Ethnic disparities in the teacher workforce in England

A summary for school leaders

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Research in partnership with Mission 44, a foundation set up by Sir Lewis Hamilton to drive change so that all young people can thrive in education and access great careers in STEM.

Our classrooms are diverse, but our teaching staff often aren't. Improving diversity in the teaching workforce isn't just about fairness - it can also support recruitment, retention and pupil outcomes.

Previous research found that 69% of primary schools and 18% of secondary schools had all-white teaching staff in 2020/21. The figure rises to 86% for senior leadership teams - despite more than a third of pupils in England being from ethnic minority backgrounds.

New research, funded by Mission 44 and carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), explored the barriers and enablers at three key career stages: entering teacher training, progressing to leadership, and staying in the profession. The findings draw on national datasets and focus groups with initial teacher training (ITT) providers and school leaders.

Data from NFER's 'Racial equality in the teacher workforce' report, May 2022

Percentage of schools with all-white staff
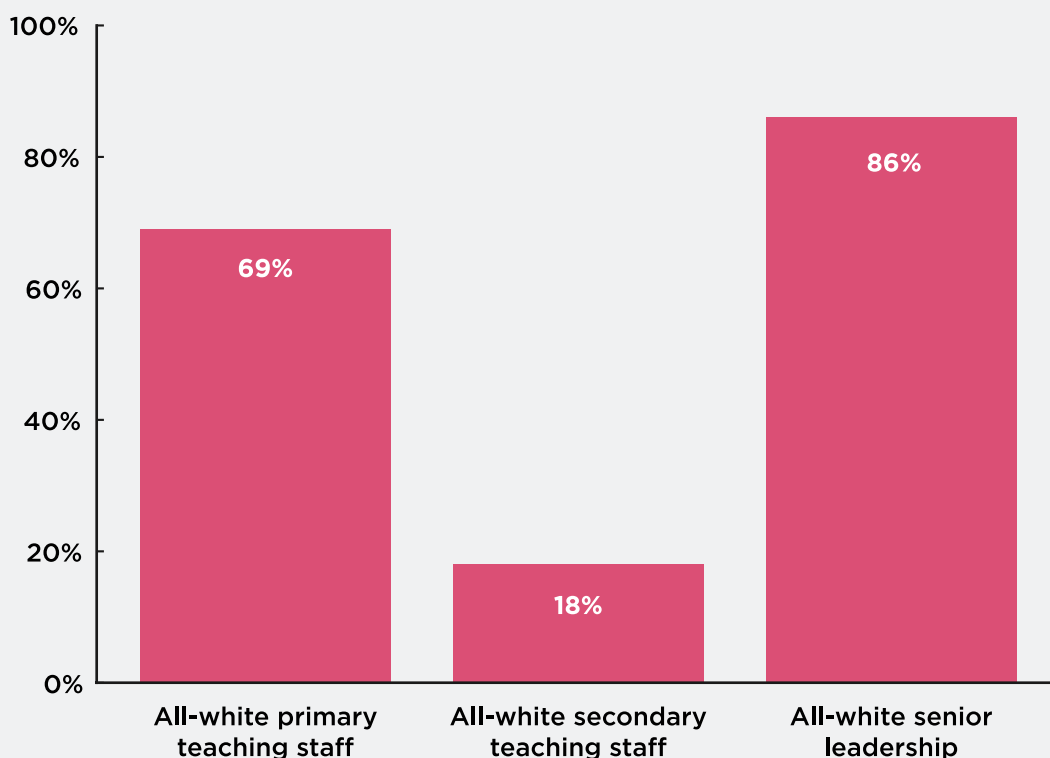
What helps teachers stay and progress?

Teachers from Asian and black ethnic backgrounds are more likely than white teachers to say they want to apply for promotion, but they don't always get the opportunity to do so.

This research suggests that many are held back by limited access to professional development, leadership opportunities, or fair selection processes. Others report feeling undervalued or unsupported in their schools.

Our 2025 report identified that:

Teachers from a black ethnic background were 17 percentage points more likely than white teachers to report an intention to apply for promotion*
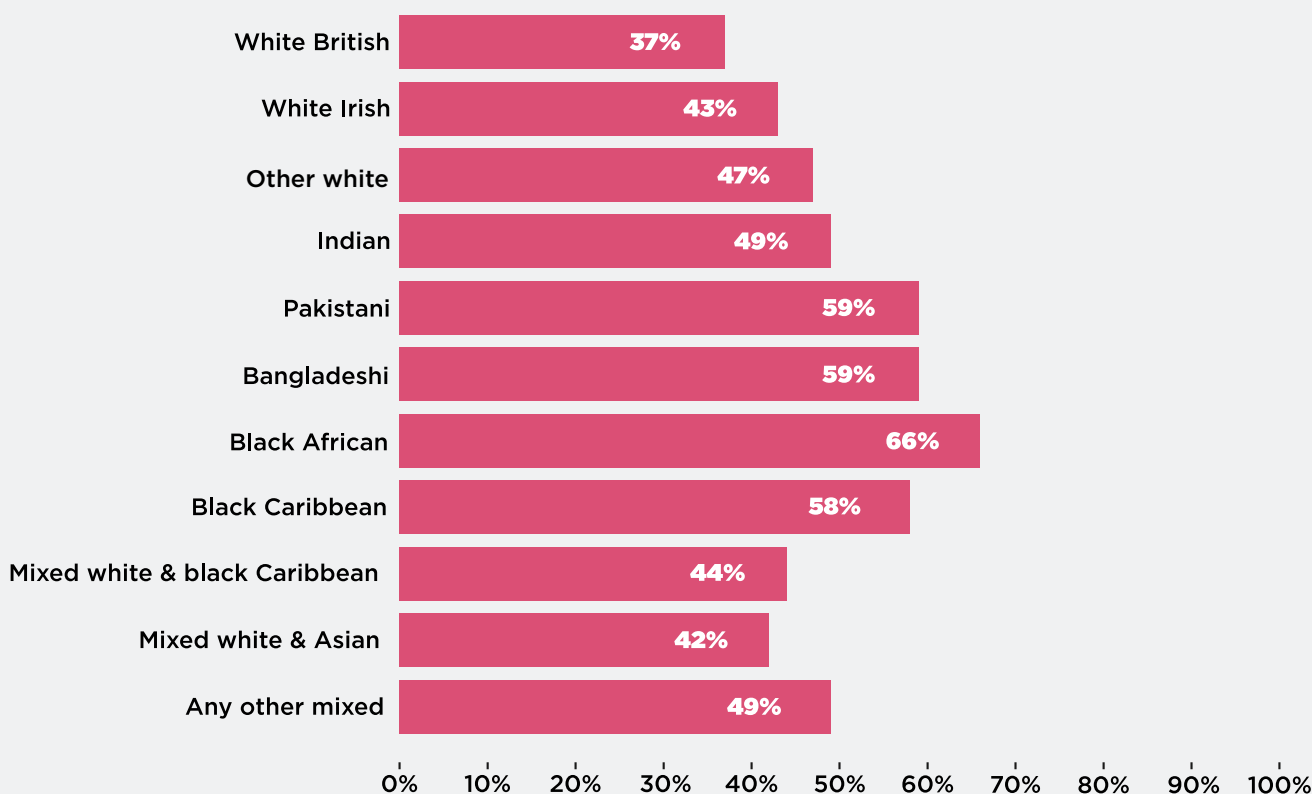
12% of all teachers report experiencing bullying or harassment

Teachers from black ethnic backgrounds are more likely to report they feel unsupported or overlooked

In the next 12 months, are you considering applying for promotion (including applying for upper pay range)?

Source: NFER analysis of DfE Apply data (2022/23 – 2023/24)

Ethnicity	Percentage
White British	37%
White Irish	43%
Other white	47%
Indian	49%
Pakistani	59%
Bangladeshi	59%
Black African	66%
Black Caribbean	58%
Mixed white & black Caribbean	44%
Mixed white & Asian	42%
Any other mixed	49%

*Statistical controls: This means the researchers accounted for factors like degree class, age, and socioeconomic background. By doing so, they could better understand whether disparities were due to individual characteristics or other underlying issues in the system.

What school leaders can do

School and trust leaders play a key role in creating inclusive, supportive workplaces. The research highlights actions that can make a difference - small changes that build a more equitable culture over time. We acknowledge that many schools will already have some of these actions in place.

Actions to consider:

Support diverse staff into leadership roles

Encourage progression through mentoring, coaching, and shadowing schemes. Where possible, provide funded time for development, not just voluntary participation. Focus group participants noted these opportunities were not always fairly distributed or advertised.

Review recruitment and promotion processes for bias and transparency

Evaluate job descriptions, interview criteria and panel composition. Some schools introduced structured scoring and moderation to reduce subjectivity and better support diverse candidates. Bias often "creeps in" even in well-meaning environments.

Offer tailored CPD and coaching to support progression

Teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds may face additional barriers — including being steered into roles with limited progression routes (e.g. behaviour or pastoral care). CPD should align with leadership goals and be supported by line managers.

Create safe ways for staff to report bullying or discrimination

12% of all teachers report experiencing bullying or harassment. The report stresses the importance of clear, trusted systems for reporting and follow-up. In inclusive environments, these issues are addressed — not ignored or minimised.

"We coach people... we want them to shine. There's a clear structure for progression, and people can coach others."
School leader

"We talk a lot about representation, but when the opportunity comes, it still goes to someone who doesn't reflect the school community."
School leader

Where the barriers begin – and why they persist

Ethnic disparities in the teacher workforce don't just begin at the point of initial teacher training (ITT) — and they don't happen by accident. This research points to multiple, systemic factors that shape who enters the profession, and who stays.

One major issue is the training pipeline. Applicants from black and Asian backgrounds are significantly more likely to be rejected from ITT than white applicants - even when they have similar qualifications and experience.

Applicants from black and Asian ethnic backgrounds are far less likely to be accepted onto teacher training courses than white applicants. In 2021/22, 1 in 4 white applicants were rejected - compared to 1 in 2 Asian applicants and 3 in 4 black applicants.

Accepting UK-based applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds at the same rate as their white counterparts, we could have 2,000 more trainee teachers each year, helping to ease teacher shortages and better reflect the pupils we serve.

These differences can't be fully explained by qualifications or background. Even after accounting for factors such as degree class, age, socioeconomic background, prior experience and more, black applicants were still 18 percentage points more likely to be rejected than white applicants.

But it doesn't stop there. Focus groups with ITT providers also highlighted that:

International applicants often face confusing and inconsistent guidance

Application screening and interview processes do not account for diversity in culture and communication styles

A lack of representation in tutor teams and admissions panels affects the inclusivity of the process

Some providers are already taking action - from auditing their admissions data to diversifying interview panels and training staff on equity and bias.

> "We're doing some work… with the people who take the first look at applications, to say don't make assumptions and reject straight away."
> **ITT provider staff**

Proportion of applicants who were rejected from teacher training courses

Ethnicity	Rejection rate
White	26%
Asian	51%
Black	76%
Mixed	36%
Other	57%
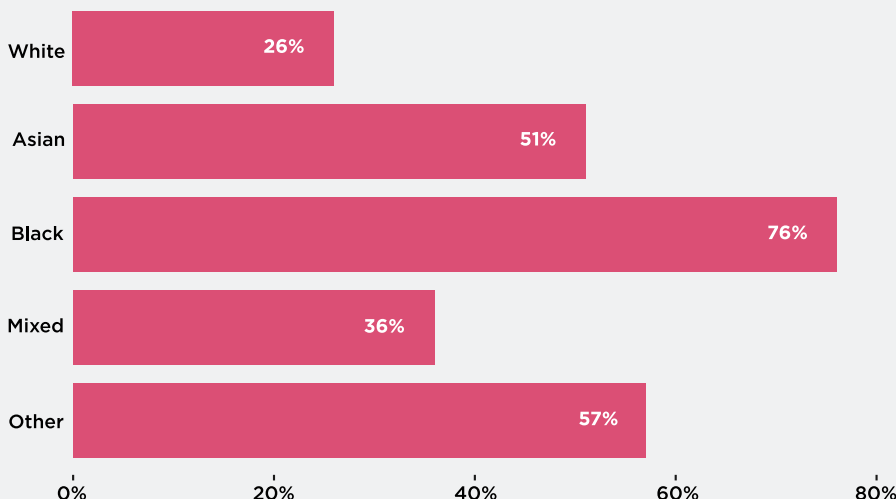
Note: Rejection rates calculated at the application level and weighted to account for applicants submitting more than one application. See main report for methodological details.

Source: NFER analysis of DfE Apply data (2022/23 – 2023/24).

How the whole system can improve

Improving teacher representation and retention won't happen by accident; and it's not just the responsibility of school leaders. It also requires action from training providers and government. Recommendations from the research include:

For ITT providers:

Audit admissions processes for inclusion

Use data to review acceptance and rejection rates by ethnicity. Identify where bias may occur and adjust processes accordingly (e.g. by reviewing interview tasks, criteria and panel composition).

Provide training on bias for all staff involved in recruitment

Include inclusivity training and equity-focused reflection sessions for anyone involved in decision-making — including university admissions staff and school-based mentors.

Increase diversity in ITT leadership and tutor teams

Representation among course leaders, tutors, and mentors helps ensure diverse perspectives are embedded across ITT design and delivery — not just at the recruitment stage.

For government:

Embed EDI across all stages of teacher development

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) should be a core focus across Initial Teacher Training (ITT), the Early Career Framework (ECF), National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), and the work of Teaching School Hubs.

Share benchmarking data to support provider improvement

Use national data collections to help ITT providers, schools and trusts assess their own performance on diversity and identify where to improve — without resorting to punitive accountability.

Streamline processes for international applicants

Improve clarity and accessibility of guidance, particularly around qualifications equivalency and visa processes, to reduce unnecessary barriers and delays.

How we did this research

This summary is based on research carried out by NFER and funded by Mission 44.

It draws on:

Analysis of national data on teacher training applications, retention and progression. Statistical modelling was used to control for factors like degree class, age, socioeconomic background and more, to help identify where disparities could not be explained by individual characteristics.

Focus groups with school leaders and ITT providers. The full report includes further details on methodology and statistical analysis.

Read the full report on Ethnic disparities in entry to teacher training, teacher retention and progression to leadership (2025) and our other research on racial equality, in the Research Bites area of our website.

Note: While we are following government guidance not to capitalise ethnic groups, we recognise that there is a diversity of opinion on the capitalisation of 'Black' and we acknowledge the sensitivities and multiple perspectives on this. For a full glossary, see page 7 of our main report on this topic.

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