

Quest for Greater Racial Diversity:

The History of the Teacher's Union, Black Teachers, and the Education of Minority Students

By Gloria L. Ho

A goal of every great public school system is to create a welcoming, inclusive, and safe environment for all students. Having a diverse educator workforce is essential to our students feeling connected and validated. Yet it can be challenging in these times with systemic inequities and racial disparities. Despite the attention given to recruit more teachers of color, little progress has been made in diversifying the profession; and as the student population becomes increasingly diverse, we are woefully unprepared to educate children of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 79% of public-school teachers across the nation are White. Delaware is higher than

the national average at 85% White. Meanwhile, according to the Delaware Department of Education, our student racial make-up is 42% White, 30% Black, and 18% Hispanic.

The Delaware State Education Association (DSEA) is the largest union in the state. Its members include teachers, educator support professionals, food service workers, bus drivers, etc. However, most members have not heard of the Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee (EMAC), a standing DSEA committee, that supports and advances greater racial diversity and inclusion of educators. EMAC consists of diverse educators across the three counties who are appointed by the DSEA president. Some school districts also have their own local EMACS.



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EMAC provides a platform for minority educators to make their voices heard within the union. One of EMAC's charges is to develop an annual conference on topics that address the needs of diverse teachers and students. Recent issues include the school

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to prison pipeline, racial traumatization, achievement gaps and health disparities, equitable policies and practices, and minority leadership training. Another charge is to develop and maintain local EMACs by building ethnic minority involvement and encouraging participation in leadership at the local and state levels. Local EMACs provide a pathway for members to raise local needs and concerns at the state level.

Throughout its history, EMAC or one of its earlier iterations struggled to achieve its goals within an integrated system that fundamentally opposed integration. In July of 1919, the Delaware State Colored Teacher's Association (DSCTA) was formed, a separate organization from the DSEA. From its inception, DSCTA fought for those teaching in all-Negro schools by submitting a bill to the General Assembly asking for equal pay and benefits with those teaching in White schools. In 1948, the DSEA finally allowed Black teachers to join, even though the schools continued to be segregated. However, most Black teachers remained with DSCTA.

In 1952, Judge Collins Seitz, who two years earlier had ruled to admit Black students into the University of DE, ruled that segregated schools were unequal and elementary and high schools needed to become integrated. Despite Judge Seitz's ruling and *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), integration did not come easily to Delaware, particularly Sussex County. In 1954, Milford School District encountered threats of violence from those

opposing integration, threats so great that eleven Black students who had enrolled in Milford High School withdrew after the DE Supreme Court ruled that while Milford's efforts to integrate were legal, the school district had moved too quickly. Pressure from White people against integration was intense. The local PTA president noted Lincoln had 50% Black children with 30% of them coming from migrant labor camps and pointed out their children would be subject to "influences they do not approve of."

Although the unions were integrated, student integration was still not achieved. In 1962, Denver Parker, father of Representative Stell Parker-Selby, was elected the first Black president of the Sussex County Education Association. Parker was a Seaford teacher and association activist who held meetings in his home for Black and White teachers to help integrate Sussex County schools. Expressing their opposition to integration, segregationists burned a cross on his lawn in front of his children.

In 1965, the dissolution of all-Negro schools state-wide left some Black teachers looking for jobs. In 1966, DSEA adopted a resolution urging districts to employ teachers from phased-out all-Negro schools. The resolution, backed by the association's civil rights arm, the Interracial Committee (an EMAC iteration), authorized the DSEA board to work "to guarantee continued em-

ployment of quality and experienced teachers left without jobs by consolidation and phasing out of all-Negro schools."

In 1967, desegregation was achieved throughout Delaware, and monumentally, DSEA elected its first woman president, Marion Bickford of Dover, and first Black president-elect, Frederick Thomas of Lewes, a teaching principal from Lewes School District.*

In 1974, the National Education Association (NEA) made significant strides in adopting ethnic minority guarantee proposals at the national and state levels to encourage racial and ethnic diversity in the organization. Leading the way into the 1980's, Delaware's minority teachers organized and met to discuss issues they were encountering, especially in Kent and Sussex Counties. A major concern was the lack of Black and Hispanic teachers and with some schools having all-White staff.

In 2022, there is still a lack of minority educators. The state and local EMACs continue to be essential: it is the minority voice demanding our educational system honor through action the guarantees provided by our predecessors to be heard and more involved in the educational process, to grow as leaders, and to be empowered to affect educational policies.

**This past September, Cape Henlopen School District, in its nod to the historical leader, voted to name its future middle school in Lewes after Frederick Thomas.*

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