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# PERSPECTIVE

NEWS FOR & ABOUT MEMBERS OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATORS

## Celebrate Success Orlando, FL 2016

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By Mark D. Benigni, Louis Bronk, and Miguel A. Cardona, Meriden Public Schools, Meriden, CT

### **The Dilemma**

Our ever increasingly diverse student populations are seeing less and less examples of people that look like them in teaching positions. Approximately 35 percent of Connecticut's students are of Latino or Black decent, compared to the teaching force that is seven percent Latino or Black. Conversely, 57 percent of the students are classified as White, as are 92 percent of the teachers. While the trend toward an increase in student diversity continues, the rates of teacher diversity remain stagnant. Despite general acknowledgement of the benefits and necessity of diversifying our teaching teams, we continue to lose ground in this endeavor. So how can we assure that diversity is visible in our teaching staffs?

### **The Research**

Maintaining a teaching staff that reflects the diversity of students is a worthwhile goal, one that many districts and boards of education endorse. As noted in the 2014 National Association for Education report titled, *Time for Change: Diversity in Teaching Revisited*, educators who share similar experiences with their students and communities bring more "favorable views of students of color, including more positive perceptions regarding their academic potential", in addition to being great role models for their students of color. (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014).

The primary reason for diversifying our teaching staff is to improve student performance. Ana Maria Villegas and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine's analysis of research supports this claim that student academic achievement increases when students of color are taught by teachers of similar backgrounds (2008). In this study, they find empirical data to support that students of color achieve higher graduation rates, score better on standardized tests and receive higher college matriculation rates when taught by teachers of color. In their review of the research, Villegas and Jordan found five practices that successful teachers of color use when teaching (2010). These teachers had high expectations for students, used culturally relevant teaching, developed trusting and caring relationships with students, confronted issues of racism through teaching and served as advocates and cultural brokers (p.180, Villegas & Jordan, 2010). The benefits of a diverse workforce are well supported by the research. However, despite policy efforts to diversify the teacher workforce in over 36 states dating back to the 1990s, it remains one of the most elusive goals in our nation's educational system.

### **Meriden's Plan**

In Meriden, we have taken a multi-tiered approach to diversify our teaching staff. This work begins by being

open and honest with our stakeholders about our goals, strategies and desired outcomes in this effort. We report on district trends in minority hiring to the Board of Education and our community twice per year. Our board members have set goals to increase minority hiring in district because they understand and value the positive impact a more representative work force can have on student achievement. Board goals are communicated to our central office and building level administrators and guide our work in this effort. Implementing programs to help achieve these goals is critical but will only provide significant gains if the district communicates the importance to those involved in the hiring process and instills a focused and consistent effort towards this end.

### **Partnerships**

The Meriden Public Schools partner with our local Regional Education Service Center (RESC) to organize minority teacher job fairs and provide priority interviews for candidates that are most qualified and deemed best fits for our district. We make efforts to fast track minority candidates in the hiring process and often involve central office administration in the process to assist with recruitment efforts. Due to the low percentage of minority graduates from teacher preparatory programs in state, we know we must act quickly to successfully hire the most qualified minority candidates. Many districts are competing from the same pool of candidates in the State of Connecticut. Additionally, the district attends other area job fairs, with minority hiring remaining a priority. Our presence at these fairs is imperative, as recruiting minority talent early in the process is vital.

In another partnership with our RESC, we help plan and participate in a Future Educator Symposium. This event is held annually and is intended to provide information on careers in Education to our minority male students in eleventh grade. This event is held on the campus of Southern Connecticut University, one of the major teacher certification program providers in the state. Students are provided a tour of the campus, along with information about the education programs at Southern. Additionally, guest speakers who hold positions (varying from teachers, administrators and superintendents) discuss their "own path" towards their career in education, while highlighting the value and satisfaction of such careers. This event is held to show students that careers in education are viable

and rewarding. It also serves to highlight the need for a more representative workforce and as a call to attendees to consider careers in education as they prepare to enter higher education programs.

### **In-District Initiatives**

Within district, we have developed a "Grow Your Own" initiative to increase minority applicants. This initiative is intended to assist individuals already in our workforce in classified positions, to attain teacher certification. Our first steps were to poll current minority classified staff (paraprofessionals, behavior technicians, clerical, tutors, etc.) to gauge their interest in becoming certified teachers. We met with all individuals who expressed an interest in the teaching profession to ascertain where they stood in the certification process. Participants ranged from merely having the goal of becoming a teacher to individuals who had already begun a teacher certification program. Through this unique program we offer: Information on education certification programs in the area, including alternate route to certification programs; Guidance on attaining certification in Connecticut, if certified out of state or in Puerto Rico; Reviews of transcripts to gauge certification progress; Scholarships through monies the district acquired through grant funding; Connections to other scholarships that are available outside of district; Placement in positions more aligned to their teaching aspirations; and Mentoring student teaching experiences in district and priority interviews upon certification completion.

By helping our staff members navigate the process of becoming certified, providing experiences to prepare them for teaching, offering varied forms of financial assistance, along with mentoring and encouragement, we hope to soon hire these newly certified diverse candidates.

### **Teacher Support Program**

We have implemented a Teacher Support Program to target potential minority teaching candidates while they are still working towards their bachelor's degree. Through this program, we are able to hire candidates working towards their bachelor's degree as substitute teachers in our district, provided we apply with the State Department of Education to grant a one year substitute certificate. Once hired, we place participants as building substitutes so they can build ties with the staff and students. We also provide participants with

professional development opportunities to continue their learning and assist them in making their transition to a certified teaching position.

### **Creative Recruiting Efforts**

We allow our administrators the freedom to be proactive in the recruitment of minority candidates. Recent examples are: a candidate from Puerto Rico was hired after a telephone interview and a candidate in New York City was hired following a Skype interview. We encourage and allow for administrators in district to be creative in their pursuit of a more diverse and representative work force. We also recognize that traditional hiring practices will not bring about the positive results our students deserve.

### **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Partnership**

In Meriden, we partner with our local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to combine efforts towards recruitment of minority hires. We have attended Historically Black College and University (HBCU) forums held in the state with our local NAACP President. This allows us to stay current on hiring minority trends, as well provide opportunities to discuss and plan how we can successfully recruit, support and retain minority teachers from outside of the state. Some of the ideas that have arisen through these discussions are: support with housing, child care, connections to the community, and promoting the advantages of a location equidistant from Boston and New York. Presently, we are planning to attend HBCU job fairs outside of the state with NAACP members and other Connecticut district administrators to implement a statewide collaborative effort towards minority recruitment.

### **University Partnerships**

We partner with local universities to place interns within our schools for a school year and we house student-teacher cohorts and undergraduate teacher certification programs on our schools' campuses. To increase our chances of recruiting minority staff, we know we need to expand the talent pipeline that we have in district. No one initiative or program will result in the district meeting our goal of a more representative workforce. However, a global approach with our university partners that is clearly

communicated and regularly reinforced has helped us make gains towards this end.

### **Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents Response**

Individual school districts continue to address the lack of diversity of their teaching teams with creative initiatives, local partnerships and district action steps. If we are going to be successful in recruiting and retaining high-quality minority teachers, our urban districts must work together and coordinate efforts with the State Department of Education (SDE) and other state agencies. To that end, the Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents (CAUS) recommended the following action steps for the State of Connecticut: Increase reciprocity agreements; Reevaluate certification requirements; Offer alternatives to demonstrate proficiency in lieu of testing requirements; Provide community of practice; Provide subsidies for advanced college degrees; Offer housing stipends; Provide gym and club memberships; Explore loan forgiveness programs; Promote university mentor programs; Provide test preparation programs; Tuition reimbursement at state colleges.

### **State of Connecticut Response**

We are thrilled that Connecticut's Governor Dannel P. Malloy, with the support of State Education Commissioner Diane Wentzell, signed a new law aimed at increasing diversity in Connecticut's classrooms.

Public Act 16-41 includes:

- "The establishment of a Minority Teacher Recruitment Policy Oversight Committee with SDE
- The requirement of SDE to conduct an annual survey on students on the effectiveness of minority teacher recruitment programs in the state
- The requirement of SDE to report annually on the effectiveness of minority teacher recruitment programs using results-based accountability methods
- The elimination of a satisfactory score on the Praxis exam as a licensure requirement for educators and instead requires the score be used as an entry requirement into preparation programs, as determined by the preparing institution
- The requirement of SDE to review and approve proposals to create alternative route to certification

programs for school support staff and to award educator certifications to qualified applicants who complete the programs

- The removal of barriers for awarding an educator certificate to out-of-state teachers
- The modification of criteria for teacher certification interstate agreements” (State of Connecticut Press Release, October 20, 2016).

Governor Malloy stated, “In every sector, diversity leads to better decisions and improved outcomes. In the context of education, better decisions lead to improved outcomes for children, which is necessary in order to sustain our growing economy.” (State of Connecticut Press Release, October 20, 2016). With the dilemma defined, the research supporting our position, a local partnership plan in place, the backing of CAUS, and a new state law approved, Connecticut’s school children and families have reason to look forward to a highly-qualified and more diverse teaching force.

## AASPA'S CAREER CENTER

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For more information or questions on posting on AASPA's career center, contact [aaspa@aaspa.org](mailto:aaspa@aaspa.org) or (913)327-1222.



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