

Monterey County The Herald

Teacher 'diversity gap' plagues state, report says

BY Claudia Melendez Salinas
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Ask adults who have overcome tremendous odds to be successful about the people who made a difference in their lives and they invariably mention their parents and teachers.

According to many educational experts, the teachers will be ones who showed compassion, who experienced similar struggles, who knew exactly how to relate. Very likely it was teachers who looked like their students.

Experts agree it is important for teachers to reflect the diversity of the student population, but while California's diversity keeps growing, the teacher pool remains persistently monochromatic. A recent study by the Center of American Progress pegs California's teacher "diversity gap" at 43 points. While 72 percent of students are of color, only 29 percent of teachers come from a minority group.

"This is a problem for students, schools and the public at large," writes Ulrich Boser, senior fellow of the Center for American Progress in "Teacher Diversity Matters: A State-by-State Analysis of Teachers of Color."

"Teachers of color serve as role models for students, giving them a clear and concrete sense of what diversity in education — and in our society — looks like," Boser writes.

Evidence suggests non-white students do better when they have teachers of color around.

Like the rest of California, the teaching population in Monterey County doesn't reflect the demographics of its students. While 73 percent of K-12 students are Latino, only 23 percent of teachers have the same background, according to the most recent data from the California Department of Education.

There are wide variations within the county. Areas with more Latino students tend to have more Latino teachers — but without reaching parity. At Alisal Union School District, where the student population is 94 percent Latino, 60 percent of the teachers are Latino. Latino teacher population ranges in the 20 percent to 30 percent range in the Salinas Valley, except for the King City Union School District, where only 6 percent of teachers are of Hispanic origin.

"When I supervise student teachers in schools, many of whom are Anglo, I see they're teaching a classroom filled almost exclusively by Latino students," said Mark O'Shea, professor of education at CSU Monterey Bay. "There's an effort to recruit students to CSUMB through

Spanish-language radio and we try to reach out to students already in college from minority groups who may be interested in moving into teaching."

The report suggests alternative certification programs are more successful at recruiting teachers of color than traditional programs, and the California Teacher Corps is an example.

Last year, 50 percent of all teachers placed through the statewide organization were from a minority group.

"We focus a lot of our recruitment efforts in the communities that have schools that need the teachers. Those are often communities with high minority populations," said Catherine Kearney, founding president of the California Teacher Corps. "We think that having teachers that are highly skilled and committed to staying in the community and come from the community is a bonus."

In the Monterey Bay Area, the alternative certification route hasn't yielded an increase in teachers from minority backgrounds, although it was successful in placing more minority teachers in high school.

"There's a strong effort to become more effective when recruiting people from minority groups but it's a challenge," O'Shea said. "There's not sufficient number of minority students to recruit from."