

Erie's Diversity is the Path to Prosperity: *Tackling the Teacher-To-Student Mismatch*

Editor's note: Following is part of an ongoing series of JES articles on sustainability issues written by Court Gould, an Erie resident and a professional in the field.

By Court Gould, MPA

The recently released [Census data](#) presents a clear trend: The nation is becoming more diverse and blending. Like the nation, the edges of Erie, Pennsylvania's ethnic and racial definitions are softening. Erie's shared richness is counted both in the more mixed ways people define themselves and in the rising numbers of diverse people.

The global economy increasingly favors diverse, [equitable regions](#). Accordingly, Erie's future fortunes are to be found in its growing advantage – racial and ethnic diversity.

Both the city of Erie and Erie County experienced a population decrease in the 2020 Census, continuing a decades-long trend for the city that began in the 1970s. The population of refugees and immigrants, however, grew in Erie, thus forestalling even greater decline.

When it comes to talent retention and attraction throughout Erie, the name of the prosperity game is to nurture these trends of growing more diverse in order for Erie to reverse its population decline and to be economically and culturally vibrant. There are many areas upon which to focus civic attention to build strength and leverage diversity for advantage. One such great opportunity and need, where energies are already being applied, is the composition of schoolteachers.

Significant benefits accrue to Erie's youth and community ([particularly material to economics](#)) where students and their teachers share racial and ethnic similarities. However, the long-standing teacher-to-student diversity mismatch is an imperative to be redressed in Erie's quest to prosper and compete.

This is a problem not unique to Erie. Teacher shortages compounded by lack of teachers of color is ubiquitous across the nation. Fixing this problem locally is a civic imperative. It's also a measure of how serious a city is about being a place of opportunity.

The Erie School District is working to increase teacher diversity. It needs help to do more. First, let's look at Erie's census data that illuminates the path to progress.

“Since 2013, the number of people seeking teaching certification has shrunk by more than 65 percent. In addition, while Pennsylvania has more than 120,000 teachers, 96 percent are white, making the state's educator workforce the least diverse in the country.”

– [PA Department of Education](#)

Erie Population Trends

The increasing diversity population trends of both the city of Erie and Erie County are in step with national trends. More choice in the census race and ethnicity check boxes allow individuals to identify themselves more richly, accentuating these numbers (see table below).

In Erie County, those who define themselves as Two or More Races, increased 172 percent from 2010 to 2020. Those who identify as Hispanic or Latino grew significantly in both the city (15.7 percent) and the county (26.4 percent) as did Other (34.1 percent city, 43.9 percent county) and Asian (134.7 percent city, 107.3 percent county). While those who identify as Black dropped slightly (0.5 percent) in the city and slightly increased (2.1 percent) in the county, White identifiers decreased 17.7 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

While much attention is being given to city and county overall population decline (-6.8 percent and -3.5 percent) the promising story is that of rising advantage found in diversity where racial equity is the ticket to growth and prosperity. The data on Erie's growing racial and ethnic richness is a healthy indicator that points to the best strategy for reversing population decline. It is further noteworthy that Erie's continuing strong trend of growth in diversity occurred even while Erie's historic welcoming flow of New Americans was slowed to a trickle during reductions imposed by the previous federal administration.

City of Erie Population Trends, U.S. Census Data

	All data Erie City except last column	2020		2010		Change City		Erie County	
		# City	% City	# City	% City			Change County	
	Total	94,831		101,786	75.0	-6.8%	↓	-3.5%	↓
Race	White	62,785	66.2%	76,327	16.8	-17.7%	↓	-10%	↓
	Black	17,057	18.0%	17,141	.03	-0.5%	↓	2.1%	↑
	American Indian	228	0.2%	291	1.5	-21.6%	↓	-15.7%	↓
	Asian	3,555	3.7%	1,515	0.1	134.7%	↑	107.3%	↑
	Pacific Islander	38	0.0%	53	2.5	-28.3%	↓	-33.3%	↓
	Other	3,351	3.5%	2,498	3.9	34.1%	↑	43.9%	↑
	Two or More	7,817	8.2%	3,961	6.9	97.3%	↑	172.1%	↑
Ethnic	Hispanic or Latino	8,106	8.5%	7,005		15.7%	↑	26.4%	↑

Source: [2020 U.S. Census data breakdowns for Erie County, GoErie.com](https://www.goerie.com/2020-us-census-data-breakdowns-for-erie-county)

[Erie city, Erie County, Pennsylvania Demographics and Housing 2020 Decennial Census | goerie.com](https://www.goerie.com/erie-city-erie-county-pennsylvania-demographics-and-housing-2020-decennial-census)

Teachers & Students

The spotlight story here is that while Erie is becoming more diverse, the city school district (Erie’s public schools) has a long way to go in narrowing the racial mismatch between teachers and students. This issue is central to Erie’s fortunes as the costs and benefits associated with student achievement, dropout rates, and numbers who go on to college ([three outcomes that directly relate to economics and social determinants](#)) have been substantiated by a wealth of national-scale research.

While diversification of Erie’s population is clear and shows in its students too, the composition of their teachers in Erie’s public schools remains the same. As shown in the chart below, student diversity in Erie’s public schools is significant and growing.





Overall, in 2019-20, 61 percent of the 10,438 students were nonwhite (34 percent of students were Black; 12 percent Hispanic; 9 percent two or more races; 6 percent Asian) and 39 percent White. Conversely, of the 742 teachers, only 3 percent were non-White.



This disparity is in step with performance across Pennsylvania. The PA Department of Education acknowledges the disparity, stating on its [website](#): “While Pennsylvania has more than 120,000 teachers, 96 percent are white, making the state’s educator workforce the least diverse in the country.” This puts the state and Erie at a disadvantage. There is a mountain of validation that, as [stated by the Philadelphia Inquirer](#), “[Research shows](#) the benefits of diversity among the teaching ranks. Having at least one Black teacher early on reduces a Black student’s likelihood of dropping out and increases Black students’ likelihood of going to college.” Research further shows this association of student motivation and achievement to their perceptions of teachers [can help close longstanding racial achievement gaps](#).

“While White students also benefit by learning from teachers of color, the impact is especially significant for students of color, who have higher test scores, are more likely to graduate high school, and more likely to succeed in college when they have had teachers of color who serve as role models and support their attachment to school and learning. Students with racially diverse teachers also have fewer unexcused absences and are less likely to be chronically absent.”

– Linda Darling-Hammond, [Learning Policy Institute President and Stanford University professor emeritus](#)

Erie’s Public Schools’ Demographic Divide Between Teachers and Students

Erie City School District		2019- 2020		2013-2014			
		<i>Student Total</i>	<i>Teacher Total</i>	<i>Student Total</i>	<i>Teacher Total</i>	<i>Change Students</i>	<i>Change Teachers</i>
	Total	10,438	741	Total	767	-11.1% 	-3.4 
Race	White	39%	96%	11,740	96%	-5% 	same
	Black	34%	3%	44%	3%	same	same
	American Indian	0%	0%	34%	0%	same	same
	Asian	6%	0%	0%	1%	same	-1% 

Erie City School District		2019- 2020		2013-2014			
		<i>Student Total</i>	<i>Teacher Total</i>	<i>Student Total</i>	<i>Teacher Total</i>	<i>Change Students</i>	<i>Change Teachers</i>
	Pacific Islander	0%	0%	6%	0%	same	
	Two or More	9%	0%	0%	0%	6% 	
Ethnic	Hispanic	12%	0%	13%	28%	-1% 	same
White Male		51%	26%	n/a	69%		
White Female		49%	71%	n/a			

Source: There is no regular public reporting of teacher race/ethnicity in Pennsylvania. However, in collaboration with WHYY, Research For Action (RFA) received seven years of teacher race/ethnicity and gender data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, dating from the 2013-14 through 2019-20 school years. RFA cleaned this data and merged it with student data to calculate the percentages of teachers and students by race/ethnicity and gender at the state, county, district, and school levels for all Pennsylvania public schools.

[Teacher Diversity in Pennsylvania from 2013-14 to 2019-20 - Research for Action](#)

Remedies to the Diversity Mismatch Between Teachers and Students

Erie’s public schools is focused on this challenging problem. Below is a rundown of the numerous targeted initiatives being pursued to bring more teachers of color to the district’s classrooms. The initiatives are strategic with significant investment of time and resource. They are in step with best practices noted around the nation. Other districts would be well-served to do half of what Erie has underway. However, while the strategies show promise in recruitment of diverse new teachers, the numbers are modest compared to the gulf in representation. (For example, eight nonwhite teachers were hired in the 2018-19 school year through an intention process focused on diversity). The key question is: What more could be done to scale up these efforts for systems change if the community provided more support?

“Unfortunately, although more teachers of color are being recruited across the nation, the pace of increase is slow and attrition rates are high, leaving growing gaps between the demand for such teachers and the supply.” – [Teachers of Color: In High Demand and Short Supply](#)

Erie’s Public Schools Initiatives

Measuring and Investing

Acknowledging the need to address teaching diversity, soon after taking the superintendent reins in early 2017, Brian Polito hired Ken Nickson as the Erie School District’s first coordinator of educational diversity, equity, and inclusion. With diversification of teachers as an express strategy to improving learning for students of color and for closing persistent academic achievement gaps, one of Nickson’s leading responsibilities is increasing the number of minority teachers.

Nickson’s focus on teacher diversity is accelerated through facilitation of the [Goal 4 Team](#) focused on Equity, Fairness, and Justice, which is composed of 20 internal and community members. Monthly meetings include

evaluation and advancement of a specific Teacher Diversity Action Plan focused on diversity recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers.

Recruitment – Diverse Teacher Pipeline Strategies

The strategies for bringing on new teachers who represent diversity are multifold. Among innovations to make Erie competitive in hiring and successful in retention are:

- Substitute teachers are approached and cultivated to apply to teach. This includes substitutes at Erie schools and from districts within an eight-hour driving distance from Erie.
- College students from institutions near and far are targeted to become teachers, both traditional colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, and those with teaching specialties. Nickson attends career fairs in-person and virtually. Nearby western Pennsylvania colleges – Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Slippery Rock University, and Thiel College – are examples of institutions that have teaching specialties and are located close to Erie.
- Teacher Residency: Despite a past unsuccessful grant proposal to the state, Erie’s public schools continue to target local college students and degreed professionals who have passion to become teachers. About 30 local Erie professionals, many with bachelor’s and master’s degrees, along with soon-to-be college graduates are being cultivated and some have been hired through a District Education Specialist (DES) placement. This enables classroom experience in hopes the college students or local professionals will commit to obtaining a teaching certification or alternative teacher certification degree within two to five years. Past Covid-19 relief funds were used to provide these candidates with salary and benefits. Toward retention of new hires, existing teacher mentors are provided. To add to the socialization, special effort is made to ensure the DES is mentored with current or former teachers from Erie and to form a professional group of teachers for diverse educators.
- In-house students: Erie’s district is actively introducing students at all grade levels to the Human Services pathway, which emphasizes an education focus within the pathway. This includes two elective courses taught at and by faculty at Erie High School, one of the district’s two high schools. Students at Collegiate Academy, the other high school, have the ability to bus students for these courses through the district’s intercampus model. Also offered are dual enrollment courses through the [Frederick Douglass Institute at Edinboro](#). Through the Frederick Douglass Institute a teacher fellow acts as an adjunct professor from Edinboro University and teaches a college-level education class at Erie High School every semester. This free class is open to any high school student through the intercampus student model. Students who take the courses consistently can end up with 12 credits to transfer into their next post-secondary institution. The newest program, called the BORO Teach, is designed to get first generation sophomore students interested in a teaching career, commit to a specific content area to each in their junior year, and become eligible for a first-year paid for scholarship at Edinboro through their BORO-Teach Program. A [PA State System of Higher Education newsletter](#) featured this model program in stating among information, “Mr. Nickson shared, ‘We at Erie’s Public Schools are excited about our newly developed partnership with Edinboro University on the BORO-Teach program. This innovative program provides a new pathway for our 9-12th grade students to gain foundational teaching courses while still in high school at no cost, followed by one full school year of tuition-free enrollment in Edinboro’s education program. BORO-Teach reinforces the serious work, outlined in our district’s strategic plan, ensures fair and equitable treatment regarding access to educational resources, to spur each student’s growth and eliminate disproportionalities in achievement, and increasing timely access to rigorous courses, programs, and interventions...’”

Recommendations:

To raise awareness of the Erie public schools' concerted efforts on teacher diversity, the following recommendations are intended to recognize and grow appreciation for the concerted commitment while scaling up existing and new strategies.

- **Organizing:** Examine the composition of the district's existing Goal 4 and Urban STEM teams to ensure support (or empaneling of a leadership group) among Erie's leadership who command resources and political clout to help scale up success in numbers of teachers of color successfully recruited and retained. Elevate the Teacher Diversity Action Plan in step with Erie's high stakes challenge to be a leading, prosperous city. Also, raise the profile of the urgency through communications by setting goals and tracking and reporting related data together with holding press conferences to highlight wins in hiring of teachers of color.
- **Financial Incentives:** For Erie's public schools to compete in an extremely tight market for diverse teacher candidates, the Erie community could level the field by developing a pool of funding for use by the Erie district to match signing bonuses and housing incentives being provided by other school districts to new teachers. Also develop funding to subsidize the costs of teachers (including the District Education Specialists) for their education and to earn their certifications or defray debt for the same. The funding strategy should leverage local financial commitments with national and state sources through a fundraising approach to the likes of [The 1954 Project](#), the first Black-led, focused, and funded philanthropic initiative in support of K-12 education. Also on target is The Walton Family Foundation, [Teacher Diversity Initiative](#), which supports innovative strategies and programs to advance educator diversity, including expanding the pool of applicants for recruitment efforts and new fellowships, mentorships and other career advancement opportunities.
- **ARPA Funding:** Provide funding for Erie's public schools to retain additional support staff and outreach so that its Office of Educational Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion has more capacity to implement the many strategies needed to recruit and retain diverse teachers. This should begin now with use of the district's American Rescue Plan Act funds. "Districts can use federal relief money in multiple ways to help improve teacher diversity: for recruiting and hiring, setting up mentoring programs to encourage students of color to become teachers and programs between veteran and new teachers, and for improving employee benefits to boost teacher retention rates," said [Tanya Garcia, deputy secretary for higher education for the Pennsylvania Department of Education](#).
- **State Funding:** Lobby the Commonwealth to help would-be teachers of color with college expenses or debt relief. According to the [Education Commission of the States](#), in 2019, 11 states had at least one financial incentive program (scholarships, grants and/or loan repayment programs) specific to recruiting teachers of color, seven states prioritize teachers of color for already established scholarship or loan-forgiveness programs; and five states provide incentives for educator preparation programs to recruit and enroll students of color. Pennsylvania is not among them.
- **Erie County Community College:** Engage with the new community college to establish teacher education among its next core offerings. Seek to add to the existing articulation agreement between Edinboro University and the Erie County Community College (on other degree tracks) so that teaching track students can eventually transfer easily from the community college to Edinboro. As such, for example, two years at the community college would transfer to Edinboro into its teacher preparation degree programs.
- **Teacher Residency:** Seek funding to expand the recruitment of local college students, and also local professionals, who get a start on becoming teachers by way of the aforementioned District Education

Specialist placement and alternate certification degree options. Also provide funding to defray the cost of exams and to supply mentorship and tutoring in preparation for the required credentialing exams.

- [PA Department of Education - Aspiring To Educate Pilot Program](#): Seek to be added to the existing state program whereby a local community college and universities work with interested high school students to develop specific plans for each to enroll at one of the schools. Once enrolled, students would receive financial assistance for their postsecondary education through a combination of free or reduced tuition offered by the partnering institution. Students continue to be mentored as they progress through their teacher preparation programs. Upon graduating, students will be encouraged to return to Erie's Public Schools.

Erie's economy and quality of life is in the balance and affected by its teacher/student makeup. By bringing more resources to accelerate the Erie district's efforts at systems change to diversify its teaching staff, the community will reap multifold benefits in the near and long term.

As the census data show, Erie's best future is found in accentuating and building off its diversity, by embracing and adding fuel to the clear demographic trends. Growth through increasing diversity and blurring of racial and cultural lines raises appreciation for peoples' similarities, and interconnections as well as interdependence. Erie's most savvy play for prosperity is through civic strategies that focused on nurturing equitable development. More quickly closing the gap in teacher to student representation will further distinguish Erie as a place that is intent to prosper by growing more closely together.

About the Author: Court Gould, who lives in downtown Erie, served 20 years as founding executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh. He established the organization as a leader in accelerating the policy and practice of sustainable development borrowing from cities around the world regarding local strategies for Smart Growth, Regional Equitable Development, DEI, Transportation for Livable Communities, Energy Visioning and Strategy, Outdoor Recreation, Sustainable Community Development, Blight and Abandonment, Sustainable Business Strategies, and more.

After three years with the Erie Community Foundation as vice president of Community Impact, Gould is a sustainable solutions consultant and certified professional coach. His education includes an MPA from the University of Southern California, and a BA in Political Science from Tufts University. He attended the Stanford Graduate School of Business Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders and earned Professional Coach Certification from Duquesne University.