

MICHIGAN

Michigan's teaching ranks getting more diverse, but work remains, study says



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Redford Township — Sixteen middle school students sit relaxed at desks as they prep for a science exam inside DCP Redford, a K-8 public charter school. Laptops are open, and the mood is light. Students chat and smile.

In walks Juan Wise II, their 28-year-old teacher. In a deep, commanding voice, Wise tells the student their review is beginning. Chatting stops. Silence falls over the room. Students turn to face the front of the class.

"We use more non-renewable resources than renewable resources. What does that tell us?" Wise asks his students in a class discussion ahead of the test. Several students raise their hands.

Wise is trying to make an impact as one of Michigan's few Black male educators. Nationally, Black men make up only 1.3% of the current teaching force, and Michigan reflects that trend.

A new study by the National Council on Teacher Quality, a Washington, D.C.-based, nonpartisan research and policy organization that advocates for teacher quality and educational outcomes, shows the racial diversity of the K-12 teacher workforce nationally is growing at a slower pace than the racial diversity of college-educated adults.

While Michigan has made some gains in increasing the number of Black and Hispanic teachers in its public education workforce, the report from the council found that only 9.1% of Michigan's teacher workforce was composed of people from historically disadvantaged groups in 2022. Statewide, about 14.5% of working-age adults from historically disadvantaged groups have college degrees.

Report authors say this trend indicates that increasingly Black and brown adults who earn college degrees are either choosing other professions or electing to leave the classroom after becoming teachers. According to the report, as people of color are gaining a larger share of the degrees in the United States, their representation in the teacher workforce is not keeping pace, the report says.

Research shows that compared to White teachers, teachers of color produce additional positive academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes for all students, regardless of race. Black students who had at least one Black elementary teacher are less likely to drop out of high school than Black students who have never been taught by a Black teacher between the third and fifth grade, according to one study.

“Teachers of color have a positive impact on all students — especially students of color — yet our teacher workforce continues to lack racial diversity,” said Heather Peske, NCTQ president, in a statement.

“Addressing this issue begins with better data,” said Peske, referring to the report's dashboard that includes information on the nation's teacher prep programs.

'A lot of work to do'

There is encouraging news in Michigan despite the overall trend. Michigan Department of Education says an additional 2,272 teachers of color have joined the workforce in the last eight years, a 34% increase.

Specifically, there have been an additional 1,653 Black or African American teachers, including an increase of 336 since last year. For Hispanic or Latino teachers, there have been an additional 260, and for Asian teachers an additional 192.

Michele Harmala, deputy superintendent of educator excellence, career and technical education, special education and administrative law for the Michigan Department of Education, said she is pleased by the state's progress in this area.

“Research shows that all students — particularly students of color — benefit socially, emotionally and academically when their schools have a diverse teacher workforce,” Harmala said. “But we still have a lot of work to do in having a teacher workforce that’s as diverse as the students in our classrooms.”

In August, the state education department announced that after decreasing 59% from 2011-12 to 2016-17, enrollment in teacher preparation programs in Michigan has rebounded with an increase of 56% from 2016-17 to 2021-22.

Department officials said several programs and initiatives are sparking interest in people exploring the field of education and support those seeking teacher certification, including "Grow Your Own," which creates support staff-to-teacher programs where teaching candidates work while completing preparation programs; "MI Future Educator Fellowships," which offer \$10,000 scholarships to up to 2,500 future educators every year; and MI Future Educator stipends, which offer \$9,600 to support student teachers.

"The Michigan Department of Education recognizes the importance of a diverse teacher workforce. We applaud the important work that local school districts are doing in this area," a statement from the department read. "As noted in the NCTQ report, research shows that all students benefit from a diverse teacher workforce, especially students of color. These benefits extend beyond academics, including improved attendance, and social-emotional and behavioral outcomes."

The journey to a teaching career

The Black Male Educator Alliance supports teachers like Wise to keep them in the profession and is focused on efforts to create a teacher pipeline by reaching students in grades K-12 to encourage them to become educators.

Wise says that, growing up, he wanted to be in the NFL — not an educator. And he only had three Black male teachers during his K-12 years, all in high school.

"I did not see myself being a teacher growing up, honestly," Wise said. "After that, I thought was going to be a sportscaster. I didn't see education at all."

Wise said he loved working with the youth, especially the troubled youth, because he grew up in a rough neighborhood on Detroit's west side.

"So it was a rough struggle growing up, but by the grace of God, I made it through," Wise said. "Once I started working with at-risk youth, it was like, OK, I have a story to tell, so why not pay it forward and let them know like there's other choices out here, other than what every day shows us in the streets or what we may not have the opportunities to see."

Wise began working with young people caught up inside juvenile prisons and facilities. Then he thought to himself: what can I do in the classroom to help them before they possibly end up in this situation?

His first teaching assignment was a fourth-grade class at a charter school, which was challenging, he said. Then he found the Black Male Educator Alliance and connected with a mentor, Mike Payne, who helped Wise master academic standards and, at the same time, make learning fun for students.

"So it gave me that push, especially seeing other educators that look like myself. So OK, yeah, we are what they need to see in the classroom," Wise said. "My math coach helped me break down standards, understanding the math standards, how to make it reliable and educationally fun for the students, so they can not only pay attention, but grasp the understanding, because we all know math is a lot of numbers, and sometimes it can be boring in the classroom."

Wise said he focused on developing skills to keep students engaged in their studies and in their future. His goal: "Making sure they know they have somebody they come talk to, knowing they have somebody that will correct them when they're wrong, but still stand beside them."

Payne said Wise knew he needed to grow, making him ideal for the program.

"He was flexible in his learning. He has been appreciative of the support and his willingness to learn and grow and be an educator," Payne said. "He is good with the kids. And he is trying to improve. He is the type of educator we are looking for— he is driven for the right reasons."

Impact in the classroom

Stephen Johnson, principal at DCP Redford, where Wise teaches, said careers in education are not being well marketed to young men of color. Of the 17 teachers on staff at the 200-student K-8 school, only two are Black — Wise and the physical education teacher.

"One of the things that kind of throws us off is we were always looking for the male to be the disciplinary," Johnson said. "And I don't wake up to discipline kids. I wake up so I can teach. I can show you how to read. I can show you how to add. And you know that part gets lost in the sauce sometimes, and so it doesn't look appealing, it doesn't look fun, it doesn't look like there's a future in it."

Johnson said there is a future in teaching and watching young people grow from elementary school to high school.

"You've got them for a short period of time ... So it's about telling the proper story about what it means to be an educator," Johnson said.

Wise can relate to his students, Johnson said.

"He's stern with them, and he gives another perspective," Johnson said of Wise. "Everybody hears a lady's voice, but now there's a different voice that says the same thing. It takes on a different meaning. All of those different things, that makes a big difference in a lot of in a lot of cases."

Peyton Brown, a seventh grader in Wise's science course, said Wise is her favorite teacher.

"He made me really like science," said Peyton, 12, during class. "... Because when you learn about science, you have a different perspective and look on different things."

When Wise tells other people he is a middle school teacher, they always have questions.

"It's more of a wait — are you serious? Like, how do you do it? Like, how do you deal with the kids? And especially when I tell them, I'm teaching middle school now, it's like, do they do they respect you? Do they listen to you? Like, how does it make you feel?"

Wise said he tells them it's a new challenge every day.

"These children aren't perfect, but they need to see strong male figures in the classroom, and I give them grace every day," Wise said.

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