# Federal judges block efforts to curtail DEI programmes in public schools



Federal judges have temporarily blocked efforts by the Trump administration to curtail diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programmes in public schools, after legal challenges from educational groups including Philadelphia's Center for Black Educator Development. The ruling, issued late last week, halts the U.S. Department of Education's recent directive that threatened to withdraw federal funding from schools maintaining DEI initiatives or classroom teachings perceived as discriminatory.

The Philadelphia-based Center for Black Educator Development, founded by Sharif El-Mekki, is among the plaintiffs in the case. El-Mekki, a prominent city educator renowned for his work to diversify the teacher workforce, has publicly highlighted the impact of the administration’s order. He noted in comments to The Philadelphia Inquirer that the directive would dismantle the centre’s core mission of enhancing educational quality for all students and rebuilding the declining pipeline of Black teachers nationally.

“This order moving forward would dismantle the core work of the centre,” El-Mekki said. “Providing all students with access to high-quality education that improves their conditions and learning outcomes, and to rebuild the declining national Black teacher pipeline—the lack of diversity in our classrooms impacts all of us, and now we’re being attacked for actually trying to create a just educational environment for all.”

The legal challenge, filed in federal court in New Hampshire with support from the National Education Association (NEA) and argued by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), seeks to prevent enforcement of the federal policy. The education department had issued a directive this month forbidding schools from receiving federal funds if they sustained DEI programmes or teaching content deemed discriminatory—though it did not specify details of prohibited conduct.

Sharif El-Mekki’s background is rooted deeply in Philadelphia. A West Philadelphia native and alumnus of Overbrook High School and Indiana University of Pennsylvania, El-Mekki initially pursued criminal justice but later shifted to education after a personal experience involving gun violence. He transformed his career into education, working as a teacher and principal in multiple city schools, earning national recognition and a fellowship from the U.S. Department of Education.

Founded in 2014 initially to recruit Black men into teaching, El-Mekki’s organisation evolved into the Center for Black Educator Development by 2019. The centre offers summer training programmes for teachers of colour, an annual national conference held in Philadelphia, a year-round career and technical education course for Black students aspiring to enter teaching, and fellowship opportunities for diverse educator candidates.

The centre’s work is underpinned by research demonstrating the benefits of a diverse teaching force. For instance, 40% of U.S. schools have no Black teachers, and most Black students nationally experience over a decade of education without Black teacher role models. Studies show Black students with just one Black teacher in early grades are significantly more likely to graduate high school and attend college, with these positive outcomes increasing with more Black teacher exposure. Yet in Philadelphia, less than a quarter of teachers are Black despite nearly half the student body being Black.

El-Mekki’s legal response underscores the broader challenges facing Black educators. “Black individuals who do become teachers face tougher working conditions and leave the profession at higher rates than their white peers," he wrote in a March filing. He explained that Black teachers often bear greater burdens in managing disciplinary issues and are informally charged with mentoring colleagues on culturally responsive teaching. Meanwhile, non-Black educators frequently lack training to effectively teach Black students.

The centre’s programmes, El-Mekki emphasised, do not discriminate based on race and are open to all educators. However, they reference themes of diversity, equity, and inclusion to address systemic educational inequities. The department's prohibition threatens these efforts because it categorises such discussions—covering cultural identity, anti-racism, implicit bias, and equity—as potentially illegal discrimination. El-Mekki described this stance as an existential threat to the centre and cautioned about worsening the ongoing national teacher shortage, warning that potential candidates might avoid teaching environments where their cultural or historical perspectives could provoke scrutiny or harassment.

State responses have varied. In Pennsylvania, Acting Education Secretary Carrie Rowe advised school districts that no changes to DEI practices were necessary in light of the federal order. The district court in New Hampshire, presided over by Judge Landya McCafferty, granted a preliminary injunction favouring the plaintiffs, effectively preventing the administration from withdrawing funding over DEI programmes tied to either the centre or NEA members. Although this development temporarily halts enforcement, the legal proceedings remain ongoing.

The Philadelphia Inquirer is reporting on the broader implications of this legal battle, highlighting the intersection of educational equity, federal policy, and the ongoing efforts to diversify the teaching profession.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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