

Building diversity into our workforce strategies

Discussion paper

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**Confederation
of School Trusts**

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In diversity there is beauty and there is strength.
 – Maya Angelou

Teams that are diverse in personal experiences tend to have a richer, more nuanced understanding of their fellow human beings. They have a wider array of perspectives – fewer blind spots. They bridge between frames of reference.
 – Matthew Syed, Rebel Ideas



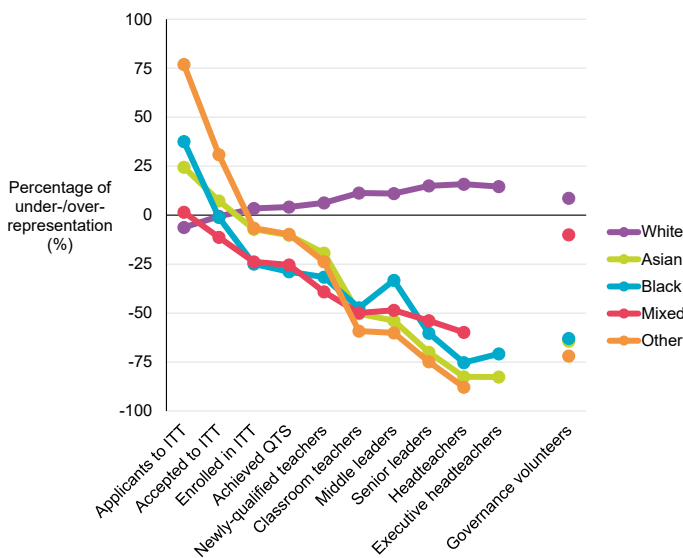
Introduction

Ethnic diversity in schools in England remains a challenge for all of us. While society has continued to grow in diversity, and despite best intentions of those working in education, the diversity of staff working in the sector continues to lag behind the communities it serves.

The numbers show this problem quite starkly. The 2021 Census reported that in England, 81% of the population identified as white (including white gypsy or Roma).

Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that compared to this, all ethnic groups other than white were under-represented in all stages of the teaching profession.

The exception is initial teacher training, where people from a range of backgrounds are interested in joining the teaching profession and apply in healthy numbers¹. However, their numbers drop off at each stage, from acceptance to enrolment to gaining qualified teacher status. By this point – and at every level subsequently – there is substantial under-representation of non-white groups:



Source: NFER analysis of data from⁷: UCAS; TF; ITT-PP; SWC; and NGA. Population estimates are based on 2011 National Census data for England, projected forwards to 2021.

¹ NFER (2022), [Racial Equality in the Teacher Workforce](#)

NFER found that some 60% of English schools had all white teaching staff; 86% had all white senior leadership teams; and 96% of headteachers were white. Workforce figures are not collected in the same way for trust chief executives and leadership teams, but given that headship is a typical career path for these roles it seems unlikely there would be a significant shift from this general picture.

The gap between staffing and the communities they serve is even more stark when compared to the percentage of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds in our schools. In 2022-23, 35.7% of pupils in our schools were from minority ethnic backgrounds.²

There are a number of issues this poses for us as a sector and as a profession. Perhaps most profoundly, the fact that our workforce does not represent our richly diverse population. The gap between ITT applications and career progression suggests we may be missing out on a substantial talent pool. Our pupils are not all seeing people like them in the classroom, and junior staff are not seeing people like them amongst leadership or in the trust boardroom. It is hard to feel a sense of belonging when you feel like a stranger.

This is not for want of awareness or desire for change in the sector. Research by Edurio in 2021, interviewing some 16,500 school and trust staff, found that 80% of staff felt their workplace was positively committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).³ The same research found that 90% of those in leadership roles felt their workplace was committed to promoting EDI.

However, leaders' belief that they are committed to promoting EDI does not always accord with the reality in practice, a well-known phenomenon referred to as the 'thermocline of truth', where leaders tend to have a more optimistic view than those on the ground.⁴ In Edurio's report, there is a distinct gap between leadership and minority ethnic staff, where the figure drops to 69%. And four times as many minority ethnic staff (8%) feel that their workplace is not committed to EDI as white British / Irish staff (2%).

Clearly staff and leaders want to do better, but the statistics suggest this is challenging. NFER first reported on racial equality in the teacher workforce in May 2022.⁵ In January 2024, NFER published a follow-up report calling for action and providing promising approaches to improving ethnic diversity in the teaching workforce.⁶

2 Office for National Statistics (2023), [Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#)

3 Edurio (2021), [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Among School Staff: Staff Experience in Schools and Multi-Academy Trusts](#)

4 Bruce F. Webster (2008), [The Wetware Crisis: the Thermocline of Truth](#)

5 NFER (2022), [Racial Equality in the Teacher Workforce](#)

6 NFER (2024), [Ethnic diversity in the teaching workforce: evidence review](#)

System leadership

School trusts now hold the majority of schools in England. We cannot wait for policy makers to act. Instead, we must exercise system leadership. Borrowing from one of the five principles for inclusion set out by Ben Newmark and Tom Rees, we need 'action at all levels'.⁷

The recruitment and retention crisis may provide an opportunity for us to think differently about pathways into teaching and the wider workforce. This is important because we want to build forward thinking and effective organisations that equip our children to succeed in today's increasingly culturally interconnected world.

Our discussion paper is informed by NFER's research and by practical feedback from CST member trusts and other sector colleagues about their approaches and challenges. It seeks to offer some concrete steps that school trusts can make to take real ownership of encouraging diversity, and to encourage innovative thought about new approaches to recruitment, retention and progression and, importantly, governance.

The approaches discussed below focus primarily on ethnicity, but we recognise this is only one aspect of diversity and inclusion. School trusts have a legal and moral duty to ensure staff and pupils of all backgrounds can flourish.

⁷ Newmark, B and Rees, T (2023) [Five Principles for inclusion](#), Confederation of School Trusts



Recruitment

Attraction

How do we make the teaching profession more attractive to the right candidates (without higher pay) and ensure supportive application processes?

Discussions with CST member trusts and sector colleagues found that if there was a choice to be made about where to invest resources, attraction is the top priority. Various approaches can be taken to reach a wider pool of candidates.

Potential approaches for trusts:

- **Ethnically diverse candidates need to 'see it to believe it'.** Our group felt that teaching was still very much seen as the domain of white, middle-class individuals. Organisations could raise the profile of ethnically diverse role models in the sector by celebrating them. They could include more ethnically diverse individuals in marketing materials and widen social media campaigns to platforms used by more diverse communities. Video clips of ethnically diverse teachers describing their positive experiences in schools could be a highly effective marketing tool – our group agreed that lived experiences speak louder than generic advertising and video has a greater impact than words.
- **Focus on moral purpose.** Our group noted that many ethnically diverse candidates are motivated by moral purpose and go into teaching to serve their communities. This should be a point of focus in marketing campaigns. The sector needs to highlight the positive and personally rewarding aspects of teaching rather than simply airing the negative in the press and elsewhere. Ethnically diverse ITT candidates prefer being placed in schools within or near their communities – this should be facilitated.
- **Word of mouth and role-modelling are powerful drivers.** Our group felt that ethnically diverse candidates are far more likely to apply if they know 'someone like them' who has successfully navigated the system. We need to be creating networks of evangelists. In addition, schools that are seen as active civic institutions in their communities will attract the next generation of teaching candidates. Routinely sending school staff out into the community provides real life role models for potential future teaching candidates in the community. Dixons Academies Trust does this by asking staff to 'walk the streets' around their schools.

Thoughts for the DfE:

- **Bursaries are effective in attracting a wider pool.** Discussion with member trusts suggests that bursaries are helpful in removing financial barriers to getting into teaching. These should be retained and, where possible, expanded.



Application process

Despite the fact that ethnically diverse groups are over-represented amongst applicants for ITT programmes, few are accepted. Our group identified several potential contributing factors relating to application and interview processes, as well as different approaches.

Potential next steps for trusts:

- **We need to be less precisionist.** By expecting slick, flawless and beautifully-written applications, our group felt we are missing out on candidates that bring a range of other relational skills and life experiences that could be the key to connecting with pupils. It also potentially excludes candidates who might lack writing skills but bring expertise in subjects where we have the largest shortfalls (Physics and Maths).
- **Blind applications?** Blind applications focus attention on the candidate's education, experience and skills. Organisations like Teach First have used them to good effect. However, there are a few considerations: First, this assumes unconscious bias and may send a message to candidates that the organisation does not trust its own employees not to be racially biased during the application process. Second, blind applications may be inhibiting for organisations that have concluded that positive promotion of ethnic diversity amongst their workforce is a priority. This does not mean lowering standards, but being less precisionist (see above).
- **Train everyone, at every level.** Racism awareness training for all involved – teams that answer the phone, respond to emails, meet people face-to-face, who conduct DBS checks – can reduce the likelihood of candidates having a negative and intimidating experience from the start. The difference between anti-racism and non-racism training was highlighted by our group. Training for interviewers is also key – interview processes are often devolved further down the organisation and this has implications for the perception of candidates and the potential for bias.

Thoughts for the DfE:

- Investigate the causes of **low ITT acceptance and progression rates** for applicants of colour and use relevant strategies to address them. With teaching school hubs, provide data around cold/blind spots where schools are not interacting with ITT and contrast that with schools that do it well.
- Degree apprenticeships being launched in 2025 are welcome. The DfE is encouraged to consider further **alternative pathways into teaching**, especially for more mature candidates.



Retention

Why do people leave and what would make them stay?

NFER's report found that retention is significantly lower for teachers of colour than their white peers. In addition to high workload (which they found to be higher for ethnically diverse teachers for a host of reasons), they leave because of 1) overt and covert racial discrimination from staff, pupils and parents, 2) disillusionment with their ability to make a difference for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds and 3) a lack of opportunities for progression.

But there is no less enthusiasm for the role. Research by Edurio found that 68% of Asian/Asian British staff report feeling excited by the work that they do very or quite often and only 6% report rarely feeling excited. Conversely, white British/Irish staff have the smallest proportion feeling excited by the work they do: 58% feeling excited very or quite often and 8% rarely feeling excited.⁸

Potential next steps for trusts:

- **Change the culture.** We know that creating a sense of belonging in our schools is necessary for our pupils, but it also reaps benefits for retaining staff. True inclusion and belonging is only achieved when staff feel comfortable enough to bring their true selves to work.
- **The 'good egg' test.** Sufian Sadiq at Chiltern Learning Trust has coined this approach, which asks school and trust leaders to consider in every interaction, 'Am I being a good egg?' Leaders undoubtedly feel immense pressures to perform and their roles can be stressful and demanding. Showing staff that we care about them as humans first and employees second creates a supportive, collaborative workplace.
- **Induction, induction, induction.** A new teacher's first days in schools can be the defining ones. A meaningful and welcoming induction facilitates the sense of belonging and can have lasting positive effects.
- **Flexible working may need to become the new norm.** We are in a new reality post-Covid. For younger generations in particular, a lasting legacy of the pandemic is a heightened desire to work to live, rather than live to work. Flexible working⁹ might mean staggered hours, compressed hours or annualised hours, which means the rigidity of timetables may need to change. In-year flexibility might include personal or family days off, lieu time, and remote working on some days. Dixons and others are experimenting with nine-day fortnights through creative timetabling and reimagining the workday for teachers to allow them to end their days at a more reasonable hour.¹⁰
- **Mentors and supportive networks foster confidence.** Effective mentorship and networking opportunities are important to ensure a sense of belonging is instilled. We can connect ethnically diverse staff with supportive organisations and people, to ensure they stay in the sector and thrive.
- **Train everyone, at every level.** Racism awareness training throughout an organisation is key to ensuring that ethnically diverse staff do not experience the 'added workload'. Early career experiences – such as being told to 'lose their accent' or dress differently or having challenging interactions with parents or other staff – routinely leads ethnically diverse teachers to step out of the profession early.

⁸ Edurio (2024), [Staff Wellbeing in Academies: Understanding the Challenges Faced by Teachers and Education Staff](#)

⁹ DfE (2024), [Flexible working in schools](#)

¹⁰ Dixons Academies Trust (2024), [Flexible working](#)

Progression

What are specific barriers to progression and how do we overcome them (without additional resources)?

Staff leave for a variety of reasons, but some of the most common are:

1. The lack of flexibility of school roles and the inability to accommodate personal and family lives
2. An inability to clearly see a pathway to leadership
3. Unappealing and individualistic professional development
4. The role of racism in lack of promotion.

Our group discussed some potential solutions.

Potential next steps for trusts:

- **Accommodate staff with families.**

Women between the ages of 30–39 leave the education workforce at a faster rate than any other group, suggesting a dire need for more flexible working arrangements and creative alternatives such as job sharing. Nadine Bernard, Headteacher at Van Gogh Primary, has achieved minimal staff turnover by creating an environment where staff are supported with their personal and family commitments. There is no clock watching and staff happily cover each other when required. The school feels like a second home and staff's children are allowed into the office as required to accommodate schedules. Leaders can also model a good work-life balance, by being open and transparent about their own family commitments.

- **Career progression for part-time staff.** Some staff become disillusioned with the sector upon returning to work part-time after maternity leave and finding their progression opportunities curtailed. Anecdotally, part-time staff may find themselves passed over for promotion and denied the opportunity to take on or maintain a Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR), which is often a stepping stone to leadership. Ensuring equal opportunities for part-time staff will secure greater retention of more diverse and experienced staff and encourage their progression into leadership roles.

- **Help people see their journey.** Career pathways should be outlined from the start. Being explicit with ethnically diverse staff about their journey and specific milestones is essential to ensuring they can imagine pathways into leadership.

- **Provide potential leaders with enhanced leadership skills.** As the largest provider of NPQs nationally, Chiltern Learning Trust have introduced expert-led modules that enhance practical school leadership skills around areas like effective timetabling, balancing a school budget and managing a school estate.



All potential leaders should also be encouraged to become governors (e.g. at their children's schools) to familiarise them with the nuances of governance. This has the added advantage of filling governor vacancies at other schools and providing educational expertise on boards.

- **Make CPD a social event.** Continuing professional development (CPD) needs a rebrand. At Chiltern Learning Trust, CPD is hosted at family-friendly venues such as children's petting farms and staff can bring children. It can happen at jazz clubs or by inviting entertaining speakers. Eating together is bonding, so it can happen as a 'coffee & croissant' or 'chai & chat' event or a 'leadership supper'. A key aspect is bringing different staff together for CPD and move away from an individualist approach. This leads to a sense of belonging and community rather than just a CPD event.
- **Diversity data.** Larger trusts and local authorities, where there are sufficient numbers to make data meaningful, should commit to publishing institutional data to understand gaps in progression, monitor progress and share good practice.
- **Train everyone, at every level.** To counteract racism, Dixons has pledged to provide 100% of staff and new starters with an hour of high-quality anti-racism training annually. Importantly, the board, executives and principals receive EDI training to lead the development and implementation of an EDI Big Move.

Thoughts for the DfE:

- Taking a cue from the [NHS's Long Term Workforce Plan](#), the DfE is encouraged to take a long-term view of the education workforce and develop a comprehensive workforce plan, in recognition of the fact that schools and trusts are anchor institutions whose long-term sustainability is tied to the wellbeing of the communities they serve.

Governance

Any discussion of addressing ethnic diversity in the school trust workforce would be incomplete without a discussion of governance. Our group concluded that strategic leadership from decision makers within organisations is crucial to promoting the action required to make progress towards achieving meaningful change. We asked the following questions.

Monitoring, reporting and data – do targets work?

Our group concluded that targets can work if there is a clear sense of the current picture at your trust and clear targets with realistic timescales, based on accurate data and benchmarking. Targets can also have the added benefit of maintaining a focus on the topic. However, our group cautioned that there are always pitfalls to simplistic quantitative data targets and true inclusion is highly qualitative.

Potential next steps for trust boards

- **Build diversity into strategic plans.** Boards can encourage diversity by ensuring it is included in strategic plans, which are then actioned and monitored. Dixons' EDI strategy¹¹ notes that roughly 28% of its teachers are currently from ethnic minority backgrounds. This drops significantly at middle leader (16%) and SLT (20%) level. At principal level representation reduces further. By 2025, their aim is for the percentage of ethnic minority staff at middle leader and senior level to be equal to that at teacher level.
- **Build diversity into performance management.** Boards build diversity into the performance management of school and trust leaders. Once realistic targets are set, leaders can be held to account for their efforts to achieve them.

Boards themselves are not diverse – is this a hindrance?

In a word, yes. A non-diverse board will not necessarily recognise and prioritise the issue of diversity. At our group's discussion, GovernorHub shared its ground-breaking dataset on the lack of diversity on governing boards in England, confirming the scale of the problem. The group then discussed some approaches.

Potential next steps for trust boards

- **Address board culture.** The culture of any organisation is led and modelled by the board. New recruits should be recruited with a view to being a 'culture-add' rather than simply 'culture-aligned'.
- **Create a pipeline of diverse talent for boards.** The Housing Diversity Network takes a two-pronged approach to fostering diversity on housing boards: 1) a two-year development scheme for trainees from 'non-traditional' backgrounds to create a pipeline of housing board talent and 2) training and mentoring programmes for housing leaders on how to run inclusive organisations.
- **Make governance visible and demystify it.** Boards that make their work visible to the communities they serve have a better chance of encouraging a new and more diverse pipeline of candidates. If teachers in a trust cannot name anyone on the board of trustees, it is an indication that the board is not sufficiently communicating its work to all stakeholders.
- **Use local tiers to diversify governance and build community connections.** Trusts that move away from traditional local governance models (focused on compliance, skill-sets and monitoring) and towards a community-centred

¹¹ Dixons Academies Trust (2024), [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy](#)

approach focused on partnerships with local stakeholders will attract more diverse candidates. Trusts should be seeking out community champions who may not necessarily have traditional 'governors' skills but have deep knowledge about the community.

- **Qualitative board self-assessment.** True board inclusivity can only be measured through qualitative criteria rather than quantitative data. Skills audits focused on finance, HR and legal skills miss the most important skills of all – emotional intelligence and cognitive diversity. Recruiting for these types of skills would naturally expand the pool of board members, as well as improving the effectiveness of boards. Inductions that incorporate the 'how' as well as the 'what' will cement cultural shifts (e.g. through the *Academy Trust Governance Code* rather than just the *Academy Trust Handbook*).
- **Co-opted committee members.** Creative use of co-opted committee members provides opportunities for more diverse individuals to get involved and lend their expertise, skills and knowledge, without the full commitment required to be a board trustee which can be limiting. However, the group cautioned that committees should always be chaired by a trustee and, to retain collective responsibility, duly report back to the board.
- **More accessible meeting times and conditions.** Trusts need to market and reframe governance to attract a younger, more diverse cohort, as well as those with family or work obligations. There are economic challenges to attending meetings during the day, while at the same time there are family-related challenges to attending meetings in the evening. Excessively lengthy meetings are off-putting and require an unreasonable time commitment. Shorter meetings are more manageable and encourage focus and efficiency.
- **Board diversity data.** The DfE has encouraged boards to publish diversity data, but there are some challenges around gathering accurate data, including the fact that diversity data often cannot be published due to data protection concerns. Again, larger trusts and local authorities can attempt to publish anonymised diversity data to understand gaps, but our group cautioned that quantitative data alone may not paint an accurate picture.

Thoughts for the DfE:

- Inflexibility at work can be a barrier to more diverse candidates for school governance. Employers are currently required to allow employees reasonable time off for certain public duties, such as serving as a juror and magistrate. The DfE can **encourage a wider pool in school governance by mandating time** for this important public duty.

Conclusion

The recruitment and retention challenge in our sector will not be quick fix. But it cannot be addressed without reference to the lack of diversity. The two are interlinked and if we focus our efforts on building diversity into the workforce strategy for our sector, we will address the shortage of talent in our sector and become more effective, ethical, and accountable as strong and sustainable civic institutions anchored in our communities.

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