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# Conditions That Teachers of Color Perceive as Contributing to a Sense of Belonging at School

## Findings from the 2022 Learn Together Survey

### KEY FINDINGS

- A majority of teachers of color, when asked how their school cultivates a sense of belonging for them, described efforts to recognize and celebrate race and educate the school community about race and culture.
- Half of teachers of color mentioned that school climate (e.g., feelings of inclusivity, having a voice) and common school practices (such as social gatherings) fostered a sense of belonging.
- Teacher and school characteristics, such as a teacher's race and school demographic composition, made a difference in how teachers of color perceived the cultivation of a sense of belonging in their schools.
- Teachers of color who indicated that they had strong positive relationships with fellow teachers tended to highlight common school practices, such as social gatherings and collaboration time, as factors that created a sense of belonging. Teachers of color without strong positive relationships tended to describe student-focused efforts.

**A**mid national concern about increased teacher attrition and a growing attention to workforce diversity, many states and districts are taking a variety of actions to attract and retain teachers of color (Education Trust, undated). A racially and ethnically diverse teaching workforce is crucial for the social, emotional, and academic development of all students and is particularly critical for students of color (Bristol and Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Carver-Thomas, 2018). Teachers of color can play a critical role in connecting with students of color through shared language, improvement of students' aspirations for their futures, and increasing feelings of school connectedness for students (Egalite and Kisida, 2018; Flores et al., 2007). Teachers of color also serve as role models for students of color (King, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1990) and have a higher level of multicultural

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## Efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging could contribute to improving retention of teachers of color.

awareness (Cherng and Halpin, 2016), which can translate to more culturally responsive teaching.

There is some evidence that teachers of color leave the teaching profession at higher rates than do their White colleagues, and some teachers of color have reported that their decisions to leave their jobs are related to feelings of isolation and racial harassment (Dixon, Griffin, and Teoh, 2019; Steiner et al., 2022). Teachers of color are underrepresented in the workforce and often are in the minority among staff in their schools. As of 2018, roughly 7 percent of teachers in the United States identified as Black or African American, 9 percent identified as Hispanic, and 2 percent identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Recent surveys of nationally representative samples of teachers have found that only about one-third of teachers of color reported teaching in a school in which the majority of the staff were also people of color.<sup>1</sup>

Efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging could contribute to improving retention of teachers of color. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have defined a *sense of belonging* as an innate human need for interpersonal attachments, while other scholars have described it as “personal involvement (in a social system) to the extent that one feels that they are integral and indispensable” (Anant, 1967, p. 1137). People who feel that they belong in their workplace are more productive and engaged and might have a better sense of well-being (Kachchhap and Horo, 2021; Waller, 2020). If realized, these ben-

efits could promote positive learning experiences for students (Kachchhap and Horo, 2021; Shah, 2012). Schools—and the culture they promote—can play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging for teachers, as can positive relationships with colleagues (Kachchhap and Horo, 2021; Waller, 2020). However, less is known about the specific actions and activities that contribute to the sense of belonging that teachers of color feel in their schools.

To investigate this, we used the American Teacher Panel to survey roughly 3,608 teachers in March and April 2022 through the Learn Together Survey (LTS). The LTS asked all sampled teachers about the extent to which their school cultivated a sense of belonging for teachers who identify as people of color. Teachers who responded that their school did so “to a moderate extent” or “to a great extent” were then asked an open-ended question about *how* their school cultivates this sense of belonging. In total, 1,507 teachers responded to this question. We focused our analysis on the interpretable responses of 342 teachers of color. We defined teachers of color as any individual who self-identified as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or American Indian or Alaska Native and did not self-identify as White. Because this report focuses on the responses of only teachers of color, we use the term *teachers of color* and the more general term *teachers* synonymously in the remainder of the report to refer to our focal population.

To our knowledge, this is the first time teachers of color have been asked on a national scale about the specific ways in which their school supports their sense of belonging. The survey question we asked these teachers was open-ended; the resulting data provide a broad understanding of the types of school-level actions that teachers of color say support a sense of belonging but do not provide information about national prevalence of specific policies and actions. For additional details on our methods and a list of factors that contributed to teachers’ senses of belonging, see the “How This Analysis Was Conducted” box at the end of this report.

## More Than Half of Teachers of Color Reported That Recognizing and Celebrating or Educating About Race and Culture Cultivated a Sense of Belonging

A majority of teachers of color (approximately 200) reported that efforts made in their schools to recognize and celebrate race or culture or to educate students and teachers about race and culture help cultivate their sense of belonging. We identified three main types of practices that recognize race and that teachers reported fostered their sense of belonging: (1) student-facing practices, (2) staff-focused practices, and (3) schoolwide practices.

Just over one-third of these 200 teachers described student-focused practices, such as Black History month celebrations, curricula or books featuring the experiences of different racial groups, or hallway decorations honoring different cultures. A large majority of the teachers who mentioned such efforts described school celebrations of specific cultural holidays or participation in Black, Hispanic, or AAPI history months. A few teachers provided examples of these celebrations or activities, such as essay contests, door and bulletin decorations, cultural attire days, performances, and luncheons. One teacher explained, “[w]e celebrate Black History Month well by including the entire school in appreciation activities. We have specialized morning announcement[s] talking about achievements of famous Black individuals throughout history. Finally, we have a Black History Luncheon for staff with home-cooked, potluck ‘soul food’ . . . It’s one of our best school events.” At the same time, a few teachers noted that it can be a challenge to hold the responsibility of planning cultural celebrations: “I really don’t see any sense of belonging unless it’s the teachers themselves that are doing the planning within their ethnic group.” About one-quarter of the teachers described their school’s efforts to recognize race in curricula and books. Although these efforts might have been geared toward students, many teachers reported that these activities contributed to their own sense of belonging.

Approximately one in five teachers pointed to staff-focused practices. Most commonly, these teachers described staff trainings on topics such as equity, diversity, bias, and racism. Some teachers noted that their schools’ equity teams, book clubs focused on discussing racism, and affinity or support groups for teachers of color created a sense of belonging. One teacher explained that department chairs created an afterschool group for teachers of color to share and connect with each other. She explained that “[a]ll teachers are welcome, but I appreciate that I can meet with teachers who understand my culture [and] thinking process and are willing to share together.”

Finally, a few teachers described *schoolwide practices*, which we define as general policies or practices recognizing race and culture that affect the broader school community. Such practices included the provision of information in multiple languages, a school focus on inclusion, and intentional efforts to have teachers of color in leadership roles. One teacher stated, “[m]ost of the staff are people of color so we validate each other and make sure all communication is sent in English and Spanish to give both languages equal value.”

We have done work around implicit racism and [W]hite supremacy. In meetings, space is created for different voices and perspectives. White folks acknowledge when they are taking up space and step down so others can speak up (or are explicitly asked to).

— Hispanic teacher

Our staff gets along great, and we support each other no matter [our] race. We will meet up for social hours or attend events together as a staff. Everyone is inclusive of each other and we all feel very welcome.

— Hispanic teacher

### **Teachers in Schools Where Most Staff or Students Identified as People of Color Tended to Describe Student-Facing Efforts**

Teachers in schools in which either most staff or students identified as people of color tended to describe student-facing practices to recognize and celebrate or educate about race as creating a sense of belonging. Compared with teachers who taught at schools that predominantly serve White students, twice as many teachers who taught at schools that predominantly serve students of color described formal school celebrations of race and culture (e.g., celebration of holidays and cultural history months) and efforts to educate about race in classroom instruction.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, teachers in schools in which the principal or most of the staff were White tended to describe staff-focused practices. These practices included equity committees, affinity groups, trainings about race or equity, or a book study focused on better understanding the effects of race and racism.

Compared with teachers who taught at schools in which the principal was a person of color, nearly twice as many teachers of color who taught at schools with a White principal described staff-focused efforts to recognize race as helping cultivate a sense of belonging. Similarly, compared with teachers who taught at schools with a majority of teachers of color, twice as many teachers who taught at schools in which most of the staff was White mentioned staff-focused practices to recognize race as a means of creating a sense of belonging.

### **Half of Teachers Reported That School Climate and Common School Practices Cultivated a Sense of Belonging at Their School**

In addition to race- and culture-focused strategies, half of teachers in our sample reported that *school climate* and *common school practices* contributed to their sense of belonging. About one-third of teachers said such school climate-related factors as staff demographic composition, teacher camaraderie, and a general sense of inclusivity and equality contributed to their sense of belonging. Roughly 13 percent of teachers specifically noted that the demographic composition of their school inherently created a sense of belonging because other teachers shared their racial or ethnic background. As one teacher said, “[m]any administrators are [people of color], many students, many staff . . . . Due to that, a safe space is inbuilt.” Other teachers mentioned that their school is welcoming and that their administrators include them in school decisionmaking, and a few teachers said that all teachers are treated equally and with respect. Nearly 20 percent of teachers said that common school practices contributed to feelings of belonging. These included school-organized social gatherings, teacher recognition efforts, promotion of teacher mental and physical health, planning time, and professional learning communities.

## **Working in a School Where Most Staff Were Also People of Color Appears to Foster a Sense of Belonging, Particularly for Black Teachers**

Teachers in our sample who taught at schools in which the principal or the majority of staff identified as people of color mentioned that the staff demographics inherently cultivated a sense of belonging more often than their counterparts did. Principal and staff demographics often aligned; teachers of color who worked in a school with a principal of color said that a majority of the school staff were also people of color. In contrast, most teachers of color who taught in a school that predominantly serves White students reported that the staff was majority White.

Compared with teachers who do not identify as Black, more Black teachers specifically mentioned staff demographics and common school practices as creating a sense of belonging. Prior research suggests that having representation in the workplace is an important aspect of feelings of acceptance and belonging for Black individuals (Bauman, Trawalter, and Unzueta, 2014).

## **Strong Positive Relationships With Colleagues Appear to be Linked to a Sense of Belonging**

Finally, we asked teachers a separate survey question about whether they had strong positive relationships with other teachers in their school. A large majority (89 percent) of the 342 teachers of color in our qualitative sample said that they had such relationships. More teachers in our sample who had strong positive relationships with their colleagues described a positive school climate (e.g., feelings of inclusiveness, equal treatment, staff demographics) as influencing their sense of belonging than did teachers who did not report having such relationships. Teachers who had strong positive relationships with other teachers also described opportunities for social gatherings, teacher recognition, and teacher collaboration as supporting their sense of belonging more often than their counterparts did. Teachers who did not have

We are all, with the exception of one member of faculty, of color. We all share a heightened level of mutual respect and understanding. We consistently embrace and celebrate our cultures and ethnicities.

— Black teacher

strong positive relationships with their colleagues tended to report student- and staff-focused efforts (rather than school climate or common practices) to create a sense of belonging.

## **Discussion**

Teachers of color support the positive social, emotional, and academic development of students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Therefore, recruiting and retaining a racially and ethnically diverse teacher workforce is essential. Feelings of isolation, racial discrimination, and being undervalued, among other challenges, are key reasons that teachers of color say that they consider leaving their jobs (Bristol and Martin-Fernandez, 2019). Research shows that organization leaders' efforts to create a sense of belonging in the workplace can help improve retention (Waller, 2021). We recommend three types of efforts that school leaders could implement to foster a sense of belonging for teachers: (1) Consider student and staff demographics in schoolwide planning, (2) establish groups that support teacher diversity, and (3) foster strong, positive relationships among staff.

Broadly, our findings indicate that teachers of color in schools that predominantly serve students

of color or in which a majority of staff are people of color identified different factors that contributed to their sense of belonging than their counterparts in schools in which the principal or a majority of staff are White. For many teachers of color in schools in which a majority of staff were people of color, common school practices and staff demographics inherently cultivated a sense of belonging. It might be the case that common school practices help build rapport and trust among teachers. Our findings suggest that it could be even more salient for Black teachers to see themselves represented in their schools. Thus, we encourage school and district leaders to continue considering the demographic composition of their students and staff, alongside staff and student input, when planning schoolwide efforts (Dixon Griffin, and Teoh, 2019; Warner and Duncan, 2019). However, some school and district leaders might need to be cognizant of state policies within the United States that limit the discussion of race within schools, which can complicate these efforts.

In contrast, teachers in our sample who worked in schools in which most staff and the principal were not people of color tended to describe staff-focused efforts (e.g., equity committees, trainings

about race or equity). Research indicates that school leaders can support teacher diversity through support networks or equity teams (Dixon, Griffin, and Teoh, 2019; Galloway and Ishimaru, 2019), and we urge school leaders to consider implementing such groups. These efforts should be developed and led by a racially diverse group of staff and avoid the appearance of being a compliance activity (Dixon, Griffin, and Teoh, 2019). Such efforts have been criticized for placing the onus of equity work on people of color, and we recommend that school leaders compensate teachers for these additional responsibilities (Lerma, Hamilton, and Nielsen, 2020).

We also found that positive relationships with other teachers appeared to be linked to a sense of belonging regardless of school demographics. Therefore, we recommend that school leaders implement efforts to cultivate positive relationships between staff and develop a positive school climate (Retaillick and Butt, 2004; Shah, 2012). Teachers who have strong positive relationships with other teachers might more readily engage in social activities and feel as though their school is cultivating a sense of belonging because of the connections that they have with their colleagues (Steiner et al., 2022). Although we were not able to investigate the causal direction of the relationships, strong positive relationships could create—or be a byproduct of—a broader sense of belonging.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the multipronged ways in which a sense of belonging might be cultivated for teachers of color. It is evident that activities that explicitly focus on race and culture play a role in teachers' perceptions of a sense of belonging, in addition to the overall school climate and the everyday interactions between teachers and administration. While our report examines the factors that positively contributed to the sense of belonging of teachers of color, future research might explore what aspects of schools negatively affect teachers' senses of belonging so that school and district leaders might proactively address and mitigate those aspects of their schools.

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## Limitations

This research has six limitations. First, our findings rely on self-reports and perceptions, which might be incomplete and are subject to reporting bias—a limitation present in all survey research. Second, the small number of teacher responses, which are unweighted, limit generalizability of our findings. Third, teachers self-selected into our sample by providing an interpretable response; these teachers could be systematically different from those who did not provide a response in ways we are unable to measure.

Fourth, our data do not capture the opinions and experiences of teachers of color who did not feel that their school cultivated a sense of belonging. Fifth, our findings are purely descriptive characterizations of a small number of teacher responses and do not imply causal relationships. Finally, we recognize that in aggregating and analyzing data across racial groups, our findings might mask variations in the experiences of teachers between (and also within) racial groups; the experiences presented in this report might not be representative of or apply to all teachers of color.

## How This Analysis Was Conducted

Two qualitative analysts coded teachers' responses using a coding scheme inductively developed by the qualitative lead. Teachers' responses varied significantly in content and depth—some answered with a couple of words, and others wrote a paragraph or two. Accordingly, we developed the coding scheme so that we could describe the variety of responses through both broad themes and finer-grained subthemes. The analysts met regularly while coding to resolve ambiguities, ensure reliable application of the codes, and discuss additions or revisions of codes. We examined whether there were substantive differences in teachers' responses across teacher characteristics (e.g., racial background, answers to a survey question about strong relationships with fellow teachers) and school characteristics (e.g., locale; whether the principal, a majority of students, or a majority of teachers identified as people of color; and whether the school required either cultural competency or antiracist training for staff).

Throughout the report, we use majority to refer to at least one-half of the respondents in an applicable group, most to refer to at least three-quarters of respondents, some to refer to more than one-quarter but fewer than one-half of survey respondents, and few to refer to fewer than one-quarter of survey respondents. When appropriate, we also provide rough proportions (e.g., "about 20 percent") to signal to the reader how frequently some responses arose. Some respondents described multiple ways in which their schools cultivate a sense of belonging for teachers of color, so responses are not mutually exclusive.

Of the 3,608 teachers surveyed, 1,507 teachers, or 42 percent, reported that their school cultivated a sense of belonging to "a moderate extent" or "great extent." These teachers were then asked the open-ended question: "In what ways does your school cultivate a sense of belonging for teachers who identify as people of color?" We focused our analysis on the 372 responses of teachers of color. We removed 30 responses because either the teacher reported that their school did not do anything specifically to cultivate a sense of belonging or because it was uninterpretable, meaning it lacked sufficient detail or clarity (e.g., "We do things a part [sic] of our culture"). Teachers' responses to this open-ended survey question fell into three broad categories:

- Recognizing and celebrating or educating about race and culture. This condition consists of the following three types of practices:
  - student-facing practices, examples of which include formal school cultural and holiday celebrations and curricula that incorporate diverse perspectives
  - staff-focused practices, examples of which include trainings or professional development and affinity groups or book clubs
  - schoolwide practices, examples of which include encouragement for teachers of color to take on leadership positions and broad missions of inclusion.
- School climate. Examples of this condition include staff demographics and feelings of equality, inclusion, and camaraderie.
- Common school practices. Examples of this condition include social gatherings and opportunities for teacher collaboration.

We define teachers of color as any teacher who self-identified as Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander or American Indian or Alaska Native. Multiracial teachers were considered to be teachers of color. Teachers who reported their race as White and did not select any other racial or ethnic categories or who preferred not to state or self-describe their racial identity were not counted as a teacher of color. Four-fifths of the 342 teachers in our final sample were women; one-fifth were male. Forty-five percent identified as Hispanic, 36 percent identified as Black, 11 percent identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 8 percent identified as "Other," including teachers with more than one race or ethnicity.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This analysis was conducted for the 2022 Learning Together Surveys. Further details can be found in the Technical Documentation (Doan et al., 2022). To determine the racial composition of teachers' schools, we asked teachers approximately what percentage of teachers in their schools identify as people of color. Teachers were able to respond that "none," "1 to 25 percent," "26 to 50 percent," "51 to 75 percent," or "76 to 100 percent" of teachers in their schools identify as people of color. Teachers were also able to respond that they did not know. We analyzed teachers' responses by their self-reported racial or ethnic identity and found that, among teachers who were able to estimate the percentage of teachers of color in their schools, 34 percent of teachers of color reported being in a school in which more than half of teachers in the school were also people of color.

<sup>2</sup> *Schools that predominantly serve White students* are defined as schools with a population of 50 percent or more White students. *Schools that predominantly serve students of color* are defined as schools with a population of 50 percent or more students of color.

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## **About This Report**

In this report, we draw on a survey of teachers from the American Teacher Panel (ATP), which is a nationally representative sample of more than 22,000 teachers across the United States. The ATP is one of three survey panels that comprise the American Educator Panels (AEP), which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative.

For technical information about the surveys and analysis in this report, please see *Learn Together Surveys: 2022 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (RR-A827-9, [www.rand.org/t/RR827-9](http://www.rand.org/t/RR827-9)). If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading other publications related to the AEP, please email [aep@rand.org](mailto:aep@rand.org) or visit [www.rand.org/aep](http://www.rand.org/aep).

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