

Small but Mighty: Lessons from Black Teachers' Experiences in Allegheny County

Webinar
November 16, 2023



Introductions

MEET *the* RESEARCHERS



PROJECT SUPPORT *and* ADVISING



Report:
“Small but Mighty”: Lessons
Black Teachers’ Experiences
in Allegheny County



Statement of the Problem and Purpose

Problem:

Similar to national trends, Allegheny County has seen significant decreases in the number of Black teachers between 2014 and 2020.

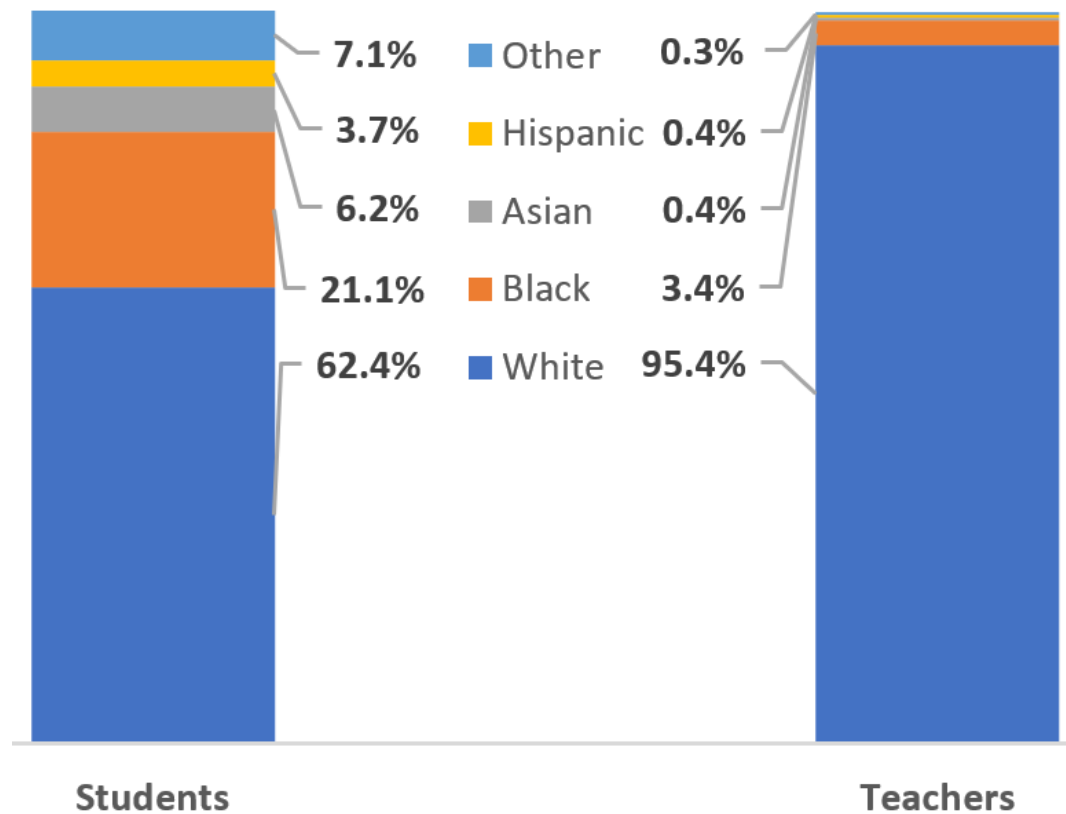
Little research has been conducted to understand the causes and subsequent consequences for this decline.

Purpose: This study was designed to learn directly from Black teachers in the region about the barriers to recruitment and retention in Allegheny County's public schools.

Understanding the Landscape

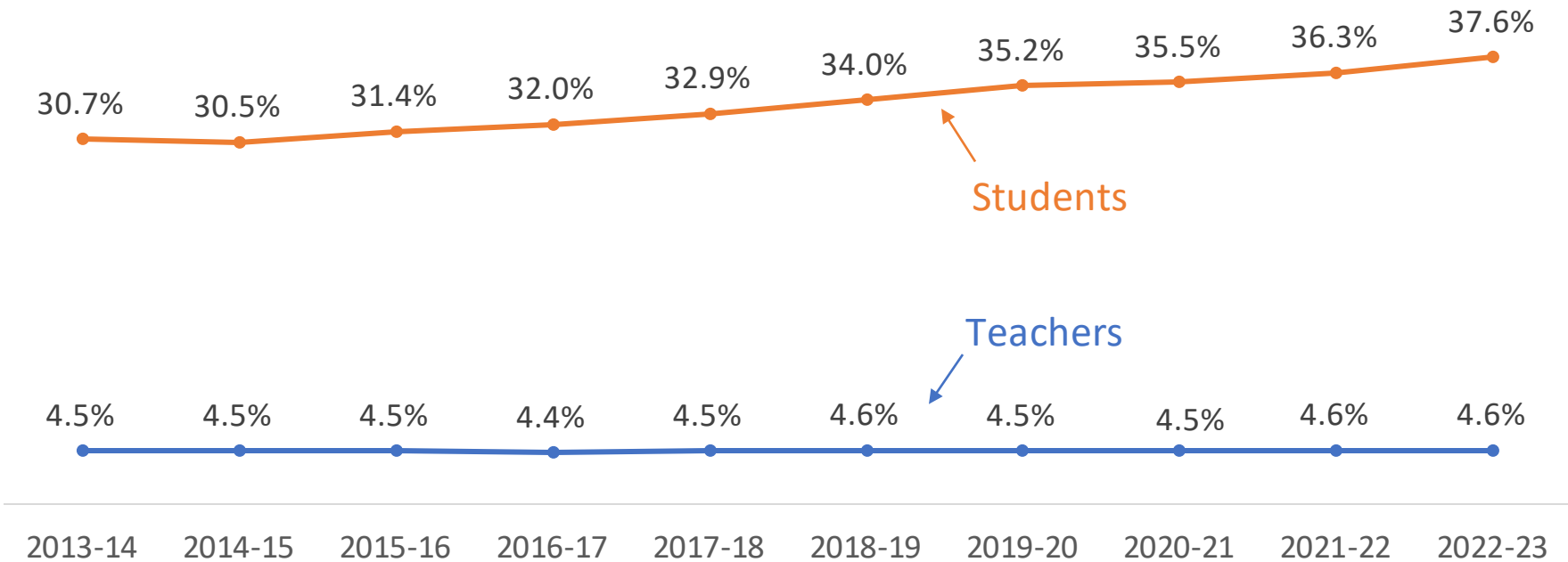
- Allegheny County has 43 public school districts and 25 charter schools serving approximately 145,000 students.
- RFA's analysis of teacher and student data over the past 10 years show a large and growing disparity between teacher and student demographics within the county.

Allegheny County Student and Teacher Race and Ethnicity, 2022-23



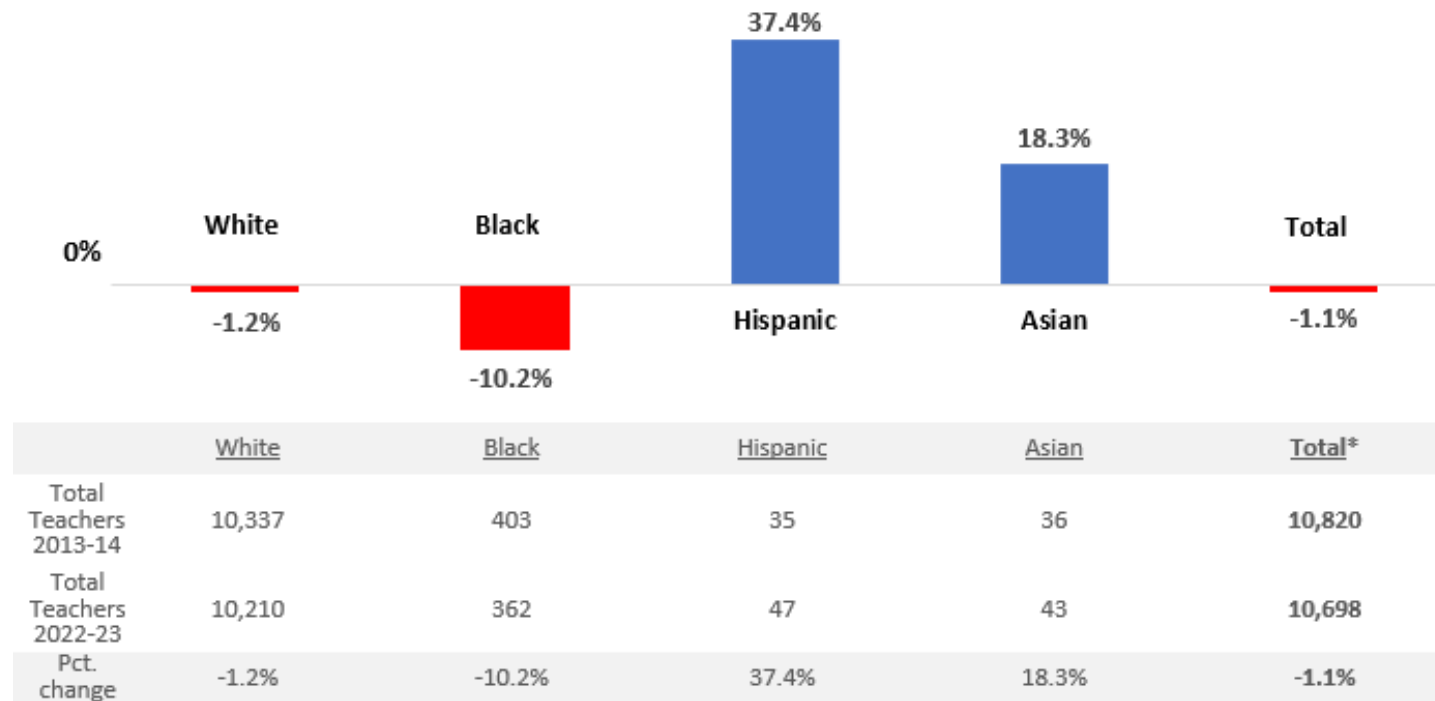
Understanding the Landscape

10-Year Change in Percentage of Students and Teachers of Color in Allegheny County, 2013-14 to 2022-23



The Decline of Black Teachers

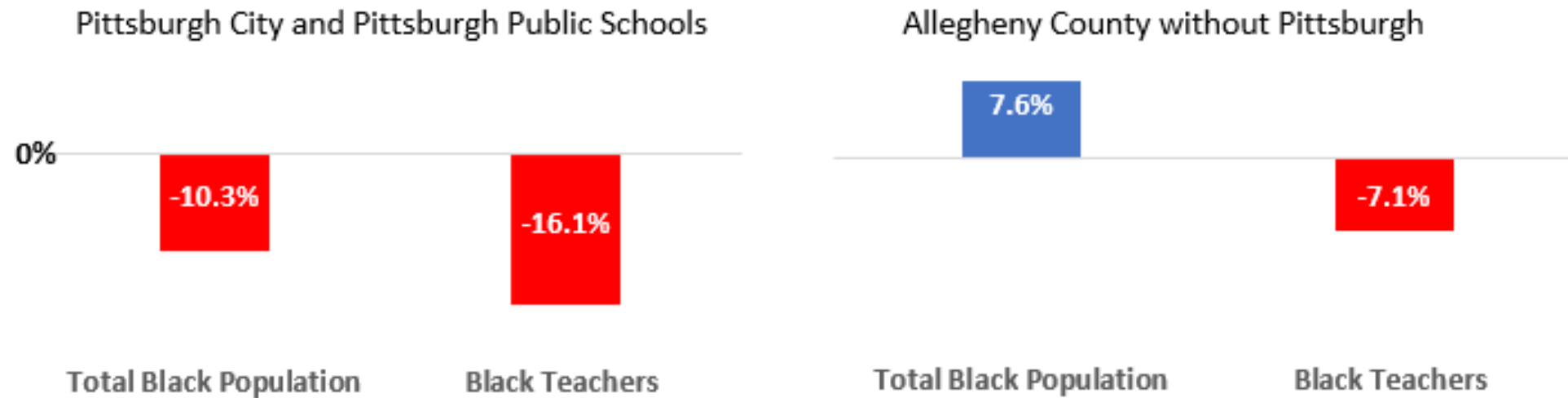
10-Year Percent Change in Number of Teachers in Allegheny County by Race or Ethnicity, 2013-14 to 2022-23



* Total includes teachers identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and two or more races.

The Decline of Black Teachers

Change in Black Population vs Change in Black Teachers: 2013 to 2021



Research Design & Methodology



Research Design

Research Questions

- How do current and former Black teachers understand the attrition of Black teachers from the teacher workforce in Allegheny County?
- What systemic factors—from the school to district to policy level—contribute to Black teacher attrition in Allegheny County?
- What specific supports, systems, and resources are needed to support retention and curb attrition of teachers of color and Black teachers in particular?

Data Collection

- Background research (literature review, media scan, background interviews with field leaders)
- Current and former teacher interviews and focus groups
- Focus group of teacher diversity field leaders

Participants

44 total participants:

- 29 current teachers
- 9 former teachers
- 6 field leaders of teacher diversity initiatives in the region

The teachers represent:

- 23 different PPS schools
- 4 other AC Districts
- 4 different charters/charter networks
- Every grade, K-12
- Multiple subjects, including ELA, Math, Science, Social Studies, Specials/Electives, CTE

Community Engagement

Our research team has been advised by a Research Advisory Council (RAC) and Research Practice Learning Community (RPLC).

- Formulated through our connections/partnership with PEDC
- The RAC included members of the community who are involved with and lead educator diversity efforts, K-12 education, higher ed, and teacher education.
- Members of the RAC have been joined by current teachers who participated in the study to form the RPLC.
- These groups informed the research throughout the phases of the project.

Findings



Key Takeaway 1: Unique Contributions

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

- Special connections with Black students
 - Shared cultural backgrounds, experiences and communities
 - Intentional investment of time and energy
 - Representation and role-modeling
- Unique pedagogies and practices
 - Culturally relevant pedagogies and practices
 - Maintaining high expectations
 - Alternative discipline strategies



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. . . . 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.





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.



Key Takeaway 2: Challenges

Black teachers in Allegheny County face many challenges that impact their experiences as educators. Participants shared that they experience both systemic and interpersonal racism, which work together to create and maintain an environment that poses the following challenges:

- **Racial microaggressions**, including unwanted touching or offensive comments
- **Harm caused by White colleagues**, through condescending or demeaning interactions, exclusion
- **Unjust treatment and retaliation from White district and school administrators**, including unnecessarily punitive behavior and unwarranted retaliation
- **Heavier workloads**, as Black teachers felt they were assigned and took on more responsibilities than white peers
- **Racism toward students**, demonstrated by White teachers and administrators who exhibit deficit perspectives



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.

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.



Key Takeaway 2: Challenges (cont'd.)

Participants also described several major challenges that may be experienced by all teachers in Allegheny County and beyond. Compounded with the challenges unique to Black teachers, they further impact Black teachers' experiences and contribute to Black teachers leaving the profession.

- Lack of support from administration
- Lack of resources and support for students
- Overwhelming workload
- District/LEA policies, mandates, and expectations that limit teacher autonomy
- Instability and unpredictability due to staffing policies and turnover
- Inadequate pay
- Lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic



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.



Key Takeaway 3: Retaining and Sustaining Teachers

Despite the numerous challenges they face, several current Black teachers expressed that they plan to stay in the profession in Allegheny County. Participants shared various factors that contribute to their desire to continue teaching.

- **Love of students**, and the opportunity to play a role in students' growth and success
- **Strong school leaders and positive school culture**, described as collaborative and team-oriented
- **Supportive and affirming networks**, especially those created for Black educators
- **Investment in their careers**, including both the time and money they've invested

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.





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.



Recommendations

Current and former teachers 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
- Increasing support, mentorship, and training

RPLC-developed strategies

- Organized by key stakeholder groups: state policymakers and district and charter school leaders, communities within Allegheny County, and existing teacher diversity initiatives in the region
- These are not exhaustive and are intended to be a starting place

Q&A



Thank you!

Would you like to continue the conversation? Contact us!

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Participants

Characteristic	Current (n=29)		Former (n=9)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
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