



To support new teachers of color, build communities, not committees

BY JAY GARVEY SHAH, SARADA HANUMADASS WEBER, ANTONIO HOYE, MARISA FLOWERS, AND HEATHER LOTT

The Dane County New Teacher Project, a consortium of 17 school districts in Wisconsin, believes that new teacher induction is everyone's responsibility. To that end, the group pools resources from member districts to ensure support for new educators as they improve their effectiveness with students, find joy and purpose in their

careers, and continue in the profession.

In keeping with our decades-long partnership with the New Teacher Center, our work aims to strengthen multiple roles that support new teachers — mentors, coaches, and principals — as well as supporting the new educators themselves. Within this work, a new dimension of support has emerged over the last two years that is showing promise as a practice for supporting and

retaining new teachers of color through a project called Partners for Racial Inclusion, which pairs experienced teachers with novice teachers of color.

The need for such a project became clear as the COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing racial disparities in educational experiences. Locally, the Dane County Equity Consortium explored root causes and sought insights from students throughout the county



From left: Jay Garvey Shah, Marisa Flowers, Sarada Hanumadass Weber, and Antonio Hoye are lead partners in the Partners for Racial Inclusion project in Wisconsin. Photo by Heather Lott.

during a forum on social justice.

One finding from that forum was clear: There was a significant disparity in racial diversity among staff and students, and this disparity factored greatly in how students of color experienced school. Students told of microaggressions, including misrepresentation and underrepresentation in curriculum and among their teachers. Students who could see themselves represented among the school staff were more engaged.

When we looked at data from 25 Dane County Equity Consortium districts (including urban, suburban, and rural communities), we saw that 31% of students identified as people of color, but only 6% of educators did. (See charts on p. 40.)

This pattern was particularly troubling because research shows that students of color benefit when they have teachers who look like them. For example, a Black student's likelihood of graduating from high school increases by 7% and of enrolling in college increases by 13% when that student has just one Black teacher by 3rd grade. The likelihood of college enrollment jumps to 32% higher when that student has two Black teachers by the same age (Gershenson et al., 2018).

With this knowledge, the members of Dane County New Teacher Project and Dane County Equity Consortium recognized that we needed to do more to recruit and retain teachers of color. A group of educators from various roles, districts, and racial backgrounds collaborated to design a pilot project called Partners for Racial Inclusion.

The project called for hiring four lead partners — full-time educators who would work an additional six to eight hours per week, each supporting four novice educators of color from across the county. Project leaders invited experienced teachers to apply and hired the lead partners in July 2021. Outreach to new educators began in August 2021.

DEVELOPING THE PARTNERSHIPS

A racially diverse group of educators and leaders from several districts in Dane County formed a design team. The team felt it was important to honor the well-developed instructional mentoring work already existing in districts.

They agreed the focus of conversation would be to process the experience of living as an educator of color in a vastly white-majority district, county, and state, and that the agenda

WHAT THESE LEAD PARTNERS SAY

Antonio Hoye: “I have a deep appreciation for the opportunities out of my own district that have opened doors for me to experience this with others. ... It has helped me continue to find my value in supporting our students.”

Jay Garvey Shah: “... [T]he level of discrimination and systemic racism and the universality of some of those things are surprising. I don't know if I didn't predict it or if I wasn't thinking about it, but some of the things were unfortunate and came as a surprise.”

Sarada Hanumadass Weber: “What does it mean to be the ‘only’ in my department? The design of this program took the burden of judgment away and freed us to have these conversations.”

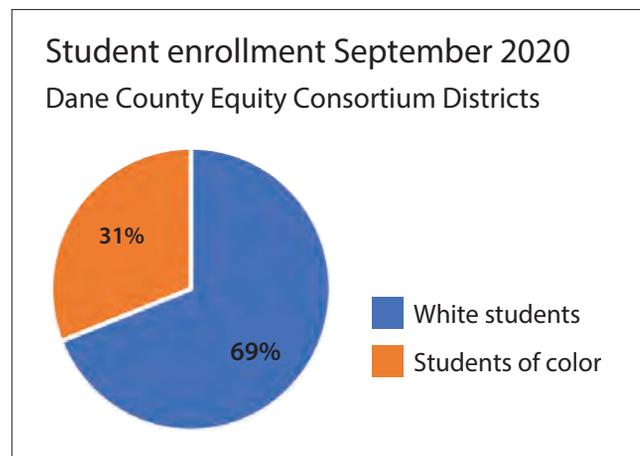
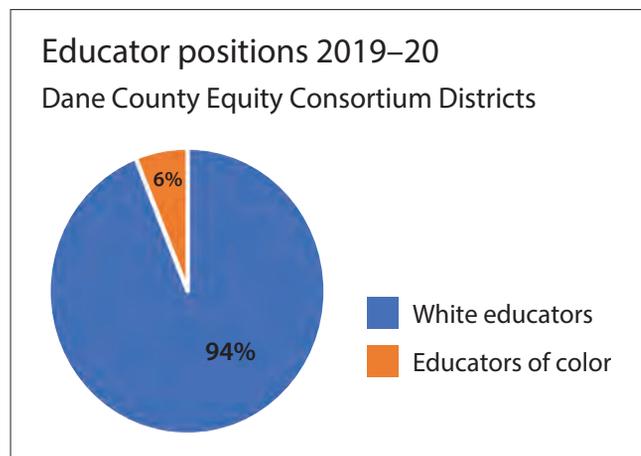
Marisa Flowers: “Community is the primary appreciation. We're all teachers of color, but the backgrounds we all have with experiences, cultures, and ages are all varied. It is a true community with a sense of belonging and a feeling of being heard.”

for each partnership meeting would be determined by the new educators, not the lead partners.

Even more important to designers was that all hierarchies be eliminated — all four experienced lead partners and their 16 new educator colleagues would be equal learners and supporters. To honor this collaborative status, new educators were paid for participating at the same hourly rate as the lead partners.

STUDENT AND EDUCATOR DEMOGRAPHICS

The charts below show the percentage of students and educators in the 25 Dane County Equity Consortium districts who identified as white or people of color.



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Lead partners and new educators met twice monthly for one-on-one conversations. They also organized monthly small-group gatherings made up of a lead partner and three to four new educators. Additionally, all lead partners and new educators joined a quarterly lunch meeting. During these meetings, conversations focused on the experience of working within a majority-white community and how to navigate that community both inside and outside of schools.

Although partners hope and want each other to be successful educators, they recognized that support for the whole person is important and will ultimately lead to success in teaching. They asked: How are you? How are you showing up? How are you navigating the community? The conversations provided a space to talk about teaming, conflicts about race, and things beyond school. They may have led to some discussion of instruction, but that is not their specific purpose.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

As the one-year pilot program came to a close, lead partners and new educators felt they had achieved much of what they set out to do. They

gathered in May to reflect on the year and completed a year-end survey, which revealed several insights highlighted here. Most participants indicated they will choose to remain in their districts, and the overwhelming majority are looking for ways to continue as members of the Partners for Racial Inclusion community.

Lead partners expressed particular appreciation for the experiences with new educators and the potential to share their learning to inform systemic changes in the future. This speaks to the value of the work accomplished this year.

The lead partners and new educators involved with the pilot realize that, although this project's main goal was to provide direct support to educators of color, it also has the potential to effect systemic change by providing feedback to school and district leaders and the larger educational community. Here are key takeaways that they hope will inform school districts as they work to support new educators of color.

Some of the structures and strategies districts have already implemented have been supportive for the educators of color in this pilot

by providing a community of other professionals who care about each other's work. For example, partners express appreciation for collaboration with their teams to share and receive ideas, materials, and curricula during regular and more informal meetings.

Some of the most powerful support has come from administrators and mentors who are responsive and provide intentional, authentic, and meaningful check-ins. Additionally, it has eased the burden for new educators of color when some districts have recognized and provided resources to help with the very real burden of navigating licensing issues with the state.

Through their year-end reflections, partners have also identified some challenges and barriers that need to be addressed.

New educators in the pilot reported that they frequently faced micro- and macroaggressions. They bore the disrespect expressed by colleagues who questioned their legitimacy in the school and criticized their accents and cultural differences. A feeling of isolation persists as some of the new educators struggle to navigate racism and suspicion from the community on top of the stresses of being new to

the profession. When they are the only educator of color in their school or district, the sense of isolation is even more pronounced.

They also bear what has been called the “invisible tax” on teachers of color (Modan, 2022). These educators of color sit on committees on equity and racism, advise student clubs and affinity groups, and feel pressure to speak on all things related to equity and culture. But there is a lack of compensation for those sometimes-invisible extra tasks.

In addition, those who were hired before receiving their license faced the barrier of the state license certification process, which is expensive and time-consuming. At least 50% of new educator partners this year were simultaneously tending to coursework, passing tests, and applying for their licenses while working as new teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Partners for Racial Inclusion believes recruiting and retaining more teachers of color is an urgent social justice issue that cannot be delayed because students deserve teachers of color while those students are still in school. After working together for a year, lead partners and new educators have outlined short- and long-term steps that would help school systems. They believe these steps will communicate belief in educators’ potential as well as providing instrumental support.

Reduce isolation. Districts that hire educators of color could consider placing them in schools and teams with peers and administrators who are also people of color. Offering a system or structure, such as Partners for Racial Inclusion, that supports mentorship and collaboration with other educators of color to discuss conflicts about race and things beyond school will meet the needs of finding community and belonging in an otherwise lonely place.

Compensate professionals for their work. Districts must address the “invisible tax” right away by acknowledging and legitimizing the

extra tasks our educators of color take on and awarding additional compensation for those responsibilities. In this pilot, all partners received compensation to participate, and we recommend implementing similar strategies more broadly.

Give ongoing feedback and support. An administrator who checks in both formally and informally sends a message of commitment to and investment in an early-career professional. Peers and mentors can also provide encouragement and support. It is important for colleagues to communicate that they see and recognize both the skills educators of color bring to their work and the stress they shoulder of being new and often isolated.

Cultivate leadership. Many of the tasks beginning educators of color are engaged with are decidedly leadership activities (for example, participating and leading equity teams, working with student clubs, and specifically supporting both colleagues and students of color). We recommend school systems and leaders formally recognize this type of leadership as an official role with pay and professional learning. This would legitimize and formalize the work often being done behind the scenes. Absent that recognition and support, this work is accomplished voluntarily and adds to the extra burden influencing new educators to leave their positions.

Prioritize professional learning for all staff to become conscious of systemic racism and take action to repair it. All colleagues are responsible for this systems work. The work on equity and inclusion needs to strengthen its focus on teaching adults to collaborate within a diversifying workforce alongside the continued focus on students. Ideally, this will support all colleagues to welcome and include those professionals who may be the only (or one of the few) persons of color within their school or district.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

If hiring and retaining more teachers of color is a priority, we must

commit to building *community* rather than launching a siloed initiative such as a committee charged with hiring more teachers of color. In our Partners for Racial Inclusion work, we find that building a sense of belonging and caring for one another has meant partners can collaborate in a safe place, generate joy, and find the support to continue forward in the profession. For everyone involved, it has been rewarding and enjoyable to know we are having an impact on one another’s well-being through a trusting community.

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