

Salem-Keizer's increasingly diverse students continue to be taught primarily by white teachers

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI
Of the Keizertimes

Data released last week by the Oregon Department of Education for the 2020-21 school year showed the gap between the amount of students and teachers of color has continued to grow in the Salem-Keizer School District.

While 58% of the district is made up of students of color, only 13% of teachers and administrators are people of color—a gap that has grown by 5% since the 2017-18 school year.

The discrepancy in representation between Hispanic students and teachers is especially large. While Hispanic students make up the largest demographic in the district at 45%, only 10% of all teachers and administrators are Hispanic.

“We have a long way to go. When you really look at the percentages of our student

body versus the percentage of our employees, it's a continuing issue and we continue to battle it every day,” said Brian Turner, the director of staffing and recruiting for the Salem-Keizer district.

According to the 2020 Oregon Educator Equity Report, matching students of color with teachers of the same race or ethnicity not only has positive academic and social impacts for those students but it also leads to improved perceptions of teachers of color for white students, which is “a key facet in developing anti-racism in today's schools and society.”

Turner, who is Black, talked about how representation impacted his own journey towards becoming a teacher.

“One of the most influential African-Americans in my life was a fourth grade teacher, Mr. Brown. He instilled in me that I could be something,” said Turner. “I didn't



Students and a teacher at Weddle Elementary School in Keizer. FILE PHOTO, Keizertimes

come from a whole lot, but with him being there and modeling that, ‘Hey, education could be something for you and you can have a good life.’”

Representation in Keizer's elementary, middle and high schools is even worse than the overall district's. Of the 300 teachers in Keizer's 11 schools, only 24 are not white. Two schools, Gubser Elementary and Optimum Learning Environment Charter School, have all-white teaching staffs.

Additionally, of the 300 teachers, only one teacher is Asian and no teachers are Black.

“Pointing to the data, have we made all the progress we'd want? Of course not. If we could wave a magic wand and it'd be proportional to the amount of students we have in the district, that would be great,” said Larry Ramirez, the district's director of high school education. “For now, obviously we continue to recruit and we're just honestly having difficulty getting a full staff no matter what their background is.”

At McNary High School, the largest school in Keizer with 1,811

students, 38% of students are Hispanic compared to only 5% of teachers. That means for approximately every 170 Hispanic students there is one Hispanic teacher at the school.

McNary Principal Erik Jespersen said he knows that McNary has struggled in years past to diversify their staff but that they are continuing to try to improve representation among teachers and administrators.

“When you post a (teaching) position, you're going to cast this net out and you're going to get applicants that apply,” said Jespersen. “Sometimes you're able to hire diverse, amazing candidates. And sometimes those candidates may not be there. So the other piece of that is if you're really committed to diversifying your staff, you have to think outside the box.”

One strategy McNary is using, according to Jespersen, is hiring a more diverse classified staff. Classified staff includes positions such as office staff, custodial, transportation, educational assistance and other positions that don't require the certification that teachers do.

The school then works with classified staff towards becoming certified and, hopefully, a teacher at McNary.

“When (classified staff) say they want to be a teacher or something like that, that's a bonus for us because we're hoping that we can get them into our system and then support them in a professional goal,” said Jespersen.

Using this strategy, Jespersen said the school hired three of their own classified staff members as teachers last year. All three of those hires were teachers of color.

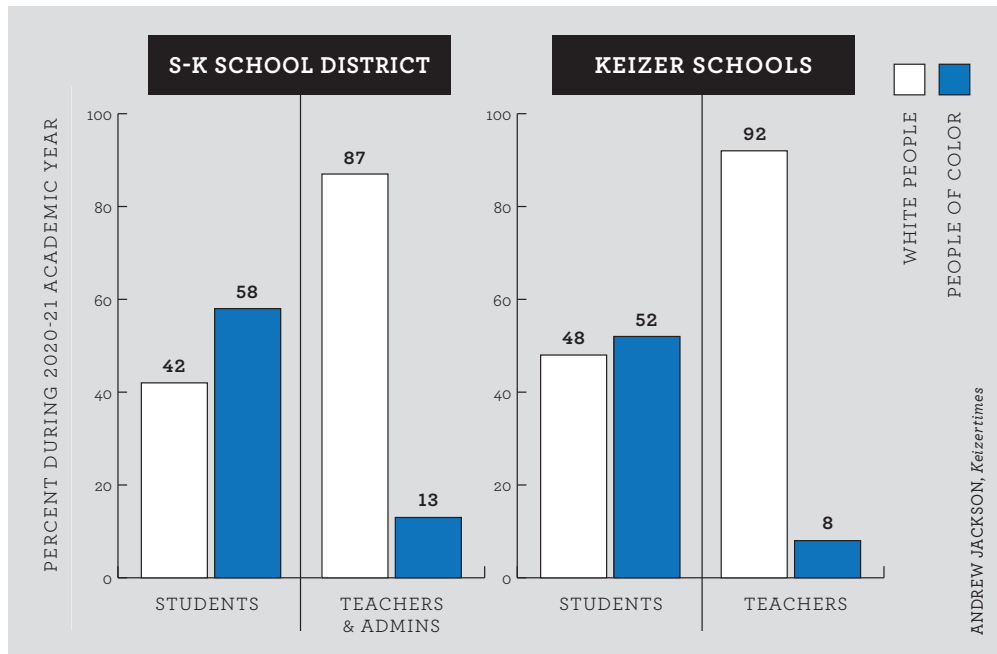
Turner said recruiting a more diverse staff within schools is difficult in a state that is as white as Oregon. To combat this, according to Turner, the district will often recruit from outside Oregon, in states such as California, to create a more diverse pool of applicants.

While this may initially increase diversity, Turner said it can be difficult to keep these people of color around at schools located in predominantly white towns.

“Where do you receive your culture and your cultural norms in a city that's predominantly white? That's probably one of the biggest challenges for anybody, any minority that moves to an area where they become a micro-set, like one or 2% of the population,” said Turner.

Turner related his own story of being recruited to work in Oregon from out of the state.

“I was 30% of the population and then I became 2% of the population. It takes a different kind of resolve to stay and be fixated on change to make it better for folks that look like yourself,” Turner said.



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