Calif. Program Takes Aim at 'Teacher-Diversity Gap'

An Oakland, Calif., program emphasizes keeping mix of educators on the job

By Stephen Sawchuk

Oakland, Calif.

As the country's K-12 student population grows more ethnically diverse, students of color face the troubling possibility of never having a teacher who looks like them.

According to federal data, more than 40 percent of students are nonwhite, compared to just 17 percent of teachers, and that mismatch appears to be on the rise.

But a new project here is taking a deeper aim at the factors contributing to what's sometimes called the "teacher-diversity gap." The organizers hope to encourage more adults from a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds to enter the profession—and stay in it.

Teach Tomorrow in Oakland, begun in 2008, guides adults from the city as they fulfill credential requirements, pass their licensing tests, navigate the hiring process, and—crucially—negotiate the tumultuous first few years in the classroom.

Its manager, Rachelle Rogers-Ard, calls TTO a teacher-development program—a distinction underscoring that the initiative is not focused only, or even primarily, on recruiting teachers. In fact, the program requires recruits to commit to teaching in the district for at least five years.

Since its inception, TTO has succeeded in helping a diverse mix of 70 adults become teachers in the 37,000-student Oakland district. It currently has a retention rate of 89 percent.

The program's recruits speak of it not in terms of its mentoring, professional development, or support. They speak of it as a family, one that continues to grow as more TTO teachers come in and increasingly take on leadership roles in their schools.

In the words of 6th grade TTO teacher Sabrina N. Moore, "It's a movement now."

Anatomy of a Problem

Researchers cite several reasons why the teacher-diversity gap warrants careful attention.
For one, a limited but mounting body of research suggests that students of color benefit academically from being taught by a teacher of the same race or ethnic background. Equally compelling, if less empirically verified, is the idea that such teachers can serve as role models for students of color—and help dispel stereotypes for white students and colleagues.

For Ms. Rogers-Ard, the issue of teacher diversity is fundamentally also about the nature of America's democratic ideals.

"I sort of bristle when people say, 'We need people of color for children of color.' I think you need to represent all the different types of diversity so children have the opportunity to learn from all kinds of folk," she said. "We need to create a schooling environment that says the people who are in charge are not only white women."

Despite policy attention spanning three decades, the gap has proved to be remarkably stubborn. By late in the past decade, more than 30 states had established financial incentives, recruitment programs, alternative-preparation routes, or other strategies to help minority candidates enter teaching, according to a 2012 study by Ana Maria Villegas, a professor of education at Montclair State University, in New Jersey, and two colleagues.

There's some evidence that such efforts have made a dent: Teachers of color made up about 17 percent of the teacher workforce overall in 2007, compared with 13 percent two decades earlier, the analysis shows. But that increase hasn't kept pace with the growth in the population of nonwhite students.

"No matter how much work we've done to increase the number and production of teachers of color, we haven't been able to keep up, and frankly, I don't think we'll catch up in the near future," Ms. Villegas said.

Factors that continue to contribute to the problem include: lower college-going rates overall among minority high school students; problems with the articulation between the two-year colleges many such students initially attend and four-year institutions; and the fact that minority students who do go on to college are often recruited into more-prestigious fields.

**Staying Put**

In addition, recent research shows the diversity gap to be more than a problem of supply.

A 2011 analysis of data from the federal Schools and Staffing Survey found that teachers of color moved to other schools and left the profession at a rate that outpaced that of white teachers—an annual percentage rate of 19 percent versus 16 percent for whites.

Working conditions seem to be a factor. The study's authors, Richard M. Ingersoll and Henry May, both scholars at the University of Pennsylvania, also found that more than half of such teachers nationwide were employed in urban schools, and nearly two-thirds were in high-poverty schools, in which working conditions such as autonomy and having a say in school decisionmaking were reported to be less desirable. When the researchers controlled for those conditions, they found that the differences in the attrition rates between white and nonwhite teachers disappeared. Their conclusion:
Programs to increase the sheer number of minority teachers have succeeded, but efforts to retain such teachers have not.

"There has been this thought, 'Let's bring these teachers in and we're done,'" said Mr. Ingersoll, an expert on teacher recruitment and retention. "The data indicate that it's only half the story."

The Teach Tomorrow in Oakland initiative focuses heavily on the retention side of the equation. It grew out of a community task force created in 2006 by Oakland's mayor at the time, Ronald V. Dellums. Topping the group's list of recommendations was an effort to help foster a teaching force with deep ties to Oakland that better reflected its student population, which is 94 percent minority. (More than half the district's teachers are white; 40 percent are black or Latino.)

The program's founders aimed to balance efficacy with expediency.

"Grow your own" programs that help graduating high school students and paraprofessionals earn bachelor's degrees in education have shown some success. But as Ms. Rogers-Ard noted, they take many years to produce a single classroom teacher.

"I realized that if I had to wait seven or eight years to get a teacher, I wouldn't have a program," she said.

On the other hand was the desire not to exacerbate teacher turnover. Data show that, nationally, alternative-route programs have helped increase the number of teachers of color. But Oakland task force members and even district officials said the district's reliance on national teacher-recruiting programs came with a cost.

"We've been very successful getting qualified teachers, but we have had an extremely high turnover rate," Brigitte J.A. Marshall, the Oakland district's associate superintendent for human resources, said about such efforts. "Children benefit from consistency and stability."

**Systems of Support**

The sweet spot for TTO staff was working in partnership with community groups and teacher colleges in the San Francisco Bay area to craft a program in which interested local residents could make a transition to a career in teaching relatively quickly.

"I just wanted to contribute to the youth of Oakland, to give them some hope," said Cicely Day, an elementary teacher who studied fashion design and worked in child care before catching the teaching bug.

Ms. Moore, the 6th grade teacher, recounted a harrowing story of growing up amid Oakland's 1980s drug wars and not learning to read until a determined 5th grade teacher refused to put her out of class for bad behavior. As an adult, it took several years for her to heed mentors' and friends' advice to become a teacher—a path she took only days after winning an award at her previous job as a
market-research analyst.

A majority of the TTO recruits enter the profession through California's "intern" teacher route. To qualify for an intern certificate, they must take at least 120 hours of coursework. Typically, recruits take evening classes at one of the program's three partner teacher colleges beginning in January, followed by a seven-week summer course provided by the program.

Candidates receive tutoring and financial support to fulfill licensing-test requirements. After securing teaching positions in the fall, they receive up to eight weeks of daily, intensive mentoring from a retired educator, while they continue coursework toward a preliminary teaching credential.

The community partnerships, meanwhile, help the program get the word out and identify promising adults who might consider applying.

Support continues throughout the teachers' first few years in the form of monthly professional-development meetings, at which they're given the chance to work with colleagues in the same grade level and subject.

In all, Ms. Rogers-Ard estimates, only about 25 percent of TTO resources are spent on recruiting; the other 75 percent is spent on retention. The program costs about $10,000 per teacher, she said, and so far has received two federal Transition to Teaching grants amounting to some $4 million in all through 2016.

Most of the teachers can easily count the ways in which the program has helped get them through rough times. That's certainly the case for Michael G. Williams, an elementary teacher who had a rocky year after being assigned a disproportionate number of students with a history of discipline problems. (He says he was able to establish a good relationship with them, but test scores didn't rise as much as his principal had hoped.)

"I thrive in a family environment. When I feel like I'm loved, it helps translate into the classroom," he said of TTO.

Precious James, a 3rd and 4th grade teacher in the district and one of the first crop of TTO recruits, also described a difficult first year on the job. But her students' scores increased across the board, she established a good relationship with her principal, and now she's serving as her building's math coach.

"If I didn't have these people, and God, I wouldn't have made it," she said about TTO. "It wasn't an easy year; there were challenges after challenges, but it was successful not just because of test scores but because my children were able to see success in their work, in their actions."

Asked about the five-year teaching commitment, most of the teachers reported that they hadn't even given that factor much consideration. After all, Oakland is home, they said.

"For me, the five-year commitment means that TTO is going to be committed to me for the next five years," Mr. Williams said.

**Informing Recruitment**

Though only 4 years old, the program has already helped shape the Oakland district's ongoing human-resources efforts, district officials say.

"We've raised the bar, and now we're focused on learning from the work, the philosophy, and the
grassroots community emphasis that is represented in TTO," said Ms. Marshall. "It's been a huge influence on the overall district recruitment strategy."

There are still worries about the future. Continuation funding for the program after the federal grants expire remains a concern, even as Ms. Rogers-Ard works to refine an evaluation tool that produces data on TTO teacher performance, based on feedback from principals, parents, and students.

Still, every day, the need for the program hits close to home.

"My daughter said to me recently, 'Mama, I haven't had any Latino teachers,' " Ms. Rogers-Ard said. "And I said, 'Yeah. I need to start working on that.' "

Coverage of policy efforts to improve the teaching profession is supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation, at www.joycefdn.org/Programs/Education.