

Propel's Teacher Residency Program: Using the Residency as a Catalyst for the Recruitment & Retention of Quality Black Educators

I. Introduction + Motivation

Where are all the black teachers at? As I scan the faces in the staff Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) meeting, I am not alarmed, but mostly disappointed and exhausted. Racially insensitive questions and shallow discussions are the result of not enough black educators being in the room where decisions are made. During my five years working with Propel, I am used to being the only or the few in the room. Despite research that shows the positive impacts of black teachers in schools, educator diversity remains a persisting problem not only within the organization but throughout the Greater Pittsburgh Area and through the entire state of Pennsylvania (Learning Policy Institute, 2018). The pandemic has only highlighted the racial pandemic our country is facing and the urgent need to get more black educators in classrooms. Our organization, like most across the country, have promised more equitable and diverse workspaces. This cannot happen without more teachers of color actually in front of kids delivering instruction (not as support staff or custodians). As an organization that prides itself on “defying expectations” and being a “catalyst for change in public education,” I wonder how we can strengthen a program that we already have, The Propel Teacher Residency Program, to make necessary change in the number of black educators and leaders in our organization?

II. Background

According to a 2018 report by Research for Action, “Pennsylvania has one of the highest disparities between students and teachers of color in the nation. Nationally, 18% of teachers are persons of color, compared to only 4% of teachers in PA” (Stohr, Fontana, & Lapp, 2018). Educational leaders in the state have spent time and money trying to come up with solutions to address this crisis.

Teacher Residency Programs: What & Why?

Teacher Residency Programs (TRP) are alternate routes to teacher certification. They combine educational coursework with in-classroom experience to help prepare teacher candidates for their careers. In many urban cities across the country including Chicago, Baltimore, and Memphis, urban teaching residency programs are targeting black and brown teachers-in-training as a way to fill the diversity gap in urban, high-poverty, low-income schools. The National Council for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) shares that “teacher residencies have proven effective in expanding teacher talent pipelines, with an extensive track record of developing diverse, effective, classroom-ready teachers for the schools and students that need them most” (Azar, Hines, & Scheib, n.d.).

Propel Teacher Residency Program

Created in 2014, the Propel Teacher Residency Program (PTRP) was formerly known and marketed as the Pittsburgh Urban Teaching Corps (PUTC). Then, the four year residency program was a partnership with Chatham University and included intensive in-the-classroom training along with a paid masters degree in teaching and a living stipend in exchange for a three year work agreement. It was Propel's response to the statewide teacher shortage,

specifically in schools serving urban, high-poverty areas. A program like this did not exist in Pittsburgh at this time and was very attractive to future teachers looking to serve in the city. One December night in 2015, I stumbled upon an advertisement and article about the program. In the article, a black professor named Dr. Tyra Good talked about how Propel was specifically seeking teachers who looked like the student body they served--teachers who were passionate about urban communities and social justice. Propel sent out the call and several candidates answered, including myself. After a long interviewing process, I joined the second cohort of the PUTC alongside nineteen other educators; more than half of these candidates were educators of color. I spent my residency at Propel Braddock Hills High School. Any staff member there during that 2016-2017 school year can tell you how different the culture of the building felt. The impact of having just four black staff was tremendous. We implemented after school clubs and activities, boosted the school spirit and culture, and held scholars to high academic expectations in the classroom.

The following school year, Propel Schools, specifically Propel Braddock Hills Campus had the highest increase of educators of color in Allegheny County (17.6%), largely due to the PUTC (Stohr, Fontana, & Lapp, 2018). While the program had its flaws at the time, it still had potential to help recruit and retain teachers of color. In the 2017-2018 school year, I became a mentor teacher for a resident teacher in what is now known as the Propel Teacher Residency Program. The number of incoming resident teachers in the program began decreasing, and greatly impacted the number of participating black resident teachers (table 1). I also noticed that the retention of residents, specifically black resident teachers, decreased as well throughout the years (table 2).

Table 1: *Participating Residents in the Propel Teacher Residency Program*

Cohort	Total Number of Participating Residents	Percentage of Person of Color Residents
Cohort 1 (2015 - 2016)	10	60%
Cohort 2 (2016 - 2017)	20	55%
Cohort 3 (2017 - 2018)	16	38%
Cohort 4 (2018 - 2019)	11	36%
Cohort 5 (2019 - 2020)	12	25%
Cohort 6 (2020 - 2021)	14	46%

Table 2: *Residency Participants Currently at Propel*

Cohort	Percentage of Total Cohort Residents Currently at Propel	Percentage of Person of Color Residents Currently with Propel
Cohort 1 (2015 - 2016)	10%	0%

Cohort 2 (2016 - 2017)	50%	40%
Cohort 3 (2017 - 2018)	56%	13%
Cohort 4 (2018 - 2019)	27%*	0%
Cohort 5 (2019 - 2020)	91%*	18%*
Cohort 6 (2020 - 2021)	100%*	N/A*

**Educators are still participating in residency program*

The program had gone through some restructuring to go with the new name---including new leaders, new incentives, and new contract agreements. One of the most attractive features of the initial residency program—master’s degree in teaching paid for by the organization in exchange for years of service—is not being offered to residents at this time. Additionally, community partnerships like the established relationship with Chatham University, who had a black professor as a liaison, had since been replaced with other partnerships like one with Point Park University. There is now, however, an entire team of staff instead of just two people leading the residency team at Propel. This team has leaders of color as opposed to previous years’ leadership.

III. Purpose of Research

The purpose of the research project was to find the barriers or challenges facing Propel’s Residency Program so that we can determine how to use it specifically to address the lack of teacher diversity in the organization.

IV. Methods of Research

Supported by the innovative Emancipatory R&D Infrastructure (based on the work of Dr. Temple Lovelace), the primary method of research was secondary data analysis and interviews. Propel was collaborative in sharing their non-identifying data on participating program residents, including total number of participants by each cohort year, the percentage of participants that remained with Propel, and including the number of black educators that participated each year. There were also opportunities to interview school administratives to discuss the program model and suggestions for adjustments to the program to improve the recruitment and retention of participating black teachers.

V. Challenges

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic caused additional stress to already stressed educators and researchers. The research project was conducted via Zoom meetings between the researchers (Cuffe & Hamilton) and faculty from Propel, including Dr. Tina Chekan, Superintendent, and Erin Sandoval, Assistant Director of Teacher Residency & Induction.

Limited Data

Because much of the research was dependent on a secondary analysis approach, a big challenge the research team faced was collecting the appropriate data, specifically regarding demographics, from the appropriate persons within the organization. In communicating with program administrators there was difficulty in retrieving useful data due to the limited historical data collection they maintained. It was also challenging in connecting with the appropriate staff members to request and receive data to review.

Program Model

The Shifting Power Initiative was designed to position educators of color in place of power to make an impact. The program used the emancipatory research and development (R&D) infrastructure, based on Dr. Temple Lovelace’s work, to support the cohort of educators and researchers. A greater focus of the collaborative sessions given to additional training and deeper understanding of the framework would have been beneficial in ensuring the research project incorporated the elements of the framework as well as provide the educator and research team with additional skills needed to reframe traditional R&D structures within their practice and future work.

VI. Research Findings & Reflections

Although we were not able to analyze all the data from Propel Schools, there is extensive research done already about the positive effects of teacher residency programs. NCTR also has established The Black Educator Initiative which helps schools use their residency programs specifically to increase the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. In their 2020 report they share key strategies paired with their Standards for Effective Residency Programs to help residency programs attract, and keep, more black and brown educators. Based on participant observation, we recommend these steps to strengthen the already established Propel Teacher Residency Program.

Figure 1.1 : NCTR Standards for Effective Teacher Residencies

COMPETENCY AREA 1	
Partnership and Program Sustainability	
STANDARD 1	Residency programs are partnerships among school districts, universities, and other stakeholders to prepare and retain effective teachers.
GOALS	INDICATORS
Program prepares teachers in direct response to student and district needs.	A. Program uses district, state, and other data to identify and address teacher quality needs and shortage areas (i.e., subjects, grade levels, teacher diversity). B. Program partners have the capacity to meet district hiring needs. C. Program is explicitly integrated into district and university strategic plans.

1. The residency program should recruit for and from a targeted community.

Like other resident teachers, the opportunity to teach students of color with a shared sense of community and background was an appealing factor for me when deciding to apply for

the Propel residency program. At the time, the recruitment and talent team specifically mentioned that they were seeking educators of color to join the cohort; over the years, as the PUTC changed to the PTRP, and the leadership of the program has changed, diversity has seemed like less of a priority. According to the NCTR’s standards, goals, and indicators, Propel should respond to the direct need for more black teachers, by specifically targeting potential black teachers. If the program was specifically marketed to black and brown educators in Pittsburgh, in Pittsburgh’s predominantly black neighborhoods and community locations, then we would see more black and brown applicants. In previous cohorts, there were more black and brown educational leaders partnered through Chatham University. It would be in Propel’s best interest to find a strong community partner whose interest, experience and background is reflective of the largely black student population.

Figure 1.2 : NCTR Standards for Effective Teacher Residencies

STANDARD 2	Residents learn from and with teacher educators who demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and strategies of effective teachers, coaches, and instructional leaders.	
	GOALS Program recruits, selects and retains teacher educators .	INDICATORS A. Program develops ongoing recruitment effort that targets teacher educators with a track record of positively impacting student achievement. B. Program clearly defines roles, responsibilities, and compensation for teacher educators. C. Program develops and utilizes teacher educator selection criteria aligned to program impact goals.

2. The residency program must provide a culturally responsive community of support.

Black teachers bring their unique perspectives to the education field. With these perspectives, come unique challenges. As a new teacher, it is important to have consistent feedback and support. As a new, resident, black teacher, support is even more critical. In order to strengthen the resident program, actively employing culturally responsive strategies and aggressively seeking black leaders and mentors teachers must be a key priority.

3. The residency program must be specifically designed with diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion does not just mean adding “black lives matter” to the school website or creating a DEI group to have conversations about race. Successful residency programs are designed with DEI in mind, designed for the whole resident teacher. Are there language and DEI courses and professional development embedded in the program for resident teachers? Strong residency programs have competitive compensation packages, housing stipends, health and wellness benefits, childcare and other benefits to address financial barriers that often impede black teaching candidates' success at finishing academic programs.

VII. Reflections

Alonna: All in all, the research project was beneficial in learning what strategies can be employed in strengthening an already existing residency program. The National Center for Teacher Residency is an amazing organization that helps struggling residency programs and also helps residency target specific goals. Given the challenges of the research model and the stressors of teaching in a pandemic, it was a worthwhile experience. I hope that the

organization continues to invest in the residency program. By making the program more attractive to black and brown teachers and even extending the residency's reach to high school scholars can strengthen the candidate pipeline. The Propel Teacher Residency has great potential to be a high leverage program to increase the number of black and brown teachers in the Greater Pittsburgh Area.

References

Azar, T., Hines, E., & Scheib, C. (n.d.). *Teacher residencies as a vehicle to recruit teachers of color*. National Center for Teacher Residencies.

Learning Policy Institute (2018, April 19). *Teachers of color: In high demand and short supply*. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/press-release/teachers-color-high-demand-and-short-supply>

Stohr, A., Fontana, J., & Lapp, D. (2018, April). *Patching the leaky pipeline: Recruiting and retaining teachers of color in pennsylvania*. Research for Action.