

Closing Equity Gaps in Our Teacher Ranks is Core to Meeting Workforce Needs **By Frederick W. Clark Jr., Esq.**

Massachusetts is the recognized national leader in education attainment with 57 percent of its population having earned some college credential. Despite our success, the state still faces an estimated shortfall of between 55,000-65,000 college-educated workers by 2025. Massachusetts employers have been coping with these challenges for years, only to see them further exacerbated by the pandemic. This shortfall is only expected to intensify as the number of students graduating from high school declines over the next decade and Baby Boomers continue to exit the workforce. In a state with a knowledge-based economy, the reduction in the number of college-educated workers threatens our economic growth and competitive position.

The root of this problem can be found in the disparate educational outcomes of different segments of the population. Massachusetts faces persistent equity gaps whereby white students are more likely to graduate high school and complete a college degree. In Massachusetts, 48% of White residents possess bachelor's degrees, compared to only 28% of African American and 21% of Latinx residents.

It is not only an ethical but an economic imperative that we do everything possible to eliminate these disparities. The composition of our high school graduating classes is changing dramatically: the percentage of white students in Massachusetts high school graduating classes will decline from 82% to 56% by 2032, while the percentage of Latinx and African American students is projected to increase from 6% to 22% and from 7% to 11%, respectively.

This data leads to one inexorable conclusion: a key to solving our need to produce more college-educated residents is by advancing our students of color, particularly those living in Gateway Cities. If we closed the existing opportunity gaps between white students and their Black and Latinx peers beginning in high school and continuing through college graduation, we could increase the number of African American college graduates by more than 30,000 and the number of Latinx college graduates by more than 75,000 by 2038. These increases would more than cover projected shortfalls in the need for college-educated residents for our high skills-dependent economy.

We must ensure that more students of color persist and graduate from high school and then enter, persist and graduate from college. Of course, this is a highly complex issue with multiple dimensions. The Department of Higher Education under the leadership of Commissioner Carlos Santiago has put forth a bold Equity Agenda that is advancing on multiple fronts to eliminate racial and ethnic educational disparities.

Another area of focus should be on developing and implementing a “grow your own teacher” strategy. Research into educational inequities points to the critical importance of teachers, who have a profound impact on student learning, attitudes, expectations and perceptions that education is their path to a better life.

There is significant evidence that teacher diversity makes an important difference in students’ immediate school success and also in their long-term persistence and aspirations. Students of color who are taught by well-prepared teachers from their own cultures and attend schools where there is a critical mass of teachers who look like them, are more likely to want to come to school, stay in school and learn.

However, there are marked shortages of teachers of color in our schools. In Brockton, for example, 78% of students identify as African American or Latinx but only 27% of teachers identify as African American or Latinx. The disparities for Fall River (39% v. 7%) and New Bedford (55% v. 6%) are even more stark.

While teaching can be very attractive to students of color as a career path, there are impediments to recruiting and retaining diverse teacher candidates and teachers. However, across the country, a number of states and cities have had success with Grow Your Own Teacher programs that link cities, school districts, community-based organizations and higher education institutions in an effort to recruit and prepare more teachers of color and to support them once they enter the teaching ranks.

Under the premise that students “can’t be who they don’t see,” recruiting more teachers of color would create a virtuous cycle where students of color taught by teachers of color increasingly aspire to be teachers themselves.

Hopefully, the state will follow the lead of state Representative Carol Doherty in establishing a commission that would study promising Grow Your Own Teacher programs and strategies to improve the diversity of our teacher workforce. We need a more systematic, statewide approach to this issue because it is so critical right now to the future of our workforce, economy and creating a more just Commonwealth.

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