

Teacher Shortage and the Impact of Anti-DEI Mandates

A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

This conceptual analysis examines the potential impact of anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) mandates on the persistent U.S. teacher shortage. The analysis utilizes a conceptual framework consisting of policy data, education labor statistics, and is grounded on Self-Determination Theory and Systems Theory. Historically exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the shortage saw 406,964 U.S. school positions vacant or filled by uncertified teachers in 2023-2024, representing approximately 11% of all classrooms. The article details reasons for teacher attrition, primarily poor working conditions and job stress, noting that 12% of teachers leave annually and teacher preparation program completers have decreased by 17% over the past decade. It defines DEI, emphasizing its alignment with effective pedagogical approaches like culturally responsive teaching and social constructivism, and highlights increasing teacher support for DEI initiatives, with 54% opposing legal limits on classroom discussions about racism. The analysis then explores common anti-DEI arguments, such as concerns about lowered standards, and

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refutes them with evidence. It predicts that prohibiting DEI-related practices will likely decrease teacher morale and autonomy, increase job dissatisfaction, and consequently exacerbate retention issues and deter new teachers from entering the profession, particularly affecting schools serving marginalized student populations.

Keywords: teacher shortage, anti-DEI mandates, diversity, equity, inclusion, teacher retention, teacher recruitment

Introduction

In 2015, when the recovery from the 2008 economic collapse was about complete, the already existing U.S. teacher shortage sharply worsened (Pelika, 2022). Although some debate exists regarding whether this constitutes a broad shortage or one that is specific to certain content areas (e.g., special education, mathematics) or geographic regions (regions of the country, rural-suburban-urban designations) ((Nguyen et al., 2024), evidence suggests the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent “Great Resignation” further exacerbated these shortages (Garcia & Wise, 2019; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Just as many schools and districts were grappling with the challenges of the pandemic and teachers and staff leaving, what may be a factor just as emerged: anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) attacks and mandates. These aim to curtail or even eliminate the use of culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant curriculum, and even social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies, despite their proven effectiveness in improving learning among marginalized populations (Gay, 2018). They may hasten the exodus of teachers and adversely affect the teacher education pipeline.

Like most professionals, teachers seek autonomy to do their job as they were trained and how they know is effective (Mokhlis & Abdullah, 2025; Yates, 2025). Autonomy in one’s work is a proven factor in both the job performance of teachers and their retention within schools and in the profession (Abou-Shouk et al., 2023; Prakish & Philimis, 2025). Prohibiting teachers from using effective pedagogical approaches could worsen retention and discourage prospective individuals from entering the profession, thus severely aggravating the teacher shortage challenge (Lampert et al., 2024).

This conceptual piece addresses the question: Will prohibiting the use of DEI-related teaching practices exacerbate the teacher shortage? The ensuing examination includes an analysis of recent teacher shortages, reasons for teachers leaving the profession, the definition of DEI as it relates to education, the increased opposition to DEI,

and, finally, the potential ramifications of the anti-DEI movement on teacher shortages. This last section probes the potential impact on teacher morale and frustration, which could consequently affect both retention and recruitment.

Conceptual Methodology

A conceptual analysis is used to investigate the relationship between anti-DEI mandates and teacher shortage trends. This work utilizes policy data, education labor statistics pertinent to the shortage, and is grounded on Self-Determination Theory and systems theory to predict the effects of the anti-DEI mandates on the teaching force. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 1994) suggests that if teachers are to remain in the profession, they must feel a sense of autonomy and value. Anti-DEI mandates are shown to impact autonomy by limiting choices in curriculum and instructional practices, and by affecting the relationships teachers have with their diverse student populations and the communities they serve (Mokhlis & Abdullah, 2025; Yates, 2025).

In addition, this article examines the so-called culture wars in which the anti-DEI movement plays an integral part. An examination of the positive impact of Culturally Responsive Teaching counters the assertions made by the anti-DEI proponents, such as a lowering of standards and social engineering. Teacher moral evidence is used to show the deep concerns that may result from the new mandates. Finally, this methodology uses systems theory as applied to educational organizations (Senge et al., 2000) to examine how the mandates can negatively affect the teacher life cycle. Such mandates have led to the reduction or even elimination of grants that support teacher education programs' enrollment, and this can be detrimental to teacher retention by harming working conditions, a key factor in teachers staying in the field (Hoque & Raya, 2023; Kendrick, 2023).

The Teacher Shortage

The definition of a teacher shortage is elusive and can best be answered by those who are required to ensure a qualified teacher is in front of the students in their school or district. In fact, there is no federal definition of a shortage, so each state education agency determines if they are experiencing a teacher shortage, and even what a teacher shortage is and reports this to the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This state-determined definition and determination reflect the disjointed U.S. education system, where

schools and districts are reliant on the state in which they are located rather than a centralized authority. Only state constitutions require support of public schooling. Although, the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (and other aspects of the U.S. Constitution) does address the right to a public education (Johnson, S.F., 2025, April 14), the federal government has little incentive to fund public education as each state is bound to do so by their own laws. To that end, school districts receive only 11% of their budgets from federal sources (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025), mostly in the form of Title I for schools serving students from poverty. Over 60% of schools across the nation qualify for this (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024a).

With a large variation in school funding across states and districts, a great variation in teacher salaries also exists. In addition to differences in compensation, where poorer districts in cities and rural areas have lower teacher salaries (Singleton & Roberts, 2023; Tiekens & Montgomery, 2021), the overall per pupil expenditure is less in these areas due to this lack of funds. Per pupil expenditure encompasses all funding available to support education, including physical resources such as newer facilities. The concept of equity in education, where students and schools receive what they need rather than equal funding (schools serving marginalized populations would logically need more resources) is being attacked and slated for elimination as they have been deemed racist (The White House, 2025). Those schools from wealthier communities have higher per pupil expenditures due to their higher tax base when, in fact, the schools that need more resources receive less than their wealthier counterparts (Raikes & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

Although it is unclear whether teacher shortages are nationwide, geographic, or contextual (e.g., impoverished rural or urban areas) (Nguyen et al., 2024), or all three, as previously stated, what is clear is that thousands of U.S. schools struggle to find qualified teachers. As of the 2023-2024 school year, 406,964 positions in U.S. schools were either vacant or filled by teachers who were not fully certified (Tan et al., 2024). In a nation with 3.2 million teachers, this figure represents approximately 11% of all classrooms. Research indicates that 50% of public-school leaders perceived their school as understaffed, with the impact most pronounced in urban and rural schools, particularly those serving students from poverty and/or having populations of 75% or more students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, October 2024). Teacher turnover remains a serious concern, with approximately 12% leaving the profession annually, and the number of teacher education preparation program completers has decreased by 17% in the past decade (Nguyen et al., 2024).

The Learning Policy Institute cites the problem to be that of attrition, rather than people entering the profession, estimating attrition results in 90% of vacancies (Saunders & Skinner, 2025). Evidence points to poor working environments as the key factor to teachers leaving, followed by pay. Working environments encompass leadership, professional development opportunities, school climate, and parent support (Marshall et al., 2022). This is further examined later in this piece.

Geographic and Socioeconomic Disparities

Rural and urban schools suffer the most from teacher shortages. For decades, both rural and urban schools serving students from poverty have experienced teacher shortages due to various factors, including low teacher pay, poor working conditions, and many teachers' inability to connect with the communities the schools serve (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Additionally, rural schools are often geographically distant from where new, potential teachers grew up or from the teacher education colleges they attended (Lambert, 2024). Urban schools often find their middle-class teachers commuting daily from the suburbs. This commute not only increases job stress but also psychologically and socially detaches them from their students' families (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Rural and urban schools actively seek ways to attract and retain effective teachers, and some federal grants have focused on this challenge (U.S. Department of Education, 2025), as have some private foundations (e.g., The Rural Teacher Corp, Rural Schools Collaborative, 2025). However, these initiatives have recently faced cuts due to their perceived connection to DEI (Hurley, 2025; Sparks, 2025).

Using recent Common Core data, Nguyen et al. (2024) listed the states with the most vacancies of qualified teachers per 10,000. The rural Southeast and urban Northeast exhibit high areas of vacancies. The Learning Policy Institute found similar concerns using U.S. Department of Education data (Tan et al., 2024). As to be expected, the poverty levels of the communities' schools serve correlate with teacher shortages, as does the percentage of minority students in the school. Inexperienced and unqualified teachers are more prevalent at schools in impoverished communities and schools with high minority percentages (The Learning Policy Institute, 2024).

It should be noted that enrollment in K-12 schools has slightly decreased in recent years and is predicted to decline by over 5% in the next decade. Although this might help mitigate the teacher shortage challenge, it appears it may in turn be offset by the decreasing number

of students entering teacher preparation programs. In the past five years, the number of completers of teacher preparation programs has decreased by over 4%, a concerning trend for a nation experiencing a teacher shortage (The Learning Policy Institute, 2024).

Why Teachers Leave the Profession

If asked why teachers leave their jobs, most Americans would likely state lack of compensation. While it is generally accepted that teachers earn less than individuals with comparable education and experience (Murray, 2022), studies indicate that teachers most frequently cite their working conditions as reasons they leave. These conditions include the management style of the school leader, long hours, and job stress, all of which can lead to burnout and prompt them to leave their jobs and the profession (Hoque & Raya, 2023; Kendrick, 2023). Research on burnout, a condition strongly correlated to teachers leaving (Reinke et al., 2025), indicates a leading factor is the external political climate, specifically, parents and the community showing little support or respect for schools and teachers (Marshall et al., 2022). Given the current volatile political climate, with many politicians and political appointees attacking both schools and the teaching profession (Guynn, 2025; Kassam, 2025) it is reasonable to predict burnout will increase.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that “43% of public schools reported that staff expressed concerns with depression, anxiety, trauma, or emotional dysregulation/disturbance has increased since last school year—or their colleagues exhibiting signs of such conditions” (National Center for Education Statistics, Mental Health & Wellbeing, Key Findings, 2024b, row 2). Furthermore, 60% of school leaders state that this concern has increased from the previous year, while only 7% report a decrease (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024b). Given a teaching force already reporting high anxiety, the added stressor of anti-DEI mandates will likely create more anxiety.

DEI and Education: Reality and Conflations

The use of DEI is often conflated to include many “bogeymen,” as will be discussed, but according to the American Psychological Association (APA),

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is a conceptual framework that promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people, especially populations that have historically been underrepresented or subject to discrimination because of their background, identity, disability, etc. Equity involves providing resources according to the need to help diverse

populations achieve their highest state of health and other functioning. Diversity refers to the representation or composition of various social identity groups in a work group, organization, or community. Inclusion strives for an environment that offers affirmation, celebration, and appreciation of different approaches, styles, perspectives, and experiences. (“What is EDI?”, 2021, section, para. 1-4)

Schools often incorporate DEI into their mission statements; however, this practice is being banned in some states and reconsidered in others (Najarro & Peetz, 2024). With the latest Executive Orders from the current Administration, these mission statements could be banned altogether (The White House, 2025). While school and school district missions often state a commitment to serving all students, those with DEI verbiage are more explicit in making all students feel accepted, a practice that has proven successful, as discussed below.

For several decades, Culturally Responsive Curriculum (CRC) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) have gained prominence in education research literature and in classroom practices (Banks, 2017; Gay, 2018). These concepts and the strategies derived from them aim to achieve equity in schools where marginalized populations (persons of color, those living in poverty) have historically underperformed compared to White and Asian students (Goulas, 2024). Hispanic and Black students not only attain lower scores on standardized tests, which it should be noted have been shown to be racially and culturally biased (Sedlacek, 2006), but they are also more likely to be living in poverty, another factor influencing test score probability (Chetty et al., 2024). CRC is used to connect students to the curriculum by making it relevant to their lives (Ladson-Billings, 1995), while CRT employs research-based strategies to which these populations have been shown to better respond (Byrd, 2016; Gay, 2018). In short, proponents of CRC and CRT argue that these approaches connect students to their learning and to schooling systems generally constructed by and for middle-class Whites (Banks, 2017; Gay, 2018). Evidence supports the effectiveness of CRT (e.g., Byrd, 2016) and CRC (e.g., Wah & Nasri, 2019) in the classroom, an effectiveness that teachers have validated in their practice (Samuels, 2018).

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE) has evolved from CRT and CRC (Walcott, 2024) and embraces the concept of Social Constructivism. Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky were pioneers of Social Constructivism, which posits that learning occurs through the “lens of the learner’s experiences,” as well as the context in which learning takes place (Vygotsky, 2017). Freire famously used a banking analogy to describe traditional teaching, where teachers deposit

knowledge into students' accounts/brains (Freire, 1970). Another common analogy is that traditional education involves teachers pouring knowledge into an empty vessel, the student. Interestingly, this belief can be traced as far back as the 17th century in the writings of John Locke who referred to people as "empty slates" (Rodriguez, 2012). Social Constructivists argue that no one is an empty vessel (or slate), as all possess previous experiences, including their present context. Furthermore, simply depositing knowledge without considering how it is received and used, which depends on many factors within the student's range of experiences, is ineffective (Freire, 1970; Rodriguez, 2012).

CRSE embraces Social Constructivism by acknowledging the importance of treating knowledge as something unique for each learner, requiring teachers to better understand the context and experiences of learners (Wolcott, 2024). In the age of Google and YouTube, knowledge is readily accessible, so the teacher's role is to facilitate learning, not simply transfer it from their brain to the students', especially given that students can access far more knowledge on their smartphones than any one teacher or school full of teachers, could possibly possess. To claim that CRSE (or CRT or CRC) is ineffective or even racist, as stated in the actual edicts (The White House, 2025) seems to demonstrate a lack of understanding about how learning takes place—that is, learning theory. Additionally, Social Constructivists advocate the importance of active learner participation, which can lead to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2006) and a "growth mindset," a state in which individuals believe they can continue to learn (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Perhaps most importantly, using these strategies, students may view learning as something they "do for themselves" rather than something "done to them" allowing for ownership of the process. Most teachers understand the importance of Social Constructivism, CRT, CRC, and CRSE, as demonstrated by their support for DEI in schools, which is examined below.

Teacher Support for DEI in Schools

DEI concepts (e.g., CRT) focus on the intellectual and emotional inclusiveness of all learners (Ainscow, 2020; Banks, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gay, 2018). A growing international acceptance of this concept is found in the literature (Guillemot et al., 2022). UNESCO (2013) uses the definition, "Inclusive education is about putting the right to education into action by reaching out to all learners, respecting their diverse needs, abilities and characteristics and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the learning environment" (p. 1). A recent meta-analysis of 131 studies worldwide provides evidence that teachers' support for

DEI initiatives in schools has been increasing since 2000 (Guillemot et al., 2022). The authors note that positive attitudes toward inclusive education enhance the success of DEI-related strategies (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; De Bor et al., 2011). Interestingly, Guillemot et al. found a correlation between acceptance of inclusion and the general economic wealth of the nation (2022). (Their work used the Human Development Index developed by the United Nations, 2021). Furthermore, the Rand Corporation's 2022 study found that 54% of teachers and principals opposed legal limits to classroom discussions about racism and other "contentious topics," versus only 20% who believed such limits should exist (Woo et al., 2022). Recent surveys also indicate that a significant percentage of teachers believe their morale would increase if allowed to teach using DEI-related topics such as Social-Emotional Learning (Kurtz & Baker, 2025). Social-Emotional Learning is currently a target of anti-DEI advocates, as it is perceived to be tightly linked to critical race theory (Eden, 2022).

Despite evidence showing teachers' support for DEI strategies, it is becoming difficult, if not impossible, to use them. Barriers to their use include reduced or eliminated resources (Goldan et al., 2022) as well as federal government mandates and community opposition to DEI (Fadel et al., 2025).

The Opposition to DEI

If DEI-related strategies are effective and embraced by most teachers, why do so many people oppose their use? For the past few years, the media has been replete with stories about the "DEI backlash" from one end of the political spectrum, including movements to ban books (Stein, 2025), dismiss educators deemed "woke" (Natanson & Balingit, 2022; Postal, 2022), and outright making DEI illegal in schools (American Oversight, 2025). Teaching has always been a stressful occupation, but this backlash further intensifies their work, particularly since the "Culture Wars" ignited approximately a decade ago (Will, 2022).

Yoner (2025) describes the opposition in the conservative publication *The American Mind*, a piece based on a speech he gave to the largest higher education regional accreditor, at which, he admits, people walked out and booed him. Although Yoner does not offer any empirical support for his assertions in this piece or in the speech itself (beyond a reference to Thomas Sowell's 2019 book *Discrimination and Disparities*), the categories he cites align with concerns stated in other anti-DEI literature (e.g., The Heritage Foundation; National

Association of Scholars):

- **Lowering standards** by individuals not “earning” their place in schools, universities, employment, and society.
- **“DEI lie”** where advocates of DEI supposedly believe that everybody has equal talents. According to Yoder, citing Sowell, groups of people have different talents and predispositions, which must be accepted.
- **“Disciplinary corruption”** is the belief that a field of study loses its professional credibility when it embraces the “false lie” of DEI, thereby diluting expertise within that field.
- **Social Harmony** insinuates a true patriot does not overly criticize their country; therefore, not acknowledging the mistakes it has made.
- **Social Engineering** proffers that officials divide society when they attempt to use DEI strategies, dangerously focusing on race instead of being “color blind.”
- DEI has caused **an erosion of trust** in the nation, which has transitioned from a high-trust to a low-trust society. Trust has indeed been shown to be decreasing over the past two decades, and diversity may be one contributing factor (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Each of these assertions can be, and are, refuted by empirical evidence and sound scholarship. For instance, no empirical evidence exists showing any standards have been lowered due to DEI or that a field of study has been “diluted” because of the embracing of DEI. In fact, evidence suggests that more diverse institutions and organizations are stronger (Okatta et al., 2024), including schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Ignoring the mistakes and tragedies of the nation’s past actually “dumbs down” a populace, keeping them ignorant of realities (Pinto & Portelli, 2009).

“Social engineering” has long been a battle cry of those opposing Civil Rights. Often, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s statements are misrepresented to suggest he believed in a color-blind society (see Harper, 2025, for a response to this misrepresentation). Regarding the belief that DEI has led to an erosion of trust, increasing demographic diversity should not be confused with DEI policies, unless the assertion is that people do not trust those who do not look like they do. If so, that would provide even more reason to support DEI initiatives, as they aim to mitigate xenophobia (Banks, 2017; Gay, 2018).

Although easily dismissed when examined with evidence, these

anti-DEI beliefs persist among many in the U.S. and perhaps much of the world, as evidenced by a rising tide against multiculturalism and its subsequent impact on democracies (Barki, 2024). It is uncertain how long the anti-DEI movement will continue, if it will gain strength or disappear as younger generations come into political power (Kratz, 2025). However, if it does persist, it may have dire consequences for attracting and retaining teachers. The anti-DEI movement is one of the main fronts of the Culture Wars, and the bastardization of DEI will be difficult to combat. These wars have acquired an emotional element that requires challenging cognitive dissonance, a state difficult to counter with logic (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2019).

Possible Results of Anti-DEI Mandates on the Teacher Shortage

As this topic is unfolding in real time, the full results of anti-DEI mandates on teacher shortages are yet unknown. However, based on the evidence described so far and elaborated further in this section, it appears likely that they will have negative repercussions. Below is an examination of possible ways in which this unraveling could impact teaching retention and recruitment by affecting individual/professional morale and influencing school culture. This examination is founded on Systems Theory as applied to education as the effects saturate the entire scope of education, psychologically impacting teachers, administrators, teacher education programs, and the communities in which schools reside (Senge et al., 2000).

Decreased Morale and Retention

Teacher morale is a crucial element for retention and the overall organizational culture of schools (Senge et al., 2000; Willis & Varner, 2010). Tied to morale is, of course, job satisfaction, but also autonomy (Hayes & Northrup, 2024). Many, if not most, teachers are deeply committed to DEI-related strategies (CRT, CRC, and CRSE). When teaching student populations who may benefit most from these, these teachers are likely to experience “moral distress” and a clash of values if they must abandon these practices (Umoh, 2024; King et al., 2010).

Related to morale issues is self-censorship among teachers, who fear reprimands by administrators, parents, the community, and even lawsuits for saying something that may be considered “woke” and, therefore, not permissible or even illegal (Francois, 2025). Instead of having open discussions about diversity issues, teachers must “walk on eggshells” to avoid traps that could not only cause them to lose their jobs and careers but also cause significant frustration and stress

(Sonnenberg, 2025).

Studies suggest that low morale will cause retention rates to decrease (Doan et al., 2024). As more teachers become dissatisfied with their work due to a mismatch between their values and beliefs, the teacher shortage will likely worsen (Woo et al., 2022), an example of how one aspect of an organization can pollute the rest of it, a key finding of systems theorists (Senge et al., 2000). Studies actually indicate that an embrace of DEI-related strategies and beliefs can increase teacher retention (Rosa, 2025). Those holding these beliefs seem to stay longer in the profession due to, perhaps, a strong emotional commitment to the profession and a strong commitment to social justice and equity. Given the positive feelings teachers have for DEI initiatives in their schools, it can be predicted there will be more teachers opting to leave the profession due to dissatisfaction with their working conditions, particularly being prohibited from teaching curriculum they support. As previously indicated, teachers cite conditions as the primary reason for leaving the classroom (Marshall et al., 2022). Denying them the ability to teach what and how they perceive to be effective will likely lead to increased dissatisfaction with working conditions, significantly decreasing morale (Mohite & James, 2024; Zychová et al., 2024). Research in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008) shows that autonomy and empowerment are important factors in job satisfaction, and the loss of these may exacerbate discontent with one's work. Furthermore, workloads will increase when curricula are quickly changed due to restrictions on perceived DEI-related content, including the adoption of new textbooks and other curricular materials. In short, the entire education system can become infected by the forced elimination of DEI-related practices and beliefs, reflecting the interconnectedness of parts that systems theory espouses (Senge et al., 2000).

Attracting New Teachers

As mentioned earlier, the number of people entering teacher education programs has decreased over the past several years. Unless individuals who support anti-DEI mandates feel compelled to enter the profession, teacher education enrollment should continue to decline. It is possible that programs at right-leaning institutions (e.g., Liberty University) might see an increase in students, while those from left-leaning institutions (e.g., Teachers College, Columbia) would suffer. However, other factors would likely come into play in this scenario, such as those on the political left who are often motivated

to promote social justice and equity, who may feel an even greater need to enter teaching to fight the anti-DEI movement. Some suggest a drop in college enrollment among people of color may be due to their frustration with college entrance and access processes (Sikes, 2025). With fewer opportunities for diversity in higher education due to the elimination of grants and programs focused on attracting people of color (Hurley, 2025), diversity in teaching populations may decrease, as will the overall number of teachers. It was noted earlier that urban schools with high concentrations of minority students were less likely to attract and retain certified teachers (Ingersoll & May, 2016).

Meeting the Needs of Marginalized Student Populations

Cultural Competence measures and training have been a staple of professional development for teachers for the past few decades. An increase in personal Cultural Competence allows the teacher to better meet the learning needs of marginalized student populations, needs that include social and emotional needs (Banks, 2017; Gay, 2018). The slashing of DEI initiatives is based in part on the acceptance of the banking model, as described earlier, which assumes that any teacher can simply deposit knowledge into students' accounts/brains. Therefore, there is no perceived need for an understanding of culture and, by extension, students' social and emotional needs (Banks, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gay, 2018). Evidence points to a decrease in learning for marginalized populations if Cultural Competence and Social-Emotional Learning are forbidden, as seems to be the case (Gay, 2018). A snowball effect could occur where fewer educated people of color would lead to fewer teachers of color, thereby reducing the number of teachers, particularly in schools serving students of color.

Data on the effects of anti-DEI mandates on teacher retention and shortages will not be available for some time; however, current scholarship on morale, retention, and recruitment indicates a negative impact (e.g., Rosa, 2025). These mandates will likely make the profession less attractive for both those currently teaching and those who may consider teaching. This may be especially true for individuals who are people of color or those wishing to teach students of color.

Implications for Teacher Education Programs (TEPs)

The anti-DEI mandates and the teacher shortage create significant challenges for TEPs if these mandates are allowed to expand and saturate education. These challenges, as outlined below, are perhaps insurmountable barriers to enrollment and quality curriculum and

instruction. Enrollment, naturally, will be affected if the mandates do indeed reduce recruitment. Teacher education programs are already impacted by a decreased interest among high school students wanting to become teachers (Kraft & Arnold Lyon, 2024). Many people wishing to be teachers are committed to social justice, equity, and all that DEI stands for (Rosa, 2025). It may also be a deterrent to enter the field for populations of candidates that DEI is meant to support, such as people of color (Sikes, 2025).

TEPs are ethically bound to form their programs on evidence-based practices, supported by the preponderance of research and scholarship. Anti-DEI targets (e.g., culturally relevant teaching) are proven to improve learning for marginalized students (Byrd, 2016; Wah & Nasri, 2019). If such practices are forbidden, this can have serious consequences for the morale of teachers, who know and understand what truly works, putting into motion a downward spiral within the education realm (Senge et al., 2000). Finally, a decay in cultural competence, another target of the anti-DEI set, may further widen the so-called achievement gap (Gay, 2018).

Finally, TEP are accredited by state and national organizations that require reams of evidence that they are aligned to standards set by the accrediting agencies. If the anti-DEI movement causes a rewriting of such standards, which it seems it will, then a subsequent retooling of all TEPs will be required. TEPs are typically understaffed, so such a restructuring could prove impossible to attain.

Conclusion

Given the positive feelings teachers have for DEI initiatives in their schools, it can be predicted that more teachers will opt to leave the profession due to dissatisfaction with their working conditions, particularly being prohibited from teaching curriculum they support. Teachers cite working conditions as the primary reason for leaving the classroom (Marshall et al., 2022). Denying them the ability to teach what and how they perceive to be effective will likely lead to increased dissatisfaction with working conditions, significantly decreasing morale (Mohite & James, 2024; Zychová et al., 2024). Further, research in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008) shows that autonomy and empowerment are important factors in job satisfaction, including for classroom teachers, and the loss of these may exacerbate discontent with their work. Finally, workloads will likely increase when curricula are quickly changed due to restrictions on perceived DEI-related content, including the adoption of new textbooks and other curricular materials.

The Rand Corporation found that the culture wars were taking a toll on the well-being of teachers, who reported feeling harassed by the public. Additionally, 48% of principals and 40% of teachers saw the “political intrusion of political issues and opinions” into their work as causing undue stress, which they felt could lead to their leaving the profession (Woo et al., 2022). The anti-DEI mandates, the latest front in the Culture Wars, may lead to a worsening of the teacher shortage, particularly in the hardest-to-staff schools: those serving people of color and other marginalized populations, including rural Whites living in poverty.

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