



1st Annual EmpowerEd Teacher Voice Summit Student and Teacher Inspiration

The importance of educators of color

Good morning my name is Mahabuba Hasan. I am in 10th grade and go to Capital City Charter School

Having teachers of color is empowering and motivating in my learning environment because it tells me that I can be successful in achieving my goals. When I see teachers that are the same color as me and that may have faced the same struggles that I'm going through it gives me great hope for my future. Having a teacher of color makes you stronger and encourages you because it is hard in society for people of color so it makes you look to a brighter future. I often see my black and brown peers getting into trouble, fights or getting suspended because they don't have someone who is a leader and role model in their lives. For many of them they become hopeless and lose focus and as a result get pushed out of school or drop-out because they don't have that role model. This is why we need more teachers of color in our schools and society because they can help us strive for success and brighter futures especially for those of us who do not have anyone to look up to at home. Having teachers of color is also motivating, they can push us to work hard and teach us from their experiences. They can also make us feel like we have someone in our corner who believe in us which is important because sometimes we do not get that from our families. Most of the time it stands out to me as a Muslim student of color because I almost never see teachers who dress like me. I feel like we as a society need to bring attention to having teachers of colors in schools and different areas of education so students and young people can be motivated to make something of their lives and not do things like committing crimes and end up throwing their lives away. Life is better with educators of color.

Thank you for having me today.

#2

My name is **Jezelle Estrado** and I am a teacher at Perry Street Prep. Someone once said, “there is strength in numbers” and I would say “there is strength in diversity”. I have learned this through my own personal and professional experience. According to statistics, students of color make-up 90.3% of the student population in DCPS and educators of color make-up 60.9% of the teaching staff. Although, this percentage of educators seem large, especially when compared to other cities, when we take a closer look at the ratio of students to educators it equates to approximately 3:2. How does this play out in teacher staffing? Are our students having the opportunity to see truly diverse teacher teams? Despite it being many years since *Brown v. Board of Education* and the desegregation of our schools, neighborhood and school segregation still exists in our city. How can we ensure that students are seeing true representations of diverse educator teams under these circumstances? It’s important that all students, not only our students of color, have valuable exposure to teachers of color during the academic careers.

Let us think of the difficulties that many of our students face on a daily basis including, but not limited to, community disenfranchisement, poverty, violence in their neighborhoods and too often their homes, lack of role models and often as a result of all these things lack of motivation. Now let’s think of the impact of not having exposure to an educator of color, this means that a significant number of these students do not have someone that looks like them who can potentially act as a buffer, a mentor and an instructor in resilience. They do not have someone who can inadvertently and intentionally increase their overall math and reading scores, increase their graduation rate, increase their enrollment in advanced placement classes, decrease their rate of disciplinary actions i.e. suspensions and expulsions and decrease their rates of dropout. Some may argue that not only educators of color can provide these outcomes, and while this is true, based on research and statistical evaluation, these outcomes are significantly more likely for students of color when they have educators of color. As we continue to shape policy we must establish benchmarks and set the standards that would challenge our generations to higher achievement. As we discuss reform and innovation in schools and policy changes let us not leave out a key component of this discussion which is recruitment and retention of educators of color. We must continue to speak with a voice that is robust, resolute, impactful and influential.

Representation of educators of color matter not only to students of color but to all students, and to all members of the school community.

#3

The importance of school diversity/ de-segregation

My name is Monet Jones and I am a former DCPS student.

Whenever I think of success or someone who is successful I think about the numerous capabilities that one person has. Knowing different languages, being talented in multiple things, having various trades- the list goes on. Prior to attending Roosevelt HS I attended a predominantly white school up until my junior year. In majority of my AP classes and honors classes at that school, I was 1 of 2 of the black students sitting in the class with a white teacher. I didn't relate to many of my classmates therefore during group assignments I always felt left out. Being culturally different there weren't any friendly conversations and, while I was in class to learn, and not have friends, those two went hand in hand. I was not engaging in class conversation thus my understandings of topics stayed at a very base level.

When I went to Roosevelt my senior year I walked in an AP english literature class with a black woman as my teacher and classmates from all over the world. I finally felt comfortable in a classroom. Not everyone looked like me but, it was a melting pot of different cultures which ultimately our world is. I was able to dig deep in conversations and laugh with my classmates and relate different experiences to the books by black, latino and european authors we read. That's what a classroom should be. Students having diverse teachers who may relate to students was even more important. I can recall non-black teachers being very strict on assignments being typed at my former school not realizing most kids of color do not have access to a computer and library at home. At Roosevelt there were times where teachers allowed certain assignments to be hand written because they understood and they did not want students to fail over not having access to materials. That's why diversity is important, teachers should be able to understand and cater to the group of kids they teach and, students should be around a diverse group of fellow students so after these high school years we

can step into the world being aware of everyone's cultural differences and still respecting them as equals.

If I continued being the only black girl in higher level classes I would've left high school with so much doubt in what I could achieve. And, this is still a reality for so many other non-black students and it needs to stop. Thank you.

#4

Good morning everyone. My name is **James Tandaric** and I am a second-grade teacher at Raymond Education Campus. Since living here, I have seen how Segregation continues to affect DC and our schools. From working in Congress Heights at a public school to a Tier 1 public charter school, I've observed how race and class can change students potential for academic and emotional success. I was speaking with my coworker a few months ago upon leaving a concert when we talked about Segregation in DC schools. I said, "Well Wards 2 and 3 typically have most of the white population in DC while Wards 7 and 8 have practically an all black population." My coworker replied, "Wait really? I didn't know that." Upon that conversation, I was thinking how can someone not see this difference. But then I was thinking that if we choose to live in areas that only match our own race and class, whether intentionally or unintentionally, we close off to other people's perspective and close off from ourselves a chance to meet great people outside of your identity group. Research from the Century Foundation shows that integrated schools benefit higher test scores, more likely to enroll in college, and help reduce racial bias I hope that with today, we take a real look at what "lines" are made in DC and what we can do to reach over those lines to become a more inclusive and welcoming city for all of our students. Thank you.

Building Knowledge in the Early Grades

#5

Good morning everyone. My Name is **Miles Okonkwo** I attend E.L Haynes Public Charter School. I am here to talk about a book club I participated in last year when I was in 1st grade. We began reading a book that really inspired me, the book is called, Little Leaders. Immediately I was hooked because my grandfather is from Nigeria and all the people in the book looked like me. So, I felt like the book was not only about my history, it was about my family's history as well.

I was also inspired by Marcelite Harris who was an Air force General, because my step dad was in the Air Force too. After reading about Marcelite Harris it made me think about all the things I could do. For example, I need to put a lot of focus into math and science if I want to be a pilot and be able to calculate where my airplane will fly.

My first opportunity to think like Marcelite, was when my class did an experiment in Science. We made parachutes and we needed to predict where the parachute would land when we dropped them out the window. I needed to know the weight of the parachute as well as the wind speed. This really tapped into my interest in the sky and how things moved through it.

Once I read Marcelite's story I wanted to read about other leaders in the book, especially leaders from the civil rights movement. I became fascinated by books about my history. This lead me on a journey to become a better learner and work harder in school. If people who came before me could do it I CAN do it too.

#6

Greetings to all of you. My name is **Ana Schwartz** and I am a 1st grade Gen Ed teacher at E.L. Haynes Public Charter School. A little background about me, who I am, and why I am standing right here before you today. I was born in Colombia, South America, and was adopted at birth by two Jewish white parents. I was raised in a neighborhood that was predominately white. And I attended a school that was a saturated white space. .. Within this school that consisted of people who did not look like me, I was read stories about princesses and heroes, that also, did not look like me. From an early age I was always left feeling out of place. An untold story. I realized later on, that it was extremely difficult to find my voice, my narrative, my identity at home and especially at school. . Where were the fairytale stories about the Latina Cinderella's, or the history lessons about female pioneers (outside of Women's History Month) How could I envision what success looks like when everyone around me and everything I was taught did not directly relate to who I am?. How could I even begin to understand the background of other cultures? The only time we talked about or celebrated people of color was during Black History Month. At the time I did not understand but as I got older and then journeyed through my teaching career, I began to see this missing piece. I needed to see myself in learning, just like my students need to see themselves. They need to feel connected. They must see themselves and in order to feel empowered by what they are learning everyday.

During my teaching career my students have witnessed our first African American President. For most of them, that was the first and only president they knew at the time. And then things shifted in the 2016 election. As our country shifted, so did our realities. The realities of people of color, women, Muslims, the queer community, and more. I knew now more than ever that I needed to do something to make my students feel validated and empowered in a world that was trying to

tell them otherwise. How could I as a 1st grade teacher contribute to this cause?

I began by looking at the curriculum that was already in place. Many times throughout the year these books would take us all over the world through learning about animals, nature, powerful forces and Cinderella. I decided to blow up our bookshelf and switch things up. We started our journey reading *Little Leaders* by Vashti Harrison. This book emphasized on how students can utilize their voices to create change. They saw examples of how hard work and dedication allowed them to do the impossible. We read books like, *The Youngest Marcher*, *Sit In*, and *Separate is Never Equal*. These books told us we had a voice and we had the right to use it. We also dove head first into books like *Mixed Me*, *Chocolate Me*, *Crown*, and *I'm a Pretty Little Black Girl*. These essential readings allowed us to see parts of our identity as beautiful, and special. We also read books that touched on families, religion, and gender. This gave us a safe space to understand that no matter who you are, where you come from, or whether you are a boy or girl your success has no boundaries. Throughout the year book club became our most special time during the day. Kids who dreaded reading were asking, "Hey Ms.Schwartz, can I borrow the book *Little Leaders* to take home to read to my parents?". I found myself during math, science and literacy referring back to characters in the books and how if we wanted to be a doctor, lawyer, scientist or even teacher we needed to work hard in all areas. I began to see that in order to reach a child's full potential I needed to create an environment where we were all celebrated and we all felt like we could achieve any goal we set our minds to.

Breaking down the barriers that sometimes divides us, allowed me to teach the whole child. Which ultimately allowed those differences to be the driving force behind the work we do everyday. I know and believe that children are able to see all possibilities for themselves, when we are super intentional by bringing lessons and stories that

reflects all parts of the brilliant minds we have the privilege of teaching every day. Thank you.

Teacher Retention

#7

Good morning, my name is Kenvin Lacayo and I'm a 19 year old Latino from Northwest Washington DC and a proud graduate of Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School.

When I started school at Roosevelt, its reputation preceded it: "It's a bad school", "You won't learn anything", many of the same things that are said about many urban public schools. Honestly, when I got there, I agreed. My art classroom had rat feces lining the wall. The lockers were pushed in and boarded up. There was graffiti on the walls just about everywhere, and a rat even gave birth in the stairwell. Needless to say, high school was a struggle for me, and the school environment obviously wasn't tailored for me to succeed.

As a result of struggling to deal with a lot of the things young people of color deal with such as crime, drugs, gangs and poverty, I missed many, many days of my 10th and 11th grade years. I had a probation officer. I was going to be given an ankle bracelet and I had to go to court. There were, however, two reasons that kept me coming to school for a little while in my 11th grade year. One, of course, was my friends and the relationships I had built with them. The other one is the heart of what I want to share with you today.

My Third Period on A days, right before lunch, I took English 3 with Mr. Wiltshire. A Black male educator who was energetic, passionate, firm, and caring in his practice. He understood our struggles, but also understood and valued our potential even more. I would miss B days and come on A days just to sit and hear him talk while Dr. Dre and Kendrick Lamar played, talk about building a legacy in our neighborhoods and overcoming the struggles the world didn't believe we could overcome and that maybe we ourselves didn't believe we could overcome. If it wasn't for him, I don't know that I would have believed it was possible, either! I came to listen to him tell us how *Thanatopsis*, by William Cullen Bryant, could help us cope with the trauma of gun violence in our neighborhoods

that caused us to lose our beloved friends and classmates week after week. I had become accustomed to resorting to fighting to solve problems; he inspired me to stop.

Mr. Wiltshire changed my life because he was willing to stick around even when I gave him no reason to do so. He should not just be compensated for that, he should be revered. Mr. Wiltshire, Mr. Adu-Wusu, Mr. Goldstein, Ms. Miller, Ms. Buchanan, Ms. Oliver, Mr. Hipkins, Ms. Boccardi. They are the reasons I am here speaking to you today. They are the reason I joined The Literacy Lab's Leading Men Fellowship. They are the reason that regardless of Roosevelt's reputation, I feel Roosevelt was one of the best schools I ever attended, and not because of the 136 million dollar renovation of the building. They are the reason that my life changed.

We must weigh carefully the power of investing in the adults from whom we expect so much. For students, these amazing, inspiring teachers are the difference between achievement and an achievement gap. Students need these relationships to succeed in school. When teachers are being paid on average 30% less than other college graduates and are leaving schools or the teaching profession, it is the students who are affected the most and students of color, many of whom already suffer from significant disruption in their personal lives, feel the effects even more. High turnover rates are even higher in already struggling schools serving low-income neighborhoods where the students need the utmost love and support. If we want love for our students, we must ensure we are showing the same love to excellent teachers. We must provide teachers the opportunity to decompress, especially teachers of color who often times play multiple vital roles in the schools. We must ensure they're being provided adequate support by their administration. We must give them critical feedback and coaching that won't jeopardize their jobs if they need more support around certain areas. We must give them the opportunity to grow in their practice and grow with their students. They should be given more time to develop extra-curricular activities with students to further student success in and out of the classroom. Teachers are at the core of student success, and we must retain excellent teachers if we are to achieve excellent results for children, both in school and in life.

Imagine having a place where you can go to and feel your most accepted, most safe, have the most fun, and feel you can be your absolute best. Now imagine, for reasons out of your control, that place disappears, leaving you without a location providing acceptance and safety. Perhaps you're lucky enough to know someone who you can chat with openly, be vulnerable, get meaningful advice and input from, who will push you to be the best you can be. But imagine this person moves on, leaving you alone, searching for meaning and answers. Unfortunately, both of these scenarios are how students and educators alike feel when a teacher leaves a school after developing relationships over years of being in a school building.

#8

My name is **Colin Davis**, a 12th grade teacher at Cardozo HS, and teacher turnover is having a huge impact on the success of our schools, our teacher, and our students.

Teacher turnover impacts the culture and community of a school by creating a continuous need to fill the gaps left behind by those who have either decided to leave due to job stresses, lack of support in order to feel successful, or lack of opportunity for growth. Teacher turnover requires teachers and staff to sacrifice developing long-term practices and skills in order to fill the holes left behind by those leaving. Teacher turnover essentially ensures that a community can never grow in a school, creating a lack of traditions, follow-through on projects or initiatives, and relationships amongst stakeholders in a school. Not to mention the manpower and money required of our school administrators and teacher leaders to train new staff every year. Bottom-line, our schools cannot afford to lose the dedicated, highly-qualified, visionary teachers that we're losing every year, in every school.

Most importantly, teacher turnover negatively impacts students, their learning, their comfort, and their overall engagement in school. Students constantly feel the teachers they may want to develop relationships with may soon be gone, leaving disappointment, resentment and fear. "Will you be here next year?" is a question I've heard all too often. This is alarming because it's difficult to learn from someone you do not have a relationship with, and it's difficult to develop a relationship with someone if you're too used to your favorite teachers, or

teachers in general, leaving. Finally, the loss of community and school culture teacher turnover creates leaves students without pride in their school because traditions, initiatives, projects, and relationships can never take hold within the school community.

Unfortunately this is the reality for too many of our students in the District, and I have watched the impacts of teacher turnover negatively affect our schools since arriving here. We **can** fix this issue, but in order to do so, we must begin listening to teachers to find out why leaving a school and starting somewhere new seems like a better option than staying.

#9- Closing

My name is Rhonda Ferguson and I am a teacher at Turner Elementary School.

“Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it.” – Marian Wright Edelman

A few years back I was working in a classroom where I had a student who needed more. That student needed someone to ask the right questions of the right persons. That someone was me, I for the first time recognized that I was a resource for those students and families I worked with day to day. If students were to be successful and I truly believed this, then it would be necessary that I use my voice to stand in the gap and generate avenues to build the bridge for them.

When thinking about education and what we care about the most, we must recognize that it is our students. We are here today to share in this core value of putting students first in our great city. In order for us to successfully do just that, we must include the voices of educators, students and families; community members and administrators collectively doing this great work together. We know without doubt that our students deserve the absolute best that we have to offer. Teachers, especially, are the very foundation of seeing, knowing and implementing what is best to help students succeed.

Together this is our work and it begins here today!