

Bringing diversity into teaching

Minority teachers choose alternative certification programs

BY Kathryn Baron
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Tom Ribota, a teacher at a court and community school in San Joaquin County, has many of the same types of kids in his classes that he used to interact with when he was cop. So it's amusing to imagine the day when he had his students do a crime scene investigation as a way to learn some math concepts. Ribota says hands-on lessons like that make learning relevant. As a Mexican American who grew up in this largely Hispanic community, Ribota himself brings relevance to his students.

"The kids look at me and they see themselves in some respect," said Ribota, who left the police force due to a back injury. "I understand where they've been, and they understand where I've been, because I share that with them."

Ribota is enrolled in an intern program run by the county where he teaches during day and is a student at night. Programs like his are becoming the "pathway of choice for under-represented minorities," said Catherine Kearney, dean of Teachers College of San Joaquin, and founding president of the California Teacher Corps, which represents alternative certification programs.

New figures released today by the Corps show that nearly half the teachers in these programs are under-represented minorities. Of course, this requires some context. There are so few minority teachers in California that the numbers are still small, even though the trend is impressive.

Last year, for example, more than 9 percent of teachers from Corps programs were African American, compared to 4 percent statewide. Hispanics accounted for 25 percent of Corps teachers, above the statewide level of 17 percent. Some individual programs have much higher rates. Nearly 80 percent of the credential students at California State University Fullerton's On Track Scholars Transition to Teaching program are Hispanic, and most of them have deep roots in the communities where they're teaching.

California students are just about the opposite of teachers when it comes to diversity; almost three-quarters of public school students are African American, Hispanic, Asian, or Pacific Islander.

"In order for students to aspire, it's important that the people they see on a day-to-day basis, their teachers, reflect those possibilities," said Kearney. That's not just an intuitive belief. A new report from the **Center for American Progress** cites research showing that "students of color do better on a variety of academic outcomes if they're taught by teachers of color."

So, the 70 or so programs in the Teacher Corps spend a lot of time recruiting locally. Kearney credits attracting people with deep roots in the communities where they'll be teaching for the impressive retention rates of their graduates. More than 70 percent of Corps teachers are still in the classroom after five years. Typically – at least in years when they're not being laid off due to the economy – half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years.

The goal of the California Teacher Corps is to place 100,000 highly qualified teachers in California classrooms by 2020. They're already halfway there, but Kearney expects the state's massive budget

deficit to slow down the progress. According to the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, only half as many people are enrolled in teacher preparation programs in the state today as there were a decade ago.

If Tom Ribota has his way, some of his students will start to fill out the number and diversity of the state's teacher workforce. Now that they're succeeding in school, he says they see teaching as very real career goal, not some far-off dream. "I tell them that in order to change their environment, they have to become part of the change."