

Why Teacher

DIVERSITY MATTERS

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Introduction

Thirteen years ago, Fiorella Lazarte Beal was inspired to become a teacher.

Beal, who immigrated to the United States from Peru when she was 21, was volunteering at a nonprofit organization in Wyoming when she began tutoring a Latina kindergartener—and saw herself in the girl.

“She was born in the U.S., but her parents were from Mexico,” Beal says. “On the immigrant component, I could relate a lot.”

Beal’s time tutoring got her thinking about teacher diversity and “the level of impact I could have with a person, how the relationship could stimulate growth in learning.” Beal got her bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Western Governors University in 2014; today, she’s a third grade Spanish dual immersion teacher at Munger Mountain Elementary School in Jackson, Wyoming. She teaches math, language arts, social studies, and science, and she conducts all of her classes in Spanish.

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Teacher diversity matters, because it gives students role models who can help them succeed.

—Fiorella Lazarte Beal


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Teacher diversity matters, Beal says, because it gives students role models who can help them succeed.

“They see adults who look like them and speak the same language,” she says. “It’s important for students to know they have equal access, and to have somebody that fights for them, advocates for them.”

A diverse teaching pool benefits every student. But despite recent initiatives to address the teacher diversity gap, bringing teachers of color into the profession—and keeping them there—remains a challenge.

The Growing Diversity Gap



In its 2016 report “The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce,” the [U.S. Department of Education](#) predicted that students of color—including Black, Latinx, Asian, and American Indian students—will make up 56 percent of the student body in public schools by 2024. By 2060, the [Brookings Institution](#) projects, white students will account for only 34 percent of the students in U.S. public schools, as minority populations continue to skew younger than white populations and as white students continue to enroll in private schools at higher rates than non-white students.

Yet nearly 83 percent of educators in elementary and secondary schools are white, according to a study published in [AERA Open](#), the peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research

Association, and white college graduates are nearly twice as likely as non-white graduates to major in education. Moreover, the Brookings Institution found that non-white teachers were more likely to abandon the profession at four key moments along the teacher pipeline: attending and completing; majoring in education or pursuing another teacher preparation pathway; getting hired as a teacher; and staying in teaching. The [Brookings Institution](#) also notes that though the public teacher workforce has been slowly growing more racially diverse over the last three decades, the diversity gap for public school teachers is actually widening across generations, as millennial teachers are less diverse than their peers in baby boomer and Generation X. Unless a more diverse pool of educators is created, the teacher diversity gap will continue to widen.

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Beal says that representing the language and culture of her Latinx students in her classroom helps them understand that they're vital to their community. At the same time, she adds, the other students benefit from the dual immersion experience by learning a new language and culture.

“When you are exposed to people from different countries and cultures, beyond just broadening your world, it also enhances your empathy,” Beal says.

Beal's sentiment echoes what education experts say is the primary benefit of teacher diversity: It helps every student prepare to navigate adulthood in an increasingly diverse society. A study published by the [Learning Policy Institute](#) found that students of color who had teachers of color had fewer unexcused absences, performed better academically, tested better in reading and math, were more likely to graduate from high school, and were more inclined to attend college.

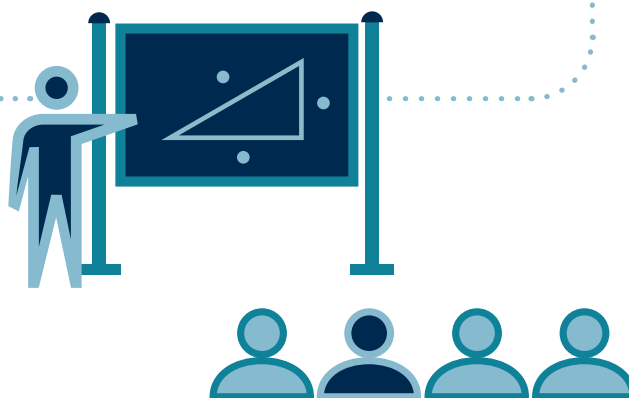
The U.S. Department of Education notes that teachers of color are more likely to refer students of color to gifted programs, help students of color confront racism, advocate for students of color in the school system, and develop more trusting relationships with students, especially students from similar cultural backgrounds. It also notes that teachers of color are

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positive role models for every student and can help break down negative stereotypes and prepare students to live and work in a multiracial society.

Research and anecdotal evidence also provide insight into how the absence of teacher diversity affects students of color. A [Johns Hopkins University](#) study found that white teachers are 30 percent less likely than African American teachers to expect Black students to complete a college degree and nearly 40 percent less likely to expect Black students to finish high school. These implicit biases might be reflected in teachers' classroom behaviors and could hurt students.

Though many studies have looked into how equity and achievement gaps affect African American and Latinx students, far fewer have investigated the effect on Asian American students. The Asian American community—which comprises nearly 50 ethnicities and more than 300 spoken languages—is misrepresented by the model minority stereotype, [Teach for America](#) notes, and the notion that Asian American students are a homogeneous, universally



successful group harms its most vulnerable and underserved students.

"We're not thought of as a population that has a high need, so we're often not invited to those conversations," Noël Harmon, president and executive director of Asian & Pacific Islander Scholars (formerly the Asian & Pacific Islander Scholarship Fund), told Teach for America, "but two-thirds of our students are first-generation, low-income, and certainly are a part of the equity gap."

Teachers of color also benefit from a diverse peer group. According to the Learning Policy Institute, greater teacher diversity could mitigate the feelings of isolation, frustration, and fatigue that sometimes drive teachers of color from the profession.

Teacher Diversity Initiatives



Providing a pathway for students of color to become educators requires re-evaluating the recruitment, preparation, and development practices within traditional teaching programs.

—Mamie Pack, Course Mentor,
WGU Teachers College
Diversity and Inclusion



Encouraging more people of color to enter the teaching profession and stay there is the shared goal of a number of national, state, and local teacher diversity initiatives, many of which have launched in recent years.

One such initiative is the [Diverse and Learner-Ready Teachers Initiative](#), started by the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2018. The program engages 10 states—Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, New Jersey, and New York—and 30 national organizations to create policies for diversifying the teaching workforce and ensuring that every educator recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in their teaching. The initiative is part of the council’s effort to have at least 15 states increase racial diversity in the teacher workforce by 2025.

In October 2019, the [NewSchools VentureFund](#) announced the first recipients in a \$3.5 million teacher diversity grant program funded by the Walton Family Foundation. The 14 recipients included two nationally focused organizations; the remaining 12 were schools, associations, and programs from eight states and the District of Columbia. The efforts are intended to boost



Teacher Diversity **Initiatives**

student achievement in PreK–12 education, especially among students from low-income communities. In addition to financial assistance, grantees also gained access to the NewSchools’ network of experts, who can help manage growing diversity programs.

A notable example of a local diversity initiative is the Denver-based [Pathways2Teaching](#). Launched in 2010, Pathways2Teaching has helped nearly 300 11th and 12th graders in Denver metro

school districts—most of them from low-income communities and many of them the first in their families to graduate from high school—explore teaching careers through a concurrent enrollment program with the University of Colorado Denver’s School of Education & Human Development. That success has made Pathways2Teaching a model program: In 2015, the [Colorado state House](#) passed an initiative that encouraged school districts to build programs like Pathways2Teaching.



Teacher Education Scholarships and Grants



Getting students of color interested in teaching won't close the teacher diversity gap alone. Providing financial assistance to students who need it will help get them into the classroom.

Beal sees a link between the low incomes prevalent in the Latinx population of Teton County, Wyoming, and the small number of Hispanic teachers—and college graduates, for that matter—in the area.

"We know that poverty and the lack of education go hand in hand," she says.

Scholarships and grants are imperative for students who would find it burdensome to repay their student loans at the start of their teaching careers. Student debt, the Center for American Progress says, could be a barrier to bridging the teacher diversity gap because it could deter Black and Latinx students, who are more likely to carry student loan debt, from pursuing public service careers like teaching, which typically pay lower starting salaries than other careers requiring the same level of education.

Teacher Education Scholarships and Grants

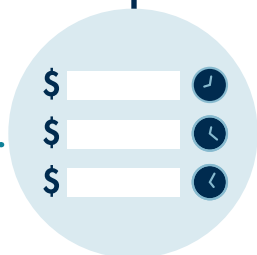
Fortunately, there are scholarships and grants available for students of color who want to earn teaching degrees:



The federal [TEACH Grant](#) provides up to \$4,000 to students pursuing their first bachelor's degree or graduate degree who agree to teach for a specified time in a low-income area. The recipients must also specialize in a high-need field, such as bilingual education, foreign language, mathematics, reading specialization, science, or special education.



The website collegescholarships.org compiles diversity scholarships available to education majors from nonprofit organizations, as well as a few state and local teaching scholarships.



The website scholarships.com also lists national, state, and local teaching grants and scholarships, displaying them in a chart that shows how much aid each provides and the application deadline for each.

An online search pairing the state or city you live in with terms like “teacher education scholarships” or “teacher education financial aid” could drum up offerings at the state and local levels.

Earning a Teaching Degree



It allowed me to keep my job and connection to the community and get a degree.



For Beal, enrolling in WGU's self-paced, competency-based program made earning her teaching degree manageable and affordable.

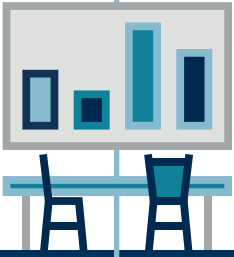
"It allowed me to keep my job and connection to the community and get a degree," she says.

And she reaps the rewards of her degree every day with her enthusiastic third graders.

"It's so fun!" she said. "They are really sweet, they're curious, and they want to make their teacher happy. They are hard workers."

The demand is great for teachers like Beal, who can be role models for and bring out the best in students who look like them. Students of color do better in school when taught by teachers who look like them, and greater teacher diversity helps every student learn to engage with and respect people of every background—an essential skill for anyone preparing to live and work in our increasingly diverse society.





What's next?

If you've been thinking of going back to school to earn a degree and perhaps pursue a new career field, consider whether teaching might be your calling.

[Explore what WGU has to offer](#)