

Where Are All the Principals of Color?

As the public-school population continues to grow more diverse, the percentage of nonwhite school leaders has remained relatively stagnant.

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Nancy Gutierrez was primed to shine. As the new principal at Fischer Middle School in East San Jose, California, it was more than a new job for Gutierrez, it was a homecoming. She was a product of the heavily Mexican American, working-class, and immigrant community, and her mom still lived just a few blocks from the school in Northern California. “I grew up going to the same bodega on the corner as they did,” Gutierrez said, speaking of her students and their families. “I wasn’t someone who ... had these expectations and didn’t know who the community was.”

Even so, she got a rude awakening at her first back-to-school meeting, and it ultimately changed her perspective. “Even though I was from that same [area], even though I was of the same [Hispanic] background, they still didn’t trust the school system,” she said. “I thought I would immediately earn credibility by just who I was, but that wasn’t the case. Rightfully so, I had to earn my stripes.”

Today, the role of the school principal has grown more complex. The Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, in 2014 examined the shifting terrain of school leadership and found that principals, once considered building managers, must be a hybrid of “an aspirational leader, a team builder, a coach, and an agent of visionary change.” Yet even with this changing landscape, one notable characteristic has remained intact—public-school principals, like teachers, are overwhelmingly white. Gutierrez eventually led two schools in Alum Rock Union Elementary School District and, in so doing, became part of a small, select number of principals of color.

According to an April report from the National Center for Education Statistics, the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing school data, the percentage of black or Hispanic public-school principals has barely budged over the last 25 years. During the 1987–88 school year, 87 percent of public-school principals were white, 9 percent were black, 3 percent were Hispanic, and 2 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. More than two decades later, in the 2011-12 school year, the percentage of white principals had declined slightly—to 80 percent—while that of Hispanic principals inched up slightly (7 percent). The percentage of principals who were black or from another ethnic group showed no substantial change, at 10 percent and 3 percent, respectively.

The lack of principals of color has a long and complicated history that mirrors the shortage of teachers of color. As the NCES report notes, because principals are often drawn from the pool of teachers, “teacher demographics [such as race and ethnicity] may affect ... principal demographics.” Additionally, for black school principals specifically, the after-effects of school desegregation were devastating. A March 2014

journal article examining the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* era found black administrators were routinely fired and demoted as school integration took hold—identical to what happened to black teachers at the time. In the decade following the landmark *Brown* decision, according to the article, an estimated 90 percent of black principals across 11 southern states lost their jobs.

Gradually the racial and ethnic disparity between school principals and the public-school population, which is increasingly students of color, has caught the notice of some districts and educational leaders. In Indianapolis Public Schools, the dearth of Hispanic principals became a campaign issue in the fall 2014 school-board race, as both challengers and incumbents called to address the gap: In a district that was over 20 percent Hispanic, there were no Hispanic school leaders. A feature article in the monthly magazine of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, a professional organization of educators, also zeroed in on the mismatch from a national perspective.

“Leadership that represents the cultural and ethnic groups that make up U.S. society is important for all students because the world students will join as adults is richly diverse,” said the 2009 piece in *Educational Leadership*, concluding that “as U.S. schools become more culturally and ethnically diverse, current leaders have a duty to tap the untapped potential of [similarly diverse] school leaders.”

Christopher Johnson, the black founding principal of Science Leadership Academy at Beeber in Philadelphia, is keenly aware of the impact he says his leadership has on the school’s students, staff, and community. Johnson began as a substitute teacher in the School District of Philadelphia before becoming a school administrator and, like Gutierrez, grew up not far from where he now leads one of the city’s magnet high schools. Johnson said his philosophy as a principal is colored more by his upbringing than it is his race, but also admits that his experience as a black male student in Philadelphia’s public schools has influenced his leadership style.

“I went to a school about a mile from [Beeber]. It was a Philadelphia public school, and they suspended me 25 times in the fifth- and sixth-grade. Guess how many fights I had? Not one,” he said. Partly due to Beeber’s values, which prize collaboration and student agency, and partly due to his own schooling, Johnson sees discipline a lot differently. Students at Beeber—the majority of whom are black—aren’t criminalized for non-criminal behavior, he said. “I’m not going to suspend a kid for wearing a hat. I’m not going to suspend a kid because they have on inappropriate clothing.”

Many decisions as a school leader come down to judgment calls, Gutierrez said, adding that her cultural relationship with the school community often influenced those choices. Knowing the families’ overriding concerns, such as valuing strong and challenging academics, was vital in her day-to-day work—from helping white teachers better understand the community and reducing discipline referrals, to building strong home-school partnerships. “And I can’t lie to you, the fact that I speak Spanish ... that I was able to speak Spanglish ... there was this connection.”

Why Principals Matter

In her current role as a senior staffer with NYC Leadership Academy, a New York City-based nonprofit, Gutierrez uses what she learned as a principal to prepare a new generation of principals of color. Her agency recruits and develops school leaders, working with districts across the country to support aspiring principals of color and current principals. The absence of racially and ethnically mixed professional networks is a major hurdle. “The higher you go in any space, the less diverse it can get,” she said. Adding to the complexity can be the feeling that as a principal of color, you speak for your entire

race. "I don't intend to speak on behalf of all Mexican people in this country ... I don't intend to speak on behalf of all women or folks of color ... but that ends up sometimes becoming part of that conversation."

Over time, Gutierrez has learned that its district leaders—those who supervise principals of color—are a critical but often overlooked part of the food chain. "When the superintendent says, 'I believe in equity,' we're going to talk about race ... we're going to name it, we're not going to be afraid of it ... [that] sets the stage for [others] on the ground to do the same."

Without this commitment, she said, the goals to boost principal diversity will inevitably falter. In districts where race, equity, and access to school leadership are discussed and addressed, such conversations set the stage for principals of color to succeed. "It is huge, and it's hard. There's no easy answer to talking about [these issues], but your ability to engage ... impacts our students," she said. "In order to lead ... this is what we have to do, even when it's hard."