

AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT AND EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES IN DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS THROUGH THE VOICES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Qualitative Research Study – Overview and Summary of Findings
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PURPOSE OF STUDY ■

African-American students, educators and community members continue to struggle in the landscape of Denver Public Schools despite progress and improvements towards the goal of every child succeeding. Persistent disparities in achievement and opportunity for African-American students, an at-times hostile work environment for African-American educators and a growing disconnect from Denver's African-American community have all raised the level of concern. The district has a long history of struggling with issues related to race and education prior to and during the Keyes mandate for court-ordered busing, and in the post-desegregation landscape. Many studies show that school districts throughout the nation are still challenged in their efforts to close achievement and opportunity gaps for African-American students. The school district has responded by requesting this qualitative study, the first of its kind in Denver and other Colorado districts. This study's purpose is to provide feedback regarding what the district, and all of us, can do to better understand the experiences and challenges of African-American students and educators.

In fulfilling the purpose of this study, the researcher gathered qualitative data through one-on-one interviews and focus groups regarding the perceptions of African-American teachers and administrators related to:

- Critical issues impacting achievement and opportunity gaps of African-American students
- Policies, practices and program that positively and negatively impact these gaps, and
- What African-American students need to do well academically

In addition, participants were asked to share perceptions of their lived experiences as teachers and administrators in the district related to:

- Policies, practices or programs that positively or negatively impacted them
- Organizational climate
- Whether they would recommend DPS to colleagues
- Supports they view as valuable
- Finally, to rate the level of institutional racism they feel is present in the district.

PROFILE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS ■

- 50 female / 20 male = 70 participants (self-selected)
- Work throughout the district and in central administration
- Majority are current teachers and administrators with a couple of formers who have returned to substitute as well as community members of the Superintendent's African-American Roundtable who participated
 - Teachers = 35 participants
 - Administrators = 26 participants
 - Community = 9 participants
- Ages of participants ranged from 26 years to 74 – lots of variation in age with about 30% in their 40s and 50s
- Years of service -- 1 year to 38 years
- Majority have completed master's degree

OVERVIEW OF STUDY FINDINGS ■

Through the thematic analysis of the qualitative narratives from 40 one-on-one interviews and three focus groups with African-American educators, multiple dominant themes were identified. The findings were selected based on their frequency and meaning to the purpose of the study. In order for an issue to be categorized as a dominant theme, it had to be mentioned by at least 10 participants and surface as a topic of discussion in at least one of the three focus groups. The multiple dominant themes that emerged through this study demonstrate the urgency, complexity and interrelatedness of the issues currently impacting the experiences of African-American educators and students in Denver Public Schools.

"We need more African-American teachers. They feel isolated and afraid to speak out. This makes for a hostile work environment."
(Participant 4A)

"If you are too black, you're not accepted in DPS." (Participant 26A)

"Equity is one of our core values and I don't see that played out as often as it should be. It should be a consistent culture across every department and every school, but I don't see that." (Participant 13A)

"It starts with treating educators of color with respect and dignity. I am feeling encouraged that the district is doing this." (Participant 10T)

DOMINANT THEMES AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

One of the most dramatic changes relative to African-American students in the district has been their declining percentage compared to other student populations. According to the *2015-16 Denver Public Schools Report of Student Membership by Ethnicity and Gender*, African-American students now comprise only 13.8% (12,538) of the total school population of 91,429, as of Oct. 1, 2015. The growing Anglo student population is currently 22.6% (20,671), while the Hispanic percentage is 55.1% (51,252). (Denver Public Schools, 2015-16) The decline in the African-American percentage of the student population has been attributed to a number of factors, including the gentrification of Denver's neighborhoods, increased levels of poverty, the shortage of affordable housing and choice options allowing student enrollment in surrounding districts. The impact of the decline in enrollment of African-American students has led many in the African-American community to conclude that the attention to the needs of these students is no longer a priority, as was the case during the era of Keyes and school desegregation.

Despite the challenges present in the current landscape, and the perceived implications for African-American students, there are signs of hope and areas of improvement. The school district has articulated a vision of "Every Child Succeeds" in the Denver Strategic 2020 Plan (2012) through a systemic focus on:

- **Great schools in every neighborhood**
- **A foundation for success in school**
- **Ready for college and career**
- **Support for the whole child**
- **Close the opportunity gap**

"Our African-American students need caring, qualified teachers with a willingness to learn about other cultures. They also need to have high expectations for our students. Our students are communal and need the interactions...I haven't seen this." (Participant 2A)

"The majority of teachers think they are doing the right thing, but they don't have the same experience. Some of the negative approaches to our children are intentional, some are non-intentional...They don't know what they don't know." (Participant 8A)

In examining key data indicators specific to African-American student success, the district reports the following:

Graduation Rates and Rigorous High School Course Work

- African-American student graduation rates have increased dramatically over time with a 20 percentage point gain, from 43% in 2007 to 63.4% in 2014.
- In 2015, African-American students passed 168 Advanced Placement exams – four times more than the 40 exams passed by African-American students in 2006.

Suspensions and Expulsions

- Since 2006-07, the suspension rate for African-American students has been reduced by a factor of 4 from 28 of 100 students in 2006 facing suspension to 7 out of 100 students in 2015-16 facing suspension. (DPS, African-American and Black Student Outcomes in the Denver Public Schools, 2015)

Even with these indicators of progress, African-American students remain at the bottom of the ladders of student achievement and opportunity in the district. Within the Denver 2020 Plan, there are specific goals related to diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as closing achievement and opportunity gaps. However, without a strong and intentional focus on these elements of the plan, and targeted initiatives focused on African-American students, equity and progress will remain elusive.

The following are dominant themes that study participants viewed as **negatively** impacting African-American students:

- **Lack of qualified / culturally competent teachers**
- **Disproportionate discipline, suspension and expulsions**
- **Lack of culturally relevant curriculum, use of white middle-class model**
- **Low expectations / deficit thinking**
- **Consent decree – English Language Learner (ELL) requirements and equity for African-American students**
- **Lack of access to quality enrichment and academic programs**

DOMINANT THEMES AFRICAN-AMERICAN EDUCATORS ■

Through this qualitative study, the voices of African-American teachers and administrators have related their observations about their own experiences in Denver Public Schools. Participants identified several issues and areas of policy and practice they perceive as having both negative and positive impacts on the degree to which they feel valued as professionals and experience job satisfaction. Each participant commented on their lived experience and shared observations regarding the status of African-American educators from different vantage points (e.g. years of teaching, administrator / teacher, age, location of employment). Despite such differences, they provided compatible answers to the interview questions.

In contextualizing the perceptions of African-American educators regarding their employment experiences, it is again important to note that African-American teachers comprise only 4% (241) of the teaching workforce of 5,948 in the Denver Public Schools. They are geographically dispersed throughout the district and are often the only one, or one of few, African-American educators in a school building or department. Despite their small numbers and geographic dispersion, the district reports that retention rates for African-American employees are higher than they are for white employees (87% vs 84%). (DPS, 2015)

Results from the district's CollaboRATE survey, which solicits employee satisfaction data from all staff, shows that engagement among African-American educators in DPS is about the same or higher than for other groups. (Of the 1,303 African-American employees who participated in the survey, 80% indicated they felt engaged. But of the 7,178 white employees who participated, only 73% said they felt engaged with the district.) (DPS, 2015) However, employee survey data captures only a snapshot in time and they typically don't provide specific feedback from employees who may not be experiencing a high level of satisfaction or engagement in their workplace. In a series of employees-of-color focus groups conducted by the district during the winter of 2015-2016 (December – February), data was gathered about the perceptions and experiences of DPS educators of color. The focus groups also obtained feedback related to the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. It was reported that African-American educators have difficulty securing positions and advancement; feel isolated and not valued as professionals; that seasoned teachers are being pushed out; more time for discussions about diversity and inclusion needs to occur without fear of retaliation; and that their voices are not heard and they feel under attack daily. (Employees-of-Color Focus Group Highlights, Denver Public Schools, April 2016)

The following are dominant themes that this study's participants viewed as having a **negative** impact on African-American teachers and administrators:

- **Practices do not reflect organizational core values**
- **Hostile environment / fear of retaliation**
- **Institutional racism / discrimination**
- **Lack of representation of African-Americans in top leadership**
- **African-American teachers and leaders do not feel valued as professionals**
- **Perceived need to "fit in" / assimilate**
- **Lack of cultural competency**
- **Human Resource processes and screening out teachers and leaders of color**
- **African-American women –"angry Black woman" label**
- **Cultural sensitivity of LEAP evaluations**

"African-Americans in DPS are invisible, silenced and dehumanized, especially if you are passionate, vocal and unapologetically black. We can't even be advocates for our kids...There is a lot of fear and black folks are pitted against each other." (Participant 41A)

"They've got to clean up DPS before they go out and recruit anybody else. You can't mistreat who you have and keep going to look for new people." (Participant 7A)

"I want them to talk to those of us who are living it and hear our stories, our struggles...and all of us can't be crazy. You can't possibly have this level of a common theme... All of us can't be making this up. It's like we're living mirror stories...all of us... I would say it is borderline criminal what is happening." (Participant 39A)

The dominant themes listed above were related by study participants as those issues, policies or programs they perceived as having a negative impact on African-American students and educators in Denver Public Schools. Interview and focus group participants were also asked about those policies and programs that may have a positive impact on the outcomes for African-American students and workplace experiences of African-American educators.

The following are dominant themes study participants identified that may have a positive impact on closing achievement and opportunity gaps for African-American students:

- **Culturally competent teachers**
- **More African-American teachers, administrators, role models**
- **Socio-emotional support, whole child focus, wrap around services**
- **Culturally relevant curriculum**
- **High expectations, eliminate deficit thinking**
- **Comparable supports that ELL students receive**

The following are dominant themes study participants identified that may have a positive impact on the workplace experiences of African-American educators as well as recruitment and retention efforts:

- **Equity and cultural competence initiatives**
- **The research around the issues impacting African-American teachers and administrators**
- **Affinity / support groups for African-American teachers**
- **Mentors, coaches and sponsors**
- **Establish / expand the district's "grow your own" initiatives**
- **Ensure recruitment teams are representative of those the district is trying to recruit**
- **Provide orientation, support and connections that are culturally relevant**

"We need a professional society or network. We are a communal people and often we don't feel this sense of community in the school building. We need a place of our own where we can learn how to deal with the racial challenges of the district... We need to feel like we have a voice and that there will be follow up to our concerns and issues." (Participant 2A).

DISCUSSION ■

Through this qualitative study, the voices of African-American teachers and administrators have related their observations about the issues impacting African-American students and their own workplace experiences in the Denver Public Schools. Despite differences in age, years of teaching, level of education, teacher or administrator and location of employment, they provided similar answers to the interview questions. Participants identified several issues and areas of policy and practice they perceived as having both negative and positive impacts. The dominant themes that emerged from the analysis of transcripts from interviews and focus groups challenge the district's stated commitments to the shared values of equity and diversity, cultural competence, eliminating achievement and opportunity gaps, and fostering positive teaching and learning environments. This feedback also reflected areas of missed opportunity which, if addressed, may provide a framework for enhancing the outcomes for African-American students and the workplace experiences of African-American educators.

The dominant theme of "cultural competence" emerged as an issue impacting both African-American students and educators. Study participants repeatedly commented on the lack of cultural competence and the negative impact of the demographic mismatch between the diverse student population and educator workforce. This has become problematic for DPS and urban districts throughout the nation. African-American students comprise 13.8% of DPS students and 83.3% of the DPS student population are students of color. However, 74.4% of the teaching workforce is Anglo and majority female. (DPS, 2015) Demographic mismatches, like that in Denver Public Schools, negatively affect critical factors like teachers' expectations for educational attainment, fairness in the application of discipline policies and overall school climate.

For African-American educators, the lack of cultural competence, along with their small number throughout the district, contributes to their feelings of isolation and marginalization, fear of retaliation, discrimination in hiring and advancement opportunities, and feeling that they are not valued as professionals. All of these concerns contribute to their perceptions that they are experiencing hostile work environments.

The majority of study participants rated the level of institutional racism in the district as high despite initiatives like the Equity Boot Camps, Bias and Inclusion trainings. Participants expressed the need for more comprehensive, ongoing and mandatory cultural competence training to address the many concerns related to both African-American students and educators.

In addition to the multiple issues surrounding cultural competency, disproportionate discipline practices and equity related to the requirements for ensuring that English Language Learner (ELLs) students are succeeding in schools also emerged as dominant themes among study participants. Many expressed concerns regarding what they perceived as the unfair treatment of African-American students through disciplinary practices. They also expressed optimism that increased requirements for cultural competence training, and district initiatives focused on the socio-emotional needs and the whole child, may assist in decreasing disciplinary disparities and keep more of these students in the classroom.

Participants perceived another inequity in the current landscape relative to what has been done for the subset of Hispanic students who are ELLs and their families. The district has implemented major ELL services across the district in curriculum, instruction, teacher training, etc. However, these same systems, services and supports have not been implemented to support African-American or Latino students whose families have been in Colorado for multiple generations. Many shared that the district's intense focus on the needs of ELLs has overshadowed the needs of African-American and non-ELL students and their families since the end of the court-ordered busing and desegregation.

Participants repeatedly voiced the opinion that African-American parents are not heard, and there is a lack of communication with and customer service for these families.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS ■

This brief overview provides the reader with a summary of study findings and analysis. Underlying many of the dominant themes that emerged in this study are those issues reflected in the historical dynamics between race and educational opportunity in Denver. This researcher is convinced that it will not be enough to just continue to shine a light on the problems – we have to fix them. In this rapidly changing environment, it will be important for district leadership, African-American educators and community to look in the mirror – at the good, the bad and the ugly – and figure out what's going on. And it's not so much about where we are at, it's more about what we do next.

It is this researcher's hope that the feedback provided through this study will provide a foundation for the district and African-American community to work collaboratively to better support educational outcomes for African-American students and the employment experiences of African-American educators. The time for action, positive change and healing is now. We have to put our hearts in it, as Dr. Rachel Noel wished over 50 years ago. The district's attention to these issues is an encouraging first step, but the magnitude and complexity of these issues will require more transparent, intentional, substantial and sustainable efforts in the months and years ahead.

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