



Role models in the classroom

Why California needs more male teachers of color

BY VANESSA RANCANO / KQED

Darryl McKellar makes teaching look easy. Over 20 years in the classroom, the English teacher has mastered some of the job's trickiest tasks.

He has a writing assignment for the 10th graders in his second period class today, based on a short story they read, *The Lottery*.

"When I say lottery, what do you think?" Breanna, what do you think?"

"Drama," she says.

"Why drama?" McKellar asks.

"When you win a lot of money, it causes a lot of controversy," she says.

"Mo' money, mo' problems. Who said it?" McKellar asks.

"It's...a rapper?" one student ventures.

"Wait," McKellar says, launching into a pretty spot-on impression. "Uh huh, uh huh, baby, baby."

The students laugh. "Biggie Smalls!" a student says.

McKellar nods. He looks pleased with himself as the students pair up and dive into the assignment. "I'm like Batman," he says. "I use every trick in my utility belt to get a kid to buy into education."

For these students, having a teacher of color, like McKellar, who has high expectations, can relate to their experiences and serve as a role model could make a big difference. When students of color have teachers of color, there's evidence they learn more, finish high school at higher rates and are more likely to go to college.

But the number of teachers of color in California isn't keeping pace with the diversity of its student body.

Changing that is top of mind for Tony Thurmond, state superintendent of public instruction. "Even one teacher of color in a school is enough for students of color to do better academically," he says, citing studies that show long-term positive benefits.

Three quarters of California students are of color, compared to about a third of teachers. But in McKellar his students have something especially rare: Fewer than 10% of the state's teachers are men of color and just 1% are black men like him.

McKellar's ninth-grade students Elijah Foster and Tyler Banner say having a man in front of the class is still a new experience. They've been taught almost exclusively by women, and they say having a male teacher changes the dynamic.

"It feels like the man expects more out of you," Banner says. "You see them as, like, the homie," Foster adds. "Like a close friend—trustable."

"Me being in front of students, being a black man, and dispelling every stereotype about what we bring to the table, that's my motivation," McKellar says.

For 28-year-old Fabian Flores, it's not unusual to be one of the only men in his classes at California State University, Dominguez Hills College of Education. So he's finding the support of a group for aspiring male teachers of color lifesaving.

Flores is part of a program called Future Minority Male Teachers of California, an experiment that got underway in 2017. The goal is to improve the pipeline for men of color who want to teach by focusing on recruitment from the local community, plus financial, instructional and emotional support from peers and veteran teachers. A handful of California State University colleges of education are testing the program, but there's hope to expand systemwide.

McKellar is a mentor in the program at CSU Dominguez Hills, in Los Angeles. "I encourage them to use all of their experiences as a person of color," he said.

The program also offers small scholarships to help pay for school. Research suggests that subsidizing the cost of teacher education is one of the best ways to remove barriers keeping people of color from joining the profession.

College graduates of color are disproportionately burdened by debt. On average, black college graduates owe over \$7,000 more than white peers when they earn their Bachelor of Arts. A few years later, that black-white gap has tripled to \$25,000. When weighing a student loan load against a future salary, teaching can make for a tough proposition.

"I would not be here if it wasn't for that extra money," said Flores, who got a \$5,000 scholarship.

Future Minority Male Teachers of California wants to get more men of color teaching in elementary grades, where they're most rare, and where they could have the biggest impact on achievement gaps.

The California Dream series is a statewide media collaboration of CalMatters, KPBS, KPCC, KQED and Capital Public Radio with support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the James Irvine Foundation. This is an abridged version of the full story, which is available at CalMatters.org.

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