

Diversity low in educator courses at Mass. colleges

State encourages more nonwhites to be teachers

By **James Vaznis**

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The lack of racial diversity among Massachusetts teachers — a growing concern across the state — can be traced to an insufficient number of people of color enrolling in educator programs at local colleges, according to a Globe review of state data.

School staffing statewide hovers around 92 percent white. Teacher preparation programs are the primary pipeline for recruiting a more diverse teaching workforce, but students of color make up just 13 percent of the 22,000 students enrolled in public and private programs training the next generation of teachers across Massachusetts.

The problem is so dire that the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has posted on its website the enrollment of teaching programs by race and ethnicity, and on Tuesday, will present a new [educator diversity initiative](#).

As part of that, districts will be urged to reach out to students of color when they're still in high school and encourage them to pursue careers in education. The initiative also calls for an in-depth review of recruitment and admission policies at the state's teacher preparation programs as well as closer monitoring of minority students as they progress through the programs and take state certification exams.

Many theories abound for the low enrollment, but the main reason could be a public relations problem facing the teaching profession, said Mitchell Chester, the state commissioner of elementary and secondary education.

“For too many people, teaching is not a desired profession,” Chester said. “Too often, there is a negative perception of what it means to be a teacher, and for people who have multiple options for careers, teaching is the one they would choose the least. Our society, unfortunately, doesn't hold teachers in high esteem.”

Hiring more teachers of color is emerging as a priority for state and local officials as Massachusetts experiences a major shift in student demographics. Over the last two decades, the segment of students who are African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American has grown from 21 percent of statewide enrollment to 35 percent this year.

Earlier this year, the Boston public schools stepped up recruitment of teachers of color, as the number of black teachers fell below a decades-old federal court order that requires at least 25 percent of the teaching force to be black. Boston officials expect to release the results of the recruitment effort in the coming weeks.

Many educators believe a more diverse workforce could help teachers better connect with their students and keep them engaged in learning. But debate persists on how much schools need to diversify their workforces, with many educators maintaining that top-notch teaching — regardless of the race or ethnicity of the teacher — trumps other factors.

Administrators in Massachusetts districts, like those in other states, have long lamented that one of the biggest barriers to diversifying their workforces has been low enrollment of minority students in teacher preparation programs.

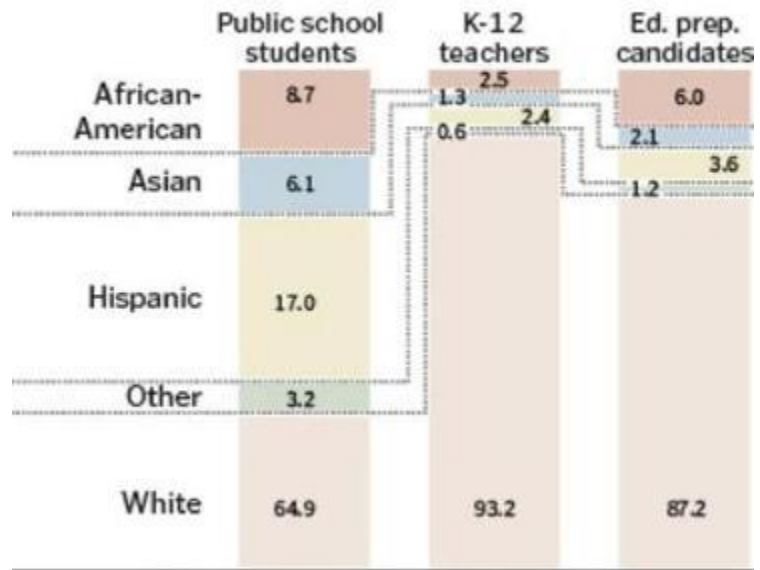
“We are all going after the same small pool,” said Kathleen Moran, executive director of human resources for the Brockton public schools, noting that it can be a challenge to lure candidates who have no personal connection to the community.

Particularly problematic is the state university system, by far the largest producer of teachers and administrators in Massachusetts, accounting for more than one-third of enrollment statewide. Students of color account for less than 8 percent of enrollment in teacher preparation programs at nearly all of the state university campuses, including Bridgewater State, Salem State, and Framingham State universities.

Private colleges tend to have slightly more diverse enrollment. For instance, students of color in teacher training programs at Boston College, Boston University, and Lesley University range between 11 and 20 percent.

Racial disparities

Percentage of each racial category reported for Massachusetts



SOURCE: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Student and teacher figures from 2013-2014, Ed. prep figure from 2011-2012. DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF

College officials acknowledged that minority student enrollment is lower than they would like and said they are trying to increase the numbers.

“It’s a really significant issue,” said Mary Beth Lawton, director of the education division at Lesley University in Cambridge.

Lawton spent Friday with 12 high school students taking an introductory education course and learning about the admissions process at Lesley, through a nonprofit program called Today’s Students Tomorrow’s Teachers, which works with economically and culturally diverse students. Ten of the students were minorities.

The state is pushing to expand this program as well as another in Boston to lure more students of color into teaching.

Boston officials also have been tapping community and nonprofit organizations to find people of color with college degrees who may be interested in teaching, and people who have teaching degrees but are not licensed yet. “Potential teachers are out there,” said Barbara Fields, an executive board member of the Black Educators Alliance of Massachusetts. “They may not be ready at this moment but they would like to become teachers.”

But getting students to enroll is only part of the problem. A state task force that in recent months examined the lack of diversity in teaching programs also raised concerns about students receiving adequate support to make it to graduation and to pass the state’s teacher licensing exam, long plagued with a disparity in pass rates among test-takers of different racial backgrounds. Worcester State University is already working on that front. Its Latino Education Institute created a teaching corps program three years ago to support students already majoring in education as well as to persuade those in other majors to consider teaching. The program pays students \$1,000 a semester to work in local schools in recognition that many students are struggling to pay for college.

“We’ve seen students switch majors to education or get permanent jobs in the Worcester schools while they are still studying, usually as substitute teachers or parent liaisons,” said Mary Jo Marion, the institute’s executive director. “It’s a win for our students and the public schools.”

Ross Wilson, Boston’s assistant superintendent for human capital, said a better avenue to recruit educators of color could be through alternative teacher preparation programs, such as Teach for America and the Boston Teacher Residency program, which have enrollments of people of color of 29 percent and 46 percent respectively. “We, as Boston, can’t wait for ed schools to find more linguistically, culturally diverse students,” Wilson said. “We have to develop our own pipeline.”

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