

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A TEACHER WHO LOOKS LIKE ME

Examining racial diversity in Wisconsin's teacher workforce and the student-to-teacher pipeline



WISCONSIN
POLICY FORUM

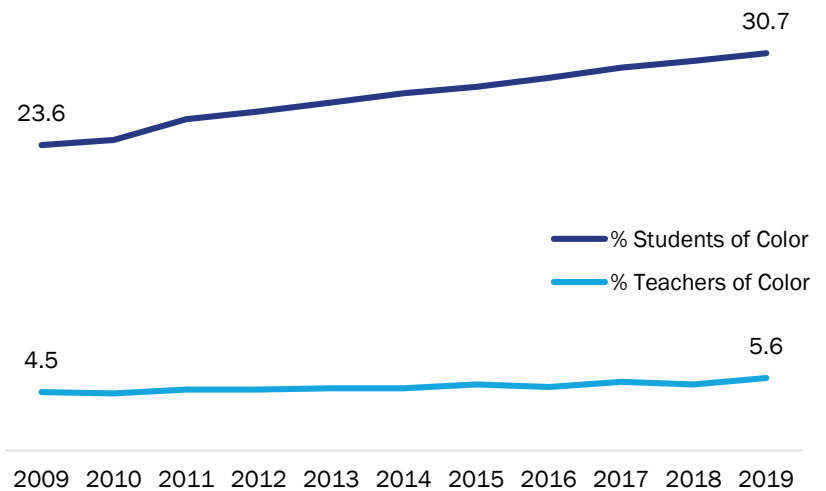
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Among the most urgent challenges confronting Wisconsin's K-12 education system are long-standing disparities in educational opportunity and achievement on the basis of race. Significant achievement gaps persist between white students and several groups of students of color, but disparities between Black and white students are especially stark. [National data](#) expose Wisconsin's math and reading disparities between Black and white students as among the widest in the country. Proficiency gaps between Black and white third graders over the past four years on the Wisconsin Forward Exam exceeded 34 percentage points, with fewer than 15% of Black third graders able to read proficiently.

These disparities limit equitable access to educational, employment, and other opportunities. Consequently, they carry profound implications for racial equity and inclusion as well the overall economy and quality of life across the state.

A large body of research suggests a teacher workforce that closely represents the racial makeup of the student population it serves is important for all students. But it holds [particular promise as one policy lever](#) (among others) to support academic performance and aspirations of students of color and mitigate trends in racial achievement gaps.

Figure 1: Teachers and Students of Color in Wisconsin
Percent of total in public schools



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Students who attend schools where they have access to teachers who reflect their own race and ethnic background are more likely to experience a variety of benefits, from higher rates of academic achievement, attendance, high school graduation, and college enrollment, to lower rates of suspension, dropout, and discipline referrals. Unfortunately, while students of color have been rising as a share of Wisconsin's public K-12 student population, its teacher workforce has remained overwhelmingly white.

Persistent gaps between teachers and students of color

Between 2009 and 2019, the number of public K-12 students of color in Wisconsin increased by 28.2% or just over 58,000 students. As a share of all students, students of color grew from 23.6% to 30.7% (Figure 1). Although the rate of growth in the number of teachers of color was similar (688 teachers or 22.5%), teachers of color started out as a smaller share of all teachers and increased by only 1.1 percentage points to just 5.6%. This widened the gap between students and teachers of color from about 19 percentage points in 2009 to 25 points in 2019.



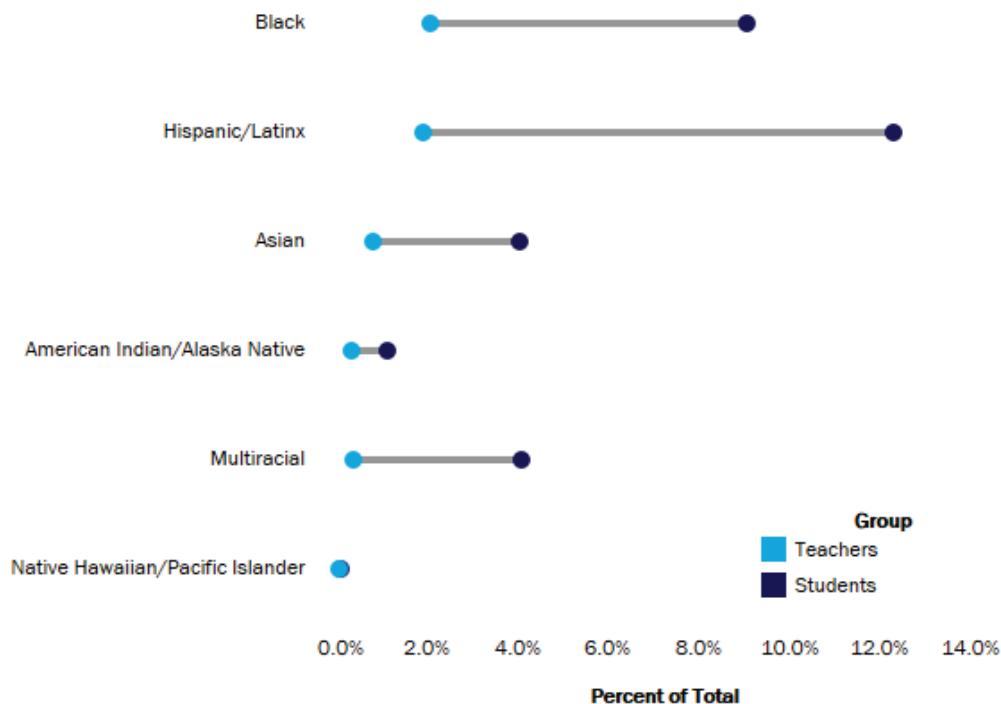
This pattern varies by race, however. In both raw numbers and as a share of their overall groups, Black students and teachers have fallen since 2009. Black students now make up just over 9% of K-12 students, while Black teachers comprise only 2.1% of all teachers.

Conversely, both Hispanic/Latinx teachers and students have more than doubled their numbers in the past decade, and their shares of the overall student and teacher populations have grown as well. Yet, the gap between them has widened every year since 2009. In 2019, Hispanic/Latinx students made up 12.3% of all students, while Hispanic/Latinx teachers comprised just shy of 2.0% of all teachers statewide.

Figure 2 shows that Black and Hispanic/Latinx students and teachers are the largest populations of color in Wisconsin and also exhibit the largest disparities in teacher-student representation. White teachers are the only race group where the percentage of teachers is larger than the percentage of same-race students, by a substantial 25 percentage points (white students comprise about 70% of the student population while white teachers make up about 95% of all teachers).

Figure 2: Teachers and Students of Color in Wisconsin

Percent of total in public schools, 2019



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

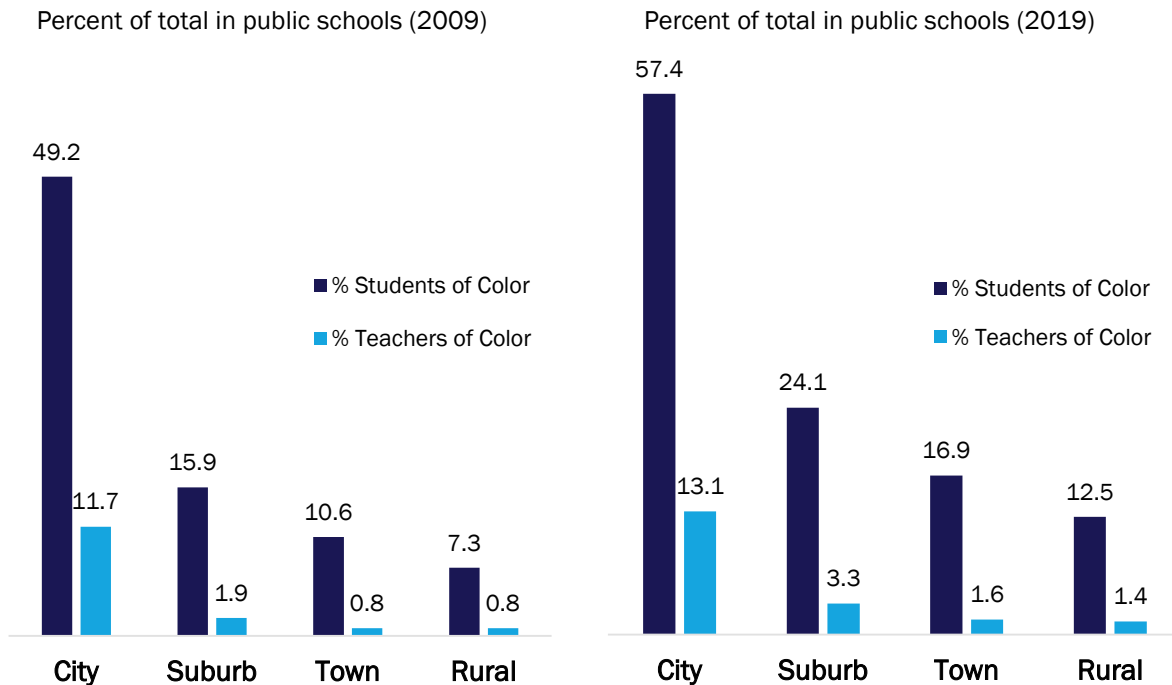
Although urban school districts have some of the widest student-teacher race gaps as well as the largest populations of students and teachers of color, disparities in representation between teachers and students by race is by no means a phenomenon limited to cities. Gaps also show up in suburbs, towns, and rural areas.

Figure 3 shows that between 2009 and 2019, disparities in all four locales widened, with the gaps between them driven almost exclusively by the rate of growth in the share of students of color. In



cities, students of color now make up a clear majority (57.4%) of all students. However, student-teacher race gaps are growing faster in towns and rural areas.

Figure 3: Wisconsin Teachers and Students of Color by Locale



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, National Center for Education Statistics

The student-to-teacher pipeline and its impact on teacher workforce diversity

Why are teachers of color so underrepresented relative to students in Wisconsin? To answer this question, it is helpful to consider demographic trends in the pathways that students follow to become teachers.

One major factor driving the racial makeup of Wisconsin’s teacher workforce is the number of students graduating from high school each year, a key prerequisite to becoming a teacher. Between 2010 and 2018, the four-year high school graduation rate among all students of color climbed from 67% to 79%, but was still well below white graduation rates exceeding 90% in that period. Hispanic/Latinx students graduated at a rate of 82.3%, but the Black graduation rate was just under 70%, the lowest graduation rate of any race group. Students of color as a share of all high school graduates rose by 7.0 percentage points to 23.8%, notably less than their 30.1% share of the overall K-12 population.

In contrast to rising trends in high school graduation, college enrollment rates across all groups have declined. About 40% of both Black and Hispanic/Latinx students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 2018, compared to 63.5% of white students. Students of color as a share of those enrolling in postsecondary education increased from 15.9% in 2010 to 19.5% in 2018, but that rate of growth lagged the increased growth rate of high school graduates of color. Moreover, [national](#)



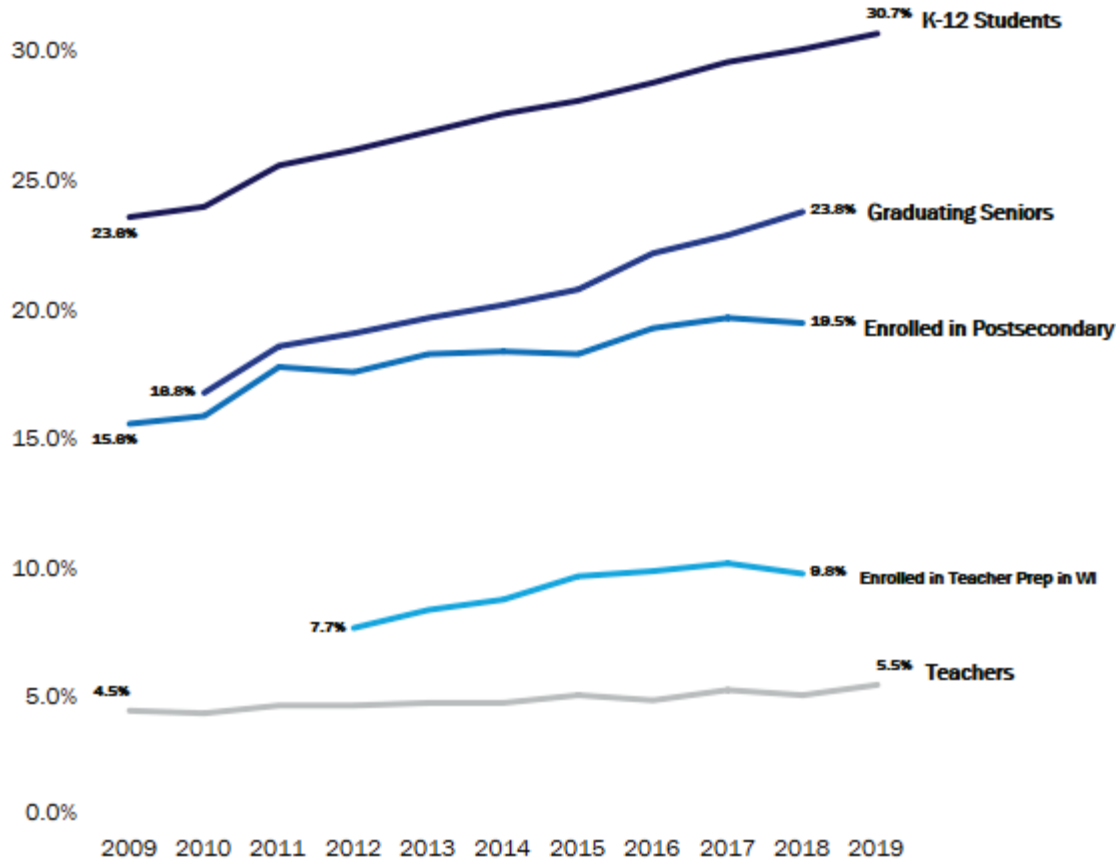
[trend data](#) suggest that Black and Hispanic/Latinx students continue to fall as a share of both those attaining a bachelor’s degree and those pursuing a major in education.

The last milestones would-be teachers must reach is enrollment in and completion of a teacher preparation program. Although the pool of students preparing to be teachers across all race groups has been shrinking, students of color saw a 2.1 percentage point uptick in their share of all enrollees between 2012 and 2018. As a share of the total, however, this growth brought students of color up to only about 10%. Meanwhile, data on pass rates for assessments required for program completion suggest only a fraction of all teacher preparation participants will complete their programs and that students of color lag behind white peers.

Conclusion

Figure 4 shows the trends in each of these areas and reveals two principal observations about the racial/ethnic patterns fueling Wisconsin’s teacher workforce.

Figure 4: People of Color by Education Level over Time in Wisconsin (Percent of Total)



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction; National Student Clearinghouse as reported by DPI; National Teacher Preparation Data, Higher Education Act Title II Reports, United States Department of Education

- The percentage of people of color at each educational milestone has increased, but that is not necessarily producing an increase in the number of people of color in the teacher pipeline. The percentage increases shown in the figure are encouraging, but they are mainly



attributed to declining trends among white students/teachers, which dropped during the past decade at every educational level. For example, the number of students of color who enrolled in postsecondary institutions dropped by 6.2% in the past decade, but they increased as a share of the total because statewide postsecondary enrollment declined more dramatically (by about 25%).

- **The share of people of color who might potentially pursue a career in teaching falls significantly as they progress down the educational pathway.** Students of color made up 30.1% of all public K-12 students in 2018, but only 23.8% and 19.5% of public high school graduates and postsecondary enrollees, respectively. At the educator preparation level, students of color as a share of all teacher preparation enrollees statewide drops to 9.8%. The fact that teachers of color comprise only 5.6% of the teacher workforce in 2019 is more readily understandable when considering these drop-offs at each milestone in the pathway.

Fortunately, each stage also offers opportunities for policy interventions both to remove barriers and encourage students of color to consider, pursue, and remain in teaching careers. Such approaches could focus on offering alternative credential pathways and strategies to improve teacher retention. Strategies that focus on barriers that may discourage young students of color from considering or having the educational attainment credentials to enter the teaching profession hold particular promise.

In future reports, we will draw on the perspectives of educators and policymakers in Wisconsin and elsewhere to bring to light such policies and practices and evaluate their potential to effect large-scale change throughout the state.

