

HBCUs produce nearly half of all Black teachers in the U.S.

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BOWIE, Md. (AP) — Surrounded by kindergarteners, Lana Scott held up a card with upper and lower case Ys, dotted with pictures of words that started with that letter: Yo-yo. Yak. Yacht.

“What sound does Y make?” Scott asked a boy. Head down, he mumbled: “Yuh.” Instead of moving on, she gave him a nudge.

“Say it confident, because you know it,” she urged. “Be confident in your answer because you know it.”

He sat up and sounded it out again, louder this time. Scott smiled and turned her attention to the other kids in her group session.

As a student teacher from Bowie State University, a historically Black institution, Scott said she has learned to build deep connections with students. The school, Whitehall Elementary, is filled with teachers and administrators who graduated from Bowie State. Classrooms refer to themselves as families, and posters on the wall ask children to reflect on what makes a good classmate.

HBCUs play an outsize role in producing teachers of color in the U.S., where only 7 percent of teachers are Black, compared with 15 percent of students. Of all Black teachers nationwide, nearly half are graduates of an HBCU.

Having teachers who look like them is crucial for young Americans. Research has found Black students who have at least one Black teacher are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to be suspended or expelled. Some new research suggests the training found at HBCUs may be part of what makes an effective teacher.

A recent study of elementary school students in North Carolina found Black students performed better in math when taught by an HBCU-educated teacher.

“There’s something to be said for the environment that’s cultivated, the way they connect with their students, the inspiration, the vulnerability that they may have with their students,” said Stanford University graduate student Lavar Edmonds, who conducted the study.

In Edmonds’ study, the teacher’s race did not have an impact on student outcomes, but their training did. For Black students, Black and white HBCU-trained teachers were more effective than their non-HBCU-trained counterparts.

HBCUs also have received recognition as key players in solving teacher shortages around the country. The U.S. Department of Education this month announced \$18 million in awards for minority-serving institutions including HBCUs, highlighting the role they play in building a more diverse teaching force.

At Bowie State faculty, students and alumni said their training as teachers centered the importance of building a strong sense of community and connecting with their students as individuals.

“It’s making sure that your students just feel safe at school,” Scott said.

The training places an emphasis on culturally responsive teaching, said Rhonda Jeter, dean of the school’s College of Education.

“People are doing the research to validate what we’ve been doing all along,” Jeter said. “When they go to places where students are students of color, I don’t think they’re uncomfortable.”

The tradition of training educators at HBCUs dates back to before the Civil War.

Founded in the 1800s to educate Black Americans who were not allowed to study at other colleges, many HBCUs first existed in some form as “normal schools,” or training programs for teachers.

Training at HBCUs provides an immersion in Black culture and an understanding that teachers can bring that to classrooms, said Sekou Biddle, a vice president at the United Negro College Fund. Students at HBCUs, he said, also learn about “the history of Black excellence in America that I think oftentimes gets missed in a lot of other environments.”

A Bowie State graduate who now teaches at Whitehall Elementary, Christine Ramroop said hearing from her classmates about their experiences as students — including times where they did not feel supported, respected or understood by their teachers — made her more aware of the impact she could have in the classroom.

“Going to an HBCU, I heard a lot of stories about so many teachers that didn’t feel seen in the classroom as students,” Ramroop said. “It really kind of shapes your mind as a teacher.”

Ramroop said that her time at Bowie emphasized the importance of finding a connection with each student and making them feel at home.

As her students walk into her class at Whitehall each day, they pass a poster hung by the doorframe. Under the title “23 reasons why Ms. Ramroop is a grateful teacher,” each child’s name is listed next to a specific quality.

Lionel’s big smile. Aiden’s sweet personality. Nadia’s leadership.

On a recent Tuesday, Ramroop gathered her first-graders onto a carpet. Hands reached up to volunteer for the chance to answer the vocabulary warm-up exercises. Ramroop was quick to praise the ones who got it right and gentle in correcting the ones who got it wrong.

“Give yourself a round of applause,” Ramroop said. “Tell your partner you did a good job. Now point to another friend and say, ‘You did a good job.’”

Around her, little voices echoed, “You did a good job. You did a good job. We did a good job!”

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