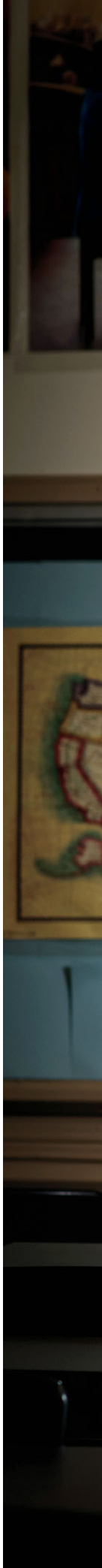
Winning the Long Game

Many school systems are working hard to recruit teachers of color. Travis Bristol is working to help them do what they hoped to do when they decided to become teachers.

By Sara Rimer

Photographs by Jackie Ricciardi



Brett McLean (right) credits BU's Travis Bristol with helping him achieve his dream: becoming a teacher in a Boston public high school.

Travis Bristol was just 22 when he arrived at Manhattan Hunter Science High School in September 2004, armed with a bachelor's from Amherst, a master's from Stanford, and a passion for introducing New York City 10th graders to the intellectual thrills of *Candide*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Othello*. But by late October, school administrators were leaning on Bristol—their only black teacher—for something else: what they saw as his skill at managing teenagers—specifically, boys of color.

When a colleague couldn't get her class under control, several boys who had been branded as "troublemakers" were reassigned to Bristol's. "There was this assumption that I could manage them," he says. "I was able to do that not because I was a black male, but because I was getting to know the students and designing content that was engaging and rigorous. The students weren't the problem."

Bristol soon learned that other teachers like him felt similarly typecast. His experience shaped his research for his PhD: asking 27 Boston teachers what it was like to be the only black male teacher, or one of just a few, at a big-city public school. Their answers helped explain why black men were leaving classrooms across the country at higher rates than their white and female counterparts. A study by University of Pennsylvania education professor Richard Ingersoll found that in the 2004–2005, 2008–2009, and 2012–2013 school years minority turnover was, respectively, 18, 24, and 25 percent higher than white teacher turnover.

The Boston teachers told of being turned into disciplinarians—the black man charged with controlling students of color. They spoke of white colleagues who didn't seem to value their intellects or ideas about teaching. They felt isolated—"like all eyes were on me," as one put it.

"They were surprised that anyone cared," Bristol says. "They said to me, 'Who's going to listen to you?'"

As it turns out, a lot of people listened. Today, as a School of Education assistant professor of English education and educational leadership and policy studies, Bristol is at the forefront of efforts to bring more men of color into the nation's teaching workforce—which remains 82 percent white even as children of color have become a majority of public school students—and to keep them there.

He is the principal investigator for New York City's $16 million NYC Men Teach initiative, begun by the city's mayor, Bill de Blasio, in 2015 to recruit, support, and retain 1,000 male teachers of color within three years—the largest such effort in the country. Bristol is intent on making those teachers feel welcome, supported, and empowered.

Such recruitment drives have come and gone for decades in school districts across the country; the Obama administration launched a nationwide effort in 2011. But recruitment, Bristol knew, wasn't enough. He helped persuade city and school officials that NYC Men Teach had to focus on retention as well as recruitment.

"Travis was an original thought partner," says W. Cyrus Garrett, executive director of the NYC Young Men's Initiative, the umbrella program for NYC Men Teach. "He had actually done the research. He showed us how our assumptions around male teachers of color not being interested in the profession because it was mostly women were actually completely wrong. It was that they didn't feel welcome in that space."

While boys of color make up 43 percent of New York City's 1.1 million public school students, only 8.3 percent of some 77,000 teachers are black, Latino, or Asian men. Nationally, the teaching workforce is 76 percent female. Men and women of color account for 18 percent of teachers, according to a 2016 US Department of Education study. Latino men make up 2 percent of teachers, and about 2 percent are black men.

With the nation's public school student population becoming more racially and ethnically diverse (children of color are expected to make up 56 percent of that population by 2024), and a growing body of research showing that children of color do better, academically and socially, when they have a teacher who looks like them, the need to recruit—and even more important, retain—teachers of color has never been more urgent, educators and policymakers say.

"Having a teacher of color matters," says Bristol, who did a postdoctoral fellowship at the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education under faculty director Linda Darling-Hammond, an authority on educational equity who led President Barack Obama's education policy transition team in 2008. "But it isn't enough to be Latinx or black. They have to be good teachers."

A New York City School Student Returns at the Head of the Class

The son of Guyanese immigrants, Bristol, whose mother is a preschool teacher, grew up in Brooklyn's working-class East New York neighborhood. The high school he attended was overcrowded and underfunded and served mostly students of color. They entered Washington Irving High School, in Manhattan, through metal detectors, Bristol recalls, and in some classrooms, the desks were bolted to the floors. Bristol makes the point that one of that school's most inspiring teachers was a white 11th-grade English teacher named Elayne Shapiro.

It was his election to student body president that led to a revelatory journey in his senior year—a subway ride downtown to meet his counterpart at Stuyvesant High School, an elite exam school where most students were Asian or white.

"I remember being filled with anger when I walked into Stuyvesant and saw that I could travel just 20 minutes on the train to another school that looked very different from mine and that had all these resources that I didn't have," he says. "There were no metal detectors. There was a swimming pool. The student council had their own offices. There were escalators. The paint wasn't coming down from anywhere."

And, he says, "clearly, the students at Stuyvesant were being asked to do a lot more academically."

At Amherst, Bristol majored in English, volunteered as a tutor in the Holyoke schools, and fell in love with teaching.

Earning an MA in education at Stanford, he did his teacher training at Menlo-Atherton High School, near Palo Alto. While he was assigned to regular classes, he spent his breaks sitting in on honors classes that had large numbers of affluent white students. "I wanted to know what the honors students were reading," he says.

"The sophomores were reading *Candide*. I decided that if those students who are living in multimillion-dollar houses can read *Candide*, then wherever I go, if I'm teaching 10th graders, I'm going to teach *Candide*." And so in September 2004, when Bristol began teaching English to 10th graders, mostly students of color, at Manhattan Hunter Science High School, he put *Candide* at the top of the reading list.

Why Black Teachers Matter

A 2016 study by two Vanderbilt University researchers found that even among children with the same math and reading scores, black students were referred by white (and other nonblack) teachers to gifted-and-talented programs at significantly lower rates than white students.

And a 2016 study by Johns Hopkins researchers showed that when evaluating the same black student, white teachers expected significantly less academic success than black teachers. The discrepancy was even greater for black male students. SR

Bristol's experience in the New York City schools, both as a student and as a teacher, enhances his role with NYC Men Teach, Garrett says. "Travis knows the system because he was in it. He understands the hurdles."

Bristol says a diverse teaching workforce provides role models and counters negative stereotypes.

And for novice male teachers of color, who tend to be concentrated in schools—in cities across the country, not just in New York—that have large numbers of students of color from low-income families and lack resources and support for just about everyone working there, the hurdles can be especially daunting. In a nod to the crucial role of black teachers, both men and women, in educating black students in segregated schools more than 60 years ago, Garrett chose the word "Anchors" for novice teachers involved with NYC Men Teach.

"They helped build the black middle class," he says. "Teaching was one of the only professions that many people of color who sought college degrees could find employment in, which led to a high talent pool of people who would otherwise have become doctors, lawyers, or PhDs."

It was an unintended consequence of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregated schools: while black students entered previously all-white schools, black principals and black teachers did not follow. Instead, tens of thousands of men and women—a battle-tested army of role models, mentors, and community leaders—were let go. (Before *Brown*, there were 82,000 black

male and female teachers in the United States. Between 1954 and 1964, 38,000 of those teachers lost their jobs.)

These men and women viewed their role not just as teachers, says Bristol, but as surrogate parents. Many teachers of color embrace a similar role in urban schools today, he says.

With input from Bristol, NYC Men Teach has set out to provide experienced teachers as mentors to help its Anchors develop their classroom skills and feel welcome in their schools. Bristol has also recommended that school administrators be provided with racial and gender awareness training; one of the aims, he says, is to get principals to "understand how their unconscious biases influence the roles they assign teachers from particular subgroups."

Bristol has published his research on male teachers of color in *Urban Education* (March 2014), a peer-reviewed journal focused on inner-city schools, and *Kappan* (October 2015), a magazine aimed at elementary and secondary school teachers published by Phi Delta Kappa International, a professional association for educators. In addition to his work with NYC Men Teach, he is consulting with policymakers and school officials in a number of different cities and school districts on how to support and retain male teachers of color.

A diverse teaching workforce benefits children—and adults—of all races, says Bristol, who in 2015 received the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education inaugural Teacher Diversity Research Award. Teachers and administrators of color provide leadership role models; their educational achievement and professional status help counter negative racial stereotypes, says Bristol, a Peter Paul Career Development Assistant Professor at BU.

"Travis has spent years examining black male teachers' pathways into the profession, their experiences, and their retention rates, and his findings have served as a catalyst for national conversations on these topics," says John B. King, Jr., who was secretary of education in the Obama administration in 2016 and 2017, and is now president and CEO of the Education Trust, a national nonprofit that seeks to close achievement gaps from pre-K through college.

"He's been dazzling to watch," says Hugh Price, a former National Urban League president, who became a mentor to the 19-year-old undergrad at Amherst College—Price's alma mater—when he was a summer intern at the Urban League. "He speaks with authority because of his combination of the academic and the practical. Given his understanding of the intersection of research, teaching, policy, and practice and his ability to operate in all those domains, I think he has the potential, if he keeps evolving and growing, to become another Linda Darling-Hammond."

After teaching for several years, Bristol concluded that the schools, not the students, needed fixing.

How a Male Teacher of Color Matters

Queens resident Shanda Lewis was a student in Bristol's class at Manhattan Hunter Science High School. Mr. Bristol, as she still refers to him, was one of only a few teachers of color she had during her 12 years in New York City public schools. "It's important to have an example to show us where we can go in life," says Lewis, who went on to graduate from Hunter College and is now in her second year at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine. "He was actually interested in what we were doing with our lives, what we were considering for our colleges. He told us, 'Aim high, don't let anyone stop you, keep going, make it happen.'"

Bristol makes an effort to keep up with his former students as they move through college and beyond, she says. "No one else really checks up on us. He always likes to promote that his students are doing well."

It goes both ways. "Seeing him go far in his career, always looking for the next step, that has been inspiring," says Lewis.

Another of Bristol's former students at Manhattan Hunter Science is Nixon Arauz, who was 12 when his family immigrated to the Bronx from Honduras. Now, 12 years later, Arauz is a junior health scientist at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in Atlanta. Arauz credits Bristol—his teaching and his example—for his own achievements, which include a BA from Cornell College and a master's in healthcare education from Columbia.

"It was such a great experience to have someone who looked like myself," recalls Arauz, who counts on his former teacher for guidance. "He empowered us to think critically about literature and how it relates to our own realities and what we could do as students to take ownership of our educations and what we could possibly become. I remember when he was teaching us *Candide*—that everything is possible in the best of all worlds."

The Teachers' Perspective

What is it like being a black male teacher?
What is your experience in your schools?

These were among the questions Travis Bristol asked 27 black male teachers at 14 public schools in Boston. Bristol separated the teachers into two categories: loners were the only black male teachers in their schools; groupers had three or more black male colleagues. Groupers, in general, felt more connected to their colleagues and to their schools. Loners, in contrast, were more likely to feel alienated and stereotyped because of their race and gender.

One loner: "I can't get mad like [other] people can because people don't like black males getting mad. They're going to perceive the stereotype. Angry black male. If I raise my voice people get scared. They think I'm going to go off or something.... I don't ever do that."

In 2012 and 2013, when Bristol was doing his research, 23 percent of Boston public school teachers were black and 6 percent were black men.

Groupers tended to be concentrated in so-called turnaround schools, which, with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, were under pressure from the district to raise test scores—or risk being closed. In Chicago, Washington, New Orleans, and other cities, large numbers of black teachers have lost their jobs as their schools have been tagged as failing and were closed in the past 15 years.

One grouper told Bristol, "Some teachers here spend more time yelling at male students of color than they do getting to know them. We have male students of color who are not academically achieving because we have people who are either lowering the standard or engaging with them as if they are an enemy in the building."

Because of such working conditions, Bristol says, more groupers ended up leaving their jobs than loners, who, for all their dissatisfaction with how they were treated by their colleagues, tended to be in higher-performing schools with more resources.

Unlike some groupers, who felt empowered by one another to address the academic and social needs of their students of color, loners were more likely to feel that their colleagues looked to them only to enforce discipline and that they couldn't push back. That role took valuable time away from their teaching. SR

Arauz says Bristol has been a role model. "Every time I was about to make a move about furthering my education, particularly in moving from undergraduate to graduate school, I consulted with him—what was his experience? He inculcated in me that whole notion of higher education, particularly for men of color." He now plans to pursue a PhD in public health and a career in academia.

After three years of teaching at Manhattan Hunter Science and another two years at Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice, a public high school in Brooklyn—and designing small, afterschool programs aimed at helping boys of color succeed in school—Bristol began working on a PhD in educational policy and leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University. "I wanted to work on systemic change," he says. He had concluded that it wasn't the boys, but the schools that needed fixing, so that the boys would have opportunities and support to be able to succeed.

"Linda Darling-Hammond coined the term opportunity gap," he says. "That has really resonated with me as I've gotten older. Given opportunities, people flourish."

Brett McLean is a black man from Boston's Dorchester neighborhood; he credits Bristol with giving him the opportunity to achieve his dream: becoming a teacher in the Boston public schools.

In 2013, while Bristol was conducting research for his doctoral dissertation, he was working full time as a clinical educator in the Boston Teacher Residency, a teacher preparation program started by the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Foundation education initiative the Boston Plan for Excellence. McLean says Bristol helped him get into the program and coached him through it. He says he also benefited from being part of a small, experimental group Bristol started within the Boston Teacher Residency to give male teachers of color—and those in training—a chance to exchange ideas with one another about lesson plans and class discussions, and about engaging their students, most of whom were of color.

McLean recalls preparing for a key test, teaching a poetry lesson before a high school class while a group of evaluators observed him on two consecutive days. If his performance on the second day wasn't rated as proficient, he says, he would be out of the program.

Bristol was there for McLean's first 75-minute class. "Travis spent the rest of the day with me—from 9:15 till after 2—going through my lesson for the next day," he says. "We were enacting 1,000 scenarios to prepare me for anything that could happen. What do you do if you have students who are disengaged? What if a student does this, or that? What if a student has a cell phone? How do you talk to them about it?"

McLean passed the test and became a full-time 11th-grade English teacher at Jeremiah E. Burke High School, in Dorchester. For the first several years, he was one of two or three male teachers of color, he says. This year, as one of six, he feels more supported in his teaching.

"Travis did everything to make sure I got through," says McLean, who is currently a part-time teaching assistant of Bristol's at BU. "Now I'm in front of the students, as a male of color coming from the inner city and doing well within a system that's not necessarily designed for everyone's success."

And that's what it takes, Bristol says.