

We are Black Educators So Why Do You Only See Us as Disciplinarians?

By Shawnta Barnes & David McGuire - February 14, 2018



In their article, “Decades after civil rights gains, black teachers a rarity in public schools” USA Today noted, “Because most white communities in the 1950s and 1960s preferred white teachers over black ones, court-ordered desegregation

often ended the teaching careers of black educators.” Although *Brown v. Board of Education* led to the initial decrease of black educators in the classroom, it is not the reason the number of black educators in the classroom is dismal today. Districts across the nation are struggling to fill teaching positions; they also are pressured to fill some of those positions with diverse candidates. But if a district does hire a talented educator from a diverse background, the school district and the educator’s colleagues may be the reason this same educator leaves. How many great educators walk away because issues are not addressed or simply ignored?

David

When I became a teacher, I wanted to be known as a Language Arts teacher and I wanted to be known for my ability to drive student achievement. I wanted to be the expert in the building on how to better help my students become better writers and find their joy for reading. I wanted to serve on the instructional committee. Those were my aspirations as a teacher.

What my school saw me as was a black man, the black man who was young enough to be considered “cool” by the students. I was the young black man in the building who could walk into the room and grab the attention of the students (90% of them were African American) and make them listen and comply. I was told by a staff member, “You shouldn’t have any problems in your class; the kids will like you.” My response to her was, “Why won’t I have any problems?” Her response back was simple, “You can relate to them.” Everyone knows what that means. They are black and you are black, so you must have a lot in common.

Shawnta

Many times as an educator of color you feel stymied. You feel it does not matter how good your data is or how much your students have learned; what is most important is your ability to manage difficult students, who are normally black and brown. Instead of addressing the uncomfortable truth that some educators are not the best fit at urban schools, or helping educators improve their practice to help them become more successful working with students who are different from them, schools go for the quick fix which, to them, means as a black educator you can expect to have difficult students in your class because you can handle them.

This has unintended consequences.

White colleagues have told me to my face, “You are an affirmative action hire” or “You were just hired because we didn’t have enough black people on staff.” It is difficult to maintain the motivation to work in your school when you believe some of your colleagues only see you as a disciplinarian and refuse to see you as a skilled educator. When you are a talented educator of color, the administration may choose not to support your professional goals or they might pass you over for opportunities you desire because the school doesn’t think they can afford to take you away from difficult students.

Not Because We Are Black

Most of us have heard this before
They say it as a matter of fact
This long-held misguided belief
It’s easy for us because we are black.

Ascribe our success to chance
Ignore our degrees, awards, and plaques
Forget the midnight oil we also burn
Spew this statement as a matter of fact

Shut down strategies shared
so quick to clap back
“Oh, you can handle these kids
because you are black.”

To you, it may seem
like a harmless wisecrack
To us, your off-hand statement
feels like a slap

Your words aren’t really about us
It’s about the skills you lack
Your lessons don’t connect to ‘these kids’
These reasons seem to be the facts

Some who read this may feel attacked
Not sorry; not cutting you any slack
When too many kids who look like us
keep falling through the cracks

Because you won't reflect,
take a moment, and step back
and acknowledge your inability to reach and teach them
has nothing do with the fact you aren't black

We need people to understand that it is wrong to limit Black educators to being disciplinarians in schools. We can't continue to be given the roughest group of students because you feel we are better equipped to handle them. We can't stand by while you limit our growth as teachers and fail to see us as equals. We can't be used to make up for colleagues' shortcomings because we are black and they aren't.

Too many black educators are falling through the cracks with their black students. If schools fail to address very real concerns of black educators, more black students will have the same limited experience as those minorities in the Barron School District in Wisconsin and will continue through their K-12 education only being taught by white educators.

Black History Month is a time to celebrate the many accomplishments and contributions of black people, including black educators. We all we need to work to ensure that black educators stay in the classroom to keep making history and to teach our future history makers.