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Diversifying the Classroom: Examining the Teacher Pipeline

Diversifying the Classroom: Examining the Teacher Pipeline

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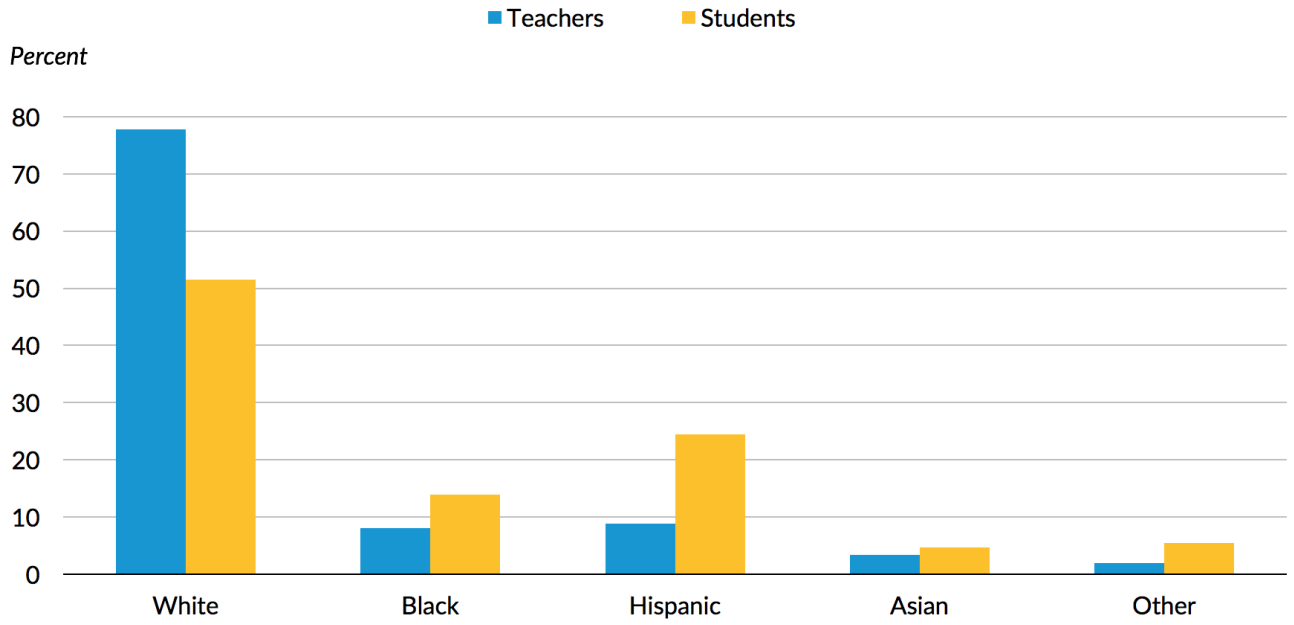
The teaching workforce in the United States remains predominantly white, even as the student body grows increasingly diverse.

A growing body of research shows that students of color do better when they have at least one teacher of the same race. These teachers can be role models for students of color, and they have been shown to have higher expectations and a better cultural understanding of these students. A diverse teaching workforce can also benefit all students by exposing them

In 2015, nearly half of students were not white while less than a quarter of teachers were people of color, according to data from the American Community Survey. The gap is not new, and in some places it has gotten worse. Disparities are particularly pronounced among Hispanics; Hispanic students make up a growing share of the student body, but the supply of Hispanic teachers has not kept up. In fact, the share of Hispanic students has grown so much that even if Hispanic adults became teachers at the same rate as white adults, there would still be a gap.

How Does Teacher Diversity Compare with Student Diversity?



Source: American Community Survey, 2015.
Notes: Students are defined as all individuals ages 5 to 17; teachers are defined as individuals ages 25 to 34, with a bachelor's degree, who are teachers at the prekindergarten through high school level.

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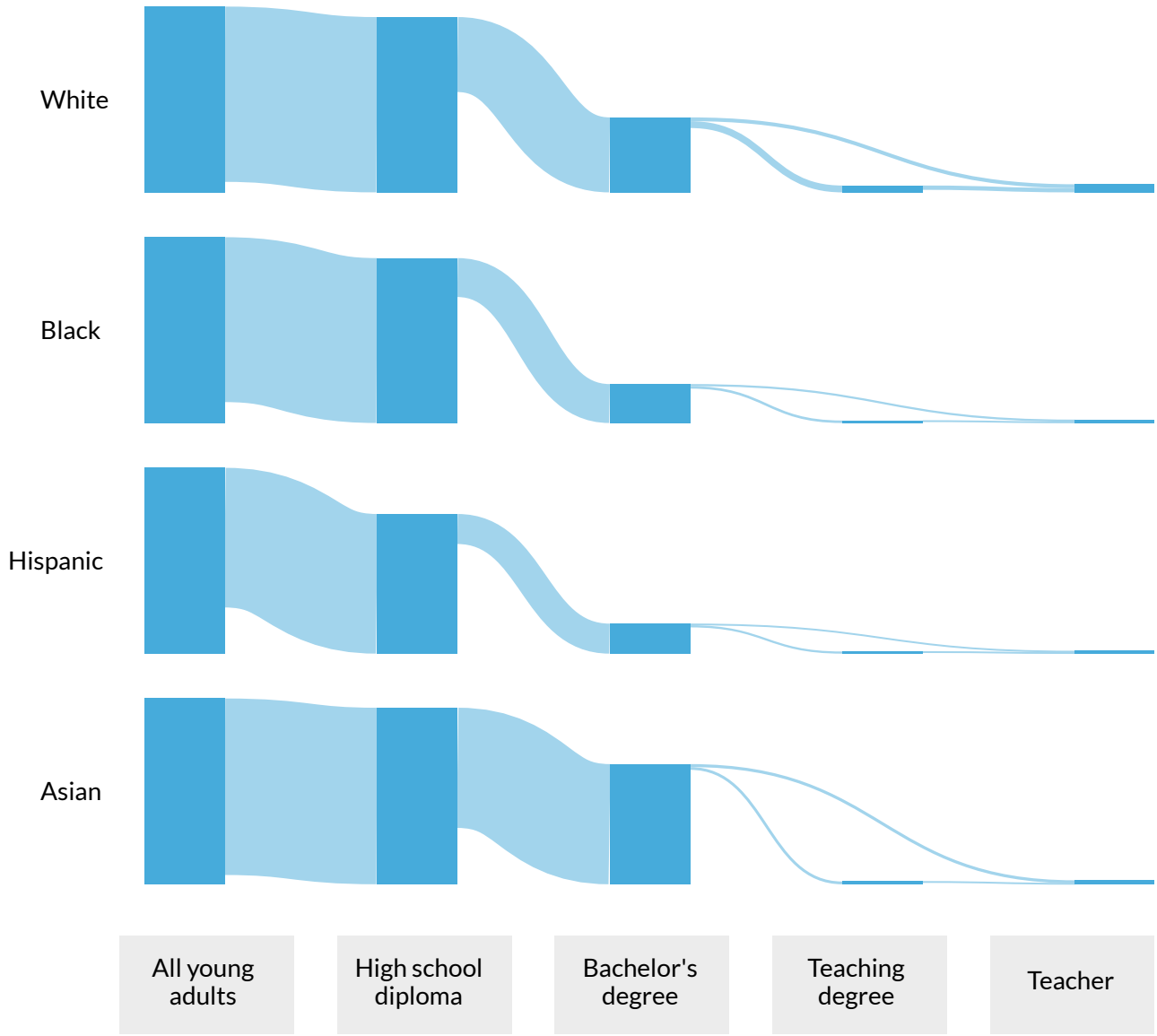
What drives this gap? It appears it's not as simple as people of color choosing not to become teachers. In fact, Hispanic college graduates become teachers at almost the same rate as white college graduates. The problem, it turns out, occurs earlier in the pipeline: Hispanic young adults don't go to or graduate from college at nearly the same rate as white young adults.

Among those who attend and complete college, 9.4 percent of Hispanic graduates, 8.6 percent of black graduates, and 10.8 percent of white graduates go on to teach. These numbers don't seem dramatically different, but when the pool of potential teachers is expanded to include all adults—including those without a college degree, but the potential to earn one—the difference is stark. In 2015, 4.4 percent of white adults were teachers, but only 1.8 percent of black adults and 1.5 percent of Hispanic adults were in the profession.

Who Becomes a Teacher?

PERCENT NUMBERS

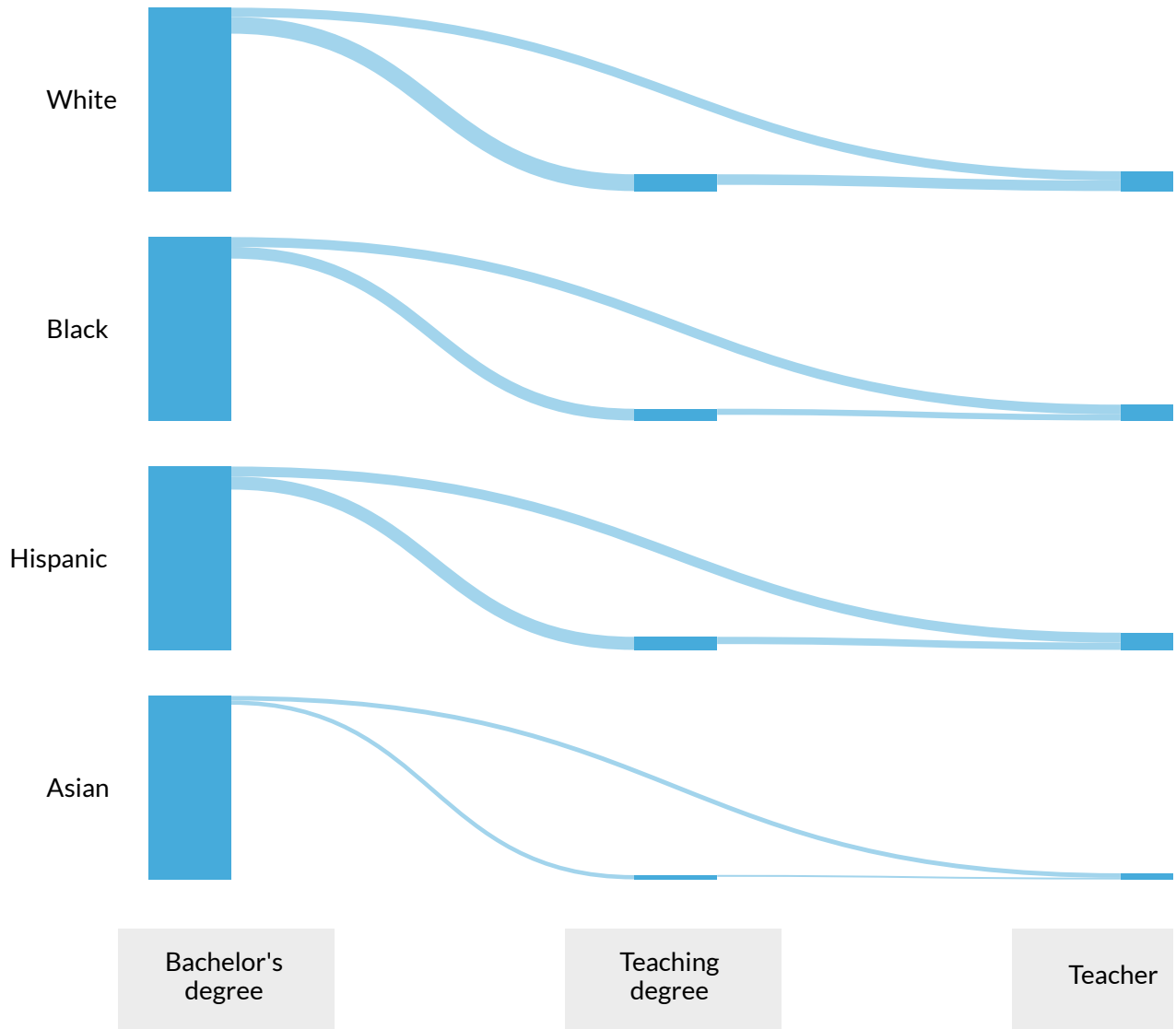


In the chart above, we start by assuming all adults have the potential to become teachers. The first step toward that goal is earning a high school diploma. Though 94 percent of white and 95 percent of Asian young adults (those ages 25 to 34, for this study) had high school diplomas in 2015, just 89 percent of black adults and 76 percent of Hispanic adults had high

This problem is exacerbated in the next step of the pipeline. While 40 percent of white adults and 65 percent of Asian adults had college degrees in 2015, only 21 percent of black adults and 16 percent of Hispanic adults had earned such a credential. Though there are a number of different paths into the teaching profession—teachers come from different fields of study, some have master's degrees, some have different certifications—a bachelor's degree is virtually always a prerequisite. Even if all black college graduates became teachers, the number of black teachers would only barely exceed the number of white teachers. **Teacher diversity gaps are constrained by a limited number of diverse college graduates.**

Of College Graduates, Who Becomes a Teacher?

PERCENT NUMBERS



When we consider only college graduates as the pool of potential teachers, the story changes slightly. This view helps explain why Asians make up a relatively small share of the teaching workforce, despite graduating from college at higher rates than any racial group.

Among college graduates, only 2.3 percent of Asians earn a teaching degree—the next lowest rate is 6.4 percent of black college graduates. Only 3.3 percent of Asian college graduates

Examining the pipeline from college graduate to teacher also sheds important light on the different pathways into teaching. Not all teachers have undergraduate teaching degrees; some come to teaching through alternative certification programs, such as New York City Teaching Fellows or the DC Capital Teaching Residency, while others earn a graduate degree in teaching after focusing on a different field for their bachelor's degree.

White teachers are more likely to hold undergraduate teaching degrees than teachers of other races. Black, Asian, and Hispanic teachers, meanwhile, are all more likely to have entered teaching through an alternative path. This may be in part because of differences in demographics and credentialing requirements across states. Teacher labor markets tend to be highly localized, with most teachers working in the states, or even the districts, where they grew up. So if, for example, the states where black college graduates are more likely to live are also the states that allow teachers to enter the profession through alternative certification programs, it is not surprising that black teachers tend to come through those channels. Research also suggests that some credentialing requirements may disproportionately hurt minority teacher candidates.

Because teaching job markets are local and because demographics and credentialing requirements vary by state, policy solutions to increase teacher diversity are most likely to be found at the local level.

How Does the Teacher-Student Gap Vary by City and State?

Select data to display

White | Black | Hispanic | Asian

American Indian | Alaskan Native | Native Hawaiian

Select a city or state

Source: American Community Survey Uniform Extracts, Version 1.2, Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2016.
Notes: "Native Hawaiian" includes other Pacific islanders. Those who indicated "some other race" or two or more races are excluded from the city and state graphs.

share of nonwhite teachers if all those teachers are in one place.

Similarly, even within a city there can be issues of concentration that our data don't address. Even if a city has the same proportion of Hispanic teachers as Hispanic students, if all the Hispanic teachers are in one school, and it's not the school where most of the Hispanic students are, some students will still miss out on having a teacher of the same race.

The state and city data also give us important information about where teachers of color are working. Though looking at the differences between student and teacher demographics is important, the proportion of diverse teachers matters on its own. For instance, a student is much more likely to have a nonwhite teacher in California, where 35 percent of teachers are people of color, than in Vermont, where only 3 percent of teachers are nonwhite.

Building a diverse teacher workforce is important for student outcomes. Though many policy solutions have focused on alternative pathways or incentives to encourage people of color to teach, our analysis shows that the most important first step is getting people of color through college. By expanding the pool of college graduates, we expand the pool of potential teachers. The pipeline to a teaching career starts well before college graduation—it starts with getting more black and Hispanic young people through high school and college.

Project credits

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