

Support and Retain Educators of Color 6 Principles for Culturally Affirming Leadership

By Andrea Terrero Gabbadon (ASCD, 2023)

S.O.S. (A Summary of the Summary)

The main ideas of the book:

- ~ It is critically important, both for the sake of justice as well as for the benefit of all our students, that we *retain* a diverse educator workforce that reflects the rich backgrounds of the students we serve.
- ~ School leaders need to be equipped with research-based practices they can put into action to create workplaces that affirm and support educators of color.

Why I chose this book:

In the past few decades, we've heard the cry to bring more diverse educators into our schools to better reflect the students we teach. But the stark truth is even as we make progress in *hiring* more educators of color, we are *not* successful in *retaining* them. Research shows that educators of color frequently feel unsupported and unwelcome in schools and often leave – sometimes departing the profession for good. While teacher turnover in general is an issue, it's even more of an issue when it comes to retaining educators of color. We need guidance on how to do better. I chose this book because of its concrete and thoughtful ideas for what we can do *differently* to retain and support educators of color.

The author, Andrea Terrero Gabbadon, is a woman of color in addition to being a leadership coach and former education professor and researcher. The guidance she provides comes directly from educators of color, whose voices are featured prominently in every chapter of her book (and throughout my summary, too). The recommendations she makes are steeped in research and expressed by the voices of teachers of color whose words exemplify what the research shows. As you read, keep in mind that the stories and quotations shared are not outliers but represent common experiences and viewpoints. So, *listen*. Listening is essential for learning how we can better support and retain educators of color.

The Scoop (In this summary you will learn...)

- ✓ The research-backed benefits to students (those of color and not) who are taught by teachers of color
- ✓ The top 5 sources of workplace dissatisfaction cited by educators of color
- ✓ Why you should not ignore race or cultural difference at school
- ✓ The specific forms of support educators of color need but frequently do not get
- ✓ Concrete actions school leaders can take to better provide those supports

Click here for my accompanying [1-page overview](#), [podcast interview](#) with the author, and [html link](#).

Introduction: The Current Situation

In the United States, about 50% of students identify as people of color. In contrast, only about 20% of teachers describe themselves that way. Educators of color are also under-represented in school administration and leadership positions. Furthermore, turnover is higher for educators of color than for white educators, and educators of color often report that conditions at their schools are not affirming or not inclusive of their backgrounds and identities.

How did it get this way? Forbidden schooling prior to the abolition of slavery, Black communities nonetheless saw education as a path to empowerment and collective uplift. They funded and operated schools for both free and enslaved Africans wherever possible. After slavery was abolished, Black politicians played a central role in establishing public schools for all in the South. Despite underfunding and segregation (by law in the South, and due to discriminatory lending and residential patterns in the North) Black educators maintained high expectations and rigorous instruction. When schools were integrated in the 1960s, tens of thousands of qualified and experienced Black educators lost their jobs and were denied jobs at integrated schools.

In the decades since the 60s, many states have attempted to diversify their educator workforce, and there has been no lack of interested and qualified candidates from communities of color. Numbers of Hispanic and Asian educators, in particular, have increased in recent years. Strides in diversity, however, have been undermined by *turnover*. Educators of color change positions and leave teaching at higher rates than their white colleagues. An analysis of departure rates by [Ingersoll and colleagues](#) illustrates a clear set of reasons:

Top 5 Reasons for Departure Reported by Educators of Color
81% cite dissatisfaction with <i>leadership behaviors</i> .
65% say they are dissatisfied with a school culture of <i>standardized testing and performance-based accountability</i> .
61% express dissatisfaction with <i>student discipline problems</i> .
57% cite <i>lack of autonomy</i> over their classrooms.
56% say they are dissatisfied with <i>inferior facilities</i> and lack of <i>access to resources</i> .

Note that while the common complaints of low pay, large class sizes, and classroom interruptions are still factors, they do not make the top five reasons educators of color give for why they leave a teaching job. When we work to increase educator diversity in schools, it’s essential to remember that there’s not only a need to *bring in* more educators of color, but we must also work to *retain* them. The social organization of schools, how leaders behave, the values demonstrated, and how staff and students are treated, all have major impact on their decisions to stay or go. Additional studies indicate that educators of color often experience conditions at school that are not inclusive and not affirming.

Fortunately, there are principles that any school leader can follow to turn these trends around. Culturally affirming leadership principles are characterized by supportive and positive relationships across difference. When a school leader leads by these principles, they open the door to the growth of a culturally affirming school where a diverse group of teachers and leaders can feel welcome and that they belong. What follows are **six principles** for leaders to create more culturally affirming workplaces.

Principle 1: Acknowledge that Educator Diversity Matters

If you haven’t done so already, you need to recognize that educator diversity is not just a “nice-to-have,” but instead is critically important to your students of all backgrounds. A first step toward retaining teachers of color is acknowledging how important they are. They bring so much value to your school and students, and they may require some unique, targeted support in order to feel your school is a workplace in which they truly belong. Begin by questioning your assumptions. Review this list of misconceptions some people have about educators of color and the impact of educator diversity. If any of these resonate with you, then step one is to consider where they came from and work through them.

Misconceptions	The Truth
Educators of color... ...are monolithic in their approach to teaching. ...are best suited to address issues of race or injustice in schools. ...will share life experiences with students who look like them.	Educators of color bring a wide variety of life experiences, skills, approaches, and unique talents to their roles. Assuming they should be the ones to take the lead on race or injustice related issues means you risk overlooking their true individual talents and can lead to toxic organizational dynamics.
Increasing educator diversity at my school would mean... ...giving preferential treatment to people of color. ...compromising on high-quality instruction. ...too little within the bigger picture of inequality and injustice.	Diversifying the leadership and teaching staff at your school will mean accessing a wider pool of qualified candidates, and becoming a place where everyone can belong. Instead of sacrificing excellence, educator diversity increases student achievement (more detail to come). And while you cannot personally reverse centuries of injustice, your small-scale actions can support growth toward greater justice and equality.

How Do Educators of Color Benefit Students of All Backgrounds?

For students of color, teachers and leaders who “look like them” can serve as “mirrors,” reflecting familiar backgrounds and identities at school. Research shows us some common practices of educators of color and the impact those practices have on students of color.

Educators of Color...		Students of Color...
exhibit high expectations	→	perform better on standardized tests in math and English
form supportive relationships	→	are absent less, drop out less, are more likely to graduate high school and to attend and stick with college
make fewer disciplinary referrals	→	miss less school time for behavioral infractions
hold positive views of their students' potential	→	are less often referred for special education and more often enrolled in gifted programs and advanced courses (particularly true for Black and Latino boys taught by someone with a similar background)
often work in hard-to-staff schools	→	are taught by a qualified teacher instead of a substitute
often bridge cultural gaps between families and schools (including unpaid translation and interpretation)	→	experience better communication and cooperation between home and school
teach from an asset-based perspective and use culturally responsive techniques	→	are more engaged

These same educators may be “windows” to students who do not identify as people of color, opening their eyes to new perspectives and increasing their cultural dexterity.

Educators of Color...		Students of Other Backgrounds...
can be positive role models	→	gain experience and comfort communicating, learning, and working together across difference
humanize complex issues	→	feel better equipped to understand social problems
counter stereotypes, support students' cultural awareness, and create opportunities for cross-racial dialogue and more complete understanding of communities of color	→	are more prepared to enter diverse settings such as at college and work
help create a positive, racially diverse community at school	→	report higher rates of social belonging and positive relationships with both staff and other students

Schools today are expected to equip students to be forward-thinking; civically active; and able to live, work, communicate, and thrive in an increasingly global community. Educator diversity matters. Continuing with the status quo would be a disservice to all our students. Developing and retaining a diverse teaching force is essential, but it will require the transformation of organizational conditions at our schools.

Principle 2: Cultivate Reflection and Self-Awareness

As school leaders, we're experts on reflection. We're always reflecting on our leadership, reflecting on teaching practices, reflecting on student learning, and so on. While reflection can sound like the opposite of action, done right, reflection is the birthplace of action. It's action-oriented because it results in changed practice.

Reflection and self-awareness on matters of race and cultural diversity is an essential step. If leaders skip over them, they risk deceiving themselves into thinking they're able to lead in a way that is color-blind or color-neutral. But educators of color aren't likely to see it that way. Reflection on and awareness of race and culture are necessary for school leaders to successfully support and retain a workforce of diverse educators. To embrace Principle 2, you'll need to reflect on this question:

Should I address or avoid difference at school?

On the surface, it might seem like avoiding discussions of difference would be the best path to treating everyone fairly. A leader may think, “I'll treat everyone the same, regardless of race or differences, and that will be fair.” But when leaders intentionally look away from difference, and strive to “not see color,” they are abandoning the people of color around them, leaving them to feel like outsiders.

Educators of color begin to feel pushed out and like no one is actively demonstrating welcome and pulling them back in.

Consider the **personal stories** of two teachers of color that reveal problems that can occur when leaders don't demonstrate awareness of race.

Diane	Atiq
<p>Diane, a Black woman, is one of the most experienced and effective teachers in her school. She has taught in urban schools for 15 years, and her students consistently outperform their peers from other schools on achievement measures. She also has a no-nonsense approach to discipline, which is recognized by the school leaders. As a result, she's often called upon to cover classes, or be present in situations where discipline is a concern such as in the cafeteria or on a field trip.</p> <p>She feels she is never recognized for her <i>content</i> expertise and instructional abilities. Although she has clearly demonstrated these strengths, she isn't called upon to be a leader in these areas. She suspects that her race has caused her colleagues to underestimate her teaching abilities, seeing her only as a disciplinarian. She feels overlooked for leadership opportunities related to instruction and student achievement.</p>	<p>Atiq, a man of Moroccan descent, is a teacher nearing his fifth year in the classroom. While the student population at his school is diverse, most of his colleagues are white and female. School leaders have praised his teaching, but they have also avoided talking with Atiq about parents' impressions of him. Atiq has seen parents assume he must be a support teacher and ask him where the classroom teacher is, presuming it could not be him.</p> <p>When parents ask for their children to be transferred out of his class, the school leadership complies but does not discuss the moves at all with Atiq. He feels demoralized that the administration seems not to intervene when families don't want him to teach their children. Atiq feels he is expected to just accept this discrimination from parents and move on as if it isn't happening, but the lack of support from the administration takes a toll on him emotionally.</p>

Diane and Atiq's stories represent experiences that are familiar to many educators of color. In both cases, the school leaders probably meant to act fairly. Maybe requests for transfers were usually granted at Atiq's school. Maybe Diane's principal admired Diane's ability to manage student behavior and thought her talents *were* being highlighted. But the school leaders also avoided talking with Atiq and Diane about race. They didn't acknowledge how it might have impacted the situation, they didn't explicitly affirm their belief in Atiq and Diane as good teachers, or reject biased beliefs about them. As a result, both Diane and Atiq felt even more like outsiders. Without active effort from leadership to pull them back in and acknowledge the forces pushing them out, they might eventually decide they're not wanted, and leave.

When leaders avoid addressing race or other differences, the result is greater exclusion for those groups. *Instead of avoiding difference, address it.* Here are 3 strategies:

(1) Interrogate biases. Research shows that being told about bias is not enough to change it. We must encounter and confront our biases to prevent their effects. This requires humility and vulnerability. It may feel safer to remain silent than to speak up and risk appearing prejudiced, but silence doesn't help us to grow. Recognizing and countering bias is a journey that everyone is on (educators of color included). Effective bias training should acknowledge the length and personal nature of the journey. It is ineffective if it's a one-time event or divorced from action or personal commitment.

Ask yourself: *What has shaped my understandings of other groups? What stereotypes or misinformation about them have I been exposed to?*

(2) Acknowledge that *intent* is not the same as *impact*. Atiq's principal may have *intended* to shield him from racist parents, but the *impact* of choosing not to talk about the transfers was that Atiq wondered if the principal had his back or secretly agreed with the parents. Principals are undeniably busy, but to grow a more culturally affirming workplace you must consider impact as well as intent.

Ask: *What did I intend* (with a particular comment, action, or inaction)? *What was the impact?* Seek better understanding of your impact by gathering feedback. When confronted with the negative impact of something you did, listen without defensiveness, accept responsibility for your action (or inaction), acknowledge the impact you had, and commit to doing better in the future.

(3) Consider the intersection of differences. Differences may overlap or intersect with each other, creating complex layers. Racial justice cannot be truly separated from other forms of inequity. For a person of color who is also a woman, racism and sexism combine, creating an experience of double discrimination (intersectionality). If you *say* you want educators at your school to be able to bring their whole selves to work, consider whether this is truly safe for them to do. Would an educator who is LGBTQ or one who has an otherwise invisible disability need to keep that aspect of themselves a secret in order to feel welcome and respected at work?

To grow your understanding, ask these questions to others who are different from you:

- *What assumptions do I make about (an identity)? And how do my assumptions influence the support I provide?*
- *What stereotypes have I been exposed to? To what extent do I demonstrate that I believe them to be true or false?*
- *How comfortable am I working with individuals of diverse backgrounds? Do I demonstrate awareness of how identities intersect?*

As a leader, it's not enough to simply avoid deliberate discrimination. To create a welcoming and culturally affirming environment, you need to provide proactive support to educators of color, preventing and counteracting bias wherever you can. Acknowledge race and bias in your school and address them both directly. It's the right thing to do and it will impact how welcome the educators of color feel at your school, and ultimately their decisions to stay or go.

Principle 3: Assess and Plan for Action

You've acknowledged the need for change, you've begun the process of self-reflection, and now it's time to determine what needs to be done at your school to better support and retain a diverse workforce. Start by conducting an **intentional study** of the following **four foundational elements that have been demonstrated to drive retention of educators of color**:

I. School Vision and Mission

III. Staff Dynamics

II. Leadership Culture

IV. Instructional Culture

For this study, each section below has ideas of what *artifacts* to examine and what *questions* you might ask educators of color.

I. School Vision and Mission	II. Leadership Culture	III. Staff Dynamics	IV. Instructional Culture
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Why It Matters

Seeing culturally affirming practices on a mission or vision statement can mean a lot to educators of color. It's an indicator that the school is aiming in the right direction and may be a workplace an educator of color can feel at home. Beyond what's written, mission and vision should *be embodied* in action and used to *guide* tough decisions.

Places to Look for Evidence of Benefits and Barriers to Retaining Educators of Color

- Vision and mission statements
- Symbols and artifacts (e.g. the school mascot)

Questions to Ask Educators of Color

- What are the shared values in our school community?
- Do all staff know and understand the values? How do you know?
- How do we demonstrate belief in every student?
- How does our school ensure that students of color are not overdisciplined or underestimated?

I. School Vision and Mission	II. Leadership Culture	III. Staff Dynamics	IV. Instructional Culture
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Why It Matters

In interviews, educators of color say that *leader behaviors* are important in their decisions to stay in a workplace or leave. They value leaders who show appreciation, foster teacher growth, and who reflect on and take seriously matters of bias and race.

Educators of color also value having leaders of color at their school. Leaders of color tend to be sensitive to organizational conditions, understand the effects of policies on teachers of color, and engage in advocacy, making the school more welcoming for all.

Places to Look for Evidence of Benefits and Barriers to Retaining Educators of Color

- Leadership roster, including demographic information (ethnic-racial identity, years of experience, etc.)

Questions to Ask Educators of Color

- Who are the leaders here?
- How do leaders hold themselves accountable for student and educator success?
- How do leaders accommodate divergent perspectives when making decisions?
- What have they done recently to engage families and the community?

I. School Vision and Mission	II. Leadership Culture	III. Staff Dynamics	IV. Instructional Culture
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Why It Matters

Educators of color stay in schools where they are surrounded by a respectful and supportive community of colleagues. Regardless of their own race or background, the staff members of a culturally affirming school recognize systems of inequality at work in history and today and strive to make their classrooms places that both reflect and challenge the students they serve.

This is good for students, but it also serves as an indicator of welcome and safety for educators of color. On the other hand, educators of color are likely to notice when other teachers or leaders express deficit-based views of students or communities of color, and they'll see it as a "red flag" in terms of organizational welcome and safety.

Places to Look for Evidence of Benefits and Barriers to Retaining Educators of Color

- Staff roster with demographic information
- Staff handbook

Questions to Ask Educators of Color

- To what extent do the staff here represent the backgrounds and identities of the students and community?
- Could a student attend all grades here and never be taught by a teacher of color?
- In what ways are people of color, their cultures, and achievements, recognized and celebrated here?

Why It Matters

Research tells us that schools that retain educators of color provide three things: **support**, **autonomy**, and **opportunity**.

- (1) Leaders consistently **SUPPORT** the growth of educators of color with individualized, early-career instructional support that is goal-oriented. This is key because *the support itself* helps teachers improve and feel more effective which leads to increased job satisfaction. Also, teachers appreciate *the sense of being supported* by a leader who cares and is invested in their growth.
- (2) Leaders protect **AUTONOMY** by allowing educators to use their agency, knowledge, and experience in their classrooms instead of obscuring it with mandated tests and curriculum. This is especially meaningful to educators of color because it allows them the latitude to teach their students using culturally responsive approaches.
- (3) Leaders provide equitable **OPPORTUNITIES** for leadership and advancement. Teachers of color are invited into leadership roles, and are given the chance to both develop and share expertise.

Places to Look for Evidence of Benefits and Barriers to Retaining Educators of Color	Questions to Ask Educators of Color
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instructional guidebooks• Book lists & curriculum• Info on mentorship and leadership opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent do teachers explore different pedagogical approaches that are consistent with their students’ culture?• Do we provide high-quality coaching, mentoring, professional development and leadership opportunities to educators of color?

Information Gathering
To study these four elements in depth, you will need to collect information from the educators of color at your school. Here are some possible methods you might use: Open forums, exit interviews (or stay interviews), focus groups, surveys, and **pulse meetings** (one-on-one check-ins for the purpose of listening).

If you are not already utilizing **pulse meetings**, consider putting these into practice. Schedule one-on-one meetings quarterly with all educators of color on your staff. These meetings are NOT regular check-ins when you revisit metrics, share updates, or give feedback.

Open by asking a few questions about aspirations, needs, workplace satisfaction, and how climate or leadership could improve. Next, listen without judgement, defensiveness, or interruption, and be sure to follow up on any concerns raised. These powerful meetings increase engagement and productivity, build empathy and rapport, help mend relationships, and mitigate bias. Their purpose is to support staff well-being, and they also give you, the leader, the opportunity to discern themes, gain insight, and be inspired to action.

Mistakes to Avoid: You should undertake information gathering delicately. While you want to understand the perspectives and experiences of educators of color, avoid asking a person to speak on behalf of their group (for example, seeking “the Black perspective” on a policy from one of the few Black teachers at your school). Also, do not expect educators of color to perform extra unpaid work (such as educating the leadership team about bias, particularly if the leaders have no intention to act on what they learn).

Benefits: Soliciting additional information from teachers can help shed light on nuances and complexities that are not visible in quantitative data. Follow up also demonstrates care and concern for teachers’ well-being and builds rapport and empathy with educators of color. And acting on what you learn, is the real benefit. Ensure that all the studying and surveying and follow-up questions aren’t for nothing by setting and working toward goals.

Goal Setting
Look for patterns and themes in the information you collected to choose goals to better support educators of color. You can use the four foundational elements (discussed above) to group your observations and give shape to the work ahead using a chart like this:

Strengths	Evidence (teacher narratives, survey data, etc.)		Foundational Element Domain
			<input type="checkbox"/> Vision/Mission <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Culture <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Dynamics <input type="checkbox"/> Instructional Culture
			<input type="checkbox"/> Vision/Mission <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Culture <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Dynamics <input type="checkbox"/> Instructional Culture
Weaknesses	Evidence	Potential Root Cause(s) (policy, practices, etc.)	Foundational Element Domain
			<input type="checkbox"/> Vision/Mission <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Culture <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Dynamics <input type="checkbox"/> Instructional Culture
			<input type="checkbox"/> Vision/Mission <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Culture <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Dynamics <input type="checkbox"/> Instructional Culture

From here, develop SMART goals. Here are a few examples:

- By June 2025, reduce turnover among staff of color by ____ % for the upcoming school year.
- By August of 2025, increase the ethnic/racial diversity of teaching workforce by hiring educators from underrepresented groups.
- By January 2026, ____ % of educators of color will answer “strongly agree” on workplace satisfaction survey when asked about support they receive from leaders.

For each goal, chart key tasks, their owners, deadlines, and benchmarks for gauging progress like in the chart below. Equity work is most effective when designated point-people create, implement, and monitor progress on specific, manageable goals.

SMART Goal	Key Tasks (and task owners)	Timeline	Benchmarks
By June 2025, 100 percent of teachers of color will indicate satisfaction with instructional support.	<u>Damien</u> will develop and facilitate a survey, allowing teachers of color to identify and rank preferred instructional supports.	Aug. 2024	All surveys completed
	<u>Naomi</u> and instructional team will review data, and determine owner for each support.	Sept. 2024	Coffee hour for teachers’ questions about the process

Principle 4: Commit to Sustainable, High-Impact Instructional Supports

The first three principles put in place the framework you need to make progress toward providing better support for educators of color.

Principle 1 requires acknowledging the importance of diversity. Principle 2 asks you to reflect on and examine your own actions, background, and attitudes and how they might contribute toward educators of color feeling included or excluded at your school. Principle 3 sets you up to gather data on the current environment at your school and to set goals for improvement.

Principles 4, 5, and 6 will cover the actions you can take to better support and retain educators of color.

First, *provide sustainable, high-impact instructional support*. Of course, instructional support is valuable for educators of all backgrounds, but it is an especially impactful way you can serve educators of color for two reasons:

- (1) Dissatisfaction with instructional support contributes directly to teachers of color deciding to leave their jobs more often than it is a contributing factor for white teachers. Research shows that early-career teachers of color, in particular, were more likely to leave when they didn’t receive instructional support.
- (2) Educators of color tend to receive less instructional support and preparation on average. Educators of color are more likely than white colleagues to have become certified through an alternative pathway, which may have meant fewer pre-service teaching observations and less time student teaching, leading them to feel less prepared as early-career teachers.

Listen to the perspectives of two teachers of color who didn’t receive the instructional support they needed to grow:

<i>Allan: “Although my kids were always working, I didn’t feel as effective as I wanted to be... When I asked for help, I always had the impression that my leader was satisfied my room wasn’t on fire, my kids were seated and doing their work. But that shouldn’t be the bar. It was disappointing.”</i>	Allan felt like his development as an instructor wasn’t a priority. The leaders may have been overwhelmed by “putting out fires” and dealing with discipline issues in other rooms, and they may have been grateful that Allan was so capable in classroom management, but Allan felt overlooked and unsupported in developing into the effective instructor he wanted to be.
<i>Dara: “Ms. Stevens always danced around the phrase ‘angry Black woman’ in conversation with me. She almost seemed scared or threatened when giving me feedback. She would say, ‘You know, I don’t want to make you mad.’ ...I think she did this because she knew I was going to ask questions about the feedback. I only did this to get a better idea of how I could improve my teaching for students...it felt like she didn’t care about my growth at all.”</i>	Dara saw she was up against stereotypes based on her race and gender. Her leader also seemed uncomfortable communicating across difference. Instead of welcoming Dara’s questions about instructional feedback, the leader discouraged Dara from engaging in conversation by implying that her questions were “angry” (and therefore inappropriate). Like Allan, Dara felt her development as an instructor wasn’t a priority. In her case, the leader’s priority seemed to be protecting her own comfort in the conversation.

Here are **three high-impact actions you can take to support teachers of color as instructors**:

#1 Personalize Feedback Loops

Begin by listening to educators of color and learning how they want to improve their craft. Work together to come up with goals they want to work on and agree to a schedule of weekly or biweekly observations and follow-up meetings. If scheduling is a problem, teachers could record themselves teaching and then share the video with you. These goal-observation-feedback loops should be kept separate from formal evaluations and official performance goals.

When you provide feedback, make sure the **four elements of high-impact feedback** are present:

- It is grounded in student outcome data.
- It draws on instructional and subject matter expertise.
- It includes positives (“keep doing this!”) and constructive next steps (“next time…”).
- It is followed by opportunities for meaningful practice.

#2 Facilitate Peer Learning and Collaboration

Enable teachers to observe one another teaching. Organize **instructional rounds** where groups of teachers observe other teachers with a focus on the school’s instructional goals, then discuss their observations. **Common planning time** with other teachers also helps teachers develop. Provide them with protected time to share problems of practice, discuss specific students, or to collaborate on work.

#3 Protect Educator Capacity and Well-Being

Developing as an instructor requires time for planning, reflecting, analyzing results, and so on. **Protect teachers’ worktime** so they can strengthen their practice. Demonstrate respect for teachers of color specifically by avoiding habitually calling on them to do unpaid tasks that fall outside their role such as de-escalating a conflict between students or translating conversations for parents.

As a leader, you need to also be aware of the frequent gap between leaders’ *intent* to demonstrate caring, and the care that teachers *actually experience*. Examine the impact of your expressions of care. While a scheduled luncheon or token holiday gift can be nice, to regularly communicate to someone that they are valued as a person and not just as a worker requires leaders to see and respond to educators’ needs *in the moment*.

Here are some common **care & well-being missteps to avoid**:

- Using “team building” or “forced fun” as substitutes for addressing people’s actual needs.
- Neglecting to ask for educators’ feedback on organizational conditions or job-related concerns.
- Receiving feedback, and then failing to act on it.
- Assigning a bunch of tasks and deadlines, then adding “don’t forget about self-care!” at the end.

Overall, leaders need to demonstrate that educators of color are valued as professionals and as individuals, and equip them to be the best educators they can be.

Principle 5: Foster Supportive Environments for Culturally Responsive Approaches

In addition to providing high-impact instructional support, you need to *ensure your school is a supportive environment for culturally responsive approaches*. The ability to teach in ways that respond to their students’ cultures has a direct impact on the job satisfaction of teachers of color. It impacts their decisions to stay or go. Listen to the voices of educators of color on this topic:

“I want them to know their culture is important, so that they don’t feel ashamed of it.” –Camika

“It’s important that students know about the contributions made by those within their community.” –Prudence

“It makes me look forward to coming to school every day, knowing my students’ diverse backgrounds are valued.” –Yesenia

Being culturally responsive isn’t just surface-level nods to culture (“heroes & holidays” or “food & fun”). It means really trying to see students’ cultural assets, “get” where students are coming from, and respond to them. An educator using a culturally responsive approach seeks to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and uses cultural knowledge to connect to new concepts.

Educators of color frequently enter the profession wanting to teach in a way that works with their students’ cultures to help them learn. Research shows this is hugely beneficial. *When taught using culturally responsive approaches, students demonstrated increased time on task, higher academic achievement, decreased absenteeism, and higher graduation rates.*

A schoolwide commitment to culturally responsive approaches has been shown to lead to increases in student reading levels. This is not just a nice-to-have. It’s undeniably good for students. And it matters deeply to educators of color.

Schools, however, often erect **barriers** to culturally responsive teaching. Listen to the voice of another teacher of color, Jamie: *“I often feel micromanaged to teach in one way, and my lesson plans are constantly scrutinized to ensure I narrowly focus on test preparation materials. I feel like every day is a formal observation. If the tasks I give the kids don’t look exactly like the state test, I feel like I’m looked at as a bad teacher.”*

Here are **three angles you can work from** to make your school a place where teachers of color are trusted, equipped, and supported to use culturally responsive approaches:

#1 Curriculum

Elevate teacher autonomy over standardization. In order to be responsive to their specific students, teachers need autonomy in their classrooms. They need to be able to use their professional judgement and experience to assess what will work best with a given group and they need the freedom to try that approach. For educators of color, scripted curriculum and constant surveillance are disempowering and de-professionalizing and often undermine their reason for teaching and erode their workplace satisfaction.

As a leader, you can and should maintain some non-negotiables when it comes to teaching, but these should be evidence-based practices like setting learning goals and allowing for multiple rounds of student-centered practice, *not* adherence to a script. Your baseline expectations should hold plenty of space for educator creativity and responsiveness to students. Monitor teachers in a way that validates their experience and expertise so that they experience your presence and input as supportive not controlling.

Carefully examine the texts and curricula that are taught in your school. Don't make the mistake of assuming that without culturally responsive approaches, curriculum is cultureless, neutral or, skills-based only. If the achievements or perspectives of people of color are missing from the curriculum, or if students are not encouraged to think critically about whose point of view a text is written from and why, then curriculum silently dehumanizes and dishonors the groups whose perspectives it leaves out.

To best support and retain teachers of color, you need culturally affirming texts and curricula as well as freedom for educators to teach their grade-level and content standards in culturally responsive ways.

#2 Capacity

Provide structured time for learning and reflection on cultural identities and bias. Teaching responsively requires additional effort from teachers, and many teachers are willing to put forth this effort as long as they have the time and opportunity to do so. Educators (of color and not) need to grow their proficiency at navigating cultural differences in the classroom and they also need the opportunity to reflect on their biases and blind spots.

If supporting this learning directly is beyond the capacity of building-level leaders, there are external providers that can facilitate it. For example, teachers might use resources from an organization like [Learning for Justice](#).

Prioritize collaboration and planning time in which teachers can apply cultural knowledge to enhance their teaching. When teachers are given time to talk, plan, and collaborate with others who teach their same subject or grade-level, they share the resources, lessons, and ideas that have worked well in their classrooms. Even one culturally responsive teacher may benefit students across a whole grade level if other teachers are open to try new approaches. Given time to collaborate, teachers can also support one another's efforts to become more culturally responsive by reviewing assignments and offering mutual accountability.

#3 Community

Finally, your school can become a more supportive environment for culturally responsive teaching by bridging gaps between school, home, and community. As a leader, you can align yourself with educators of color by validating the community's strengths and assets.

Facilitate home-school-community collaboration beyond just parent-teacher conferences by building relationships and supporting endeavors that center the needs, aspirations, histories, cultures, and traditions of students and their families. Communicate in the community's preferred languages and using their preferred modes whenever possible.

Gather community input and invite collective decision making. As a leader, this is how you can express your belief in your students' families, communities, and cultures as assets. You can develop sustained and meaningful partnerships by sharing power with the community. Invite their participation in school governance or instructional teams. Seek their leadership on special initiatives or activities. Invite community members to help facilitate PD at your school. Solicit community input on major decisions.

Self-Assessment

If you are looking for a place to begin improving your school's support for culturally responsive teaching, take this self-assessment to identify areas where growth or change is most needed. You can also monitor progress by taking the assessment again in the future. Rate your school on each item from 0 to 4, where 0 = no evidence, 1 = beginning, 2 = emerging, 3 = progressing, and 4 = innovating.

Teachers have autonomy	0	1	2	3	4
Curriculum centers identity and promotes critical thinking	0	1	2	3	4
There are structured opportunities for reflection and learning	0	1	2	3	4
Priority is given to teacher planning and collaboration	0	1	2	3	4
Home, school, and community work together	0	1	2	3	4
School solicits input from and shares power with community	0	1	2	3	4

Principle 6: Lead for an Inclusive Community

Finally, move beyond just seeking a diverse community to *leading for an inclusive community*. While a diverse community *has* people from many different backgrounds, an inclusive community *welcomes and includes* people from many different backgrounds.

Listen to the voices of educators of color on this topic:

“It feels like there are no safe spaces for me to be myself until I get in my car at the end of the workday.” – Rosa

“Sometimes, I don’t even share my true opinion when asked because I don’t want to receive backlash from my white colleagues – I just smile and agree.” – Alison

“The way teachers speak about our Black and Latinx kids is atrocious – especially when the parents are not around!” – Kareem

There are two common tools used in schools and other organizations to address lack of inclusiveness: equity training and racial affinity groups. Both can be helpful if done right, but effective implementation is key.

Equity Training

Sometimes there is a serious gap between the intent behind equity training, and the actual impact on participants. Even worse is when an ineffective training drains time and resources. When it’s done right, here’s what effective equity training should look like:

Goal-Oriented – Goals are concrete and aligned with school priorities, include measurable adult behavior change, and communicated clearly. Collect data before and after to measure outcomes (disaggregating by demographic categories for analysis if possible).

Explicit Strategy and Implementation – Training includes messages about why equity and the training matter, what implementation should look like, and how participants will move forward afterward. Leaders engage in the training, communicating its importance.

Diverse & Effective Trainers – Training is ideally led by co-facilitators who reflect different backgrounds, representing both dominant and non-dominant identities. Facilitators model vulnerability and manage, rather than ignore, participants’ resistance and emotional responses.

Research-Based – Training is based on well-regarded, research-based materials and resources, and builds learning in a logical progression across sessions instead of using a one-and-done approach.

Application & Outcomes – The training leads participants to actively engage in inquiry about their own beliefs and practices and apply their learning in their own context. Training pairs awareness with commitment to change by guiding participants to (1) name what they have learned, (2) describe implications of their learning in their day-to-day work, and (3) identify actions they will take.

Racial Affinity Groups

Racial affinity groups provide safe spaces for educators of color to focus on their aspirations, needs, and achievements without having to defend their opinions or worry about how white colleagues might respond negatively. These groups can engage in advocacy, support educators’ well-being, connect mentees with mentors, and more. In schools with few educators of color, groups could be formed across several nearby schools or even online. Done right, here’s what effective racial affinity groups should look like:

Clearly Communicated Purpose - They have a clear purpose, informed by the needs expressed by *educators of color at your school*. Affinity groups should be publicized to all, including their value, purpose, and who may participate. Prepare to address concerns about confidentiality, exclusion, and why the group is needed.

Support – Groups receive support from their organization both now and in the future in the form of reserved meeting times, appropriately private meeting places, and funds allocated. Leaders support them by listening to and acting on their concerns.

Leadership – They are led by experienced facilitators who reflect the backgrounds of the participants and can effectively build rapport and navigate group dynamics. Facilitators should be paid for their time whether they are external or from the school’s staff.

Supporting and retaining educators of color requires more than just building a diverse staff. Staff members from diverse backgrounds also need to feel welcome and included, able to safely bring all of who they are to their workplace.

Conclusion

You now have awareness of the basic principles you’ll need to move toward a culturally affirming workplace that supports educators of color. By acknowledging the importance of educator diversity, cultivating reflection, assessing and planning for action, providing high-impact instructional support and a better environment for culturally responsive approaches, and moving toward a more inclusive workplace, your school can now begin to turn around the trend of high turnover among educators of color.

THE MAIN IDEA's Professional Learning Suggestions for Supporting & Retaining Educators of Color

Below are a few activities you can use with leadership team to jump-start professional learning about supporting and retaining educators of color. But don't forget that this is only a start. Supporting and retaining educators of color requires ongoing effort and attention and should become an integral part of your school's structures and systems.

Part I: Importance

The first two activities serve to help the leadership understand the importance of educators of color to students of all backgrounds.

A. Reflect on Experience

1. Everyone on the leadership team take a few minutes to individually reflect on their own experiences as a K-12 student regarding the following questions.

- (1) Did you receive instruction from one or more teachers of color?
- (2) Were any leaders at your school people of color?
- (3) How do you think the presence or absence of teachers and leaders of color impacted you as a student?

2. Briefly share answers with the group and discuss.

B. Review the Evidence

1. Give a few minutes for everyone to review the chart below (and in the **HANDOUT**) describing the ways research shows educators of color contribute to schools and how students benefit.

2. Everyone identify and share benefits from below they've observed at our school and benefits they most desire for students.

Educators of Color...		Students of Color...	
exhibit high expectations	→	perform better on standardized tests in math and English	
form supportive relationships	→	are absent less, drop out less, are more likely to graduate high school and to attend and stick with college	
make fewer disciplinary referrals	→	miss less school time for behavioral infractions	
hold positive views of their students' potential	→	are less often referred for special education and more often enrolled in gifted programs and advanced courses (particularly true for Black and Latino boys taught by someone with a similar background)	
often work in hard-to-staff schools	→	are taught by a qualified teacher instead of a substitute	
often bridge cultural gaps between families and schools (including unpaid translation and interpretation)	→	experience better communication and cooperation between home and school	
teach from an asset-based perspective and use culturally responsive techniques	→	are more engaged	
Educators of Color...		Students of Other Backgrounds...	
can be positive role models	→	gain experience and comfort communicating, learning, and working together across difference	
humanize complex issues	→	feel better equipped to understand social problems	
counter stereotypes, support students' cultural awareness, and create opportunities for cross-racial dialogue and more complete understanding of communities of color	→	are more prepared to enter diverse settings such as at college and work	
help create a positive, racially diverse community at school	→	report higher rates of social belonging and positive relationships with both staff and other students	

Part II: Current Situation

Facilitator or volunteer read aloud to the group: *Turnover is higher for educators of color than for white educators, and educators of color often report that conditions at their schools are not affirming or not inclusive of their backgrounds and identities.*

The first activity below (A) is designed to inform leaders what the research says about why educators of color leave their jobs. The second activity (B) starts the process of digging into the school environment and assessing which factors might be impacting the job satisfaction of educators of color at their school.

A. Rank the Reasons

1. As individuals, read the list below of 8 reasons teachers might cite for leaving their job. This a general list of *possible* reasons for job dissatisfaction, not a list specific to educators of color. If you could wave a magic wand and make immediate improvement in 5 of these items at your school, which 5 would you choose? Circle those 5 on your **HANDOUT**.

- too large class sizes
- student discipline problems
- inferior facilities/lack of resources
- lack of teacher autonomy
- low salary
- behavior of school leaders
- classroom interruptions
- culture of standardized testing & performance-based accountability

2. Now it's time to discover what the research shows are the top reasons educators of color are dissatisfied with their jobs. Facilitator or volunteer from the group: read out the statistics in the box below, and other group members can circle these reasons on the **HANDOUT** as a way to remember what might be most difficult for the educators of color at your school.

- The #5 cause of job dissatisfaction, cited by 56% of educators of color is: inferior facilities/lack of resources.
- The #4 cause of job dissatisfaction, cited by 57% of educators of color is: lack of teacher autonomy over their classroom.
- The #3 cause of job dissatisfaction, cited by 61% of educators of color is: student discipline problems.
- The #2 cause of job dissatisfaction, cited by 65% of educators of color is: culture of standardized testing & performance-based accountability.
- And the #1 cause of job dissatisfaction, cited by 81% of educators of color is: behavior of school leaders.

3. Discuss as a group: Did anything surprise you on the list of reasons for job dissatisfaction cited by educators of color? How does it compare to your own viewpoint on the problems of greatest concern? Do these statistics point out any blind spots you might have when it comes to understanding the concerns of educators of color? What shifts in focus or additional learning might be required of the leadership team now that you've been exposed to these statistics?

B. Assess your Environment

1. Everyone on the leadership team take a few minutes to complete the survey below individually (on the **HANDOUT**) to determine the benefits and barriers to recruiting and retaining educators of color. This comes from the "School Readiness Tool," by S. El-Mekki, published by The Center for Black Educator Development. The complete tool can be found the book.

Rate the accuracy of each statement for your school using the scale: 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = Some, 4 = A lot, and 5 = 100%.

Vision & Mission

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your school believes in and supports every student's limitless future. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. What your school believes and values is known to your educators, students, and families. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Leadership Culture

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Educators, students, and families have full confidence in our leadership to advance the changes we need to recruit and retain educators of color. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Families and other school community members feel welcome and valued. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Staff Dynamics

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Educators mirror the students they teach in their racial identities, life experiences and worldviews. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your school has made concerted efforts to ensure fairness and equity in the achievement, promotion, and leadership of educators of color. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Instructional Culture

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Your school insists on continual learning, modeling for your students a curiosity to learn new approaches and perspectives. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| b. Your school has thoughtfully designed and instituted protocols, procedures and programs—from hiring to retirement—that encourage educators of color to become great educators whose students excel at your school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

2. Among the leadership team, share your answers on this survey and discuss both the areas of agreement and discrepancy you find. If two leaders have given very different scores on a certain statement, can they share the evidence they considered or what, in their opinion, supports the number they chose?

3. Based on the results, discuss what areas the school seems to need the most work on and where you might start.

Part III: Action

A. Grade Yourself

1. According to research, educators of color frequently desire (but lack) specific types of support in their jobs. As individuals, read the three areas of support described below (and on the [HANDOUT](#)) and give yourself a “grade” on how well you as a leader do at providing this kind of support to educators of color at your school. You could use letter grades like A, B, and C or choose other descriptors like “does not demonstrate,” “progressing,” or “exceeds standard.”

Grade	Support Type
	I provide support for educators of color in becoming better instructors. This might look like: (a) Individualized feedback loops where the teacher identifies what they want feedback on, the leader observes, provides the requested feedback, and then the teacher has a chance to be observed again soon, acting on the feedback; (b) Protected work time to plan, reflect, and improve; or (c) Opportunities to collaborate with and learn from peers, including observing others teaching.
	I provide support for educators of color in their autonomy to teach in culturally responsive ways. In other words, at your school, there’s not just one right way to teach. Teachers are not expected to deliver a scripted curriculum and can instead teach their content and grade level standards in ways that are meaningful for their students. They’re given time to plan and collaborate with colleagues to come up with effective approaches.
	I provide support for educators of color to be themselves and feel welcome at school. Schools sometimes approach improving in this area by providing effective equity training for all staff or by establishing racial affinity groups.

2. Set a personal goal to improve your “grade” in providing one of these types of support. Write down your goal (on the [HANDOUT](#)) and spend a few minutes sharing with the leadership team about the goal and how you will work on it.

Personal Goal: _____

B. Act on Input

1. As a group, list educators of color at your school (if there are many, begin by choosing a number equal to the number of people on the leadership team to focus on for this exercise).
2. Divide up the list so that each leader designates one educator of color they will meet with to listen to and gather input on support they need.
3. Each leader, schedule a one-on-one meeting with the educator of color they plan to meet with. Brainstorm in advance possible supports you could offer them, referencing the chart in the previous exercise for ideas.
4. Choose one or two of the questions below (also listed on the [HANDOUT](#)) to ask in the one-on-one meeting. If possible, provide them to the teacher in advance so they can consider their responses.

Possible Questions to Ask in One-on-One Meetings

- What impact do you hope to make on your students? What resources or support do you need to achieve these this?
- Are your strengths and interests being recognized in your work as a teacher? Is there something that could be done to give you a chance to incorporate these into your work more, or to use your strengths and interests to influence the whole school community?
- What types of PD and support have you experienced? What was most/least helpful? What is missing?
- Do you receive feedback that is clear, rooted in evidence, and actionable? What recommendations do you have to improve our processes related to feedback?
- From your perspective, do the day-to-day expectations and demands allow for work-life balance? What do you think could be modified to allow for greater work-life balance?
- Do you feel you are a valued asset at our school? If not, is there anything that could be done differently to help you feel like a valued and important member of the community?
- Based on your experiences and observations, what can be done to better support and retain educators of color in our school?

5. Spend the majority of the meeting *listening*. Ask additional questions as needed to keep the conversation going, but make sure the focus stays on the teacher of color, their experience, and their needs.

6. Identify one or more actions you can take to respond what you heard. Take those actions and then communicate to the teacher what you did in response to their concerns. The follow-up is absolutely essential to the whole process.

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Each month I send one education or leadership book summary along with PD ideas to use with staff. I also have other goodies – podcasts about the books, PPT workshops you can use, over 170 *searchable* book summaries in my archives, and more.

HANDOUT for Workshop on Supporting & Retaining Educators of Color

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help create a positive, racially diverse community at school	→	report higher rates of social belonging and positive relationships with both staff and other students	

Some Possible Reasons for Educator Job Dissatisfaction

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • too large class sizes • lack of teacher autonomy • classroom interruptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student discipline problems • low salary • culture of standardized testing & performance-based accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inferior facilities/lack of resources • behavior of school leaders
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Personal Goal: _____

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