

Belonging Begins with Teachers

Mattahunt Elementary, 2024 School on the Move Winner

The Mattahunt's story is one of renewal and transformation. In 2017, the school closed due to persistent underperformance. The Mattahunt reopened in 2018 with a commitment to doing things differently. With a focus on implementing tiered school-wide instructional supports, the Mattahunt team aimed to ensure that all students can access and master grade-level content. The payoff was broad gains in performance. By 2024, students identified as "lowest performing" exceeded accountability targets in both Math and ELA. The same year, the Mattahunt won the School on the Move Prize, an award presented annually by EdVestors that spotlights the most notable school-wide improvement efforts happening across Boston Public Schools.

Introduction

The joy in the building was palpable when the School on the Move Prize Selection Panel visited the Mattahunt Elementary in fall 2024. In a kindergarten classroom, the children focused on their teacher as she danced and sang in Haitian Creole, the home language of many of the students. Even when five visitors slipped quietly into the room, the children stayed focused. They laughed, clapped, and echoed her words, their faces glowing with joy and admiration. To the Selection Panel, it was clear that they were witnessing more than a lesson; relationships between the teacher and students were grounded in care, cultural pride, and mutual respect.

Moments like this reflect more than just strong relationships at the Mattahunt. Research shows that it matters when students see their own identities reflected in their teachers. Studies have linked this alignment between teacher and student racial or cultural backgrounds to stronger academic performance and higher levels of classroom engagement. Recruiting educators from the Mattahunt's school community is not just a promising approach to narrowing identity disparities, but, more importantly, fosters student success.

The Mattahunt strengthens alignment between students' and staff identities by hiring paraprofessionals from the community and guiding them toward full teacher licensure. This creates opportunities for students to learn from educators who understand their cultural identities and lived experiences, helping foster meaningful connections and a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom.

EdVestors asked paraprofessionals who became licensed teachers at the Mattahunt to reflect on their experience pursuing licensure—including the support they received, examples of what helped them, and why it matters that the school invests in the licensure process. Their reflections are highlighted in callout quotes throughout this brief. The Mattahunt's approach provides an example for other Boston schools and districts beyond the city to look to as a model.

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[Supporting paraprofessionals through licensure] shows they care, and I'm in a workplace that values you and supports your interests and long-term goals. It shows their investment. I felt that my leaders did not want me to stay stagnant, and they wanted to push me towards growth. They helped me envision my path forward.”

Mattahunt's Approach

At the Mattahunt, recruiting teachers who reflect students' identities begins by looking to those in the school's communities who show an interest in becoming classroom teachers. Seventy percent of students at the Mattahunt identify as Black. The school makes a point of hiring paraprofessionals who share the students' life experiences and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This approach strengthens the school community, fosters students and builds capacity for the Toussaint L'Ouverture Academy, the nation's first Haitian Creole Dual Language program offering two-way language instruction. Since 2018, the Mattahunt has supported 13 paraprofessionals in acquiring their teaching licensure. Of those 13, ten are now teachers at the Mattahunt, and one is teaching at another school. By cultivating talent from within the community, the Mattahunt ensures that future educators share a strong commitment to the children and families the school serves.

Once paraprofessionals are hired, the Mattahunt provides the structures and support needed to make the transition to a full-time, licensed classroom teacher position both possible and sustainable.

Paraprofessionals are paired with experienced mentor teachers licensed in their intended subject area. Mentor teachers provide paraprofessionals with information on which tests are needed for licensure, advise on professional development opportunities based on their intended subject area, and support them through classroom observations and in teaching their first lessons. Common planning time with mentor teachers provides an opportunity to learn about the curriculum and the skills needed to prepare lessons and assessments, which, in turn, helps paraprofessionals prepare for licensure tests. For paraprofessionals who have yet to complete their bachelor's degrees, the Mattahunt provides mentoring to help them complete their coursework and pursue licensure. In addition, paraprofessionals benefit from working within grade-level teaching teams and from one-on-one coaching. The close, trusting relationships that characterize the Mattahunt's educator culture, combined with this personalized, dynamic approach, have created a clear pathway for community members to become effective classroom teachers.

The Mattahunt's data stands out. From 2023 to 2025, the Mattahunt increased its share of Black teaching staff from 30 percent to 50 percent. Notably, the Mattahunt has one of the highest percentages of teachers identifying as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) in the district, at 59 percent, more than 80 percent of other district schools.



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[My New Teacher Developer was] someone to lean on and talk through the process with an educator who understands the field and the process. [She] listened with an empathetic ear and reminded me to give myself grace during the process.”



*A decades-old court mandate, *Morgan v. Hennigan*, called for BPS to maintain a teaching force that is at least 25 percent Black; however, the district has struggled to meet this standard. The district has also struggled to recruit and retain Latino teachers. These local trends are reflective of those seen across the State, where about 15 percent of teachers identify as Black, Latino, Asian, or Indigenous, even as the student population has grown increasingly diverse. The result is a widening representation gap, fueled by higher turnover among educators of color, limited entry pathways into the profession, and structural barriers in recruitment and retention.*

What can we learn from the Mattahunt's efforts to recruit teachers who reflect the student population?

By recruiting paraprofessionals who reflect students' cultural and linguistic identities and supporting them through the licensure process, the Mattahunt has built a staff that mirrors its student body. This approach not only increases representation but also strengthens student connections. Children see role models with shared experiences, and educators enter the classroom already rooted in the cultural and linguistic community they serve.

For school leaders seeking to align teacher and student identities more closely, the Mattahunt's model offers clear strategies:

1 Recruit paraprofessionals from the cultural and linguistic communities the school serves, especially those interested in advancing into teaching roles.

At the Mattahunt, this meant prioritizing candidates from the Haitian American cultural community, hiring staff who shared the same language, and fostering deep trust among families. Other schools can reflect on the neighborhood groups, cultural associations, and local networks in their communities with whom job opportunities could be shared, ensuring that the path into education begins where students and families already feel connected.

2 Provide support for paraprofessionals to complete their education and obtain licensure, including mentoring, coaching, and working in grade-level teams.

At the Mattahunt, paraprofessionals are paired with experienced mentor teachers who guide them through completing coursework toward bachelor's degrees and licensure. Other schools may consider establishing in-house mentoring programs and partnering with local colleges to support enrollment, making the path to licensure more attainable.

3 Create pathways for newly licensed teachers to remain at the school or transition into roles at other schools across the district.

The Mattahunt proactively works with soon-to-be-licensed teachers to secure a teaching position that coincides with their licensure date—either at their current school or another school within the district—so that newly licensed teachers can secure a teaching position and continue their professional growth. Other schools can consider systems to help paraprofessionals secure a classroom role as soon as they are licensed as teachers, ensuring that they begin their careers as classroom teachers with the full pay and recognition they have earned.

These efforts offer a clear pathway for building a teacher workforce that is more diverse, more representative, and better equipped to meet the needs of Boston's students.

“ [Supporting paraprofessionals] starts with building authentic relationships with staff... The administrators made their staff feel seen, which also aided in building relationships. Then, when administrators come across information and opportunities that offer growth, they can share it with the staff. Mr. Henderson [Principal of the Mattahunt] would share information about a bachelor's completion program and gently remind me about what he knew would support me until I was able to take that step.”

About EdVestors

EdVestors' mission is to advance equitable, meaningful education that prepares every Boston student to activate their power and shape their future. Uniquely positioned in Boston's education landscape, we serve as a:

- Connector that partners with the district, schools, community-based organizations, higher education, and philanthropy to advance efforts in issue areas that are a priority for schools and students.
- Catalyst for systems change in Boston, creating pathways from classroom to career, ensuring access to arts education, improving math teaching and learning, and seeding racial equity efforts in schools.
- Champion shining a light on the teachers, leaders, and schools who create and continuously improve learning environments where all students can thrive.



About the School on the Move Prize

The School on the Move Prize spotlights the most notable school-wide improvement efforts happening across Boston Public Schools.

EdVestors seeks to shine a light on the schools, leaders, and teachers who create and continuously improve learning environments where all students thrive. By sharing the stories of how schools improve, we hope to help more schools make significant progress for their students.

Each year, the School on the Move Prize recognizes one of the most improving Boston Public Schools. The winning school is awarded \$100,000 that includes \$80,000 of unrestricted funding directly to the school and \$20,000 that is set aside by EdVestors to engage in research and dissemination activities related to School on the Move. In addition, the other two finalist schools are awarded \$10,000 each.

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