

Do students perceive their teachers and schools more positively when more of their teachers look like them?

Alica Gerry and Lindsay Weixler

This Research Snapshot was initiated by the ERA–New Orleans Advisory Board as part of its annual research agenda.

Overview

We analyzed New Orleans students' survey responses to questions about their teachers, school climate, and student engagement for five demographic groups (Black, White, Hispanic, male, and female students), and our findings are as follows.

Across all demographic groups, student ratings for the seven dimensions of teacher quality in the survey were not associated with how many teachers shared their demographics. For other survey domains—school climate and student engagement—Black students were the only demographic group whose ratings were different in schools with more teachers who look like them. In schools with more Black teachers, Black students' ratings were more positive for six of the nine survey measures from these domains:

- Black students reported lower levels of bullying, greater feelings of emotional safety, and fairer discipline in schools with a higher percentage of Black teachers.
- Black students reported more positive academic behaviors and beliefs in schools with a higher percentage of Black teachers.
- Black students reported participating in more school clubs and activities in schools with a higher percentage of Black teachers.

Our results, taken with existing research on the topic, suggest that New Orleans' Black students benefit from having teachers who look like them. Local policymakers and practitioners should consider these potential benefits when developing policies and strategies for teacher recruitment and retention in New Orleans.

Background

New Orleans public schools' student population is composed of 90% students of color. However, only 61% of teachers are people of color. A growing body of research finds that students of color benefit from having teachers of their same race or ethnicity. These findings are particularly consistent for Black students, and several studies indicate that other subgroups such as Hispanic and Asian students could possibly benefit as well. Potential positive effects include higher teacher evaluations of students' academic performance and behavior, higher academic achievement for students, lower likelihoods of experiencing exclusionary discipline, and better attendance. For more information on the existing research, see the References section at the end of this report.

In this brief, we use data from the 2018-19 New Orleans Citywide Youth Survey to explore students' perceptions of their teachers and schools, and whether those perceptions differ when they have more teachers who look like them. For more information on the survey, see [Voices of New Orleans Youth: What Do the City's Young People Think About Their Schools and Communities?](#)

Where Do We Find Differences?

We examined the survey responses of five demographic groups for the 16 areas listed below. Note that the only differences in response patterns we identified are for Black students in the categories shaded orange.

Student Engagement	
Academic Behaviors	The student puts effort into their schoolwork.
Growth Mindset	The student believes academic success is based on hard work and learning rather than innate ability.
School Participation	The student is involved in school clubs and activities.
Absences	The student was absent fewer than four times during the last four weeks.
Tardies	The student was tardy fewer than four times during the last four weeks.
School Climate	
Absence of Bullying	Students at this school are not frequently picked on or teased.
School Safety	Students do not feel that violence is a problem at their school.
Emotional Safety	Students feel socially accepted and safe to express emotions at school.
Fairness of Discipline	Rules and strategies applied in school to manage students' behavior are clear and equitable.
Teacher Quality	
Care	Teachers and school staff show concern for students' emotional well-being.
Captivate	Teachers encourage and value students' ideas and views.
Challenge	Teachers spark and maintain students' interest in learning.
Clarify	Teachers use a variety of methods to convey knowledge to their students.
Classroom Management	Teachers foster orderly, respectful, and on-task classroom behavior.
Confer	Teachers encourage and value students' ideas and views.
Consolidate	Teachers help students integrate and synthesize ideas.

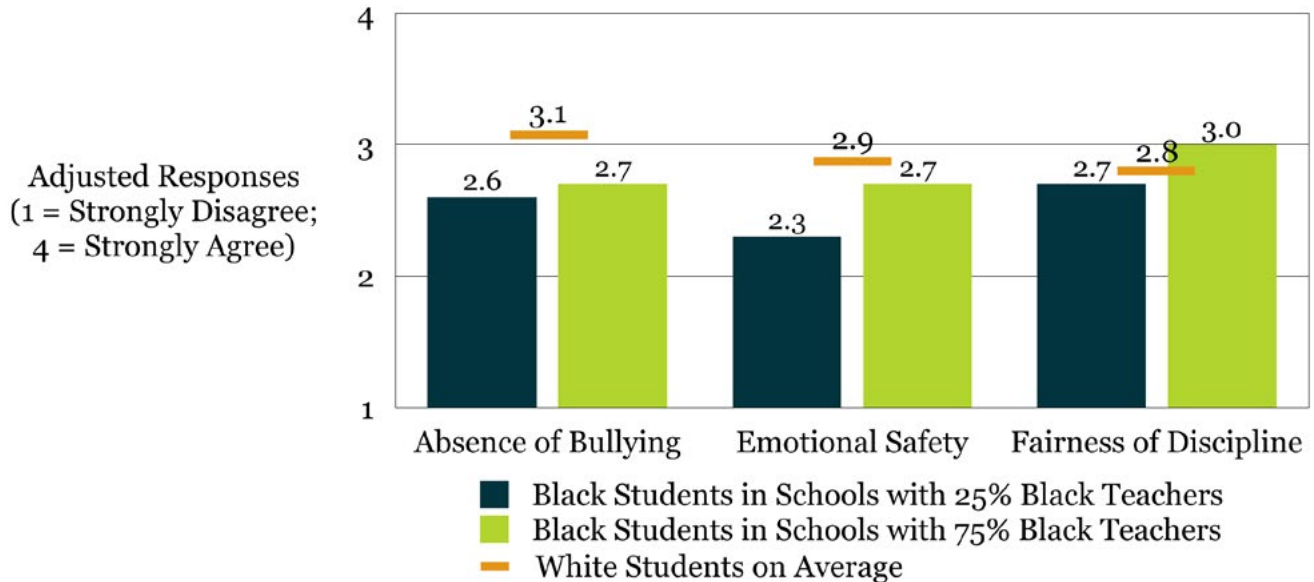
Black students responded more positively in schools with more Black teachers.
 Demographic similarities between students and teachers were unrelated to students' survey responses.

Note: This brief was updated in October 2020 to correct an error in the definition of emotional safety.

Using regression models, we estimate the association between the percent of Black teachers in a school and Black students’ responses on the survey measures, holding constant the percent of Black students in the school, the School Performance Score (SPS), and average teacher experience and salary. This helps us ensure that any differences in adjusted survey responses are not due to these other factors, which can vary across schools. Below we show adjusted responses for Black students in schools where a quarter of teachers are Black, and in schools where 75% of teachers are Black, but SPS, teacher experience, and average salaries are the same. Higher scores reflect more positive responses.

Key Finding #1

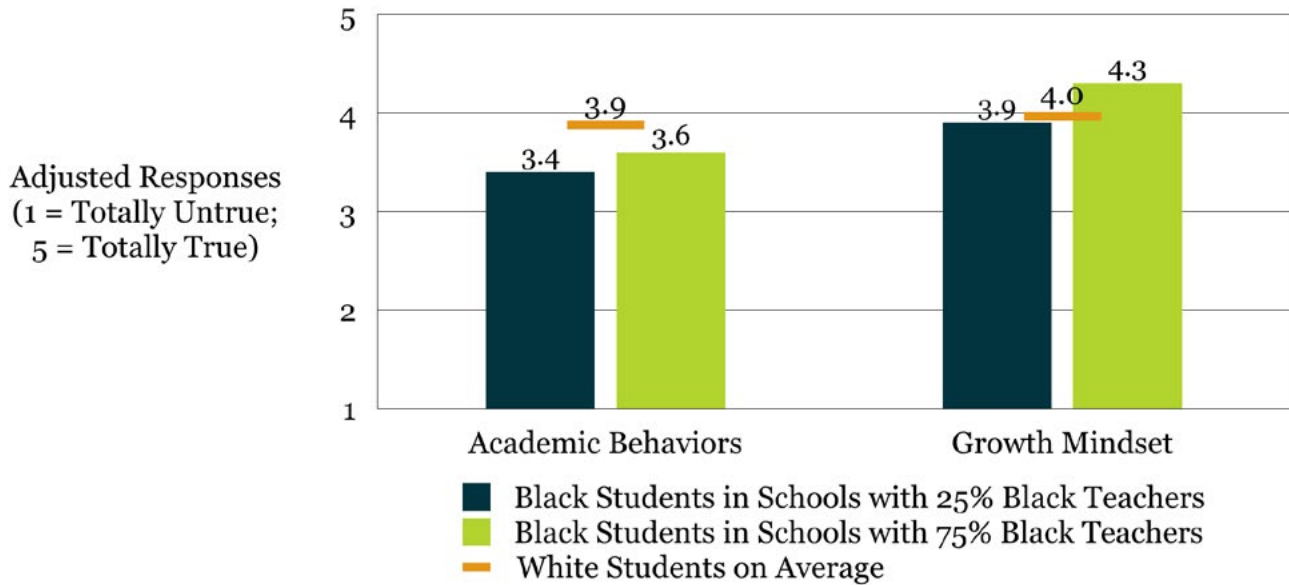
Black students report lower levels of bullying, greater feelings of emotional safety, and fairer discipline in schools with a higher percentage of Black teachers.



Black students in schools with higher percentages of Black teachers are more likely to agree when presented with statements about their school’s climate, such as, “I feel safe at this school.” Across many survey responses, Black students respond less positively than White students, so as a comparison point, we provide the average response for White students who took this survey. As shown in the figure above, we estimate that Black students in schools with 75% Black teachers agree, on average, that discipline is fair, just above the average response of their White peers. Though having more Black teachers also had a substantial effect on Black students’ perceptions of bullying and emotional safety, their responses are still lower than those of the typical White student in our survey.

Key Finding #2

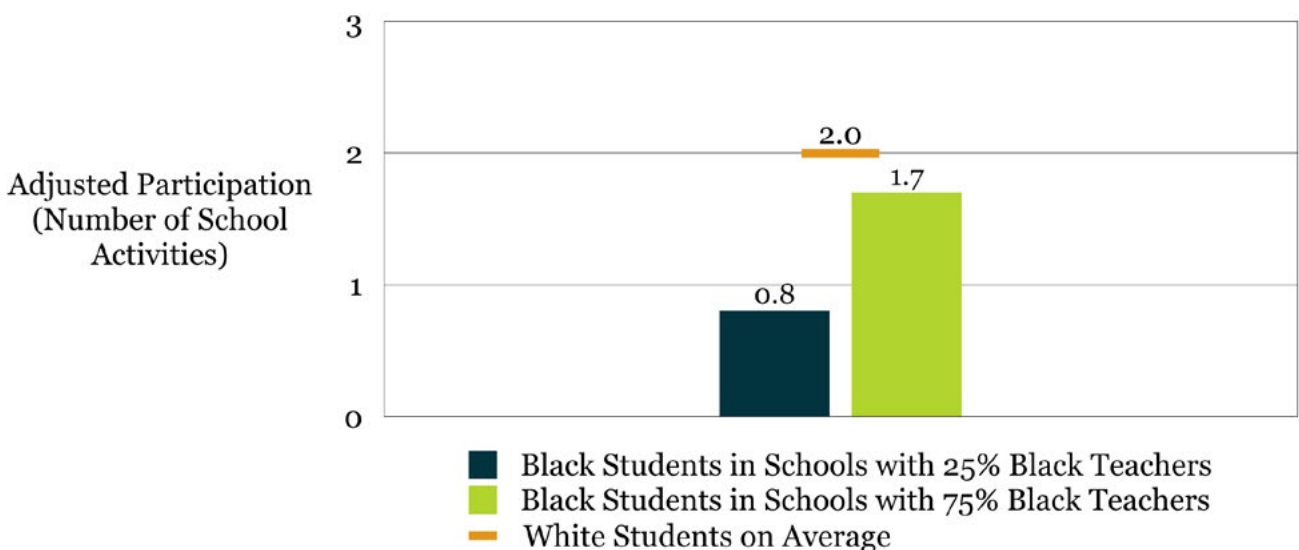
Black students report more positive academic behaviors and beliefs in schools with a higher percentage of Black teachers.



Black students in schools with higher percentages of Black teachers are more likely to agree when presented with statements about their academic behaviors. However, their responses are still lower than those of the typical White student in our survey. In terms of students' responses to statements about growth mindset like, "Working harder will make me smarter," we estimate that Black students in schools with more same-race teachers will respond, on average, more positively than their White peers.

Key Finding #3

Black students report participating in more school clubs and activities in schools with a higher percentage of Black teachers.



We estimate that Black students in schools with higher percentages of Black teachers are more likely to be engaged in school activities like music, sports, and debate teams. These students are estimated to be involved, on average, in approximately two school activities as compared to only one activity for peers in schools with a smaller share of same-race teachers.

Methodological Notes

This analysis examines how, if at all, responses differ for students depending on the percentage of demographically matched teachers at their school. We tested for this difference using a multilevel regression model interacting student race (or gender) with the percentage of demographically matched teachers at the school during the school year when the survey was administered, adjusting for student demographics, teacher experience and salary, and 2018-19 School Performance Score. We then identified those outcomes for which the target group of the analysis (i.e., Black students) responded more positively in schools with more demographically matched teachers, and for which the interaction between student and teacher race (or gender) was statistically significant at $p < .10$. The graphs show adjusted responses at below- and above-average school percentages of Black teachers, which in our sample of schools correspond to approximately 25% and 75%, respectively, holding constant the percent of Black students, the School Performance Score, and teacher experience and salary.

This is a correlational analysis using a small sample of schools. We limit this analysis to 19 of the 21 surveyed schools, excluding two schools with a very small number of teachers. Due to the descriptive nature of this study, these results could be due to other school characteristics that were not explicitly accounted for in this analysis (e.g., school spending).

References

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In this series of reports, we analyze data to inform New Orleans education policy and practice by answering questions asked by either our Advisory Board or NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS).

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