

## Building the Black Male Educators' Pipeline

Jamila Watson  
Jonathan Rochkind

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## Introduction

As a nation, we need to reverse the underrepresentation of Black K–12 teachers overall and specifically the shortage of Black male teachers in K–12 classrooms. Black males represent about 6% of the adult U.S. population, but less than 2% of the 3 million teachers in the K–12 teacher workforce.<sup>1</sup> By the third grade, Black students who have had at least one Black teacher (female or male) are 9% more likely to graduate high school and 13% more likely to enroll in college. Having two Black teachers boosts Black students’ college enrollment to 19%.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers have long noted that the role model of a Black male teacher in the classroom can significantly influence Black male students’ self-image, in part because Black teachers are more likely to be familiar with the unique cultural needs of Black students. Among key findings in the research are that, for Black male students, having even just one Black male teacher correlates with advanced course taking in high school, greater likelihood of attending college, and fewer disciplinary issues.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

To examine the core factors that may account for the underrepresentation of Black male teachers, ETS’s Policy Evaluation & Research Center (PERC) and the ETS Praxis® program co-convened two virtual seminars in partnership with The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, The National Urban League, The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, and the Western Pennsylvania Consortium of Educators with the Black Male Teachers Initiative: *Building the Black Male Educators’ Pipeline Through Effective Recruitment* (January 26, 2021) and *Structures for Success: Supporting, Developing and Retaining Black Male Educators* (May 19, 2021).

The seminars focused on three factors related to the underrepresentation of Black male K–12 teachers:

- Recruitment of Black male teachers
- Professional development and retention of Black male teachers
- Ways to identify and expand career pathways for Black male educators and enliven their experience as teachers

By assembling participants from school districts, nonprofits, colleges and universities, government agencies, and faith-based organizations already engaged in developing solutions, the seminars created opportunities to share information, ideas, policies, and practices for reversing the alarming shortage of Black male teachers in the nation’s K–12 schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, D. (2015, Fall). Black male educators: Prepared to teach. *Diversity in Ed*, 30–31.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, D. (2015, Fall). Black male educators: Prepared to teach. *Diversity in Ed*, 30–31.

<sup>3</sup> Gershenson, S., Hart, C. M. D., Hyman, J., Lindsay, C., & Papageorge, N. W. (2018). *The long-run impacts of same-race teachers* (Working Paper 25254). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25254>

<sup>4</sup> Hart, C. M. D. (2020). An honors teacher like me: Effects of access to same-race teachers on Black students’ advanced-track enrollment and performance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(2), 163–187. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373719898470>

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay, C. A., & Hart, C. M. D. (2017). Exposure to same-race teachers and student disciplinary outcomes for Black students in North Carolina. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(3), 485–510. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44983402>

### *Black Male Students and Teachers:*

By the third grade, Black students who have had at least one Black teacher (female or male) are 9% more likely to graduate high school and 13% more likely to enroll in college. Having two Black teachers boosts Black students' college enrollment to 19%.<sup>6</sup>

Black students are less likely than White students to report feeling that their teachers respect them and empathize with their challenges and more likely to view school as “a punitive learning environment.”<sup>7</sup>

Black male students are often torn between a desire to do well in school versus behaving according to negative social stereotypes, a conflict that is often sharpened by racial discrimination in class.<sup>8</sup>

In 2022, 55% of public-school students are expected to be students of color, but only 28% education degree and certificate pursuers were people of color.<sup>9</sup>

## The Power of Black Male Teachers



Brandon Flood, Pennsylvania Board of Pardons; Esther Bush, Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh; L-Mani Viney, Piscataway High School; Rodney Robinson, Virgie Binford Education Center

A panel discussion at the first seminar explored the impact on Black students of having Black male teachers as role models. The discussion was moderated by **Esther Bush**, President and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh and founder of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School, and included **Rodney Robinson**, the Council of Chief State School Officers' 2019 National Teacher of the Year, and **L-Mani S. Viney**, Dean of Students for the Piscataway High School in Piscataway, New Jersey.

<sup>6</sup> Gershenson, S., Hart, C. M. D., Hyman, J., Lindsay, C., & Papageorge, N. W. (2018). *The long-run impacts of same-race teachers* (Working Paper 25254). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25254>

<sup>7</sup> Toldson, I. A. (2013). Race matters in the classroom. In C. W. Lewis & I. A. Toldson (Eds.), *Black male teachers: Diversifying the United States' teacher workforce* (pp.20–23). Emerald Publishing.

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, D. C. (2016). Black boys in middle school: Towards first-class citizenship in a first-class society. In S. R. Harper & J. L. Wood (Eds.), *Advancing Black male student success from preschool through Ph.D* (pp.45–60). Stylus Publishing.

<sup>9</sup> American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. (2022). *Colleges of education: A national portrait*. <https://aacte.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Colleges-of-Education-A-National-Portrait-Executive-Summary.pdf>

Robinson, now a senior advisor with the Richmond, Virginia Public Schools, reflected that, while growing up in rural Virginia, he only had one Black teacher. He said that the absence of a Black male teacher and/or mentor throughout K–12 propelled him and many of his peers to enroll at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) once they graduated from high school.

“We had to get that cultural relevancy that was missing throughout our entire K–12 experience,” said Robinson. The mentorship and familial environment at HBCUs cultivated a desire to give back. His comments resonated with Viney of Piscataway High School in New Jersey, who noted that, for Black male educators, there is a “level of advocacy” in the classroom as well as a “spoken language” that is only understood by young Black men and Black women.

“There is a way in which we can see beyond the trauma and understand the traumas that they go through,” he said, and “see the images that [Black students] may want to put on and go beyond and get them on a proper trajectory.”



Doris Smith-Ribner, Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court Judge Emeritus; E. Wyatt Gordon, ETS; Hal Smith, National Urban League

Indeed, the research supports Viney’s conclusions. “We know that Black male educators leverage their situated knowledge and experience as assets for all students,” said **E. Wyatt Gordon**, the former Executive Director of Professional Educator Programs in the Student and Teacher Assessment division at ETS. “Black male teachers serve as relatable role models for diverse students, raise the bar by setting higher expectations for students of diverse backgrounds, and are more likely to commit to careers in our most under-resourced schools [where teachers are desperately needed]. Critically, we also know that diverse teachers—including Black male educators—positively impact the educational achievement of racially diverse students and strengthen teacher quality.”

Gordon, himself a former teacher, noted that in 1950, nearly half of all Black professionals in the United States were teachers. Since the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, this percentage has continued to wane rapidly and dramatically.<sup>10</sup>

“The history of Black professional participation in the education workforce provides a possibility of what could be if we are serious about our commitment to quality education through recruiting,

<sup>10</sup> Will, M. (2019, May 14). 65 years after ‘Brown v. Board,’ where are all the Black educators? *Education Week*.

<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/65-years-after-brown-v-board-where-are-all-the-black-educators/2019/05>



retaining, and supporting diverse voices in the classroom—because as the data makes clear, diverse educators elevate the performance of all students in classrooms across our country,” he said.

Gordon emphasized that each stakeholder in the educator pipeline has work to do to support diverse classrooms.

“We are here today to highlight the issue, breathe life into solutions, connect with our colleagues, and to seek out remedies and move the needle for diverse teachers and students alike,” he said.

“Black male students deserve teachers in their classrooms who motivate and encourage them, do everything every single day to make sure that those youngsters get the equal opportunity and educational advancement that they deserve like all other children in this nation,” said **Doris Smith-Ribner**, a Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court Judge Emeritus. A representative of the Western Pennsylvania Consortium of Educators with the Black Male Teachers Initiative, she has long advocated for education reform, particularly as it relates to diversifying the teaching profession.

According to **Hal Smith**, Senior Vice President for Education, Youth Development, and Health at the National Urban League, who presented at both sessions, all Black students can benefit from Black teachers of any gender. By third grade, he noted, Black students who have had at least one Black teacher are 7% more likely to graduate high school and 13% more likely to enroll in college. After having two Black teachers, Black student college enrollment jumps to 32%.

## Recruiting Black Male Teachers



Roy Jones, Clemson University

**Roy Jones**, Provost and Distinguished Professor of Education at Clemson University, called for a “collective vision” to address widening racial disparities in the classroom. He noted that change will be minimal until school districts and institutions of higher education collaborate on becoming much more “intentional” about recruitment and retention. He offered two suggestions:

1. **Take a Holistic Recruitment Approach.** A strategic focus on recruitment calls for a full-throttle engagement with various stakeholders and formalization of the process. Such an approach, he added, might include memorandums of understanding among stakeholders on a

division of labor<sup>11</sup> and a strategy to assist college students of color with standardized assessments so that they can successfully pivot into careers in the classroom.

- 2. Deepen a Focus on Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic in K–12.** “The Praxis hurdle, for especially students of color and teacher candidates of color, needs to be solved at the K–12 level,” he said about the licensure exam that tests the knowledge and skills needed to prepare an individual for a future career in the classroom. “Praxis is reading, writing, arithmetic,” he said, adding that many four-year colleges are not interested in providing remediation for the exam.

Jones is the director of a celebrated program for recruiting Black men into the teaching profession, the Call Me Mister® (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) program, created by Clemson University in 2000. The program has been lauded for its ability to excite male college students to become teachers at low-performing elementary schools throughout the deep South through Grow Your Own Teacher programs, in which potential educators are recruited from local communities. Since 2004, the program has graduated about 344 fully certified MISTERS.

**Brandon Flood**, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons, stated that the dearth of Black male educators may be due in part to criminal convictions, which can prevent an aspiring teacher from becoming certified for five to 10 years. He said that the Pennsylvania Department of Education should collect demographic data by race on how many people are denied teacher certifications, and for what kind of offenses, and that the department could work to create a pathway for some formerly convicted individuals of all races to become teachers.

## Developing and Retaining Black Male Teachers



Becky Pringle, National Education Association

One proposal offered at the *Structures for Success: Supporting, Developing and Retaining Black Male Educators* was for educators to work with community-based organizations to move beyond talking about recruitment and focus on retention instead.

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<sup>11</sup> Oregon Department of Justice. (n.d.). *Guidelines for a memorandum of understanding*. [https://www.doj.state.or.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/mou\\_sample\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.doj.state.or.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/mou_sample_guidelines.pdf)

Too often, Black male teachers are used as disciplinarians instead of as authorities on a specific subject matter, a dynamic that has created a frustrating dilemma for many.

“Instead of being seen as content experts and as the professionals they are — who have gone through rigorous preparation just like their colleagues — they are pigeon-holed into operating in that school system in a disciplinary capacity,” said **Becky Pringle**, President of the National Education Association (NEA).

Pringle noted that the NEA, which represents more than 3 million educators, invested \$4 million to create mentorship programs and initiatives to provide emotional support opportunities to reduce feelings of isolation teachers of color often experience.

That support is critically important. **Desmond Blackburn**, CEO of New Teacher Center, noted that providing structural support, such as coaching and mentorship for all teachers, leads to an increase of 22% and a cost reduction of nearly \$1 million in recruitment and early stage development.

“That cost savings then can be applied to teacher retention and other support issues,” he said. “Black males are most likely upon entering the profession [to] be thrust into the most challenging conditions and situations with the most responsibilities, least pay, and having to chair the Black history month celebration. We need to support Black males.”

**Richard Warren Jr.**, Director of the Men of Color in Education program at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, agreed that retention and success on any level is “preceded by supports on all levels.”

Warren’s program is designed for high school and university students and career changers interested in or curious about teaching careers in teaching. The program offers three learning experiences to train, support, and increase the talent pool of male teachers of color:

- The High School Teacher University
- The University Cohort
- Man the Shore Network

Warren said that policies at the state level should be reevaluated to ensure funding is readily available to support Black teachers and suggested that school districts strengthen their relationship with teacher unions, such as the NEA, to champion for additional resources.

“I think the combination of those and others are responsible for making sure that we are intentional about retaining the students that we do have,” he said.

With support and training often seen as an afterthought, **Sharif El-Mekki**, founder and CEO of the Center for Black Educator Development, suggested “insight interviews” rather than exit interviews to better understand the individual experiences of Black male teachers. Launched in June 2019, the Center for Black Educator Development claims to be revolutionizing education by increasing the number of Black educators so that low-income Black and other traditionally disadvantaged students can reap the full benefits of a quality public education.

“If it is a negative learning environment for Black children, it is a negative working environment for Black teachers,” he said. “Quite often, we want to separate the two. But it is the same thread of microaggressions, same lack of support.”

Another idea that emerged from the two convenings was a proposal for creating a clearinghouse to share information and resources about how best to support Black males. The need has become urgent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Opportunities to Build Pathways for Black Male Teachers

Beyond recruitment and retention, postsecondary institutions such as minority-serving institutions can also encourage more Black males to enter the field by working with students to pass the Praxis test to meet certification requirements. Jones emphasized this point at the first convening.

“When it comes to education, representation isn’t just a nice objective,” said **Lillian Lowery**, former Vice President of Student and Teacher Assessments at ETS. “It is a difference maker. Our institutions need to reorganize around the principle that it is our responsibility to recruit, retain, and then prepare a diverse workforce. Our failure to do so says much more about our educational institutions than our diverse educators.”

That kind of talk resonated with El-Mekki, who was introduced to the joys of teaching at a young age, when he was approached by a teacher who told him that there was “no purer form of activism than teaching Black children well.”

“It really guided me into looking at education and educational justice being intertwined with racial justice,” said El-Mekki. “I realized that’s what I could pursue.”

Smith-Ribner suggested revisiting past federal initiatives and programs for increasing the number of Black male educators. “In 2012, President Barack Obama issued an executive order to launch a White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans. A major objective of the initiative was to ensure high-quality education for Black students, which included improving the recruitment, preparation, development, and retention of Black teachers.

“To address the barriers to success facing boys and young men of color, the president launched the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative in 2014,” she said. “Through a series of MBK platforms nationwide, many have said that boys and young men of color need teacher role models who understand their cultural backgrounds and experiences and relate to the challenges that students face on account of their race, they need teachers who have high expectations that the students can achieve academically, they need teachers and counselors willing to help them set educational goals, and they need teachers who they can trust and go to for adult guidance.

“Until we start having these true conversations of equity when it comes to K–12 and supporting our Black boys and higher education in supporting our Black men who want to go into education, we will always have trouble keeping and recruiting males of color,” Robinson said.

“Are we telling Black boys that [they] could be great teachers?” Robinson asked. “Are we actually creating pathways to education for them instead of creating pathways to other careers?”

There was also discussion of current programs. The Call Me MISTER program, Jones noted, can be widely developed and initiated at community colleges and four-year institutions throughout the nation through public–private collaborations, like one in South Carolina. Ninety percent of students



in the Call Me MISTER program come from South Carolina public K–12 schools, and 85% of graduates are still teaching in them, often in Title 1 schools. If MISTERS leave the classroom, it is usually to become administrators, as 36 alumni have since 2020. Two hundred and seventy-eight MISTERS have graduated from the program in South Carolina, and 42 have been named Teachers of the Year by their respective school districts.

At the conclusion of the events, **Michael T. Nettles**, Senior Vice President and Edmund W. Gordon Chair of Policy Evaluation and Research at ETS, and Smith-Ribner gave their remarks. Smith-Ribner said, “While we know the urgency of recruiting, developing, and retaining more Black male educators to teach in our classrooms, that urgency is now magnified by the educational equity crisis brought on by the pandemic.” She noted that this is the beginning of an engagement campaign on the issue and that there will be more convenings in the future.

Nettles expressed gratitude that the issue was finally getting the national attention that it rightfully deserved.

“I leave today optimistic that if one day I am fortunate to have grandchildren, that they will tell me amazing stories about their teachers,” said Nettles, “some of whom will look like me.”



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