

POLICY & PRACTICE BRIEF

SUPPORTING AND SUSTAINING LEADERS OF COLOR IN MINNESOTA

January 2025

Authors

Regina Seabrook
Sara Kemper
Katie Pikel

Center for
Applied Research and
Educational Improvement

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Driven to Discover[®]

SERIES OVERVIEW

The [Minnesota Principals Survey \(MnPS\)](#) was developed to “elevate principal voice” in Minnesota education policy and better understand the working conditions, concerns, and needs of Minnesota school leaders. The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota conducted the second biennial MnPS in Fall 2023, with nearly 1,000 responses from school leaders across the state.

CAREI conducted a series of follow-up focus groups in Summer 2024 to better understand school leaders’ experiences and ideas. A total of 36 school leaders participated in one of seven focus groups on the following topics: 1) Addressing student mental health challenges; 2) Addressing staff mental health challenges; 3) Communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community; 4) Engaging families in school-level decision-making; 5) Establishing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS); 6) Leaders of color perceptions and experiences; and 7) Recent state policy changes.

Our [Policy & Practice Briefs](#) summarize survey and focus group findings on these topics, with an emphasis on what school leaders tell us they need. Please reference the companion Policy & Practice Guides, where we translate findings into research-aligned recommendations for three audiences: 1) [state policymakers and leaders](#), 2) [district leaders and school boards](#), and 3) [principal preparation and professional development providers](#).

The MnPS is made possible with the generous support of the Joyce Foundation and the Minneapolis Foundation. Please contact mnps@umn.edu with questions.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief summarizes MnPS and follow-up focus group findings about the **professional experiences of leaders of color**. First, it offers a summary of research affirming the importance of leaders of color. Second, it provides a snapshot of Minnesota’s leaders of color and the unique challenges they face using demographic and MnPS

survey data. Lastly, it summarizes what was learned from focus group participants related to the specific challenges and needs of leaders of color.

WHO ARE LEADERS OF COLOR AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

In Minnesota, about 12% of school leaders are of color (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2024) compared to 39% of students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024). Of 2023 MnPS respondents who reported their race and/or ethnicity, 10% identified as Black, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or selected two or more racial/ethnic categories—suggesting that MnPS data is highly representative of the statewide population of school leaders in terms of race/ethnicity. In this brief, we use the term “leaders of color” to refer to this group of respondents.

Research suggests that leaders of color have a positive impact on both teachers of color and students of color (Perrone, 2022). Schools with leaders of color are likely to have more teachers of color (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023; Perrone, 2022). Their leadership is associated with increased teacher of color recruitment and retention (Perrone, 2022). Having more teachers of color increases the likelihood that a student of color is taught by a same-race teacher. This matters because empirical evidence suggests that same-race student-teacher matches lead to better academic outcomes for students (Egalite, 2024; Gerhenson et al., 2022; Egalite et al., 2015), including increased graduation and college attendance rates (Gerhenson et al., 2022). In Minnesota, where students of color are far less likely to have a school leader who looks like them than their White peers, sustaining and growing the population of leaders of color is a key equity lever.

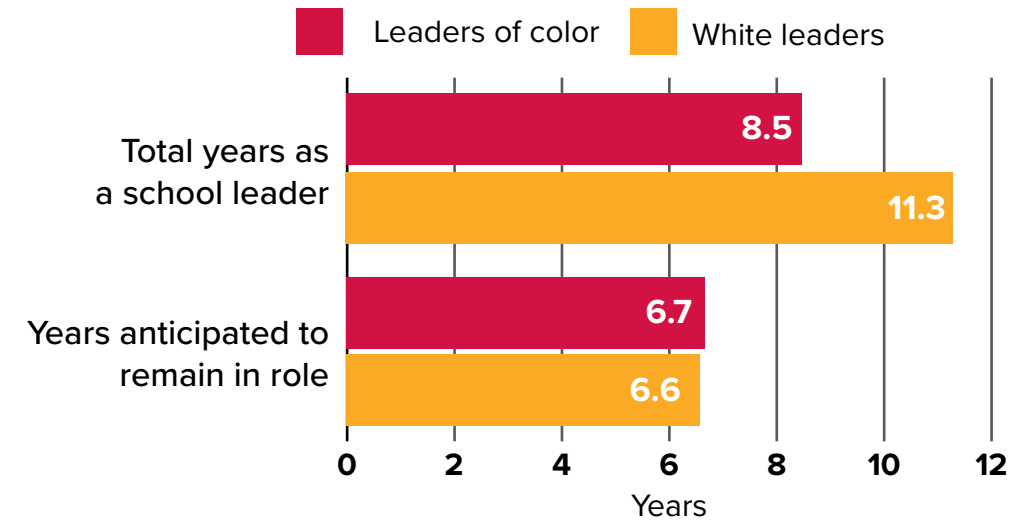
Research also suggests that leaders of color have a positive impact on teachers and students, regardless of their race. For instance, analysis of national data revealed that high schools with Black women principals, in particular, had significantly higher collective responsibility among teachers for student success and significantly

higher standardized math test scores among 9th grade students (Jang & Alexander, 2022). Finally, leaders of color, through their positive impacts on the recruitment and retention of teachers of color, help to diversify the principal pipeline (Perrone, 2022).

SURVEY SAYS: LEADERS OF COLOR HAVE LESS SCHOOL LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE, ON AVERAGE, THAN THEIR WHITE PEERS

According to the 2023 MnPS, leaders of color reported having worked as a school leader roughly three years less than White leaders, on average, which may be attributable to more intentional efforts by school districts to hire more racially diverse leaders in recent years. Despite having somewhat less experience, leaders of color intended to remain in their roles for the same length of time as White leaders, just over six and a half years (see Figure 1).

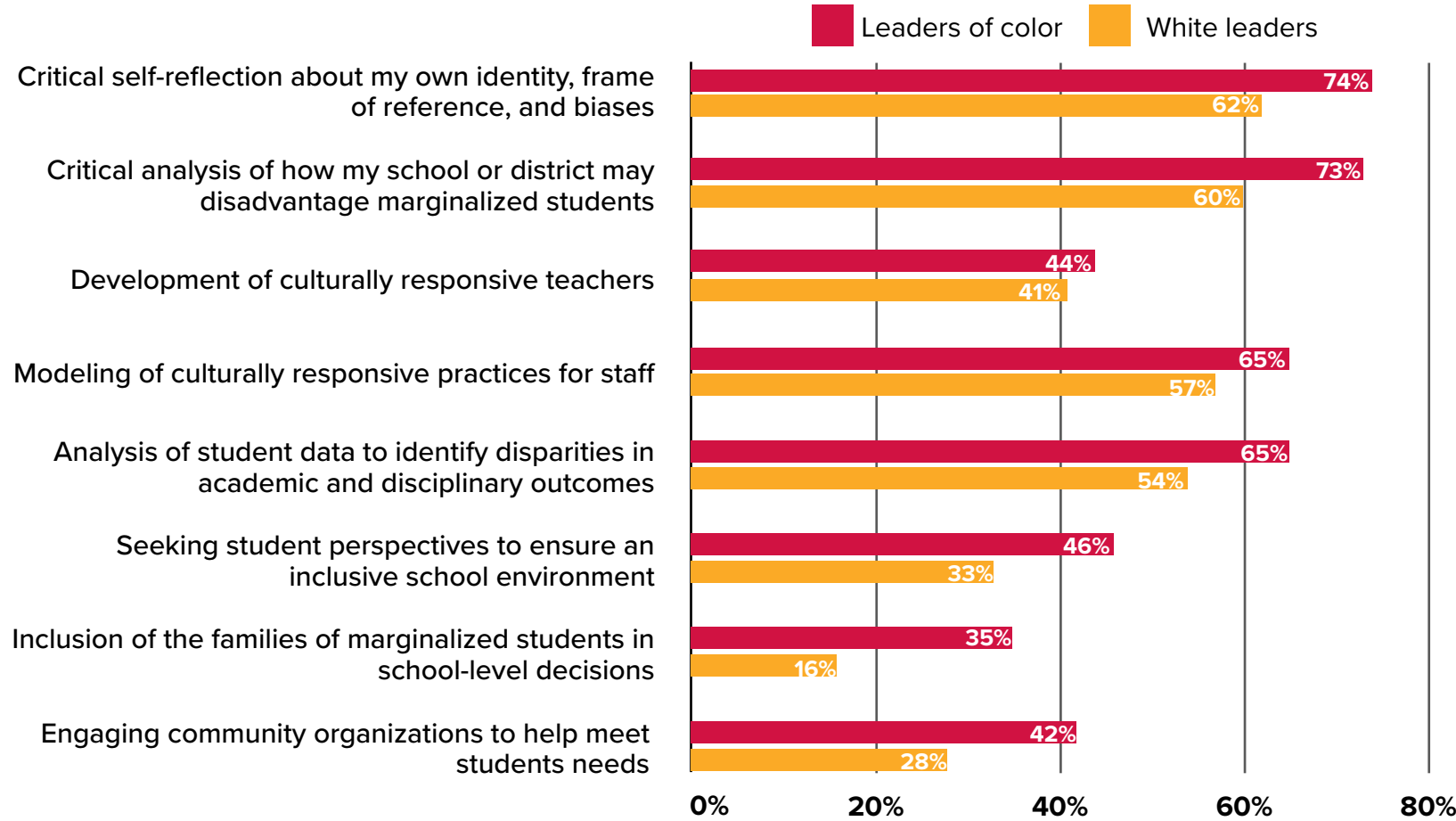
Figure 1. School leadership experience and anticipated tenure in current role, leaders of color and White principals, 2023 (MnPS)



SURVEY SAYS: LEADERS OF COLOR ARE MORE LIKELY TO PRACTICE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP (CRSL) THAN WHITE PEERS

The 2023 MnPS revealed that leaders of color reported engaging in all 8 CRSL practices asked about on the survey more often than White leaders. Figure 2 compares the percentages of school leaders reporting engaging in these 8 practices on a monthly or more basis for leaders of color and White leaders. Differences exceeded 10 percentage points in all but one practice. The *development of culturally responsive teachers* was the only practice where the difference in practice between leaders of color and White leaders was under five percentage points.

Figure 2. Percentage of school leaders engaging in 8 CRSL practices at least monthly, Leaders of color and White leaders, 2023 (MnPS)



WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A SCHOOL LEADER OF COLOR IN MINNESOTA?

Focus group participants shared that being a leader of color was rewarding yet very difficult. Although this response was in many ways similar to the responses of principals overall, leaders of color indicated that they experienced rewards and difficulties directly related to their racial/cultural/gender identities.

Individuals shared the following rewards of being a leader of color (1) closing the Black/White achievement gap at their school, (2) using their knowledge and skills to create meaningful and rigorous education experiences for students of color, and (3) being role models for students of color.

Ironically, leaders of color endured the very challenges that they are trying to mitigate for students through CRSL. Difficulties included (1) isolation, (2) feeling unheard when advocating for students in the community, (3) perceptions of being racially targeted by White staff, (4) non-supportive relationships with supervisors, (5) a lack of visibility or recognition within the wider community for their accomplishments, and (6) feeling that they were expected to fail.

My school is the only one school in [Metro area district] [where] we didn't have a Black/White gap...100% of Black kids passed [the] MCA... in reading, math, and science. When we found out, [the] joy was overwhelming, but...nobody acknowledged [it].

I feel like I'm out here by myself, trying to support my staff and support our kids, and nobody that I can relate to or be with or talk to can do that because everybody I'm reaching out to for support is not of color...

I feel that when a district is this big, how does senior leadership understand? Or have that empathy or sympathy, or understand how people of color function and work in the system?

DISTRICT-LEVEL SUPPORT FOR LEADERS OF COLOR: WHAT COULD IT LOOK LIKE?

When explicitly asked to identify ways they've perceived their district or charter leaders as supportive, some focus group participants shared that they experienced only one support, and by default: having other colleagues of color in their systems. Their recommendations, therefore, centered on district-level action to recruit and retain more teachers and leaders of color. Participants provided the following human-centered and technical recommendations for making progress toward greater racial diversity in educational leadership.

HUMAN-CENTERED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide mentorship and coaching for teachers of color to become leaders.
- Provide leaders of color with supportive supervisory relationships that foster empathy and lessen racial isolation.

And then once [teachers of color] get into an area...put them into leadership roles within their schools [and] mentor them... Like on a sports team, you have to create a leader... You have to start saying, 'What do you know about the game? How can we make this person into a leader or a captain while we're working with them?' So, in our bigger districts, if they're bringing in students or teachers and staff of color, start out right away with training them to be leaders in their districts.

Being a Black leader in [a] mostly white community and among a white staff requires district leadership to understand how those racial dynamics impact mental health and create many barriers that are both passively and aggressively placed in the way by colleagues and the community. [District] leadership can't believe their sympathy or empathy is enough, they have to act and they have to have a strategic plan to support, recruit and retain other Black leaders.

TECHNICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Examine potentially biased screening mechanisms and hiring practices.
- Increase teacher salaries to make the teaching profession more attractive.
- Provide support for new teachers in addressing challenging student behavior.

The way they recruit [and] retain leaders in general, I think something is off... There is something that is gatekeeping... kind of preventing newcomers [from coming] into the district, especially those of color and those from different backgrounds. So, at least my perception since then was that space is not for me, and people like me, and people [who] look like me.

CONCLUSION

Research suggests that leaders of color have a positive impact on student achievement and particularly the achievement of students of color, thus signaling the important role they play in schools. MnPS and focus group participants of color reported that being a school leader was rewarding, but very difficult. They expressed a commitment to the children they served. They also dealt with challenges directly related to their racial/cultural/gender identities like isolation, invisibility, and an overall lack of support from supervisors. They provided specific recommendations for district and charter systems to improve their organizational experiences and recruit and retain more leaders of color. To learn more about how to support school leaders, including leaders of color, please see our Policy & Practice Guides for [state policymakers and leaders](#), [district leaders and school boards](#), and [principal preparation and professional development providers](#).

REFERENCES

Bartanen, B., & Grissom, J. A. (2023). School principal race, teacher racial diversity, and student achievement. *Journal of Human Resources*, 58(2), 666-712.

Egalite, A. (2024). What we know about teacher race and student outcomes: A review of the evidence to date. *Education Next*, 24(1), 42-49.

Egalite, A. J., Kisida, B., & Winters, M. A. (2015). Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teachers on student achievement. *Economics of Education Review*, 45, 44-52.

Gershenson, S., Hart, C. M., Hyman, J., Lindsay, C. A., & Papageorge, N. W. (2022). The long-run impacts of same-race teachers. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 14(4), 300-342.

Jang, S. T., & Alexander, N. A. (2022). Black women principals in American secondary schools: Quantitative evidence of the link between their leadership and student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 58(3), 450-486.

Minnesota Department of Education. (2024, October 30). Minnesota report card: Demographics https://rc.education.mn.gov/#demographics/orgId--999999000000__groupType--state__year--2024__p--1

Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board. (2024, April 2). Minnesota administrative licensure data, 2023-2024 school year [public data request].

Perrone, F. (2022). Why a Diverse Leadership Pipeline Matters: The Empirical Evidence. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 21(1), 5–18.

Center for
Applied Research and
Educational Improvement

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Driven to Discover®

© 2025 Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved. The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity educator and employer. This publication is available in alternative formats upon request. Direct such requests to carei@umn.edu.



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION + HUMAN DEVELOPMENT