

Introduction

Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Bobby Scott, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and the Workforce:

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on a matter that is pivotal to the future of education in our nation—the imperative of increasing educator diversity to better serve all students. Imagine a young student stepping into a classroom and seeing a teacher who not only understands their cultural background but also reflects their own aspirations—a mentor who can guide them through shared experiences. This is the transformative power of educator diversity. My name is Sharif El-Mekki. I have more than 25 years of experience as an educator and advocate, I serve as the founder and CEO of the Center for Black Educator Development. Our mission is to rebuild the national Black teacher pipeline and, more broadly, to enhance educator diversity across the country.

The Critical Need for Educator Diversity

I was lucky enough to have dozens of teachers of color throughout my PK-12th grade education. However, once I became a teacher, the parents of my students often told me I was the only Black man to ever teach their children. Later, as a principal, I realized that the lack of teacher applicants of color wasn't just a problem in Philadelphia, where I was a principal for 16 years, it was a national crisis. Research has consistently demonstrated that all students benefit from a diverse teaching workforce. Teachers of color bring unique perspectives, experiences, and cultural understandings that enrich the learning environment for all students. They serve as role models, reduce stereotypes, and foster cross-cultural understanding.

For students of color, having teachers who share their racial or ethnic background can lead to improved academic performance, higher graduation rates, and increased college enrollment. Research shows that students of color who have at least one teacher of color may perform better on standardized tests and are less likely to face disciplinary actions. For white students, exposure to diverse educators helps prepare them for a multicultural society and global workforce. Studies also indicate that white students show improved problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity when they have diverse teachers.

At the Center for Black Educator Development, we are deeply focused on the need to increase the number of Black teachers in this country.

Specifically, studies have shown that Black students benefit significantly from having Black teachers. Black students who have even one Black teacher by third grade are 13% more likely

to enroll in college. With two Black teachers, that likelihood increases to 32%. Black teachers serve as role models, mentors, and advocates who understand the cultural and social contexts of their students, fostering a sense of belonging and boosting academic achievement.

However, despite Black students comprising approximately 15% of the student population, Black teachers make up only about 7% of the teaching workforce. This disparity is not just a statistical concern but a reflection of systemic barriers that prevent Black individuals from entering and remaining in the teaching profession.

Impact on Students with Disabilities

It's also crucial to recognize the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and disability. Students with disabilities, particularly those from marginalized communities, face compounded challenges in accessing quality education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education tailored to their individual needs.

Educator diversity plays a vital role in fulfilling the promises of IDEA. Diverse teachers are more likely to implement inclusive practices and advocate for the needs of all students. They bring cultural competencies that can enhance the educational experiences of students with disabilities, ensuring they receive equitable support and opportunities. Conversely, Black students with Black teachers are less likely to be erroneously referred to receive special education services.

Moreover, there is a significant shortage of special education teachers, particularly among educators of color. According to recent studies, special education teachers of color are leaving the classroom at higher rates due to systemic challenges and a lack of support. This shortage exacerbates the disparities faced by students with disabilities in marginalized communities, highlighting the urgent need to address this issue.

Challenges in Building a Diverse Educator Workforce

Despite the clear benefits, significant barriers hinder the recruitment and retention of diverse educators. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated teacher shortages across the nation. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), enrollment in teacher preparation programs dropped by an additional 20% since 2020. This decline disproportionately affects educators of color and those in high-need areas like special education.

Special education faces one of the highest teacher shortage areas. The U.S. Department of Education reported a 17% vacancy rate in special education teaching positions in 2022. Teachers of color in special education are leaving the classroom at higher rates due to systemic challenges and lack of support.

The high cost of teacher preparation programs and certification exams disproportionately affects candidates from low-income communities. Teacher candidates are often required to complete unpaid student teaching experiences, which can last several months. For many, the inability to earn an income during this period creates an insurmountable barrier to entering the profession.

Teacher candidates are often required to complete extensive unpaid student teaching assignments, sometimes lasting up to a year. For individuals from lower-income backgrounds, this loss of income is a significant barrier. A study by the Economic Policy Institute found that unpaid training periods contribute to the lack of diversity in the teaching profession.

Many institutions express a commitment to diversity but lack effective strategies to attract candidates from underrepresented backgrounds. Recruitment efforts often fail to reach potential educators of color and those interested in special education.

Once in the profession, educators of color frequently encounter environments lacking in mentorship, professional development, and pathways to leadership positions. This lack of support contributes to higher attrition rates.

Alternative Pathways to the Teaching Profession

In towns and cities across the nation, schools face the pressing challenge of teacher shortages and a lack of diversity among educators. To address these issues, communities are turning to innovative, alternative pathways to bring passionate, qualified individuals into the classroom—pathways that maintain rigor and competitiveness without lowering the threshold of becoming an educator.

Imagine a dedicated paraprofessional who has spent years assisting in classrooms, building relationships with students, and understanding the unique needs of their community. Programs like the collaboration between College UnBound and the Equity Institute are turning this scenario into reality by providing meaningful support for teaching assistants to earn their bachelor's degrees. This initiative has seen a staggering 400% increase in applications and boasts a 97% retention rate for participants. Such success stories highlight how investing in

local talent not only fills teaching positions but also enriches schools with educators who are deeply rooted in the communities they serve.

Similarly, the National Center for Grow Your Own is making significant strides by offering technical assistance to state and local education agencies interested in launching "Grow Your Own" (GYO) programs in partnership with educator preparation providers. These programs tackle staff shortages head-on and build long-term pipelines for future teachers and school leaders. By removing financial barriers and providing paid training opportunities, GYO programs attract aspiring educators who might otherwise be unable to pursue this career path, leading to higher retention rates and increased diversity among educators.

Residents at the Alder Graduate School of Education dive into immersive, hands-on training by working directly in the schools where they will eventually teach. Guided by experienced mentors, these residents blend theory with practice, preparing them to become effective educators from day one. The program's impact is evident, with 90% of residents expressing strong positive evaluations of their experience.

Another inspiring example is the City Teaching Alliance, where teacher residents earn a master's degree from a higher education partner, receive dual certification, and benefit from personalized support. Importantly, these programs maintain high standards of rigor and competitiveness, ensuring that the quality of education is upheld. The results speak volumes: 91% of participants who complete the program continue to teach, and 90% report that the program equipped them with the necessary skills to be effective in the classroom.

On a federal level, initiatives like the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence Program play a crucial role in advancing educator diversity. By providing grants to strengthen teacher preparation programs at Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), the Hawkins Program ensures that educators of color are well-prepared to meet the demands of today's classrooms. Continuing to fund and support these programs is essential for cultivating a teaching workforce that reflects the rich diversity of our student populations.

By embracing these alternative pathways, which are both rigorous and accessible, we are not only addressing immediate challenges but also laying the foundation for a more inclusive and effective educational system. It's a collective effort that recognizes and nurtures talent from within our communities, ensuring that every classroom is led by an educator who is both highly qualified and deeply connected to the students they teach.

What the Center for Black Educator Development Is Doing

And, of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about what we are doing at the Center for Black Educator Development. Simply put, we are driving revolutionary approaches to rebuild the educator pipeline and increase diversity within the teaching profession.

We introduce teaching as a viable and esteemed career path to students of all backgrounds early in their educational journeys. Through high school teaching academies, learning communities, and initiatives like our Teaching Academy pre-apprenticeship programming and our national #WeNeedBlackTeachers campaign, we ignite interest and provide foundational knowledge about the teaching profession. By engaging students from a young age, we cultivate a passion for education and empower them to envision themselves as future educators.

We develop mentorship programs that connect new educators with experienced mentors who share similar backgrounds or experiences. Our professional development offerings focus on leadership skills, cultural competency, and inclusive practices. By fostering supportive relationships and a community of practice, we enhance retention and career advancement for educators of color.

We ensure that our educator preparation programs equip all teachers with the skills to support students with disabilities effectively. Our training emphasizes inclusive practices and collaboration with special education professionals. By preparing educators to meet the diverse needs of all students, we uphold the principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and promote educational equity.

Recognizing the financial barriers that often deter candidates from underrepresented groups, we advocate for scholarships, stipends, and access to loan forgiveness programs. Through partnerships with educational institutions and philanthropic organizations, we provide financial support to alleviate economic burdens, making the teaching profession more accessible to diverse candidates. Importantly, we also advocate for paid training opportunities for teacher candidates, understanding that unpaid training periods can be prohibitive for individuals from lower-income backgrounds.

We actively advocate for policies that promote educator diversity and support programs like the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence. Through collaboration with policymakers, educational leaders, and community stakeholders, we seek legislative action that provides the necessary resources and framework for systemic change. Our advocacy efforts aim to create sustainable impact at local, state, and federal levels.

The Story of Imere Williams

Allow me to illustrate the impact of our work with the story of Imere Williams, a 2024 graduate of West Chester University. Imere participated in our paid teacher pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs during high school and throughout his college years. Upon graduation, he was hired to teach at his alma mater.

For students like Imere—one of only two Black men in his teacher preparation program—our ongoing engagement provided support and a network of other young Black men aspiring to lead their own classrooms. He navigated the challenges of a less diverse teacher college with the backing of a community that understood his experiences. Our programs offered him early exposure, clinical experiences, and financial support that encouraged him to join the critical profession of teaching.

Imere's journey exemplifies how alternative pathways that are rigorous and supportive can lead to successful outcomes without lowering the standards of the profession. He is one of dozens of Black youths who, through our high school and college programming, received formal invitations to join this critical profession. Organizations like ours play a critical role in this ecosystem by not only rebuilding a Black Teacher Pipeline but also strengthening it and addressing its many leaks.

Black Men in Education Convening

I also want to mention that we host the largest gathering of Black educators in the country annually—the Black Men in Education Convening (#BMEC2024). The event occurs in November each year and brings together more than 1,000 Black educators from across the country for workshops, panel discussions, and networking opportunities in Philadelphia. This conference, a platform for celebrating achievements, highlights best practices, and offers space for social-emotional well-being, reinforcing the importance of Black male educators in the teaching profession.

I would be delighted to formally invite each of you to attend our upcoming event on [insert dates], at [location]. Your presence would underscore the importance of this issue and provide an opportunity to engage directly with educators who are making a difference in classrooms across the nation. We will send additional information following this testimony.

Conclusion

The pursuit of educator diversity is not merely a matter of representation; it's a critical component of educational equity and excellence. By bringing a multitude of voices and

experiences into our classrooms, we enrich the learning environment for all students—especially those from marginalized communities and students with disabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the challenges we face, leading to increased teacher shortages, particularly in special education. Financial barriers, such as unpaid training periods, continue to deter talented individuals from entering the profession. Yet, through intentional efforts and innovative programs that maintain high standards, we can overcome these obstacles.

Imere's story is a testament to what can be achieved when systemic barriers are dismantled and supportive pathways into the teaching profession are established. Organizations like ours play a vital role in rebuilding and strengthening the Black Teacher Pipeline, addressing leaks that often deter talented individuals from pursuing careers in education.

I urge the Committee to take decisive action by:

- **Supporting Federal Programs:** Expand funding and support for initiatives like the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence that directly address educator diversity.
- **Investing in Alternative Pathways:** Encourage the development of innovative programs that offer flexible, accessible, and paid routes into teaching, ensuring they remain rigorous and competitive without lowering professional standards.
- **Enhancing IDEA Implementation:** Ensure that the principles of IDEA are fully realized by preparing educators to meet the needs of students with disabilities and addressing the acute shortages in special education teachers.
- **Addressing Financial Barriers:** Implement policies that provide financial support for teacher candidates, including stipends during training periods, loan forgiveness, and scholarships, to make the profession accessible to individuals from lower-income backgrounds.

Our collective commitment to these strategies will have a profound impact on the lives of students across the nation. Together, we can build an education system that reflects the rich diversity of our country and upholds the promise of equal opportunity for every child.

Thank you for your time and dedication to this critical issue. I welcome any questions you may have and look forward to the possibility of your attendance at our upcoming Black Men in Education Convening in November.