

More Educators of Color Need to be Involved in Education Policy

By Shawnta S. Barnes - January 21, 2018



2016-2017 Teach Plus Policy Fellowship Cohort pictured with Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett

One day, during my last year teaching middle school English in Wayne Township, I was in the teacher's lounge spreading hazelnut cream cheese on a bagel when a colleague approached me and said, "You should be ashamed of yourself." Initially, I assumed this person was addressing someone else, but when I looked around there was no one else in the lounge. The person went on to tell me that it wasn't right for me to come down to the lounge and grab a leftover bagel when I didn't attend the meeting.

The meeting my colleague was referencing was Bagels with Dr. Butts. Dr. Butts is the Superintendent of Wayne Township and he would schedule meetings throughout the school year at each school in the district to share updates about the district but to also draw our attention to policy. That year was my eighth year as an English teacher and all I was worried about was

teaching. I didn't believe I needed to worry about policy or that I could make a difference either.

When the next meeting with Dr. Butts came around, I was conflicted. One part of me thought, "What if I run into my colleague again while grabbing a leftover bagel?" Another part of me thought, "I'm grown; this person can't police what I take from the teacher's lounge." The prevailing thought I had was, "What if there is something I could learn?" I decided to attend the meeting. During part of the meeting, I was frustrated. Dr. Butts was referencing important issues I did care about, but I didn't understand how I could really make a difference.

After teaching middle school English for eight years (five in Wayne Township), I left a job I enjoyed to pursue another passion to become an English language learner teacher in another district. While in this district, I learned about the Teach Plus Policy fellowship and I made the cut into the 2016-2017 cohort. If you have a Facebook account like I do, you know there is an option to see what you have posted on the current day in any year since you have had a Facebook account. This week, the picture of the 2016-17 cohort appeared in my timeline and I was reminded that only four of us in this cohort were black. Why is this a problem? Within the fellowship, we were divided into five working groups. Three of the black fellowship members, including myself, ended up in the social justice working group and the fourth black person ended up in another group. Which meant that three working groups did not have a black educator and even if they split us all up that would have still left one group without one.

There are lots of issues facing children of color and if educators of color aren't in the room when policy is being discussed, who will speak for our children? Last year, I'm proud to say, I was part of the Indiana ESSA student support working group and Dr. Butts was in the same group as me. I'm proud to have been one of many people who worked on Indiana's ESSA plan which was named one of the top ten plans in the country and approved a couple days ago by the US Department of Education. My work hasn't stopped with ESSA; there is so much to be done. Now, I am serving on the IDOE Cultural Competency Advisory Council.

The best way to get more educators of color involved is to help them understand what will continue to happen to our children if we don't. When Teach Plus was recruiting for the fellowship that followed my cohort, I recommended the program to as many talented educators of color I knew. I also agreed to speak to potential fellows because I know how it feels to be one of a few people of color in a room and the comfort it brings to see that someone like you has done it. When I say people of color, I'm not only talking about black people. We need more Latino voices and more Asian voices. I strongly believe all educators need to understand education policy, but I want a time to come when I walk into a room and I can't count the people of color involved in the work on one hand.