The Dilemma
Our ever increasingly diverse student populations are seeing less and less examples of people that look like them in teaching positions. Approximately 35 percent of Connecticut’s students are of Latino or Black decent, compared to the teaching force that is seven percent Latino or Black. Conversely, 57 percent of the students are classified as White, as are 92 percent of the teachers. While the trend toward an increase in student diversity continues, the rates of teacher diversity remain stagnant. Despite general acknowledgement of the benefits and necessity of diversifying our teaching teams, we continue to lose ground in this endeavor. So how can we assure that diversity is visible in our teaching staff?

The Research
Maintaining a teaching staff that reflects the diversity of students is a worthwhile goal, one that many districts and boards of education endorse. As noted in the 2014 National Association for Education report titled, Time for Change: Diversity in Teaching Revisited, educators who share similar experiences with their students and communities bring more “favorable views of students of color, including more positive perceptions regarding their academic potential”, in addition to being great role models for their students of color. (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014).

The primary reason for diversifying our teaching staff is to improve student performance. Ana Maria Villegas and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine’s analysis of research supports this claim that student academic achievement increases when students of color are taught by teachers of similar backgrounds (2008). In this study, they find empirical data to support that students of color achieve higher graduation rates, score better on standardized tests and receive higher college matriculation rates when taught by teachers of color. In their review of the research, Villegas and Jordan found five practices that successful teachers of color use when teaching (2010). These teachers had high expectations for students, used culturally relevant teaching, developed trusting and caring relationships with students, confronted issues of racism through teaching and served as advocates and cultural brokers (p. 180, Villegas & Jordan, 2010). The benefits of a diverse workforce are well supported by the research. However, despite policy efforts to diversify the teacher workforce in over 36 states dating back to the 1990s, it remains one of the most elusive goals in our nation’s educational system.

Meriden’s Plan
In Meriden, we have taken a multi-tiered approach to diversifying our teaching staff. This work begins by being open and honest with our stakeholders about our goals, strategies and desired outcomes in this effort. We report on district trends in minority hiring to the Board of Education and our community twice per year. Our board members have set goals to increase minority hiring in district because they understand and value the positive impact a more representative workforce can have on student achievement. Board goals are communicated to our central office and building level administrators and guide our work in this effort. Implementing programs to help achieve these goals is critical but will only provide significant gains if the district communicates the importance to those involved in the hiring process and instills a focused and consistent effort towards this end.

Partnerships
The Meriden Public Schools partner with our local Regional Education Service Center (RESC) to organize minority teacher job fairs and provide priority interviews for candidates that are most qualified and deemed best fits for our district. We make efforts to fast track minority candidates in the hiring process and often involve central office administration in the process to assist with recruitment efforts. Due to the low percentage of minority graduates from teacher preparatory programs in state, we know we must act quickly to successfully hire the most qualified minority candidates. Many districts are competing from the same pool of candidates in the State of Connecticut. Additionally, the district attends other area job fairs, with minority hiring remaining a priority. Our presence at these fairs is imperative, as recruiting minority talent early in the process is vital.

In another partnership with our RESC, we help plan and participate in a Future Educator Symposium. This event is held annually and is intended to provide information on careers in Education to our minority students, provided we apply with the State Department of Education to grant a one year substitute certificate. Once hired, we place participants as building substitutes so they can build ties with the staff and students. We also provide participants with...
MEETING THE NEEDS OF OUR STUDENTS: CREATING A DIVERSE TEACHING STAFF

By Mark D. Benigni, Louis Bronk, and Miguel A. Cardona, Meriden Public Schools, Meriden, CT

The Dilemma
Our ever increasingly diverse student populations are seeing less and less examples of people that look like them in teaching positions. Approximately 35 percent of Connecticut’s students are of Latino or Black decent, compared to the teaching force that is seven percent Latino or Black. Conversely, 57 percent of the students are classified as White, as are 92 percent of the teachers. While the trend toward an increase in student diversity continues, the rates of teacher diversity remain stagnant. Despite general acknowledgement of the benefits and necessity of diversifying our teaching teams, we continue to lose ground in this endeavor. So how can we assure that diversity is visible in our teaching staff?

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In-District Initiatives
Within district, we have developed a “Grow Your Own” initiative to increase minority applicants. This initiative is intended to assist individuals already in our workforce in classified positions, to attain teacher certification. Our first steps were to poll current minority classified staff (paraprofessionals, behavior technicians, clerical, tutors, etc.) to gauge their interest in becoming certified teachers. We met with all individuals who expressed an interest in the teaching profession to ascertain where they stood in the certification process. Participants ranged from merely having the goal of becoming a teacher to individuals who had already begun a teacher certification program. Through this unique program we offer: Information on education certification programs in the area, including alternate route to certification programs; Guidance on obtaining certification in Connecticut, if certified out of state or in Puerto Rico; Reviews of transcripts to gauge certification progress; Scholarships through monies the district acquired through grant funding; Connections to other scholarships that are available outside of district; Placement in positions more aligned to their teaching aspirations; and Mentoring student teaching experiences in district and priority interviews upon certification completion.

By helping our staff members navigate the process of becoming certified, providing experiences to prepare them for teaching, offering varied forms of financial assistance, along with mentoring and encouragement, we hope to soon hire these newly certified diverse candidates.

Teacher Support Program
We have implemented a Teacher Support Program to target potential minority teaching candidates while they are still working towards their bachelor’s degree. Through this program, we are able to hire candidates working towards their bachelor’s degree as substitute teachers in our district, provided we apply with the State Department of Education to grant a one year substitute certificate. Once hired, we place participants as building substitutes so they can build ties with the staff and students. We also provide participants with...
professional development opportunities to continue their learning and assist them in making their transition to a certified teaching position.

Creative Recruiting Efforts
We allow our administrators the freedom to be proactive in the recruitment of minority candidates. Recent examples are: a candidate from Puerto Rico was hired after a telephone interview and a candidate in New York City was hired following a Skype interview. We encourage and allow for administrators in district to be creative in their pursuit of a more diverse and representative work force. We also recognize that traditional hiring practices will not bring about the positive results our students deserve.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Partnership
In Meriden, we partner with our local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to combine efforts towards recruitment of minority hires. We have attended Historically Black College and University (HBCU) forums held in the state with our local NAACP President. This allows us to stay current on hiring minority trends, as well provide opportunities to discuss and plan how we can successfully recruit, support and retain minority teachers from outside of the state. Some of the ideas that have arisen through these discussions are: support with housing, child care, connections to the community, and promoting the advantages of a location equidistant from Boston and New York.

Presently, we are planning to attend HBCU job fairs outside of the state with NAACP members and other Connecticut district administrators to implement a statewide collaborative effort towards minority recruitment.

University Partnerships
We partner with local universities to place interns within our schools for a school year and we house student-teacher cohorts and undergraduate teacher certification programs on our school’s campuses. To increase our chances of recruiting minority staff, we know we need to expand the talent pipeline that we have in district. No one initiative or program will result in the district meeting our goal of a more representative workforce. However, a global approach with our university partners that is clearly communicated and regularly reinforced has helped us make gains towards this end.

Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents Response
Individual school districts continue to address the lack of diversity of their teaching teams with creative initiatives, local partnerships and district action.

Steps. If we are going to be successful in recruiting and retaining high-quality minority teachers, our urban districts must work together and coordinate efforts with the State Department of Education (SDE) and other state agencies. To that end, the Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents (CAUS) recommended the following action steps for the State of Connecticut: Increase reciprocity agreements; Reevaluate certification requirements; Offer alternatives to demonstrate proficiency in lieu of testing requirements; Provide community of practice; Provide subsidies for advanced college degrees; Offer housing stipends; Provide gym and club memberships; Explore loan forgiveness programs; Promote university mentor programs; Provide test preparation programs; Tuition reimbursement at state colleges.

State of Connecticut Response
We are thrilled that Connecticut’s Governor Dannel P. Malloy, with the support of State Education Commissioner Diane Wentzell, signed a new law aimed at increasing diversity in Connecticut’s classrooms.

Public Act 16–41 includes:
• “The establishment of a Minority Teacher Recruitment Policy Oversight Committee with SDE
• The requirement of SDE to conduct an annual survey on students on the effectiveness of minority teacher recruitment programs in the state
• The requirement of SDE to report annually on the effectiveness of minority teacher recruitment programs using results-based accountability methods
• The elimination of a satisfactory score on the Praxis exam as a licensure requirement for educators and instead requires the score be used as an entry requirement into preparation programs, as determined by the preparing institution
• The requirement of SDE to review and approve proposals to create alternative route to certification programs for school support staff and to award educator certifications to qualified applicants who complete the programs
• The removal of barriers for awarding an educator certificate to out-of-state teachers
• The modification of criteria for teacher certification interstate agreements” (State of Connecticut Press Release, October 20, 2016).

Governor Malloy stated, “In every sector, diversity leads to better decisions and improved outcomes. In the context of education, better decisions lead to improved outcomes for children, which is necessary in order to sustain our growing economy” (State of Connecticut Press Release, October 20, 2016).

With the dilemma defined, the research supporting our position, a local partnership plan in place, the backing of CAUS, and a new state law approved, Connecticut’s school children and families have reason to look forward to a highly-qualified and more diverse teaching force.

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Mark D. Benigni, Ed.D., has been an educator for more than 20 years and the Superintendent of the Meriden Public Schools for the past seven years. Dr. Benigni served as a special education teacher, assistant principal, principal and elected Mayor of the City of Meriden for four terms. He has presented at state and national conferences, taught doctorate level classes and published numerous articles. Mark was recognized as a 2015 Education Week Leaders to Learn From and in 2016 the Meriden Public Schools was a recipient of a National School Board Association Magna Award and was recognized as a District of Distinction by District Administration. In 2008, Dr. Benigni was a recipient of the Ten Outstanding Young American awards by the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce. Dr. Benigni is currently the co-chair of the Connecticut Association of Urban Superintendents, and he is also a member of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents Board of Directors.

Louis Brunk is the Director of Talent Development for Meriden Public Schools. His work includes development of certified staff including: assistant principal communities of practice, the Leadership Academy, an innovative program to train the district’s teacher leaders, a comprehensive new teacher induction program and the oversight and support of the district instructional rounds. He has presented at the AASPA Annual Conference, University of Connecticut Executive Leadership Program, NEAG School of Education, and Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE/CAPSS).

Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D., is a lifelong resident of Meriden and the Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning. Cardona is responsible for the overall instructional process in the Meriden Public Schools. Cardona serves as the co-chairperson of the Connecticut Legislative Achievement Gap Task Force and was chosen by Governor Malley as an appointee to the Education Planning Commission. Cardona has represented Connecticut as National Distinguished Principal and serves as adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut in the Educational Leadership Department.
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