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OPINION

# Seniority policies are holding back teacher diversity efforts

To say that the racial and ethnic makeup of the Massachusetts teacher population is already out of step with the student body would be an understatement.

By **Lisa Lazare** Updated September 12, 2023, 3:25 a.m.



Boston Public Schools teachers from left, JoDee Hall, Taharri Turner, and Shanti Caiazzo welcome sixth-graders to Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School in Dorchester for the start of school on Sept. 7, 2023. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

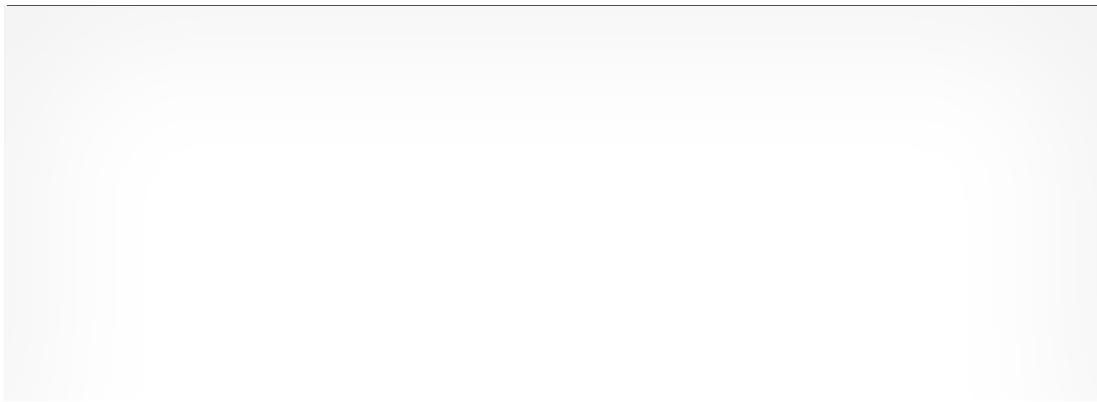
Massachusetts remains one of just 13 states where seniority is a main factor when school districts lay off teachers — [public schools are mandated by state law to use such “last in, first out” policies](#).

With the effects of inflation, the end of COVID-19 relief funding, and declining enrollment, municipal budgets are under pressure and layoffs are likely to come. Seniority-based policies threaten to have a devastating effect on the diversity of the state’s teacher base — and the students who rely on those teachers. Already, Brockton — where more than 80 percent of students are students of color — [has laid off 130 teachers](#), 33 percent of whom [are teachers of color](#).

To say that the racial and ethnic makeup of the teacher population is already out of step with the student body would be an understatement. [While 35 percent](#) of the students in Massachusetts public schools identify as people of color, [only 6.9 percent of teachers](#) identify as people [of color](#). In Boston, [85 percent of students identify as students of color](#) compared with [40 percent of teachers](#).

[Research shows](#) that the help teachers of color provide to students of color has a direct correlation to student outcomes. Students with teachers of the same race are less likely to be suspended, more likely to be referred to gifted programs, and, most important, more likely to complete high school and attend college. Indeed, all students, including white students, show improved academic performance and social emotional well-being when teachers of color are at the front of the room.

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Little wonder, then, that Massachusetts has made significant investments in strengthening and [diversifying its teacher workforce](#) in recent years. With diversification grants and assistance at the state level, and additional dollars in federal funding and in fellowships from the philanthropic sector, Massachusetts has wisely bet on a diverse base of teachers.

As a result of these investments, there has been progress: More early-career teachers identify as educators of color. In most states, teachers of color are [more likely to be early in their career](#) than are white teachers. In Massachusetts, investments in diversifying the teacher workforce have resulted in teachers of color being [more than twice as likely](#) to be in their first three years of teaching than are white teachers. As a result, seniority-based layoffs of more junior teachers will disproportionately affect teachers of color, which will have a negative effect on students.

Seniority should not be the main factor considered when school districts choose who should remain in the classroom. While still considering a teacher's length of service, districts should be permitted to consider other factors like being bilingual, additional credentials, and experience, as well as whether teachers are working at underserved schools.

The recent Supreme Court decision regarding affirmative action is also likely to negatively affect the number of diverse teachers we see in the classroom. If there is less diversity in higher education, there will probably be less diversity among classroom teachers. This means the state needs to do what it can to keep qualified teachers of color

in classrooms and to not deter them from entering into the education profession in the first place. That is why Educators for Excellence Boston is focused on making change this year. We are strongly urging state legislators to pass H.583/S.340: An Act So All Students Thrive, which would give districts an array of factors to consider when determining who gets laid off.

Students have been through a lot these past few years: a pandemic, a mental health crisis, a racial reckoning. Diverse teachers in schools are poised to help them address all of these issues. Without a diverse teaching staff, districts are threatening student success. The state needs to not only better diversify the teacher workforce but put in place policies that value that diversity and the impact these teachers have on all students.

*Lisa Lazare is executive director of the Boston chapter of Educators for Excellence.*

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