports that they need. Because, like I said, I think it's taxing on a lot of Black educators', mental health, to have to act as a parent or a relative to these kids at school, and then go home and have to take care of their own families.*

As a result, participants reported feeling unappreciated, undervalued, and disrespected. One teacher described:

> *You're just doing all the things that you can for the students, but it just feels like it's just not being appreciated. Again, teachers are replaceable. When you say you're leaving, it's like, 'All right. You're leaving,' and then that's it. They'll just find someone else to replace you and that's it. Here at school, my principal has told me that I'm valued. What I do is appreciated. That I'm a valuable member, but this is my third school. So those seven years without hearing that, and some people don't even make it seven years.*

Most participants linked their challenges with District and school leadership directly with racism, and discussed feeling disrespected particularly in the context of their experiences of racism and racial microaggressions at the hands of leadership.[3] These topics arose most often when participants were discussing the racial demographics of the administrators and staff at their schools. Interviewees' comments pointed to racial hierarchies among administrations and staff—particularly in schools with mostly White leadership. Some interviewees described racist incidents associated with White leadership while others emphasized having positive experiences where there were Black leaders or otherwise diverse administrations. In our data, racial microaggressions were more frequently reported by Black teachers located in schools within largely White sections of the city (e.g., Northeast and Center City). It is important to note, however, that not all interviewees had positive experiences with Black leadership.

Although experiences of racial microaggressions are difficult to convey as they are often felt but not explicitly seen, participants provided some clear descriptions of how they perceived or experienced racism at the leadership level. For example, a long-term teacher explained how the students keep her coming back, but if she were to leave the teaching profession:
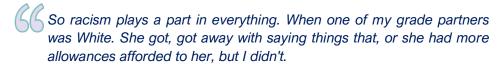
> *[…] It would be because of the toxic environment, the way you're made to feel. And just like you don't matter in the eyes of the School District of Philadelphia. In the eyes of the Caucasian administration, they really could care less about you.*

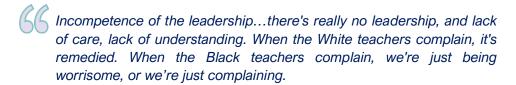[3] Disrespect from students and parents was not as prevalent a theme within our findings as disrespect from school leaders, but it was still an additional challenge shared by several teachers. It was often presented alongside interviewees' explanations of negative school climates where there were incidents of students fighting, vandalizing, and being misunderstood/unsupported, and challenges working with families.

Additionally, several interviewees pointed out how leadership is failing Black teachers especially, citing supports and allowances afforded to White teachers but not to them. For example, a few interviewees shared that when they complained or spoke up to provide feedback or a critique, it was often not taken seriously or acted upon compared to complaints from their White counterparts.
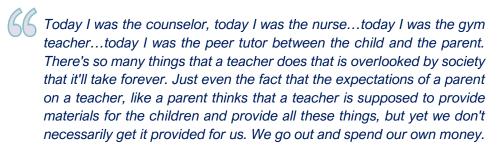
> *So racism plays a part in everything. When one of my grade partners was White. She got, got away with saying things that, or she had more allowances afforded to her, but I didn't.*

Interviewees felt they also then fell into the stereotype of being an "angry Black person" or labeled as difficult:

> *Incompetence of the leadership…there's really no leadership, and lack of care, lack of understanding. When the White teachers complain, it's remedied. When the Black teachers complain, we're just being worrisome, or we're just complaining.*
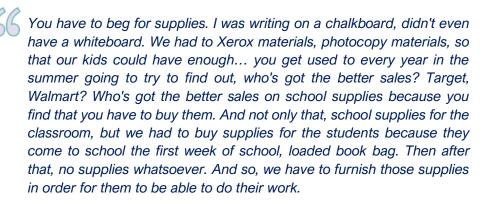
Inequitable Resource Allocation

Most teachers shared how their schools lacked adequate and even basic resources, incurring them personal financial costs. The majority of participants described lacking the necessary learning materials, school personnel, and building facilities needed for teaching and learning. Most shared how they spend their own money on supplies (paper, writing utensils, books) for their classrooms and additional time gathering resources, with no recognition of this personal sacrifice from the administration or parents. For example, teachers described the challenge of inadequate staffing and supplies, and the personal investment they make as a result:

> *Today I was the counselor, today I was the nurse…today I was the gym teacher…today I was the peer tutor between the child and the parent. There's so many things that a teacher does that is overlooked by society that it'll take forever. Just even the fact that the expectations of a parent on a teacher, like a parent thinks that a teacher is supposed to provide materials for the children and provide all these things, but yet we don't necessarily get it provided for us. We go out and spend our own money.*

Another teacher described:

> *You have to beg for supplies. I was writing on a chalkboard, didn't even have a whiteboard. We had to Xerox materials, photocopy materials, so that our kids could have enough… you get used to every year in the summer going to try to find out, who's got the better sales? Target, Walmart? Who's got the better sales on school supplies because you find that you have to buy them. And not only that, school supplies for the classroom, but we had to buy supplies for the students because they come to school the first week of school, loaded book bag. Then after that, no supplies whatsoever. And so, we have to furnish those supplies in order for them to be able to do their work.*
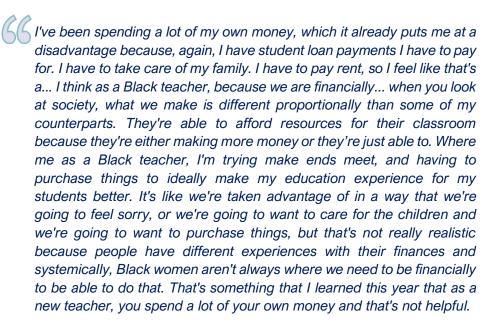
Most of these teachers also made connections between an inadequate and unequal investment in resources for Philadelphia schools and systemic racism. To teachers, these conditions feel like blatant disrespect and contribute to teacher burnout. For example, another teacher agreed with their peers cited above, and described insufficient staffing, how "the school is falling apart," and the absence of heat in her classroom for over three years. They also made an explicit connection with systemic racism:

> *[…] where I see racism is with the District and the lack of resources that my school has.' I'm living it,' I'm in it every day. I request things all the time and don't get them. You know what I mean? Like for [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exams], we had to prep them. Well, there wasn't enough books for all the kids. So, what I'm supposed to do, you know what I mean? Now I have to go online, find my own resources and things like that. So yeah, the District is doing a disservice to where I'm at, basically, because it's majority African American students from North Philly, you know what I mean? They can't be successful, so we don't have to put too much money in there. We'll put our money elsewhere.*

One teacher highlighted how systemic racism in the education system perpetuates cycles of disadvantage. She described how teachers' personal investments in response to inadequate and unequal resources further disadvantage Black teachers, particularly Black women, who as a group are less financially advantaged than their White counterparts due to racism (see Mustaffa & Davis, 2021):

> *I've been spending a lot of my own money, which it already puts me at a disadvantage because, again, I have student loan payments I have to pay for. I have to take care of my family. I have to pay rent, so I feel like that's a... I think as a Black teacher, because we are financially... when you look at society, what we make is different proportionally than some of my counterparts. They're able to afford resources for their classroom because they're either making more money or they're just able to. Where me as a Black teacher, I'm trying make ends meet, and having to purchase things to ideally make my education experience for my students better. It's like we're taken advantage of in a way that we're going to feel sorry, or we're going to want to care for the children and we're going to want to purchase things, but that's not really realistic because people have different experiences with their finances and systemically, Black women aren't always where we need to be financially to be able to do that. That's something that I learned this year that as a new teacher, you spend a lot of your own money and that's not helpful.*

Finally, teachers also spoke of not having adequate supports and resources to address the challenges of dealing with the trauma that their students carry and to help meet their needs in that regard.

Inadequate Professional Opportunities and Job Security

Black teachers shared barriers to hiring and advancement that they understood as tied to racism. Our interviewees spoke of having appropriate credentialing and experience but being passed over for promotions in favor of less experienced White teachers. Interviewees also described problematic District policies around hiring and placement highlighted their vulnerability in those contexts.

For example, participants described how site selection, the District's hiring process that enables eligible teachers to apply and interview for open roles at particular schools, has enabled school leaders to be intentional about developing the racial makeup of the teaching staff. With site selection, school leaders have agency to prioritize diversity when hiring their staff, but it also means that other school leaders could purposefully "whiten" their teaching faculty and block Black teachers from being hired. As one current teacher explained,

> *So you can't just say, 'Oh, I have this seniority. I want to come to your building.' You have to sit before this committee, basically go through an interview process and this committee decides if they want you to join the staff or not at a current school. So that's kind of different because many years ago, you just go, you see a school on the list, you pick it, you go. Now you have to go through this whole interview process and depending upon who's on the committee, it could be someone who is looking, is happy to have someone new or it could be someone that's like, 'Mmm, no, thank you.' So, depending upon who's a part of the interview process, that can make the world of the difference for a teacher coming into a school under these current terms…with this African American administrator, I now started to see more African American teachers coming into the building. So, a lot of the white staff who had been there for 20 or 30 years were starting to retire or to put in transfers and he was hiring or should I say this committee that's within the school started to hire and attain a lot more African American teachers.*

Another teacher described experiencing racial bias in hiring. This teacher holds both a bachelor's and master's degree in education, along with a credential to be an administrator, but reported being blocked from getting a promotion. They added that this experience is ubiquitous:

> *[…] And I'm not the only one. There's other people in this particular building that's had the same situation [of not getting hired as administrators or promoted]. And if you look around and speak to other teachers in the Northeast or other teachers in Philadelphia itself, you'll find the same thing.*

Participants were also vocal about the challenges posed by forced transfer—the policy of transferring a teacher, not by their choice, from one District school to another. They discussed how forced transfer results in instability within schools and also for individual teachers' career trajectories. The last person hired is the first one to get a forced transfer, and thus the trend most affects teachers in the beginning of their careers when they are often particularly challenged by the profession and most in need of stability. One teacher spoke about the negative impacts of

such policies that hit new teachers hardest, and how they compound the challenges posed by inadequate school funding:

> *New teachers have to constantly change schools. That's tough because you're thinking... you're buying resources for the class that you have. I may not teach kindergarten next year, but I purchased resources for kindergarten.*

Another teacher highlighted how recently hired Black teachers were impacted by the policy of forced transfers, including a colleague who was "bumped out" because of her limited number of years teaching at the school:

> *I have noticed that there have been three African American teachers who were hired since I've been at [my school] and all three of them have left. One was a special education teacher. I want to say that she had tried to stay on for her right to return, but she didn't have enough seniority, so they bumped her out.*

Finally, returning to the theme of limits on professional opportunities, **Black teachers identified the proliferation of charter schools as limiting opportunities for Black teachers in Philadelphia**. In their experiences, the District started to quickly convert some existing schools into charter schools (public, independent schools) and also utilized TFA and similar programs to staff schools in ways that diminished opportunities for Black teachers around the District.[4] In the words of one teacher:

> *We used to annually...take a picture at the school. And when I started, we [Black men] were the whole steps. We just running the steps, Black men. It was just powerful [picture]. And then with the advent of charter schools, the whole movement around schools, I started seeing some of the Black men leave, partly also because some of them were like long term subs and they couldn't get certified. And so, we lost a lot of teachers: A lot of Black teachers, Black men particularly. And yeah, just started seeing then, with Teach for America and the like, the whole corporatization of filling in teachers…just start seeing fewer and fewer Black male teachers, Black teachers in general.*

Several teachers also identified the threats of federal school reform and teacher accountability initiatives, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, as creating hostile conditions for teachers that disproportionately impacted Black teachers who were concentrated in high poverty schools most often subject to reforms.[5]

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[4] See White, T. (2016) for more information on lack of diversity within Teach for America, and how its diversification efforts and association with school conversions and closures have contributed to the loss of teachers of color in urban schools in the nation.

[5] Philadelphia's two-decade decline in the share and number of Black teachers has coincided with major changes to the city's public education system driven by multiple school reform
initiatives, including the rapid expansion of charter schools and shrinking of the school district by equivalent numbers, as well as other turnaround models including Renaissance Charter Schools, Promise Academies,

The "Invisible Tax" on Black Teachers: Added Duties and Expectations

Teachers shared that a major challenge of the profession is how they are often assigned the most challenging students because they are expected to be experienced with behavioral management. This challenge of an 'invisible tax' levied on Black educators has been described before (see DonorsChoose, 2022; King, 2016; Pottiger, 2022), frequently as one experienced by Black male educators. Teachers in our mostly female sample described feeling like they were being taken advantage of and stereotyped as the "strong Black woman" who can handle difficult students. Teachers voiced concerns about this burden alongside the lack of support within their schools to address behavioral and trauma-related issues and large class sizes. Several teachers spoke explicitly of how school leaders assign students with the most needs or behavioral issues/challenges to Black teachers. In the words of one teacher:

> *I also think that the other side of that is that the District has been known to take advantage of strong Black African American teachers. And I say that to say when I worked at [school name] my administrator, and she was known for this, there could be a White teacher who had a lot of difficulty with her classroom management abilities. The administrator would move that problematic student out of the white teacher's classroom and moved them into what she considered to be a strong, 'more able to manage her classroom' Black teacher's classroom. And it's happened to me. So, I do believe that teachers, when administrators take advantage of things, qualities like that, it makes you feel as if, well, why am I here? Why am I doing this?*

One teacher described how this led to their earlier-than-planned retirement:

> *I really wanted to teach, my passion is to teach. But because of all the other things, I never really felt like I could really just get in there and teach. It was the disciplinary issues, a lot of dumping. Because I had such great classroom management, I'd get dumped on every year. And that was when the principals would just throw all the children with problems in my classroom because they said, 'Oh my God, you can just handle everyone.' So, I just basically got burnt out. And that's one of the reasons why I retired.*

Despite taking on additional duties that require added skill and effort, participants reported being evaluated with more scrutiny than their White counterparts. One teacher described this as a blatant racist practice:

> *They give the White teachers easier classes to deal with, and then even as far as like evaluations, they'll come in and review Black teachers more often than the White teachers. Now we're teaching the same grades and the same subjects, so why am I evaluated more? And that particular*

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and School Closures. RFA's preliminary analyses of available data show that Black teachers were more heavily concentrated in schools that would undergo these three reforms and point to the need for additional research to further understand the relationship between these reforms and Black teacher attrition. For a detailed history of school reform initiatives in Philadelphia, see Royal, C., (2022).
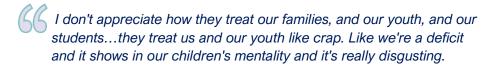
> *scrutiny or the imbalances, you're like, 'Well, how many times did they come in your room?' 'Oh, they only came once in six months,' but they've been in my room four times, and we have the same credentials. Why is that? I really believe that is by design. That's not accidental. You know, that's by design. Racism is by design. There's no accident in racism.*
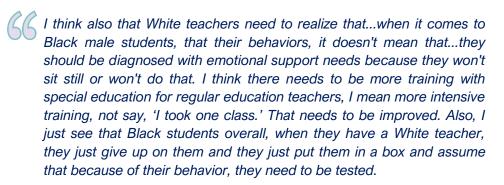
As discussed in an earlier section, despite the added burden they shoulder, Black teachers report feeling undervalued, unappreciated, and disrespected, particularly so by school leadership, and in comparison to how White teachers are treated.

Deficit Approaches toward Black Students

Several teachers discussed racism in the system and in their schools as manifested in an overall deficit framing of Black children and their families. One teacher explained how the ubiquity of this framing—evidenced through inadequate school conditions and resources and multiple expressions of systemic and interpersonal racism—results in its internalization by students:

> " *I don't appreciate how they treat our families, and our youth, and our students…they treat us and our youth like crap. Like we're a deficit and it shows in our children's mentality and it's really disgusting.*

Another teacher shared their concern over how White teachers perceive and stereotype Black students, particularly Black males, and how they might engage in problematic practices as a result – including inadequately labeling and supporting those students.

> " *I think also that White teachers need to realize that...when it comes to Black male students, that their behaviors, it doesn't mean that...they should be diagnosed with emotional support needs because they won't sit still or won't do that. I think there needs to be more training with special education for regular education teachers, I mean more intensive training, not say, 'I took one class.' That needs to be improved. Also, I just see that Black students overall, when they have a White teacher, they just give up on them and they just put them in a box and assume that because of their behavior, they need to be tested.*

Some teachers added that they sometimes have to actively keep White teachers from engaging in cultural stereotypes that harm Black students and their learning.

Teachers also lamented policies that incentivize deficit-focused and narrow measures of student learning and teacher performance. They shared examples of how older federal policies like No Child Left Behind, and its ongoing influence on student and teacher evaluations, are not reflective of student growth and do not account for the many needs and learning profiles of students within the District—particularly within under-resourced schools with predominately Black and Brown student bodies. Teachers spoke specifically of the pressure put on them to ensure that their students perform well on standardized assessments, which don't capture the extent of the learning that occurs in the classroom and are strongly impacted by systemic conditions beyond teachers' control—such as educational and social inequality, student trauma, and the pandemic. For example, one teacher shared:

> *People can tell you're a strong teacher, but when data comes out…sometimes it feels like you're celebrated one day and then the next day it's like, oh my gosh, this other data point, you have to fix this. And it's like, you can't even celebrate the good, because then there's always something more coming down the pike. [T]here's still this pressure of these numbers and not the reality, but wait, there's great things happening in the classroom.*

Teachers questioned the validity of current evaluation measures and advocated for different and more accurate ways of gauging student learning:

> *I feel like in education one, yes, we need proof the kids are learning. I think that the problem sometimes is people at the top don't understand how growth works and the kids' growth may not happen until May... and I know that I, one, make learning, engaging, but once it's time to take a test or benchmark or whatever, I prepare them really well…but at the end of the day, there's so many variables out of my control. I've had a kid test in front of me who was having a bad morning, just bombed a test, because there's nothing I can do, but say try your best if the kid's in a bad mindset […] And a lot of kids have been dis-serviced, they'll tell you about their previous schools. They'll say, 'I didn't even have a teacher last year' ...and so sometimes I just feel like there's not enough other metrics used to really determine kids' growth besides this number.*

Lack of Cultural Responsiveness

Black teachers pointed to an overall lack of cultural responsiveness within their school community and District-wide curriculum choices as an additional barrier to creating the learning experience for children that they know is best. They spoke about how curricular or schoolwide celebrations of cultures or languages are not intentionally and thoughtfully incorporated into the curriculum and school culture, and how they have had to serve as advocates and take on the burden of this work while the administration sometimes worked against them in that regard. For example, one teacher reflected on how the responsibility of recognizing Black culture and curating appropriate lessons and activities falls on Black teachers as opposed to being meaningfully incorporated school-wide:

> *Putting the onus on Black teachers to handle things like Black History Month. It just so happens that […] our Black History teacher is Black, so she handles Black History Month. She handles Black Student Union. But I imagine that if she were not here, if I were not here, I would wonder if those things would even happen at all. Are we doing it in support of our Black students to ensure that Black students are being seen? Or are we doing it because we don't want to get judgment from the Black teachers that we have?*

One teacher described how administrative oversight "strangled the joy" out of her culturally responsive lesson plans, and suggested that runs counter to the administration's rhetoric around fighting racism: *"And you supposed to be anti-racist this and all that? Listen y'all are strangling my lesson plan."*

A number of teachers also pointed out that while there is a considerable population of Black Muslim teachers and students in Philadelphia, they are sometimes penalized for taking time off for their major holidays as they are not accounted for in the school calendar. One Muslim teacher explained:

> *So now we are running into this situation, the students get an excused absence, but if a staff wants to or decides to want to celebrate on Monday, they have to either use their personal time, use a religious holiday, which is only one third your pay or go without pay for that day. And I feel like that in itself is ridiculous.*

Factors that Sustain and Retain Black Teachers

Despite facing several challenges in the profession, as explained in previous sections of this report, current and former Black teachers described a multiple of factors that played a key role in sustaining and guiding their work as educators. Several interviewees shared that their love for the profession, working with students, and commitment to serving students of color motivated them to stay in the profession despite the many barriers. Others identified their faith, positive relationships with colleagues, strong mentorship, and belonging to affinity spaces and external networks as key factors that motivated them to stay in the profession.

Students and a love for teaching: Interviewees shared that their intrinsic love for the profession and commitment to fostering students' personal and academic growth by providing them with high-quality education played a key role in sustaining them as educators. They described feeling excited and deeply satisfied when students succeeded and put skills learned in the classroom into action. One teacher explained,

> *I absolutely loved the excitement that children express when they're learning something and you see a light bulb go off. There's nothing more exciting in my mind. And to see that and to see the progression from when they begin with you and when they end. Especially in the younger grades like kindergarten and first grade. I mean, it's just, I would get chills and I would get... I would actually get chills when I noticed that someone had started using a strategy that I'd been teaching for months.*

Commitment to serving students of color: Current Black teachers shared how they are committed to serving students of color in response to the need for more teachers of color in schools. They were especially motivated to ensure that students of color feel represented and supported in their classrooms. As two teachers shared:

> *And I stay because our kids, they need to see us in the classroom. They really do. […] If we don't have other teachers of color who come in and really care for our kids... That's all I got.*
>
> *That's what keeps me coming back, seeing the progress from where they started in September to where they are now making a difference, being able to care because I have three children. I would want someone to do their best to make sure that my children get the best education they can possibly get. And also the fact that I'm a product of inner city schools myself. So if I didn't have teachers pouring into me, I would not be who I am today. So that's why I keep coming back.*

"Worked hard—not leaving yet" mentality: An additional theme across current Black teachers was the idea that after having worked hard to enter the profession, endured the steps needed to become teachers (teacher training and certification exams), and grown in their field, they were not yet ready to leave. This mentality was based on their perspective of "having earned" their careers and was guided by a "finishing what you started" mindset. As one teacher shared:

> *I work hard for what I do. And I'm still here. I don't mind being the last one here because I'm preparing for tomorrow. So I'm just making sure my lessons are tight and great. And again, it is just my mindset of continuous process improvement. I acknowledge, I don't know everything, somebody's always going to be smarter than you. However, I'm going to be 100% all in and so that's what I was doing before.*

Colleagues, mentorship, and teacher networks: Former and current Black teachers described the importance of meaningful relationships and communities within the sphere of education in motivating them to continue teaching despite the pressing challenges they face. Interviewees highlighted positive relationships with colleagues, having access to and participating in mentorship opportunities, as well as belonging to external teacher networks or affinity spaces—such as the Center for Black Educator Development, the National Council for Teacher Education, and the Black Women's Educational.

As one teacher shared, their work was sustained by *"the relationships I have with my mentors and the people who I now call friends."* Another teacher voiced what several others shared; the role of positive, supportive relationships forged with colleagues in sustaining their work as teachers and the family dynamic created by their need for each other:

> *We really lean on each other, and it's what gets us through… […] We only have each other in that building. There's nobody from the outside that's going to come in and save us. It's just us. We are who we have.*

Another teacher pointed out how his participation in and belonging to several education and teacher networks both sustained and retained him in the profession:

> *What allowed me to stay was finding networks. And then the network kind of made me find my niche, find my voice, find who I was, validate me. And through the validation, then year after year now, I'm just honed… I'm real blessed… Early in my teaching career, I found the Philadelphia Writing Project and all these crazy ideas I had about education that I was trying to put in practice, they validated like, 'oh yeah, that's cool.' And then National Teachers of English and then Sharif El Mekki and the Black Male Educators, Teacher Action Group and the Working Educators, I gravitated to a lot of those networks.*

Recommendations for Sustaining and Retaining Black Teachers

The recommendations outlined below come directly from the current and former Black teachers we interviewed for this research. We sought out and present here their expert insights into the challenges Black teachers face and the subsequent actionable changes that can be made to better retain and sustain them in the teaching profession. There was significant consensus among participants around their recommendations to sustain and retain Black teachers, and they were

aligned with the challenges they described. They focused primarily on strengthening leadership, equitable resource allocation, and tangible and attainable practices that support Black teachers in the context of racist educational systems. While a large share of their recommendations were geared toward school leaders (school-level), they have implications for District leaders. Participants also provided direct District and state level recommendations, listed below.

School Level
- Increased supportive and sustaining school leadership from assistant principals and principals, and professional opportunities for leadership to support them in their growth in that regard.
  - Leadership demonstrating that they value Black teachers' perspectives and will incorporate their feedback when appropriate.
  - Leadership expressing positive feedback and affirming teachers' hard work and commitment.
  - Increased support from school leadership in dealing with issues within teachers' classrooms and needs for supplies and resources.
- Increased opportunities for teacher mentorship (particularly among new teachers, beyond what the District currently offers) and affinity spaces, including spaces housed outside the District.[6]
- Increased cultural responsiveness within the curriculum (overlaps with District level recommendations).

District Level
- Increased access to materials/resources and improved school facilities and smaller class sizes.
- Better pay and opportunities to advance.
- District-organized or supported teacher of color affinity groups.
- More diverse staff in schools and more equitable hiring and promotion processes (also school level).

District and State Level
- Changes to student and teacher evaluation processes that authentically assess student learning and growth and do not unfairly penalize teachers.
- Increased and more equitable public-school funding to improve school conditions and access to educational resources.

Conclusion
The research presented in this report offers insight into factors that contribute to the retention and attrition of Black teachers in the city of Philadelphia. It is important to note that our findings were gleaned from a small non-random sample of 30 current and former Black teachers and may not be representative of the experiences of Philadelphia's Black teachers at large. It is also important to note, however, that our interviewees' stories, particularly those pertaining to their perceptions of and direct experiences with various forms of racism as well as other challenges to the profession, are aligned with findings from the broader national literature on this topic.

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[6] See the following for scholarship documenting the value of these recommendations: Baker-Doyle (in press); Catone, 2017; Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015; Mawhinney, Baker-Doyle, & Rosen, 2021; Mosely, 2018; Pham & Kohli, 2018; Pour Khorshid, 2016; Pour-Khorshid, 2018a.

The current and former Black teachers who shared their insights for this research described common challenges experienced by urban teachers, but also consistently articulated how various forms of racism significantly intersect with and compound those challenges and create additional ones such that an already demanding job often feels untenable. They reported feeling disrespected, particularly by leadership, and undervalued in a job that places higher demands on them as Black teachers while offering them fewer resources and opportunities in return. Teachers who choose to remain in the classroom for now despite these significant barriers cited their love for the profession and dedication to their students, including students of color in particular, and a desire to see through the career they worked so hard to achieve. Retaining these teachers requires intentional, coordinated, and sustained action at the state, District, and school levels. Interviewees shared some of their recommendations with a focus on addressing racism and responsiveness at the school leadership level.

While limited in number, the former teachers in our sample offered particularly valuable perspectives on these issues, as they spoke not only about challenges that Black teachers in Philadelphia face and how they *could* lead to attrition, but also about specific factors associated with their own decisions to leave the profession. Scholarship on teacher attrition in general suffers from limited input from former teachers; future research would benefit from additional studies that include or focus on teachers who left the classroom and can speak to the barriers they found insurmountable. Future studies would also benefit from engaging Black teachers in the research activities themselves, as the experts on their lived experiences and the ramifications of the challenges posed by the system. Such participatory research stands to greatly enrich and improve the scholarship on this topic and consequent decision-making around practice and policy, as well as support teachers in their efforts to enact positive change for Black teachers and students, and ultimately the educational system at large.

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Acknowledgements