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## Greater Columbus schools lack teacher diversity, and some fear HB 616 could make it worse



**Michael Lee**

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The last time New Albany High School junior Rina Smith had a teacher of color was her middle school Spanish teacher Miss Arellano.

“She was someone I could really relate to, because we shared a lot of cultural similarities. I felt like I could talk to her about a lot of stuff,” said Smith, 17, who is Guatemalan. “I really liked her and that’s the kind of support I wish I had here at the high school.”

According to data obtained from New Albany-Plain Local Schools, 96% of the district's 333 teachers in fiscal 2022 (2021-2022 school year) are white. The district has five Black teachers, five Hispanic teachers, two Asian teachers, and one multiracial teacher.

But New Albany isn’t the only district in Greater Columbus with a large diversity disparity in its teaching staff.

While districts have been making efforts to market themselves to a wider pool of more diverse teachers, educators across the region said they fear that bills introduced in the Ohio House of Representatives could discourage them from coming to the state, or to the profession overall.

### **More than 90% of teachers in most area districts are white**

When it comes to diversity among teaching staff specifically, a Dispatch review found most Greater Columbus school districts have percentages of white teachers above 90%.

In the Upper Arlington City School District, for example, 95% of 1,086 teachers across the district are white this school year.

In Hilliard City School District — where 69.5% of the students are white, 10.2% are Hispanic/Latino and 8.7% are Black — 96% of 2,181 teachers are white.

Among other districts that responded to a Dispatch request for data, Grandview Heights Schools reported one Black teacher, one Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander teacher, and one multiracial teacher this school year. The rest — 96.5% of 86 teachers — are white.

In Southwest City Schools, almost 96% of 1,536 teachers are white, while the student population is 54.2% white, 16.8% Black or African American, 19.2% Hispanic and 6.9% multiracial. Around 3% of students were Asian, with less than 1% of American Indian/Alaskan Native or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

Columbus City Schools, the state's largest district, is the only one in Franklin County that responded to the Dispatch data request that had a teaching staff that was less than 90% white this school year.

Out of 5,768 teachers, 71.3% are white, while 24.4% of teachers were Black, non-Hispanic. The district's student population makeup for the 2021-2022 school year was 52.8% Black, non-Hispanic, 20.6% white, 15.4% Hispanic, 7.8% multiracial, 3% Asian and less than 1% for both American Indian or Alaskan Native and Pacific Islander.

**School board diversity:** New, diverse school board members reflect on first semester in office

## **Lots of reasons for lack of diversity among teachers, OSU recruiter says**

Jenell Igeleke Penn is an assistant professor in the teaching and learning department at Ohio State University's College of Education and Human Ecology. She's also the college's director of recruitment, mentoring and retention for diversity and social justice.

Penn said that when it comes to why schools are lacking diversity in their teaching staff, the reasons are “multifaceted.”

For example, there are barriers that students of color who might want to pursue a career in teaching face, Penn said, such as students of color finding that many texts, theories, who and where they're placed with for student teaching, and teaching practices are “centered around whiteness.”

“We do have some students (of color) who start programs and decide ... it’s not for me,” Penn said.

But Penn said that another reason could just be that for many students of color, they don’t have the best experiences with schooling. She explained that this could include disproportionate levels of Black students being suspended or expelled, or multilingual students who can’t speak their language in school.

“So if, as a K-12 student, my experience with schooling was not a positive one, one that was harmful, one that was traumatic ... Why, then, would I sign up to do the same thing?” Penn said.

However, that doesn’t mean that there aren’t students of color pursuing teaching careers. Penn said she has had students who, while not having had a great K-12 experience, say: “I’m determined to be a teacher because I want to do better.”

## **Seeing representation in leadership**

For a lot of students, representation matters. When Upper Arlington School Board member Nidhi Satiani visited Asian American and Pacific Islander students at the district’s high school during her first semester as a board member, she said it felt like she was a celebrity.

“These students were so excited about having representation at the top of our district by someone who looked like them,” Satiani told *The Dispatch* in April.

That’s what students like Rina Smith and some of her Black classmates at New Albany High School want to see — more teachers that look like them.

“I feel like when you have a teacher that mirrors your personality, like your culture, you’re more able to connect with them because they understand the issues you’re coming to them with,” said Smith, one of the co-founders of the high school’s NAACP Youth Unit.

**Read more:** [New Albany High School home to new NAACP student chapter](#)

Faith Tolani, who is also one of the New Albany High NAACP unit members and a member of the Black Students Association, said she doesn't feel represented in the school.

“When anything ever happens regarding a topic or a problem, you just feel that dread that you’re going to be spoken over or you’re going to be silenced, or that you’re just going to feel invalidated,” the 17-year-old Tolani said.

Some of the topics that Black students at New Albany High have felt like they couldn't discuss included the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matters protests in 2020, said Victoria Mabatah, another co-founder of the high school's NAACP unit.

Tolani, a first-generation Nigerian American, said having more diverse representation in leadership — more teachers who students can relate to not just racially, but culturally as well — could help students like her whose parents might not understand issues like racist classmates since they did not grow up in the U.S.

“Having a Black, American teacher, someone that I can at least talk to about my struggles when I know I may not always have the same people at home to do that with” is “incredibly important,” Tolani said.

**Read more:** Book helps teachers use movies to build inclusive lessons

It's not just students who believe diverse representation is important among the teaching staff.

Donna Leiter teaches English as a second language at Daniel Wright Elementary in Dublin City Schools. Leiter is also a Korean American, transracial adoptee.

According to Dublin City Schools' 2020 Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report, nearly 95% of all full-time staff in the district were white, which includes teachers, teachers' aides, principals, assistant principals, service workers and others.

Leiter said it's important for students to see themselves in the people that they might want to become one day, like teachers, whether they be different genders, ethnicities, or differently abled.

“I feel like when students see their teachers looking like them or even expressing things like, ‘I have anxiety too’ ... it sort of makes them feel like, ‘This is normal, what I’m going through,’” Leiter said.

But Penn said that while diversity in teachers and students is important, it's not always about the numbers. She said there isn't necessarily a certain ratio that should exist between the number of students of color and staff of color, but added that minority teachers need to be supported by their white colleagues too.

“There has to be that other part of it as well,” Penn said. “The teachers of color can't be the only ones doing the work.”

## **Some proposed Ohio legislation concerns students, educators**

Last year, Ohio Republican lawmakers introduced HB 322, which would prevent teachers from “requiring or awarding course credit for lobbying or other work surrounding social or public policy advocacy.”

They also introduced HB 327, which would prohibit higher education or mandatory training for state employees on “divisive concepts,” like teaching students that one's skin color defines their morality or that they're responsible for their ancestors' actions based on their nationality. The bill has been criticized as a poorly disguised attempt to prevent instruction in critical race theory.

In April, GOP lawmakers introduced HB 616, which would prevent schools in Ohio from teaching or providing instructional material on sexual orientation and gender identity to students in kindergarten through third grade.

However, part of HB 616 further specifies what “divisive concepts” could be, which included “diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) learning outcomes” as a concept.

Educators across the region have expressed concern and confusion about what that could mean for the future of DEI efforts in their districts, including hiring teachers.

“To say we won't have any diversity, equity and inclusion outcomes, that's major,” said Dionne Blue, chief equity officer at Columbus City Schools. “And it's written in such a way that it can be retrofitted in negative ways, against the work that school districts are trying to do when it comes to making students feel more included.”

### **Responding to HB 616:** Columbus educators slam 'Don't Say Gay' legislation

Blue added that it could also harm the district's efforts to make recommendations to their schools on how to be more culturally responsive, culturally aware, and how they can “improve outcomes for students related to diversity, equity and inclusion.”

“Teachers might kind of balk and say, ‘We don't have to do that, we're not doing that,’” Blue said.

The bills also worry some future educators, like the students that Penn teaches at Ohio State.

“I do hear students who are concerned, like ‘Oh, I don't know if I would want to be a teacher if I couldn't include diverse perspectives in my classroom,’” Penn said.

## **Columbus City Schools:** HB 616 'has no place in public education'

If the bills pass, Black students like Mabatah worry about what it means not only for their clubs like the NAACP and Black Student Association, but for attracting teachers of color, too.

“It would drive away a lot of minority teachers that we don’t have,” Mabatah said.

## **How districts are trying to create a diverse culture**

Despite the proposed legislation, Greater Columbus school districts are still making efforts to diversify their workforces.

When it comes to recruiting teachers of color, Penn said she would like to see districts do more cluster hiring to help take the load off teachers of color who may be the only ones in their schools.

Penn added that some districts might provide professional development opportunities for their teachers of color, or even have arrangements for them to get the support that they need.

Districts like New Albany-Plain schools have been making efforts to diversify their workforce.

New Albany-Plain spokesman Patrick Gallaway said the district last year applied for a \$70,000 grant with the Ohio Department of Education to diversify its workforce. One thing that came out of the grant was a student chapter of Educators Rising, which aims to encourage and support students who are interested in becoming future educators.

Gallaway added that the district’s assistant superintendent, Lori Lofton, has been participating in virtual recruitment fairs with historically Black colleges and universities.

“We have so much diversity in these classrooms, especially in the lower grades,” Gallaway said. “We need people to tell our story to get (diverse candidates) to come here ... because they have this preconceived notion of what New Albany is.”

## **Curriculum in schools:** Asian American history could be required in Ohio schools

In Dublin schools, Superintendent John Marschhausen has linked the district's diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) teacher committee with Ohio State to talk about what they need to do to get better as a district when it comes to diversity.

“My hope is, as we have those conversations about professional development and things we need to do to educate ourselves, the next prong of that is hiring — what are we doing to retain and attract diverse candidates?” Leiter said.

Penn said having a diverse pool of teachers is not just for the students of color, but also for white students so that they can learn about different perspectives.

“I think when we’re really trying to change the narrative of who is a teacher ... then I think it’s important for students of color to see teachers that look like them, that talk like them, that they can relate to,” she said.

*mylee@dispatch.com*

*@leem386*