



AASA '19: Districts create new structures for recruiting, retaining teachers of color

Two school systems' leaders shared their methods, including workforce planning teams and support systems, to find diverse candidates and ensure they don't feel isolated after being placed in a school.

By Linda Jacobson

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LOS ANGELES — Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland and the Highline Public Schools (HPS), located south of Seattle, sit on opposite sides of the country. But both have made it a priority to increase the percentage of educators in their districts who reflect the races and cultures of their diverse student populations.

“Because of our emphasis on equity, we realized we had to have some hard conversations about the make-up of our staff,” Susan Enfield, superintendent of the almost 20,000-student HPS said Saturday during a session at The School Superintendents Association’s National Conference on Education, held in Los Angeles.

At the same time, “We needed to be more clear about what it means to work in my district,” she said, noting high poverty and roughly 100 languages spoken as issues that are challenging for even well-prepared teachers. “Just because you teach doesn’t mean you can teach in Highline.”

To increase diversity among the teaching staff, the district restructured its human resources department, automated transactional processes such as workman’s compensation, and

convinced Trevor Greene, a principal supervisor and former high school National Principal of the Year, to lead a Workforce Planning and Development team.

As a Native American, he understood what it felt like to not have teachers who understood his cultural background. But he also initially turned down the position, saying, “I do not want to work with knuckleheads all day.”

The role, however, takes a strategic approach to working with principals to hire teachers and paraprofessionals and match them with the schools where they are needed the most.



HPS Superintendent Susan Enfield, left, and Chief Talent Officer Steve Grubb answer questions from attendees in their session on Saturday. Credit: Linda Jacobson/Education Dive

Not enough connections

In MCPS, the challenge wasn't necessarily attracting male teachers of color, it was retaining them — which was extremely difficult when such a teacher was the only one in his or her building.

Some of the teachers entering the district, which borders Washington, D.C., had as many as seven years of experience, “but it was difficult for them to find a place to be authentic, and be themselves,” Inger Swimpson, the district’s equity specialist, said Friday during a separate session. “So, few people were being connected with one another.”

Both districts — as with many across the country — have been motivated by a growing number of studies showing how students of color benefit when they have teachers of the same race, or at least see them in teaching or other professional positions in the building.

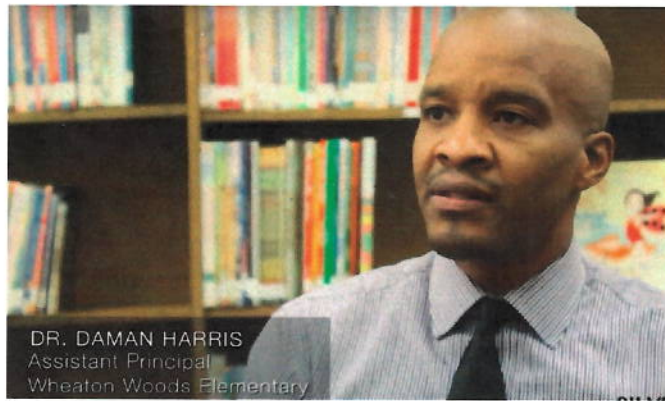
Swimpson, Daman Harris — an assistant principal in the district — and counselor Daryl Howard responded by creating Building Our Network of Diversity, or the BOND Project, a support system for male teachers of color. Through weekly conversations and monthly face-to-face sessions, the members share their struggles, such as feeling like they have to prove their qualifications to parents, that they are constantly being watched, or that they are expected to be discipline “enforcers.”

In a documentary about BOND, created by students at Montgomery Blair High School, male teachers and school leaders of color, such as Harris, talked about feeling isolated. And students interviewed sometimes recalled having only one black male educator from elementary through their high school years — or none at all.

“I think it is an issue because the students are so diverse, so the teachers should be, too,” one student in the video said.

With other Maryland districts now wanting to create something similar, BOND has grown to include an academy, a blog and opportunities for participants to lead professional development sessions. Swimpson, Harris and Howard also hope that as the diversity of the teaching staff continues to grow, the effort will also influence students to think about education as a career.

“We’ve got to make sure we are creating experiences for students of color because that’s where our next teachers are going to come from,” Swimpson said.



Daman Harris, an assistant principal in MCPS, appears in a student-produced documentary on the BOND Project. Credit: Flower Avenue Productions/Montgomery Blair High School

Finding ‘the shortest path to the best result’

In HPS, Greene’s team includes three specialists, who recruit from universities, and three HR partners, who concentrate on working with principals and principal supervisors to anticipate hiring needs. The district uses a cadre process in which Greene’s office handles the bulk of the recruitment, hiring, vetting and onboarding.

Principals attend a training on implicit bias and the interviewing process, conduct interviews with several candidates, and advise Greene on which candidates they think should be offered a contract. Then, the HR partners determine which newly hired educators are the best fits for which grade levels and schools.

The district also frequently offers positions to leading candidates even when there aren’t vacancies — a risk, said Steve Grubb, the district’s chief talent officer — but one that usually works out. Since 2014, when the new effort began, there has been a 30% increase in diverse certified candidates hired districtwide and a 38% increase in those hired centrally through the cadre process.

Grubb said he knew he had to present the cadre concept as a collaborative effort with principals or else it would be “dead on arrival.”

“Principals were skeptical of it early on,” he said. “But they will find the shortest path to the best result.” And they still have the option of doing site-based hiring if they want, but it’s a lengthy process.

One challenge with creating a more diverse workforce, Enfield said, is a union contract that favors seniority. If layoffs are necessary because of declining enrollment, those newly hired teachers of color could be the first to go, and the district would have a hard time overcoming “this narrative that we’re not a hospitable place for teachers of color.”

Like MCPS, Enfield said supporting those newer teachers of color is also a priority. While the district has a mentoring program, all of the mentors are white.

“What we’re trying to figure out is how do we as a system support them, but not impose on them as an affinity group,” she said. “We’re talking to staff about what would that support look like.”