



Mass. students are increasingly diverse. But their teachers are not.

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The Massachusetts public school student population has grown increasingly diverse in recent years, but the state's teaching force has remained overwhelmingly white — a worrisome mismatch that, studies show, reduces minority student performance.

Minorities accounted for 37 percent of public school enrollment in the last full school year, but only 7.1 percent of the teaching staff, according to [records](#) from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for 2015-2016.

“I think if we're serious about closing achievement gaps, then we've got to treat this like it's a crisis,” said Kim M. Janey, senior project director for the nonprofit Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

Altogether, school staffs — including teachers plus other workers — are less racially and ethnically diverse than their student bodies in more than 99 percent of public school districts statewide.



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The gap has grown over the past decade as minority student enrollment has grown significantly, while minority teaching staff has not.

“It’s a challenge because every superintendent is looking for someone of color, and there’s only so many candidates to go around,” said John Reed, a retired Barnstable teacher who serves as treasurer for the Massachusetts Partnership for Diversity in Education, which works to recruit minority teachers.

Reed, who is also vice president of the NAACP’s Cape Cod chapter, said school districts also need to do a better job of retaining and promoting minority teachers.

The student-teacher diversity gap in Massachusetts echoes the [situation nationally](#).

In the [United States](#), about half of public school students are minorities, but only about one in five teachers is. And researchers project the gap will grow even wider in the coming years as the student population grows ever more diverse.

Why are teaching forces so white?

Experts say the [pipeline](#) to become a teacher — from college to licensing exams to actually getting hired — is riddled with leaks, where minorities exit at higher rates than whites.

“There are pretty significant leakages of minorities at basically every step along the way,” said [Michael Hansen](#), an education policy researcher at [The Brookings Institution](#) in Washington.

He said two of the more prominent “leaks” in the pipeline are that minorities are far less likely to major in education and also less likely to graduate from college.



Multiple factors might be at work, including that minorities are more likely to come from low-income families and to attend lower-performing K-12 schools that inadequately prepare them for college, experts said.

Minorities are also disproportionately saddled with college debt, which might contribute to the lower graduation rates and might steer those who do graduate toward higher-paying careers.

Minorities might also be less interested in becoming teachers. “It may be there is a vicious cycle that’s going on because there’s a low representation of minority teachers,”

Hansen said. “When students of color are going to pick a major, they don’t think of education because they say, ‘Oh, I don’t know of any teachers who look like me.’ ”

He said that while racial discrimination on the part of those in charge of hiring teachers cannot be ruled out, it is not believed to be a major factor causing the underrepresentation of minorities among teachers.

The result is that the pool of candidates that superintendents and principals can hire from is predominantly white.

Of the 5.1 million adults in Massachusetts, 21 percent were minorities, according to 2010 census figures.

Studies have shown that students taught by educators of the same race or ethnicity tend to perform better and have fewer absences and suspensions. Teachers have also been shown to have higher expectations for students of the same race, suggesting they are more likely to push those students and to serve as role models for them.

“They are not huge effects, but they are statistically significant, and it does make a difference,” Hansen said.

Chelsea has the largest student-teacher diversity gap of any traditional (noncharter) public school district in Massachusetts.

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‘There’s a lot going on, but there’s a lot more that can be done.’

Minorities accounted for 22 percent of all school staffers, or 10 percent among just teachers, last year, both of which were above statewide averages. Yet those figures paled in comparison with the 93 percent of district students who were minorities.

Many districts with the largest student-teacher diversity gaps are places with high percentages of minorities in the general population. They include Lynn, Lawrence, Lowell, Brockton, Holyoke, Malden, and Springfield.

Those districts, like Chelsea, have staffs that are as, if not more, diverse than the statewide average. But the student bodies in those districts are so overwhelmingly diverse that a major gap has opened up.

Then there are cases like Waltham, where the diversity gap exists because of both a diverse student body and an overwhelmingly white staff.

In Waltham, 55 percent of students were minorities last year, compared with just 6 percent of all staff, and just 3 percent of teachers.

“We know this is an issue. We know we can do much better at this,” said Shelly Chin, an administrator for Waltham schools who is a member of a diversity task force the district launched in the fall. It will report its recommendations this spring.

“I don’t think we’ve made as strong a commitment to [teacher] diversity, or been as public about it, in the past as we should have,” she added. “But I think having new leadership in [Superintendent Drew] Echelson here has brought on a new commitment and made it a priority.” Echelson started the job in July 2015.

Superintendents around Massachusetts, while acknowledging that some key factors driving the problem are beyond their control, outlined [various steps](#) they have taken to try to increase teacher diversity in their districts.

“This is very much on the minds of superintendents,” said Thomas Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents. “They are always looking for ways to attract candidates.”

“I think people are realizing more and more that it’s not going to just happen,” he added. “It’s going to have to be planned and more strategic. There’s a lot going on, but there’s a lot more that can be done.”

In Springfield, nearly 88 percent of students were minorities, while about 29 percent of the district’s staff were. (Teacher-only data were not available.)

That gap “is a big concern and something we’ve put a lot of focus on,” Superintendent Daniel J. Warwick said. “We’re not where we want to be, but we’ve made improvements.”

Efforts included partnering with Westfield State University to set aside spots each year in the college’s education program for Springfield public school graduates.

Chelsea school Superintendent Mary Bourque said her district has also launched efforts to improve teacher diversity, including encouraging high schoolers to return to teach in the district. But she and many others said that’s a challenge.

As a society, “We’ve portrayed going into teaching as a horrible profession,” Bourque said. “We’ve bashed teachers. We’ve bashed the unions that represent them.”

“When, as a country, are we going to go back to the days when we made it glamorous to go into a life of service?”

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