RESEARCH
FOR ACTION

SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Lessons from Black Teachers' Experiences in Allegheny County

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Introduction

Research has documented extensive evidence on how teachers of color enhance the educational experiences of students of color, and all students across the country.[1] However, there is also evidence that teachers of color overall—and Black teachers specifically—have been leaving the profession at higher rates than White, non-Hispanic educators and are more likely to cite non-personal reasons for leaving, such as working conditions.[2]

Similar to national trends, Research for Action's (RFA) analysis of teacher retention in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, found that teachers of color left their positions at greater rates than White educators between 2014 and 2020.[3] In addition, RFA found a steep decline in the number and percentage of Black teachers in Allegheny County and in Pittsburgh Public Schools over the past 20 years.[4] Little research, however, has been conducted to understand the causes and subsequent consequences for this decline.

RFA's Allegheny County Black Teacher Study is a community-informed research project designed to learn directly from Black teachers in the region about the barriers to recruitment and retention in Allegheny County's public schools. This report shares takeaways from data we gathered from speaking directly with 38 current and former Black teachers about their perspectives and experiences in Allegheny County through interviews and focus groups conducted in the spring of 2023.

At the end of the report, we share recommendations—informed by data we collected through a focus group with six leaders of teacher diversity initiatives in the county—for how to improve efforts to recruit, hire, retain, and sustain Black teachers within the region and beyond. Please see the appendix for more information on our research design and participant sample.

Understanding the Landscape

History and Demographics of Allegheny County Schools

Allegheny County is in the southwestern region of the state of Pennsylvania and encompasses Pittsburgh, the state's second largest city. The county has 43 public school districts and 25 charter schools serving approximately 145,000 students.

The region has experienced major population loss for many decades,[5] with Allegheny County most recently ranking as one of the top 10 counties in the nation with the largest population loss from July 2021- July 2022.[6] In recent years, the declining number of Black residents in the city of Pittsburgh has been particularly concerning and referred to as the New Great Migration.[7] Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) has seen a similar sharp decline in student enrollment, from 46,000 students in 1980[8] to only 20,000 in 2022.[9] Enrollment in traditional public schools has also shifted in recent years due to increasing enrollment in the region's charter schools, which now serve approximately 10,000 of the county's students.

The majority of the county's overall population identifies as White (79.1%), with Black residents making up the second largest racial group (13.5%).[10] RFA's annual analysis of public K-12 teacher and student data show the county's teacher workforce is less racially diverse than the overall population with over 95% of teachers identifying as White and only 3.4% of teachers identifying as Black in the 2022-23 school year.[11] Teachers of color are concentrated in schools located in and around the city of Pittsburgh with PPS, the largest district in the county, employing over half of the county's

Black teachers. Additionally, 119 schools and eight entire districts in the county had zero teachers of color. In contrast, the county's public school student population is more racially diverse with 36% of students identifying as students of color. **You can read more about the Allegheny County landscape here**.

Teaching While Black in Allegheny County

Black students and teachers were excluded when free public education started in Pittsburgh in 1834, and Black teachers have reported experiences of discrimination in the region's schools for over a century. Dr. Ralph Proctor Jr.'s 1979 Dissertation from the University of Pittsburgh[12] cited sources that some Black teachers were working in the first school for Black students that opened in 1837, but the first public record of the city employing a full time Black teacher was in 1937. Moreover, the city's school system has long been plagued by racial segregation. Meanwhile, researchers and local news outlets have documented the shortage and need for more diverse teachers for several decades. As early as 1965, Pittsburgh Public Schools began developing **principles and initiatives** to increase racial diversity among staff.[13]

Research Participants' Perspectives on the Landscape

The Black teachers and leaders who participated in this project described local school conditions and characteristics in ways that mirror the historical and demographic context discussed above, including:

1. **Racial segregation.** Several teachers also described segregation in the county's schools
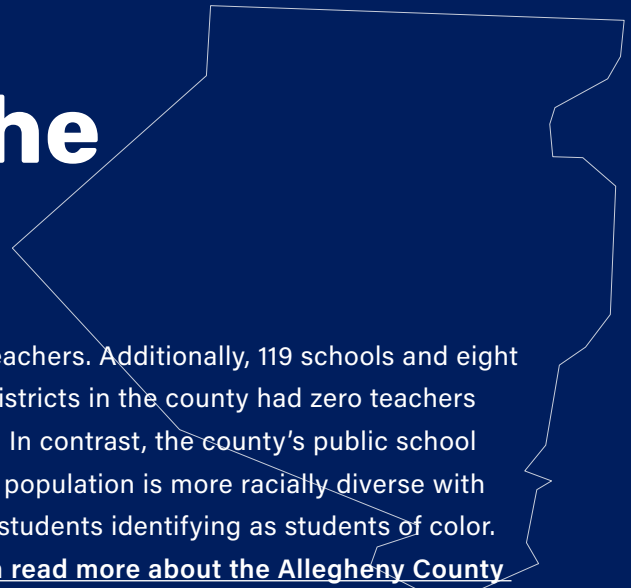
and communities, including that Black students are often concentrated in high-needs schools that receive inadequate resources, support, and opportunities, and experience more challenges. A few teachers shared that even schools with diverse student bodies may also implement tracking policies, which function as a form of within-school segregation. Teachers in Pittsburgh Public Schools specifically noted that a handful of choice, magnet, or elite schools have the ability to choose which students they admit, usually resulting in more White students.

2. **Declining enrollment.** Several participants shared that declining student enrollment trends are negatively affecting the school culture and environment, impacting their ability to teach

effectively, and contributing to job cuts and the teacher shortage. They cited gentrification and rising housing costs, as well as competition with nearby charter and private schools as reasons for the changing enrollment.

3. **Lack of racial diversity in teaching staff.** Participants also noted that the teaching staff are often not racially/ethnically representative of the student bodies in their schools and districts. Most of the teachers we spoke with shared that their schools are majority Black, while the teaching staff is majority White. Many participants shared that they were one of few or only Black teachers in their buildings. We discuss the challenges related to the small number of Black teachers later in this brief.

This report provides additional information about how Black teacher participants described local conditions and characteristics that impact their experiences and pose challenges and limitations on their ability to secure teaching positions, remain in the profession, and teach effectively.

The report is organized around the following three key takeaways:

1. Black teachers support Allegheny County students and schools in several unique and important ways.

2. Black teachers face many challenges that impact their experiences as educators in Allegheny County.

3. Several factors retain and sustain Black teachers in Allegheny County.

Key Takeaway 1

Black teachers offer Allegheny County students and schools several unique and important contributions, which are informed by their identity and purpose.

The experiences and perspectives shared by participants in our study demonstrate that Black teachers are uniquely positioned to support and educate Black students, as they bring specific approaches and practices that other teachers do not offer. This is because, as described in this section, every aspect of their role—including pedagogies and practices—is informed by both their Black identity and their purpose for choosing this profession. While several participants emphasized that they develop strong relationships with all students and work hard to ensure their entire classrooms are learning effectively, they expressed that their contributions to Black students' learning are important because other teachers are not able to teach Black students in the same way.

The Role of Black Identity

Nearly all the teachers we spoke with agreed that their Black identity influences their role as a teacher. They explained that lessons from their own experiences navigating the world as Black people helped them better understand their Black students, ensure that they meet students' needs, and offer supports that Black students may lack due to negative school experiences. Participants saw this practice of allowing identity to inform their teaching as an asset. For example, a few participants shared that their identity informs how they build connections and relationships with Black students and their students' families. Many participants described seeing Black students the same way they see their own children, as they are mindful of the cards stacked against Black children in schools and society at large. As one participant shared:

> I get called. . . Black mom. . . . I guess the parent in me comes out, but even when I wasn't a parent, my expectations [were high]. Because there's not a lot of African-American teachers pouring into our African-American students, I guess for me, I feel like I got to do my part. I got to make sure they're good, because there's not a lot of us here teaching for them or speaking for them to give them what they need.

The participants' reflections on the role of Black identity illuminate the reason Black teachers are unique and necessary, as their teaching is directly connected to their sense of self and lived experience. Importantly, this understanding of Black teacher identity mirrors research that demonstrates how positive racial identity serves as a protective factor for students and promotes their success.[15]

Teachers' Purpose

Several Black teachers discussed a deep sense of commitment to serving Black students that is related to their identity and rooted in their connection to Black communities. Many participants described teaching as a mission, a calling, and a profession that carries significant meaning. Participants expressed that they want to help Black and marginalized students realize their latent potential, and more broadly, "to improve the lives of Black people." Additionally, several teachers discussed how the opportunity to represent Blackness in Allegheny County's educational spaces, which typically lack Black representation, drew them to the profession in the first place. One teacher explained how important it was to serve as models for students:

> It seems like when I got to [my school], it wasn't too many Black teachers. . . . I've even had parents doing open house come and just say, "I've never seen or heard of a Black teacher in mathematics." It was somewhat. . . offensive. But I knew that I had to be there for a purpose. And the purpose was. . . to represent. I had to be there for our Black students, to see that there are Black teachers there in the world. A Black person can be a teacher. . . . A Black person can do mathematics.

A few participants also expressed an understanding of the profound impact of Black educators who had personally impacted their own lives and inspired them to pursue teaching, including one teacher who said, *"I wanted to be a teacher since I was five. I had a Black teacher that I used to brag about in Head Start. Then from then on, I always wanted to be a teacher, so that's what I went into."*

Another teacher shared that once she was exposed to the systemic disadvantages children from under-resourced communities and schools face, she felt so passionate about working with those children that she was able to overcome her initial reservations regarding the minimal salary and lack of prestige:

> I started to do a work study job. . . and we were going into preschools all over the city, and I was working with kids and trying to prepare them for kindergarten. We were reading books and doing lessons and things like that. [It] kind of shifted my perspective and I felt like coming into teaching was more of a calling and I had to answer the call, otherwise I wasn't being true to who I was— what my passion was. And then I think that was my first time really being in an urban environment and seeing the disparities in schools firsthand. I grew up in a suburban but still under-resourced district, and even in that, it was just so drastically different. So, I felt like I could come in and be somebody who was there for children and not just there for a paycheck.

A participant who previously held a career in a different field shared that they felt a need to transition into teaching because of the profound need for Black teachers:

> [There] was a need and a purpose for me to be in the field of education, I ended up just being there. . . . When I first entered [there] was a sense that they needed more Black teachers because they were not hiring Black teachers at the time in the state of Pennsylvania.

As participants described, strong identities as Black people and a clear sense of purpose uniquely position Black teachers in Allegheny County to contribute to students' lives and learning in meaningful and distinctive ways. Below, we detail these contributions, which include building healthy relationships and connections with Black students and implementing effective pedagogical approaches.

Black Teachers' Unique Contributions

Building Relationships and Special Connections with Black Students

Every one of the Black teachers we spoke with reported working to build and nurture strong relationships with Black students that often extend far beyond the academic year that a child may be assigned to their classroom. For example, one teacher shared:

> Once I go to work, I'm like on my own little island in my little classroom, working with my babies. Pulling the best out of them, letting them know that [I'm] going to be here. Whether you turn six today, or 26 in a couple years, I'm still going to be [me]. I'm still going to be here for you.

Teachers described a deep commitment to not just students' academic growth, but also to caring for students as human beings, in and outside of school, and expressed that this helped them develop special connections with Black students more effectively than many of their White and non-Black peers. As noted above, a few teachers described such strong relationships that students saw them the same way they see their own mothers and other family members. Several teachers also explained that these meaningful connections help them more easily manage student behavior and ensure that students are meeting expectations.

We identified three main factors that participants described as elements that support them in developing strong relationships with Black students:

1 **Shared cultural backgrounds, experiences, and communities with their Black students.** Several teachers shared that they grew up, live in, or frequently visit the neighborhoods where their students come from, and felt that the similarities in their lived experiences help them relate well to students. Others believe that cultural aspects—such as a shared appreciation of Black hairstyles—lead to strong connections. As one participant summarized:

> I think it makes me relatable to children because I look out there and I see children that look like me. It allows me to bond with children a little easier simply because little girls, when they get their hair braided or cornrows, I could say, "Ooh, that looks nice. That's good. Who did that for you?" Little things that most people wouldn't be able to. . . or at least a lot of the other teachers wouldn't understand about their culture, I would know, and so it's easier to relate with them. Also, when they have problems and home situations, as a Black person, from my experience, I've been able to relate to their households, the dynamics.

2 **Intentionally investing time and energy into building relationships with students and with their families, particularly with Black students and their families.** Several participants described investing in relationships as an integral part of their role and expressed that many White teachers in their buildings lack connections with students because they do not invest the same time or energy. As one teacher noted:

> I feel like the little bit of Black teachers that are here try to build more relationships better with the families and the students, versus the White educators who just seems like, they come here, put in their hours, and then go home. . . I don't see it as extra work. I really enjoy to do it.

3 **Representation and role-modeling.** Some teachers felt that Black students seek out relationships with them because they are looking for representation of someone of their same race or ethnicity on the teaching staff. For example, one participant described how being a Black male teacher positioned him to be helpful to Black male students:

I'm the only African-American male in the building. I think a lot of times that helps, especially some of the African American boys, because sometimes they feel like there's no one in the building who relates to them. And they can come to me, and I can pull them to the side and give them some words of advice or help them cool down and at least get them on a path that, even if they did something wrong, [deals] with the issue. Let's move on, tomorrow's another day.

Several teachers described feeling a responsibility to demonstrate to Black children that they can become teachers too, or anything that they are passionate about. One teacher described it as modeling "Black excellence" for their students:

I find that I love being a Black male teacher because I get to be and represent what Black excellence looks like in my classroom every single day. And I get to show my students that they are also Black excellence every single day. And Black excellence, it's not just about how much money you have, how many cars, how big your house is. It's about when you wake up each morning and you get to do your purpose and that's what you're passionate about, that's a life worth living. And I think that my students help me be the best version of myself too.

As evinced in the title of this report, even though teachers who identify as Black in Allegheny County comprise a small percentage of the teacher workforce, their impact is "mighty"—particularly for Black students. One teacher explained,

I think we are small but mighty. . . . You do not see as many Black educators come through. . . . I think that being in this position, you kind of have to show that you belong here. . . you have to show that I'm a Black woman, I can do this just as good as you do. I work hard to build a relationship with them. . . . Now, Black teachers, Black students, hit it off. We are the same, we've been through the same things. It looks different for us. . . As Black educators, that means we also have to fill the shoes—as the other teachers that are lacking in this area—to build a rapport, to make them feel comfortable, to make them eager to learn, to make them want to come to school, to make them feel safe and comfortable in school.

Black Teachers' Pedagogies

Participants described several pedagogical approaches and practices as central to their teaching, including culturally relevant or responsive practices; meeting students' needs; holding high expectations; and implementing alternative behavior management or discipline strategies. As previously noted, the teachers see their identities and relationships with students as anchors of these pedagogical approaches, which are outlined below:

1 **Culturally relevant pedagogies and practices:** "Culturally relevant" and "culturally responsive" teaching strategies were very commonly discussed by participants. Even teachers who did not use these specific terms described practices consistent with these approaches, including meeting students where they are, drawing on students' own interests, and adapting the curriculum for the specific students in their classroom. One teacher even described culturally relevant pedagogy as the "foundation of everything I stand on," and referenced the work of Gloria Ladson Billings—the pioneer of culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural inclusion in the classroom—as her inspiration.

Several teachers offered specific examples of strategies they use in their classrooms that they describe as culturally relevant or responsive. In discussing the importance of ensuring the curriculum reflects their students' culture, these teachers named representation in books and other materials as a major factor, and one teacher even discussed bringing books from her home library to make sure that her students see themselves in the classroom materials. A few noted feeling frustrations with the common practice of confining lessons about Black people to specific days or

events, like Black History Month. Another teacher described that they choose not to stray from "heavy topics" like slavery, the civil rights movement, and mistreatment of Black people, explaining:

> I charged the students with doing research and learning about their history, and learning about different Black people in particular. And we'd read certain stories or learn about people, and I'd help them to realize that this wasn't that long ago. Ruby Bridges is in her sixties, maybe seventies now. This wasn't that long ago. You could go home and talk to a grandparent, and they could probably tell you about what they experienced or what they remember.

To another teacher, celebrating learning successes by integrating music and dance into the classroom was a way to connect with her students and make her classroom feel familiar. She felt steadfast in her approach, and proudly reported:

> My pedagogy looks like this because of the students that I'm teaching. . . . I have to be responsive to the students that I have. Yes, everything's going to look and sound different in my classroom because I'm going to give it to these kids the way that I know it's going to do better for them.

Teachers who did not use the terms "culturally relevant" or "culturally responsive," still indicated understanding of the importance of "giving it to [the students] on their own terms so that [they] have frames of reference for these things to then pick up what I'm putting down."

A few teachers explained that the practice of "meeting the needs" of their students sometimes required stretching as an educator, which is a key element of culturally relevant teaching.[16] These teachers described regularly addressing a range of needs related to basic survival, curricular content, and understanding the social context of racism as Black children:

> I see different needs that they need to have met every day. One of the needs that I meet is that my students are constantly hungry. And so, every day my students, they know if they need a snack, they come to my classroom.

> I make my lessons based off of what I think is going to be more beneficial for my students. . . . I teach a film and film appreciation class. . . we just finished analyzing Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. [This] allowed me and my students to open up and talk about just grieving, as well as I had our counselor come in and talk about just different levels of how to handle stressful and traumatic situations. Because I know that when they leave out of the school, that they have completely different lives, and I want to show them that [there are] resources here at the school.

Several participants described how their teaching extends beyond a solely academic or curricular focus as they feel a responsibility to address racial contexts and realities with their majority Black students. They spoke of "doing their part," not only to serve their Black students, but also Black communities as a whole. One teacher described this as "keeping it real" with his students. He went on to describe what drives this commitment:

> Coming out of the summer of George Floyd, I felt like I had an obligation to Black students to help them understand what is going on in the world, and the world around them, and what they have waiting on them when they leave school.

A few teachers also spoke about imparting important life skills to their students during their class time to "equip [them] with the tools so [they] could grow and compete."

2 **Maintaining high expectations:** Holding high expectations was another theme that arose when teachers discussed pedagogical approaches, and they often associated this with caring. Most participants felt that White or non-Black teachers may not have high expectations for Black students, which makes it important for them to do so. As one teacher put it, "these children are capable of anything. They are brilliant, but no one treats them like that, and that's the problem."

Several of these same teachers described giving and demanding respect as part of their teaching approach. They consider nurturing respect and in turn holding students to high expectations to be part and parcel of developing strong relationships with students, the importance of which is noted above. For example, one teacher said she makes this clear when students first enter her classroom at the beginning of the year:

> I tell the children, "Welcome to [my] world, and these are the rules for [my] world. I'm going to respect you. You're going to respect me. I'm going to love you, care about you, show up at your game, show up at your church. I'm going to do whatever I need to let you know where I stand, and I expect the same."

3 **Alternative discipline strategies:** An additional theme that emerged was teachers' unique approaches to behavior management or student discipline. A few teachers discussed taking an approach that differs from the common approaches in their school, and specifically from those utilized by White colleagues. For example, one teacher shared:

> There have been times that when it comes to behavior, that I would talk to my White colleagues and they would say, "Well, why didn't you just write them up?" And my thing was always that we can show kids that there's another way that we can give them a form of discipline [rather] than always giving them a consequence of writing them up to then suspend them, so they are then behind in school.

A few teachers described alternative approaches that were rooted in deep care and commitment to their students, rather than reactionary responses based on feeling inconvenienced or distracted by student behavior. One teacher used the term "assertive direction" to describe his approach and explained that it comes from centering compassion and "allowing [students] to see the problem and then asking them if they recognize it and then trying to figure out the next steps from there." Another described using restorative circles and imparting skills for self-regulating emotions. Related to the theme of respect above, two educators explained how they lead with respect and that translates into how they address classroom conflict or disturbances. One teacher shared:

> These are my classroom rules: Be respectful. I will always treat you with respect and I expect the same. If you're having a bad day, let me know before you walk in my door, [I'll] give you some time to cool down. Be responsible, handle your work, handle your business, do what you have to do so you can do what you want to do. And then be safe. I'm not going to swear in front of you, don't swear in front of me. My job is [to] work with you, not against you. And that lays down a really good foundation for my students to know that, number one, I understand that you might have outside forces that might disrupt you. You don't have to tell me everything, but just know that I'm here to help you in whatever capacity I can.

The contributions described above demonstrate that Black teachers in Allegheny County offer approaches that are unique to who they are as both people and educators. These contributions are beneficial not only for Black students, but also for entire classrooms, school communities, districts, and local education agencies (LEAs). However, participants also shared that they face deep systemic challenges—many of which are unique to Black teachers—that cause them to leave the profession or to question their capacity to remain. We discuss these challenges in the section that follows.

Key Takeaway 2

Black teachers in Allegheny County face many challenges that impact their experiences as educators.

As we describe in this section, participants expressed that working as a Black teacher is often challenging, as they teach in schools and districts that were not created for Black people to thrive. Their stories demonstrate that most experience schools as hostile work environments that not only lack support but also pose challenges that make their roles more difficult. This takeaway is aligned with findings from previous research,[17] including a Philadelphia-based study conducted by RFA.[18] While this study is focused on Allegheny County, the alignment with existing literature underscores the systemic nature of Black teachers' challenges nationwide.

Challenges of Teaching While Black in Allegheny County

Several teachers described the Allegheny County educational system as "rooted in White supremacy" and not built for Black teachers or Black students. While a few participants reported positive experiences, almost all the teachers we spoke with feel that Black teachers are not wanted within Allegheny County and described working in such a system as causing significant stress. The majority of the Black teachers we spoke to were one of very few Black teachers, or the only Black teacher, in their schools. They saw this lack of Black teachers as related to the racism they experience, and they described feeling alone, lacking community, and having a sense that they were invited into the school to "check off a box." Furthermore, the participants expressed that they sometimes feel misunderstood or feel a need to change themselves to seem more amenable to White colleagues, administrators, and parents. Importantly, most teachers articulated an understanding of both the systemic nature of anti-Black racism in their districts or LEAs and the interpersonal racism experienced by teachers and students. The following quotes illustrate participants' perspectives on the racism they experienced:

So me coming into understanding that the system is not made for Black teachers to be in these spaces because you can't pass the test that puts you in that seat, and once you do pass the test to get you in that seat, now you got to defend why you were there.

I feel like ultimately this whole system is rooted in White supremacy and I don't believe we going to change it from within.

Why I left [the district] the second time when I was in the central office role, is not wanting to be complicit in a system that's not serving children. You know what I mean? That, it didn't sit right with me.

When you look at it, the system is just what you call tainted. . . for Black people in general. A constant oppression of Black people. . . . In teaching, I believe the system is so corrupt in terms of the mindset of White people, that they don't want us there.

These quotes demonstrate understanding of systemic and interpersonal racism working together to create and maintain an environment that poses constant challenges for Black teachers. We outline the kinds of challenges that participants highlighted below:

1 **Racial microaggressions:** Nearly every teacher participating in the study shared that they have experienced instances of racism in their schools, ranging from racial microaggressions to overt expressions of racism, although racial microaggressions were experienced by teachers more often. Such microaggressions include unwanted touching or offensive comments, such as one teacher who experienced White colleagues trying to touch her hair:

> [I'm] feeling like I've become a zoo animal because I've changed my hair. Over examination, wanting to touch it. . . at one point I just got angry and I was like, "I don't touch your hair or care about your hair in that way. . . . Why is it okay to ask me those things or want your touch? I know there's a curiosity to it, but understand that your curiosity makes me feel uncomfortable."

> I waited until the principal and the secretary came back and was like, "Thanks for covering the office." I took that award back to my class. . . . You come in and you assume I'm either the lunch lady or the secretary. You never assume I'm the teacher in the building that has got the excellence award, the teacher of the year award. You never assume that.

A common experience was the expectation that Black teachers stand in to be a "spokesperson for Black people." For example, several teachers mentioned they carry the responsibility of organizing the MLK day events or Black History Month. Moreover, one teacher recalled hearing resistance from White teachers about celebrating Black History Month at all. Another common experience described as a racial microaggression was the questioning of the credentials and qualifications of recently hired Black teachers. For example, one teacher described hearing a common sentiment in their school: *"'Oh, we keep hiring all these Black teachers, but they're not really qualified.' That kind of language was used multiple times. . . it was not blatant, but it was definitely veiled."*

Another teacher described feeling like she and other Black teachers were "not being taken seriously as professionals." The teacher shared:

> This year I had a colleague call me 'girl' in a conversation. He kept referring to me as a 'girl'. . . . I teach kids that look like me. And so, I'm invested. And the fact that [colleagues] seem so lost and are willfully ignorant, that hurts. But then when I have to deal with colleagues who are treating me less than, with the microaggressions and stuff like that, it makes the job 10 times harder to do and I can just go find somewhere else to be.

One Black teacher shared a humiliating experience she endured when she won the district's teacher of the year award. The teacher was covering the front desk to help the principal when the district official came to the school to deliver the award. As the teacher tried to explain to the district official that she was in fact the awardee and not the secretary, the official thought she was joking. The teacher explained:

(2) **Harm caused by White colleagues:** Many Black teachers expressed that poor relationships with their colleagues added frustration to their experiences as teachers. Several Black teachers shared that White teachers were condescending and diminished or questioned Black teachers' knowledge and abilities. A few participants

shared that they sometimes feel unwanted when they are not included in or invited to social gatherings outside of school that White teachers organize. Others described a need to "watch their back" around their White peers, as in a few cases, their White colleagues have attempted to have Black teachers fired. One participant shared:

> The Black people call themselves the Underground Railroad at my school. We have dinner meetings once a month [to] talk about all experiences of racism that we see. The White people at my school are very sneaky. They either are in with [the school leader's] agenda or they are scared to say things that could be seen as hostile [because it would challenge someone else's viewpoint]. There are a few White people there who know that there's something wrong. But at the same time, they are willing to stay quiet if it doesn't mean that they will be crushed. . . or have problems with [the school leader] or the group. . . . It's a bad dynamic. Every Black person that's been there for years is trying to transfer out.

3 **Unjust treatment and retaliation from White district and school administrators:** In addition to issues with colleagues, several participants have also experienced several issues with White administrators and school leaders. They shared that in some cases, school administrators were punitive and retaliated by putting Black teachers on unwarranted improvement plans, giving teachers lower ratings on performance reviews than they deserved,

or threatening to cut their jobs. These punitive actions were sometimes carried out in response to Black teachers sharing criticisms or feedback about administrative or school policies, speaking out about their experiences, or advocating for racial equity. The following quotes offer examples of this type of punitive behavior:

> But then our relationship also changed with that principal and her behaviors towards me were very punitive. . . . And when I got basic and below basic [scores on my observations], I knew that it wasn't warranted because there was no evidence. . . . And at the time, because I was in a career ladder role. . . and it comes with a little bit more money and pay, [but if you are rated basic or below basic] you lose that position and you go back to the classroom. Which, that's fine, going back to the classroom, I'm not opposed to that, but I'm opposed to going back to the classroom like this because I worked hard. . . . I had to fight to keep my job. . . . For a while, my position was taken from me. . . and then over the summer, I had to fight. And I did, and I won it through the school district's litigation process with our union and they gave me my career ladder position back.

> [All this was based on] one 40-minute lesson—that didn't even go poorly, but [administrators] can say it did. One 40-minute lesson does not adequately paint a picture of me as a teacher. But our rubrics for our summative evaluations for the year are, in my opinion, questionable. You could have someone come in on the wrong day, and they could just be mad that day. There's just too many factors to just say, "We're basing so much of where you go and where you stand, off of this." Then you fight it, and it becomes a bigger issue. Then I've been told, "You can just go be a token Black teacher in a different district." I've actually had people say that to me.

4 **Heavier workloads:** Many participants expressed they are expected to take on more responsibility than their White peers, despite a belief they are paid less than colleagues at equal or lesser levels of education and experience. Several Black teachers shared they are sometimes assigned more classes, or a higher number of students within the classes they teach. A few shared they are assigned a greater share of the students performing at a "below basic" level at the beginning of the school year and still expected to help all students achieve a "proficient" level, or they are expected to teach different groups of students who have a wide range of academic needs within one classroom.

Aligning with existing research on Black teacher experiences beyond Allegheny County,[19] several Black teachers shared that they are often seen as the go-to disciplinarians in the building and expected to discipline students that they do not know well or do not teach personally. Moreover, in their classrooms, several indicated they are assigned the majority of students struggling with behavioral issues:

> I can't be happy in a place where I feel like. . . when kids misbehaved, then a Black person has to solve it. I don't like that. We get a disproportionate amount [of students with behavioral issues]. Anytime. . . there's a problem, we're expected to fix it. None of that is pushed onto White colleagues. They're getting the same paycheck I'm getting, but they're doing less work and have to deal with less issues. And they're supported in a way that is really biased and it's seen by everyone. I think the main factor in keeping me [in teaching] will be for me to find another building.

Several participants also shared that they take on more of the responsibility of meeting students' personal needs, such as ensuring that their hair is styled for school or that they receive breakfast. As noted above, several participants described being the only people in the building willing to take on or lead equity work or offer culturally relevant teaching, which they saw as necessary for students' overall development and for their academic learning. One teacher's description of their experience with a supervisor who did not understand the need for culturally relevant teaching demonstrates the stress Black teachers feel when attempting to meet students' needs in the way they believe is best:

> You get [a principal] who doesn't see [things] the way you do and it's like, "Well, I'm not seeing the rigor. . . . Do you have any emergent readers?" I'm like, she just learned her name. . . . Understanding the cultural and the social stuff is just as important as finding the letter A. So just my entire existence has been defending why I have to do what I need to do in order to get the result that you praise me and give me distinguished remarks for, that kind of stuff.

5 **Racism toward students:** Several participants reported witnessing a lack of care for Black students by White teachers and administrators who exhibit deficit perspectives, or thinking that ascribes Black students' challenges to perceived internal defects, rather than systemic inequities. These teachers shared that they have been disappointed and disillusioned by White teachers' lack of respect for Black children and by their unwillingness to maintain high expectations for Black students, to help them feel empowered and heard, or to support them in succeeding academically.

> Just sometimes the lack of [awareness] that other colleagues have for our students of color. Kids' voices are so powerful. And so yes, do they always tell the truth? Not always. Do they lie? Sometimes, but aren't we all human? Shouldn't we all be treated with respect but also the ability to be heard? And I feel like there are some teachers that just don't believe in that.

Several teachers also shared examples of more overt instances of racism toward students, like White teachers making prejudicial assumptions about Black students and their families and administering harsher punishments to Black students than White students. Several teachers shared outright racist remarks made about students and/or their families that were tolerated by other staff.

Relatedly, several participants described how racism towards students can take less overt forms

but still have serious implications for students' learning. For example, these participants expressed frustrations with some of their White colleagues' resistance to efforts to make the curriculum more culturally responsive or to other diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) efforts taken up by the school. the following quotes offer examples of those frustrations.

> The way [White colleagues] perceive Black adults, teachers in the building [is a problem]. And the way they perceive Black students or ESL students in their classroom, and also students labeled with a disability. Also, [there is an] unwillingness from administrator[s] to make sure that White teachers are teaching to all students. Teaching students instead of teaching the curriculum. . . . There's a big difference in teaching students, getting to know students. Then there's a difference between that and standing up in front of the classroom, just turning the pages in a book, just reading whatever's in the curriculum.
>
> Well, I think part of the problem is, then the kids don't have somebody in there fighting for them. If I leave and I'm a person who's throwing bows and making space for conversations, and the other people are just cool to get by, and they bring some new person in who can barely manage a classroom, they're not going to know what's wrong.

Importantly, the racism and related challenges described above not only wear teachers down but

also require that they take on the additional (and unrecognized) labor of shielding their students from insidious systemic and interpersonal racism. The burden of navigating these challenges while also attempting to fulfill their responsibilities as teachers has led many participants to feel that they are fighting a system while also working within it.

Additional Challenges of Teaching in Allegheny County

In addition to the challenges that are unique to Black teachers, participants described several major challenges that may be experienced by all teachers, which further impact their experiences and contribute to Black teachers leaving the profession.

Participants specifically cited several major challenges, including (1) lack of support for teachers, (2) lack of resources and supports for students, (3) overwhelming workload, (4) issues with district/LEA policies and mandates, (5) issues with staffing or high turnover of administrative positions, (6) inadequate pay, and (7) changes related to the pandemic.

1 **Lack of support for teachers from administration:** One of the most common challenges that teachers discussed was a lack of support from their principals and other leadership in their school buildings. Teachers described looking for more support with issues like training or mentorship, interactions with parents, and meeting or navigating district/LEA mandates and requirements that they perceive as unreasonable (detailed below). In a couple of cases, administrators were not only unhelpful, but also posed more challenges for teachers.

As alluded to earlier, behavior management is one of the most common areas where

teachers need more support. Many teachers feel that their schools lack clear and consistent policies for discipline or expectations for behavior and shared that building administration does not hold students accountable by implementing consequences or restorative practices. One teacher described a situation where their school leader declined to address a situation with a student who physically assaulted them until the student assaulted another teacher:

> I have been bitten three times. I've been assaulted almost every other day. [A student] gets agitated, and he assaults kids. . . . When I got bit the first time, [the administrator] left and told me that, "I'm sorry it happened to you, but what am I going to do?" . . . But they said that the child will be removed. It's been two weeks, child's still there. . . Friday, he attacked the one-on-one. . . . They gave her hazard pay. . . . But I was with that child for three months, and I asked for help, and [the administrator] told me I could not get any.

A few participants stated that lack of support from leadership also contributes to a negative school culture, which makes it difficult to work in their school building. These teachers expressed that building administration should provide more structure to ensure that policies and practices are implemented consistently, for both staff and students. One participant noted:

> The expectation is that the leadership sets the tone. And I've been in places that have just run the gamut where you have someone who's a very strict, dictatorial type person who does not entertain any input. And then you have a lot of people then who are scared, who are stressed, who feel negative, who want to get out. . . . And then [I've been] on the far range was where it was very lax there. You hardly saw the principal out and about. He, at times, was down in the gym, working out on the school day or just had his office lights off, "I'm not here." And so people just kind of did whatever they wanted to do.

For the former teachers we spoke with, the lack of support was a major reason for leaving the profession. They expressed that their needs were not taken seriously or adequately addressed by school administrators. This lack of support over time led to feelings of frustration and disillusionment. Moreover, a few teachers felt that the subjects they taught—especially those less emphasized such as art or physical education—were looked down upon compared to Math and English.

> I didn't feel like I mattered or I was important because it was like first I was a para, and so there's already that thing where it's like you're not a real teacher, you're just a support. So then finally I became a teacher, but it's like you're just a music teacher. It's not like you're teaching math or reading. So I felt like I just was never taken seriously.

2 **Lack of resources and supports for students:** Several participants shared that they lack basic tools like pens, pencils, and paper, as well as tech equipment like updated computers. Several teachers mentioned that they paid for basic classroom materials out of their own pockets when necessary. Participants also noted a lack of culturally relevant curriculum; staff and programs to provide emotional support and address interpersonal conflict; support for special education; funding for specific programs like music; and transportation for field trips.

> We wear many hats as educators. Sometimes a parent, a support system, a role model, a therapist. We wear these many hats. So it can be overwhelming as well, because I feel like sometimes there are not enough supports in the schools to serve all of our students.

3 **Overwhelming workload:** While multiple Black teachers noted differences in their workload compared to non-Black peers, several teachers also discussed challenges related to workload that are not necessarily specific to race. Participants shared that at the classroom or school level, the number of classes, number of students, or breadth of classes that they are asked to teach contribute to the feeling of a heavy or even overwhelming workload. As we note in more detail below, these teachers also indicated that there are too many mandates from the district that add to teachers' workloads and impede their ability to teach

effectively. For example, one teacher shared frustration with the number of professional development hours they are required to complete, in addition to their other responsibilities:

> The amount of professional development hours that we need each year. . . . I personally find it being like it's a ridiculously high amount and it should not be that extreme. When we as teachers. . . we're trying to write IEPs and do grades. And for me, I'm doing programming and stuff like that. There's so much stuff on our plate that sometimes sitting in a space for four hours [learning] about something that's not going to help us become [professionally] developed is the last thing that we as teachers want to do.

Several former teachers expressed that the demanding nature of the job led to burnout, which contributed to their decision to leave the profession. The draining effect of the amount of work combined with minimal support resulted in a lack of motivation and satisfaction in their profession. A few mentioned that the workload posed difficulties in their personal lives, as they were not able to achieve work-life balance. As one former teacher explained:

> One of my reasons for leaving [was that] teaching English is really intense, just with all the grading and the testing. So I just didn't see how I was going to be able to be an excellent teacher and a good mom.

4 **District/LEA policies, mandates, and expectations that limit teacher decision-making and professionalism:** Several participants expressed that the district places too many limitations on curriculum and instruction, rather than allowing teachers the autonomy to offer curriculum that caters to their students' needs. These teachers felt that the mandates and expectations handed down by their districts or LEAs lack alignment with those needs. Additionally, requirements like completing a specific number of professional development hours and implementing new initiatives add to already heavy workloads and take capacity away from teaching. These teachers indicated that they want the autonomy to teach what they believe the students need to learn, in a way they believe is most effective. One teacher mentioned that she has stopped worrying about what the district wants and instead focuses on meeting her students' needs:

> Especially those of us that have taught for 10 or more years, [we] have seen the changes that have come down the pipeline from the district. It's like they want us to have a voice, but they don't really want us to have a voice. . . . It's just stressful. . . . At this part of my teaching career, I'm focusing in on what my kids need versus what new mandate the district is rolling down the pipeline. I'm going to make sure they're good, because I know once they leave from here on the other side, when they leave school, it's going to be a real world out there for them.

5 **Instability and unpredictability due to staffing policies and turnover:** A few teachers mentioned issues with policies and practices around hiring, staffing, and promotions or raises within the district. Some participants said their schools have been short-staffed, which then creates challenges for teachers who have to fill in the gaps. At the same time, other teachers shared that it is difficult to find a teaching job that feels like a good fit. For example, one participant shared that they were forced to move schools frequently and felt "booted out" of one school with very little notice, due to layoffs in their district. Speaking about an instance when they learned that they would not be asked to return the next school year, they said:

> When I first found out I was in shock because I didn't expect it. It was close, it was really the end of the school year and it was like, I want to say a week before the end and I was expecting to sign my return letter. And then the other teachers [said], "Yeah, that's messed up. They were supposed to give you. . . way more advanced notice." But I feel like lately it has been real short notice when they do things like that.

A few noted that high turnover of principals and other building administrators contributes to the environment feeling unstable. This feeling of instability negatively affects both the teaching staff and the students:

> The principals were changing every six months, if not even sooner. It was just a lot going on. The children didn't seem stable, they didn't know who were going to stay, who was going to leave, it just wasn't a good environment.

6 **Inadequate pay:** Related to issues of staffing and hiring within their districts and LEAs, several participants expressed that they did not receive fair compensation for their work. A few participants shared that their teaching salary was not sufficient for covering their living expenses, and they have either previously struggled or currently face challenges with covering those expenses. One teacher shared that at the time of their interview, it had been three years since their charter school had chosen to give the teachers raises. The teacher believed the school was acting punitively because teachers had recently decided to unionize. As mentioned previously, a few Black teachers also shared that their districts or LEAs pay them less than their White peers who have the same level of education or experience. One participant shared that they had decided to take some time away after realizing that their district was not paying them fairly:

> They're not paying me what I feel like I'm just due. When I say that there are people that I came in with and that I interviewed with, who are making $30,000 more dollars than I am. And I'm like, "Yo, y'all need to fix this." They're not fixing it, so I'm just not going back.

7 **Lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic:** A few participants shared that they believe specific changes that occurred during the pandemic continue to affect teaching and learning. While changes like requiring less homework and giving more time to complete assignments may have been necessary during the pandemic, they expressed that these practices lowered expectations for academic performance and that expectations remain too low. Participants also noted changes in student behavior that they believe are related to the lasting impact of the pandemic.

One participant mentioned that after the pandemic, students returned with emotional needs that she was not prepared to address:

> Coming back from the pandemic, there's a lot of emotional needs that the kids need that I'm not qualified, I'm not trained in. So having to counsel and play therapist to kids, to students, without supports of people who are trained in that, I would say is also an obstacle.

Key Takeaway 3

Several factors retain and sustain Black teachers in Allegheny County.

Despite the numerous challenges they face, several current Black teachers expressed that they plan to stay in the profession in Allegheny County. We explicitly asked participants why they decided to remain, and below we present the various factors they shared that contribute to their desire to continue teaching.

1 **Love of students:** Several participants conveyed a passion for and love of young people that motivates them to continue teaching. Similarly, many other teachers shared that playing a role in students' growth and success is profoundly rewarding and motivating. Several interviewees expressed appreciation for the meaningful, intentional relationships they build with students. A few educators expressed a special dedication to affirming and celebrating Black youth who they believe are often written off by other teachers and adults. One teacher shared how working with marginalized youth is their favorite part of teaching:

> [I love] working with the kids who are written off and proving that they don't deserve to be written off or celebrating their successes and stuff. I do summer school and [a student said], "My teacher said I'm dumb. My teacher said I can't read." [At] the beginning of the summer, there's a lot of things they don't know how to do, but [by the end of] the summer, they either can do it or feel this confidence they can do anything.

Another participant described their students and the opportunity to serve as a model for them as the reason they remain in the profession:

> Last year was my first year. . . [so some] students didn't know me, and they would be like, "Are you a teacher here? You're a teacher?" And I'm like, "Yeah." And at one point, one of the students just started clapping and was like, "Yes, yes! We need some Black teachers. We have a Black teacher." And I was just like, wow. And to see them just be so just happy about it, and for them to know that this is a good thing and just to not hide it, to be proud about it and be like, yes, we need more Black teachers, was definitely a plus. Definitely what keeps me.

2 **Strong school leaders and positive school culture:** A few participants who have had positive experiences in their schools underscored the impact of school culture on their teaching experience. Good relationships with school administrators were often described as key in maintaining a positive culture. These participants

recounted how their administrators have been appreciative of their work; invested in their professional growth; and fierce advocates for them, which has helped them to feel respected and bring the best version of themselves to the job. For example, one participant discussed how their principal listened to their concerns about their grade placement and made some adjustments to suit their needs:

> I loved teaching first grade. Early childhood is definitely my base, but the dynamic wasn't conducive, I think, to my growth. So luckily, I had a principal who was willing to listen to me and make some shifts and changes for my needs. And it worked out. It doesn't always work out in a building that you can do that. So, then I transitioned into third grade. I loved it.

Positive relationships with colleagues are important for the school culture as well, as other interviewees highlighted the collaborative, team-oriented nature of their working relationships as rewarding. For example, one such participant shared that their interactions with colleagues are based in "being relational." In describing the culture at the school, this participant stated, "our culture is team."

3 **Supportive and affirming networks:** Participants expressed that teaching is an emotionally, physically, and cognitively demanding job. Many stressed the importance of supportive groups and

networks of educators to share challenges and successes with and further their professional growth. They expressed that the opportunity to work with such groups within their schools and districts or LEAs results in participants feeling valued and empowered to create culturally relevant, equity-focused, and antiracist programming. These groups also resulted in the teachers facing fewer challenges related to interpersonal racism. One participant who had the opportunity to work with groups that focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work shared:

> I feel like I can be my authentic Black self here in a way that I didn't feel in other districts. I have done a lot of DEI work across the district. . . . At one point, another woman and myself were leading the DEI work across [the charter network]. We have a partnership with [teacher diversity initiatives in the region], that I am the representative on that team. . . . Here, I feel like being a culturally responsive practitioner and all of that, this is the first place where I felt that that's mattered.

Groups created specifically for Black educators are especially impactful. Another participant shared that the Black teacher affinity group they joined serves as a safe space to vent, share liberatory practices, and develop more equitable systems:

> We have an agenda, but a lot of times it's just share out, just a safe space. I think that a big part of support comes with having a safe space. There's no way that I don't have a space to just go, "Oh my God, let me tell you what happened today. So-and-so's mom stormed in my classroom. She was mad because her daughter came home and there was a chocolate milk stain on her skirt," which happened to me before. So that affinity group is needed.

4 **Investment in their careers:** As discussed above, teachers shared that the challenges they face daily are often overwhelming. Multiple teachers reported that these challenges would cause them to leave the field were it not for the financial and temporal investments they have already made to reach their current positions. Many of these participants also mentioned that they have financial responsibilities as parents that would preclude them from leaving a job that provides a stable paycheck and good benefits.

Recommendations for Recruiting, Retaining, and Sustaining Black Teachers

This report was designed with the goal of providing increased understanding of the contributions that Black teachers in Allegheny County offer, as well as the unique and serious challenges that these teachers face. Another goal of this report is to support stakeholders in addressing the issues our participants raised, by making changes to better recruit, support, and retain Black teachers. Below, we have synthesized several direct recommendations from teachers, field leaders, and community members who contributed to this study.

Current and former teachers offered their perspectives on the changes needed during interviews and focus groups. The participants indicated that the region should prioritize removing barriers to entering the profession; addressing the systemic and interpersonal racism that permeates most aspects of their experiences, as well as the experiences of their students; and increasing support, mentorship, and training.

In addition to engaging current and former teachers, RFA collaborated with several community members through the creation of a Research Practice Learning Community (RPLC) comprised of the research team, educators, and leaders of teacher diversity initiatives in the county (see the appendix for more information about the RPLC). The educators and field leaders advised the study, beginning with the project design phase and continuing throughout the life of the project. Several of the RPLC members also participated in a focus group designed to gather background information and context on the challenges and progress related to efforts to increase educator diversity in Allegheny County. Through a collective process, the RPLC developed specific strategies designed to address the participants' concerns about the barriers to entry, lack of support, and racism that prevent many from entering or remaining in the teaching profession.

We present the following recommendations by key stakeholder group, so that each group can effectively implement changes that are informed by, and targeted to support, Black educators. These recommendations are directed toward (1) school districts and charter school LEAs, (2) local communities throughout Allegheny County, and (3) existing educator diversity initiatives.

For State Policymakers and District and Charter School Leaders:

To directly address the barriers to entering the profession, the Allegheny County RPLC recommends that policymakers and district and charter leaders:

Conduct thorough audits of teacher examination and certification policies, then revise these policies accordingly to ensure that Black candidates do not face additional barriers throughout the certification process.

Conduct audits of their hiring practices and policies, then revise as appropriate, to ensure that Black candidates receive fair treatment and equal opportunities throughout the hiring process.

Design pipeline programs for students who have an interest in the teaching profession that will provide support and lead to a teaching placement. Prioritize partnering with teacher education programs at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and with existing Black teachers to offer these programs.

Create a program for paraprofessionals to develop teaching skills and experience, and eventually secure teaching placements. Prioritize matching Black paraprofessionals with Black mentor teachers.

Ensure that school funding is adequately and equitably distributed to all schools, including schools that serve students of color at high rates.

> [District leaders should] go to these HBCUs and bring them in, even if it's just for student teaching purposes. I would love to have somebody for a quarter or for a semester and have them shadow me and me teach them the ropes of how to do it.

To address the lack of support, mentorship, and training for Black teachers, the RPLC recommends that policymakers and district and charter leaders:

Establish mentorship/ supervision programs for school leaders, to ensure they are consistently offering effective and equitable support to their teaching staff.

Create and maintain mentorship programs for new teachers that extend beyond their first year and offer multiple touchpoints throughout the school year, including observations, discussions based on feedback, and modeling. Position experienced and veteran Black teachers as lead mentors.

Create affinity spaces where Black teachers can connect with other Black teachers, both within the county and beyond.

" It would really benefit for Pittsburgh Public Schools [to] have some type of mentoring program for Black teachers. And to have a program that. . . not only mentors but recruits other Black teachers, where Black teachers go into some of these colleges and [talk to] the youth.

To address issues of systemic and interpersonal racism, the RPLC recommends that policymakers and district and charter leaders:

Participate in continuous education/training to learn about developing safe environments that are conducive to recruiting, supporting, and retaining Black educators.

Implement a mandatory and research-informed racial equity training for teachers and school leaders of all racial/ethnic identities.

Develop and implement systemic and infrastructural improvements and supports to recognize, elevate, and harness Black teachers' unique contributions to their students and schools.

Conduct a third-party audit of salaries and adjust accordingly to achieve pay equity.

> I think there needs to be a genuine effort to provide culturally responsive, unconscious bias, some type of training. . . there needs to be a genuine effort to provide training that can really move people into a more tolerant, accepting mindset, a growth mindset.

For Communities Within Allegheny County:

To hold districts and LEAs accountable for implementing changes and to offer models of effective support for Black teachers, the RPLC recommends that members and groups within the communities that Allegheny County districts/LEAs serve:

Develop and participate in collectives that include individuals and groups that represent families, local businesses, community leaders, and grassroots organizations. These collectives would be responsible for:

- Identifying needs and advocating for policy changes, including legislation, that could improve recruitment, retention, and support of Black teachers.
- Attending school board meetings and other events to voice concerns and suggest changes.
- Community organizing, when necessary, to draw public attention to issues that have not been addressed by districts and LEAs.

Develop spaces for Black teachers to connect and network with each other, students and their families, and other community members.

Recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate Black educators within their respective communities.

For Existing Teacher Diversity Initiatives

To further address the issues identified by study participants, members of our Research Practice Learning Community expressed that existing teacher diversity initiatives and programs in the area would be able to better serve the region through increased collaboration. The RPLC recommends that initiatives dedicated to increasing teacher diversity in Allegheny County (including but not limited to Teach Plus and the Equity Leadership Institute, Pittsburgh Promise Scholarship, FAME, and Teaching is My Favorite Color), participate in a collective that would collaborate on:

Supporting their participants in moving through the process of becoming a teacher, as some programs begin in high school and others support teachers with securing placements and remaining in the profession.

Partnering with the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium (PEDC), a grassroots organization that exists to bring together organizations and individuals in PA who are dedicated to increasing teacher diversity, to build on the momentum PEDC has generated in the region and garner additional support.

Strategic mapping of teacher diversity initiatives in the region, with a specific focus on initiatives that support Black teachers. The completed maps could be distributed to several stakeholders, including other teacher diversity initiatives, prospective teachers, colleges and universities, and community organizations.

Securing multi-year funding that will support teacher diversity work well into the future.

Building support for alternative pathways to certification and advocating for legislation that supports these pathways.

While these recommendations are not exhaustive, we see them as a starting place for stakeholders to begin engaging. Given that context and demographics vary across the region, we hope that stakeholders within Allegheny County will build on these recommendations to ensure the approaches they adopt are appropriate and effective for their specific communities.

Conclusion

The number and share of Black teachers in Allegheny County have been declining for decades. Current and former Black teachers have a wealth of first-hand experiences that can explain these trends and inform the reforms needed to reverse them. This report was designed to help state, local, and school leaders in Allegheny County learn from these experiences so they can better support current teachers and attract and retain additional Black teachers.

The findings demonstrate that the county's Black teachers are dedicated to their craft and their students and offer several unique contributions that are directly tied to their identities and experiences as Black educators and individuals. Yet several challenges lead too many to leave the profession. These include challenges that are both unique to their experiences as Black teachers—including systemic and interpersonal racism—and challenges that are common for all teachers but may compound more heavily on Black teachers. Despite these challenges many Black teachers persist and thrive in the profession when they are empowered to make positive impacts on students, are supported by colleagues and administrators, and are appropriately rewarded for their efforts.

While Black teachers in Allegheny County are small in numbers, they are mighty in their contributions. If policymakers and school leaders focus on addressing challenges, empowering teachers, and providing needed supports, the number of Black teachers in county schools can be expected to grow over time. And with a growth in Black teachers, the county can also expect growth in the positive impacts they make on students, schools, and communities.

Appendix: Methodology

Research Design

To learn how to improve efforts to recruit, hire, retain, and sustain Black teachers within Allegheny County, we designed a community-informed, in-depth exploratory study of the experiences and perspectives of current and former Black educators in the county's public schools, and those leading educator diversity initiatives in the region. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do current and former Black teachers understand the attrition of Black teachers from the teacher workforce in Allegheny County?

2. What systemic factors—from the school to district to policy level—contribute to Black teacher attrition in Allegheny County?

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

4. What promising practices and efforts are being pursued to diversify the teacher workforce in Allegheny County?

5. What reported outcomes, if any, are these initiatives and efforts producing?

Community-Engaged Approach

Throughout the study, RFA's team engaged the community by collaborating with the directors of the Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium of Southwestern PA (PEDC SW) and leveraging a Research Advisory Committee (RAC), comprised of five members who lead teacher diversity efforts in the region: one retired veteran PPS teacher, one leader of an equity-driven teacher leadership program, one director of diversity, equity and inclusion in an Allegheny County district, and two directors of teacher education programs at universities in the region. The RAC played an instrumental role in informing our sampling and recruitment strategies and data collection instruments. During the data collection phase, the RAC evolved to become a Research Practice Learning Community (RPLC), which includes the research team and current teachers in addition to the original RAC members. The educators and field leaders who participated in this group further informed recruitment efforts; offered feedback and reflections on the data analysis and findings; and provided input on the development of this report.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with current and former Black teachers in Allegheny County, and a focus group with leaders of teacher diversification efforts in the region. Our data analysis began with a review of the transcripts, development of a coding structure informed by both the interview and focus group protocols and participants' responses, and coding in Dedoose software. Our research team then analyzed the data by code to identify patterns, which we then developed into our key takeaways. While these takeaways may not represent every individual's experience, we believe they offer valuable insight into the most pressing issues that are commonly experienced by Black teachers within Allegheny County. In addition to collection and analysis of the interview and focus group data, we conducted a descriptive analysis of teacher diversity data that is cross-referenced with broader community demographic data to better understand the current and historical context of regional educator diversity trends.

Participant Sample

To address the study's goal of centering Black teachers' knowledge and experiences to understand changing teacher demographics in Allegheny County, we recruited a purposive sample of Black teachers who represent various schools, districts or LEAs, levels of experience, grades and subjects. Participants were identified through a recruitment process that included dissemination of an email and informational one-pager, which were distributed through our networks. Interested parties responded to a brief survey that included questions about demographic information and current teaching status and/or roles, which the research team used to determine eligibility. Those found to be eligible were invited to participate via email.

We conducted interviews and focus groups that included 38 total teachers; 29 were current teachers and 9 were former teachers. The sample of former teachers includes participants who have left the classroom but continue to work in education, participants who have left the education field and now work in a different field, and retirees. All participants self-identified as Black.

At the time of data collection, participants held roles in nine different LEAs, including five districts (four suburban and one urban) and four charter schools/networks located in and around the city of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh Public Schools, the county's largest district, is represented by a subsample of current and former teachers from 23 different schools within the district. Some participants also held previous positions in additional LEAs not included in the count.

Every grade is represented by the teacher sample, from Kindergarten through 12th grade. The teachers also represent multiple subjects, including ELA, Math, Science, Social Studies, Specials/Electives, and Career and Technical Education (CTE).

Please see Table 1 for information on the teachers who participated in the study, including current status, gender identity, and years of experience.

TABLE 1

CHARACTERISTIC	CURRENT (N=29)		FORMER (N=9)	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*
Gender				
Female/feminine	21	72	8	89
Male/masculine	8	28	1	11
Years of Experience				
0-5 years	8	28	3	33
6-10 years	7	24	1	11
11+ years	14	48	5	55

In addition to the teachers, six field leaders of teacher education and teacher diversity programs in Allegheny County participated in a focus group to describe local efforts being pursued to diversify the teacher workforce. This data provided additional context and informed the recommendations section of the report. Several of the focus group participants also engaged with the study as part of the Research Practice Learning Community.

Endnotes

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Prior to joining RFA, Siettah served as a Project Manager and Research Associate at Teachers College, where she is currently conducting her dissertation research. Siettah also has several years of experience in providing racial-equity focused, evidence-based professional development to educators through a national and global summer institute at Teachers College called Reimagining Education. In addition, Siettah has mentored and instructed MA students in sociological qualitative research methods. She has previously worked in schools in Newark, NJ and New York City.

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Kevin Burgess has spent more than a decade in the education field, including eight years as a high school history teacher. His experiences led him to pursue graduate coursework in policy analysis at Indiana University Bloomington, where he conducted preliminary qualitative research designed to amplify the voices of teachers and other stakeholders traditionally marginalized in the enactment of education policy. Burgess leverages his professional and academic background in support of his projects at RFA, which include partnering with Black teachers to examine and address the issues they confront at their schools.

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