



LEARNING LEADERS

Baruti K. Kafele

THE URGENT NEED TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN BLACK MALE TEACHERS

We need to not only recruit and hire Black men, but also value and support them so they stay in the profession and make a difference for the long term.

I knew even before I landed my first teaching position that my presence as a Black male educator was going to matter. My main purpose for entering the education ranks was to inform, inspire, and empower the Black male learner. I have always cared deeply for all my students, but my “why” — the purpose that drives me — is disproving the stereotypes about Black boys and proving to the world what they are capable of achieving.

Black men comprise less than 2% of America’s teaching force (Borowski & Will, 2021). That means that, for most Black children, the likelihood of learning from a Black male teacher is slim to none. That’s problematic for all students, but especially Black boys, because, as the expression says, “I can’t be what I can’t see.”

On top of the invisibility of Black men in schools, scores of Black children go home to households where Mom is playing the dual role of mother and father. That means many Black boys spend their days and nights without direct exposure to positive Black men. Although many mothers are getting the job done on their own with strength and grace, there are countless mothers who are, understandably, struggling, especially with meeting the needs of their boys.

That’s why there is an urgency to increasing the number of Black men in America’s schools, particularly where Black boys are enrolled. We need to not only recruit and hire Black men, but also value and support them so they stay in the profession and make a difference for the long term.

As a member of several Black educator social media groups, I read a lot of comments from Black male educators about working in America’s schools. I hear the reasons that so many of them want to leave the profession. Salary is a given, because teachers are grossly underpaid. But it’s the frequent comments about lack of intellectual respect that stand out to me.

Many Black male teachers say that their administrators treat them exclusively as disciplinarians, calling on them frequently to discipline Black children — even those not assigned to their classes — and ignoring them when they want to talk about curriculum, instruction, and the academic program. The administrators’ lack of interest in their professional expertise renders them voiceless, leading to frustration and, eventually, a desire to leave the profession.

We need to think differently about how to recruit, retain, and empower the Black male teacher. The first step, how to recruit Black men into America’s classrooms, has been an obsession of mine for over three decades. One of the most important lessons I’ve learned in that time is that we need to start early. The Black men we are looking for are already in our schools as students. But we fail to identify and prepare them to come back to our schools as teachers. What if we didn’t miss the opportunities to bring them into the fold?

One day, when I was a high school principal, I was walking the halls and began to wonder

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We can show new teachers that life is full of falling and recovering.

Ask yourself: Am I open to feedback? Have I built the skills to manage myself when challenging experiences happen? Do I have strategies for keeping myself emotionally and psychologically healthy, and am I open about using

those strategies?

New teachers are watching us to see what it means to be an educator. While we are providing lesson plan support and little pick-me-ups like a latte cart on Fridays, it is just as important to demonstrate vulnerability, model positive strategies for dealing with challenges, and communicate

transparently about our struggles and recovery from them. Those actions should become an ongoing part of new teacher support, too.

REFERENCE

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how many students had ever thought of becoming teachers. I got on the PA system, begged my staff to forgive the interruption, and asked any students who were interested in a career in teaching to report to the cafeteria. I could not believe the large number of students who reported, many of whom were Black boys.

As a result, I created a club called the Newark Tech Future Teachers. We met twice monthly for two years and delved into many education topics. We also attended conferences for future teachers in New Jersey. I loved being part of developing the next generation of Black male educators and seeing the impact this could make on those young men and their future students. My biggest regret about my early retirement was missing the opportunity to one day hire my former students. At least 10 of the students from our club are now elementary and high school teachers.

I'm proud of this outcome and these young men. But I also know that a systemic, district-level approach to cultivating future educators would make a bigger impact, especially if conducted in partnership with local universities with incentives for enrollment in teacher education, such as scholarship and loan forgiveness programs for those who commit to teaching after college. Principals can play an important role in these

programs, but we can't do it at scale by ourselves.

Retention and empowerment are as important as recruitment and hiring. As Black men are hired to teach in America's classrooms, they must be respected and appreciated as educators from the outset. They cannot be seen as the answer to the school's behavioral challenges. They must feel empowered in their teaching positions. That means administrators must welcome their input about the academic program. Their peers must respect their leadership. Support staff must recognize their nurturing for children. The whole community must show them that they are needed and appreciated.

Teaching is the most important and influential profession on the planet. Black men should and must be part of it. When Black men are appreciated, respected, and given the opportunity to be more than just disciplinarians, they can make a significant difference in the lives of children, especially Black children. They can be positive role models for Black children, serving as examples of manhood and teachers of manhood for Black boys. They can demonstrate leadership and mentorship for Black children so they can grow up to be Black educators themselves. They can be an alternative to the negative and destructive Black male images that so many Black children see portrayed in the media and, in some cases, their own

communities.

Empowering Black male educators also brings a vital perspective into schools that serve Black children. When Black male teachers are seen and respected, they can monitor and help address the problems, issues, and concerns that exist within the schools, especially around the teaching of Black children. They bring a personal and professional perspective that can be beneficial for the entire school community. They can also be champions of culturally responsive teaching — for example, by infusing Black history and social justice throughout the curriculum in meaningful ways. And as their careers develop, they can advance into leadership or administrative positions and spread their talents and skills even farther.

I know what it's like to not feel welcomed or respected, and I understand deeply, viscerally, why that drives Black male educators to leave. We have to change that pattern, and we start by changing the environment.

REFERENCE

Borowski, J. & Will, M. (2021, May 4). What Black men need from schools to stay in the teaching profession. *Education Week.* www.edweek.org/leadership/what-black-men-need-from-schools-to-stay-in-the-teaching-profession/2021/05 ■