

# PENN STATE CENTER FOR EVALUATION AND EDUCATION POLICY ANALYSIS

## Policy Brief 2020 – 2: Systemic Inequalities in Pennsylvania: Access to School Counselors for Black Students Zoë Mandel and Ed Fuller

### Introduction

School Counselors are certified and/or licensed individuals who assist students in many areas, including academics, personal development, mental health, and post high school plans.<sup>1</sup> Recent research confirms prior studies about the influence of counselors—specifically, counselors are associated with increases in student achievement, graduation rates, college readiness, and college attendance.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this is particularly true for students living in poverty and students of Color.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, Mulhern found that counselors have a causal effect on these outcomes, meaning counselors positively influence these outcomes apart from the influence of other factors that influence such outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

School counselors are particularly important for Black students who are more likely to seek out and benefit from counselors.<sup>4,5</sup> This is especially true given that Black students in Pennsylvania are far more likely to have been personally impacted by the effects of Covid-19 given the disproportionate effects Covid-19 had had on the Black community and are also more likely to have been personally affected by the recent protests against police violence.

Despite this greater importance, we document below that Black students in Pennsylvania have less access to school counselors than their white peers and most Black students are enrolled in schools without a single Black counselor. Given existing research, this inequitable access to counselors likely has a negative impact on the schooling outcomes and post-secondary trajectories of Black students in Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup>

***Black students in Pennsylvania have less access to school counselors than their white peers and most Black students are enrolled in schools without a single Black counselor.***

In the remainder of this brief, we discuss the influence of counselors on both academic and non-academic outcomes, the need for Black counselors, and barriers to access to counselors. We conclude by documenting the degree to which Black students in Pennsylvania have access to any counselor, are enrolled in a school with selected student per counselor ratios and enrolled in a school with a Black counselor. We conclude with a brief set of policy recommendations.

### COUNSELORS AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

School counselors are associated with a wide range of short- and long-term positive outcomes for students at all levels.<sup>7</sup> States with a strong policy emphasis on school counselors report increases in academic achievement as well as reductions in problem behaviors that disrupt instruction in elementary schools.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, teachers in schools with counselors had more positive perceptions of school climate.<sup>9</sup> Thus, access to school counselors directly and indirectly impacts several prominent issues in education policy, including the school-to-prison pipeline, opportunity gaps, and teacher satisfaction/retention.<sup>5</sup> peers in more affluent households.<sup>11</sup>

***Access to school counselors, particularly in early high school, is associated with increased high school graduation, 4-year college attendance, college selectivity, and college persistence***

Counselors influence several important secondary student outcomes, including achievement, graduation, college readiness, and enrollment in college.<sup>10</sup> Counselors are typically responsible for course assignments, which have a significant impact on college readiness.<sup>11</sup> In fact, access to school counselors, particularly in early high school, is associated with increased high school graduation, 4-year college attendance, college selectivity, and college persistence.<sup>12</sup> The information and resources that school counselors provide is especially important for Black students, who are not only more likely to reach out to school counselors than their White counterparts, but also less likely to have access to information related to accessing pathways into college, particularly more selective colleges.<sup>13</sup>

### COUNSELORS AND NON-ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

School counselors can help to explain and connect the social and personal factors that may impede a students' academic success such as feelings of belongingness, academic and educational aspirations, self-efficacy, and social identities.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly true for Black students who are consistently subject to racial biases that influence teacher perceptions of engagement and ability, as well as peer evaluations that often erroneously label Black students as aggressive and disruptive.<sup>15,16</sup> Racial and ethnic identity development is one area where school counselors' can advocate for their students as well as support and counsel

them and school staff in addressing students’ personal identity issues, facilitating dialogue around sensitive subjects, and explaining how cultural diversity can impact students and school climate.<sup>17</sup>

THE NEED FOR BLACK COUNSELORS

Recent literature has found that students matched with a counselor of their own racial/ethnic background have increased post-secondary attendance rates.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly important for Black students who are 50% less likely to be placed into Advanced Placement classes when compared to their white peers.<sup>18</sup> Even more troubling, recent data reveals that many Pennsylvania school districts are twice as likely to suspend Black students.<sup>19</sup> Increasing access to Black counselors could significantly reduce these negative outcomes for Black students.

*Black students are substantially more likely than other students to report their school counselor was the most influential person in helping them access post-secondary education opportunities.*

Furthermore, because school counselors often encourage students to attend colleges based on their own experience, Black school counselors are uniquely positioned to advocate for post-secondary enrollment, including attendance at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and .<sup>20</sup> In fact, Black students are substantially more likely than other students to report that their school counselor was the most influential person in helping them access post-secondary education opportunities.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO COUNSELORS

While the benefits associated with increased access to school counselors are clear, many factors contribute to the accessibility of school counselors. For instance, larger caseloads have consistently been found to have a detrimental impact on post-secondary student outcomes such as high school graduation rates, college selectivity, and post-secondary completion.<sup>21</sup> Reduced school budgets have required many school counselors to serve more than 1,000 students, well over the recommended 250:1 ratio.<sup>22</sup> Charter school growth has also decreased the availability of counselors to students as Pennsylvania charter schools are less likely than public schools to employ counselors.<sup>23</sup>

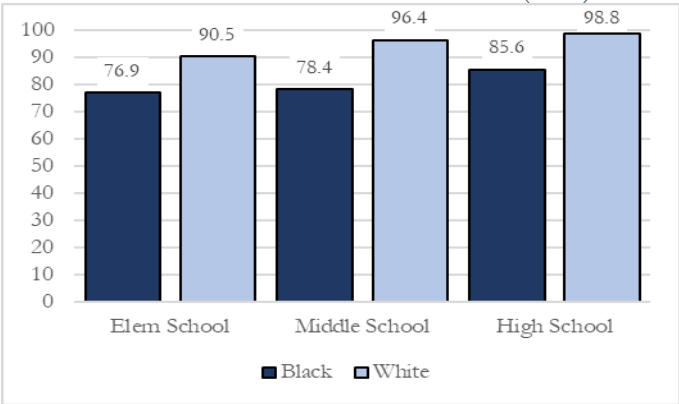
BLACK STUDENT ACCESS TO COUNSELORS

There are multiple ways to define access to counselors. One definition is enrollment in a school that employs at least one counselor a for at least part of the school day. Another definition is enrollment in a school that employs a full-time counselor. Other definitions examine the ratio of students to counselors in a school. The American School Counselors Association recommends a ratio of no more than 250 students per one counselor to ensure all students receive adequate time with their counselor. Because so few schools meet this recommendation, other definitions rely on other ratios such as 500 to 1 or 750 to 1.

In this brief, we use three measures of access to counselors: (1) the percentage of students enrolled in schools with at least one counselor at the school at least part of the day; (2) the percentage of students enrolled in schools with a 250:1 student-counselor ratio, and (3) the percentage of students enrolled in schools in schools with a 500:1 student-counselor ratio.

As shown in Figure 1, a far lower percentage of Black than white students were enrolled in schools with a counselor. Indeed, the gaps were 13.6 percentage points at the elementary school level, 18 percentage points in middle schools, and 13.2 percentage points in high schools.

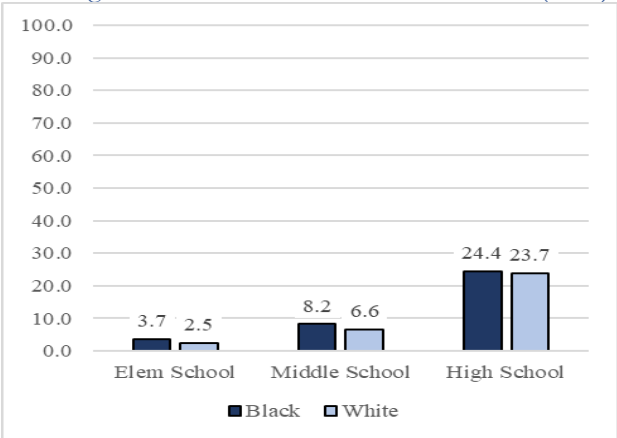
Figure 1: Percentage of Black and White Students Enrolled in Schools with a Counselor (2018)



Data Source: Authors’ analysis of PDE employment data from the PDE website <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/ProfSupPers/Pages/default.aspx>

As shown in Figure 2, there is little difference between the percentages of Black and white students enrolled in schools with the recommended 250:1 student-counselor ratio. But note that very few elementary or middle school students of either race are enrolled in schools that meet this recommendation. At the high school level, about 24% of both Black and white students were enrolled in schools that met the recommended 25:1 student-counselor ratio.

Figure 2: Percentage of Students Enrolled in Schools Meeting the 250:1 Student to Counselor Ratio (2018)

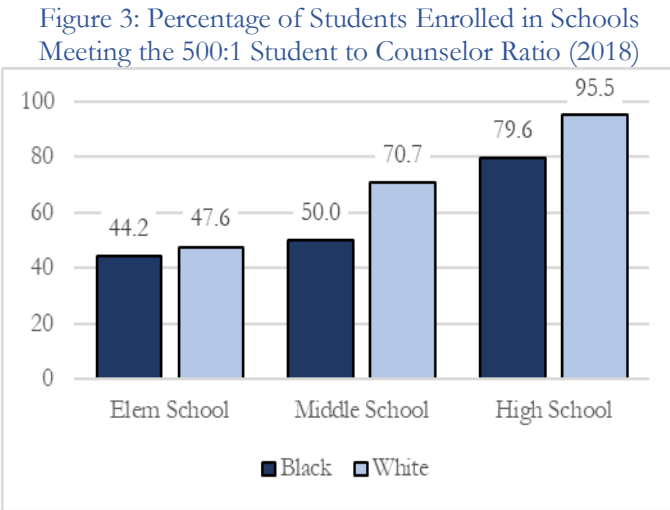


Data Source: Authors’ analysis of PDE employment data from the PDE website <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/ProfSupPers/Pages/default.aspx>

When examining the percentage of Black and white students enrolled in schools meeting a less restrictive 500:1

student-counselor ratio, we find larger differences between the two groups of students as shown in Figure 3.

The most substantial gap was at the middle school level, with nearly a 21 percentage point difference between Black and white students. At the high school level, the gap was 15.9 percentage points while the elementary school level gap was 3.4 percentage points.

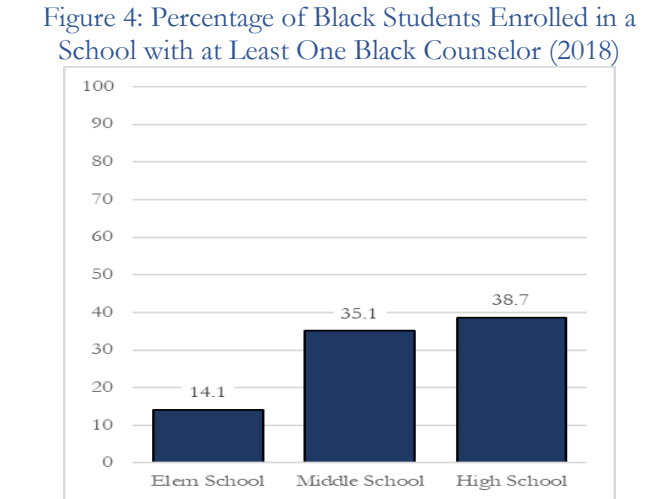


Data Source: Authors’ analysis of PDE employment data from the PDE website <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/ProfSupPers/Pages/default.aspx>

These findings are similar to those from a Research for Action (RFA) analysis of national data from 2015-16.<sup>24</sup> RFA also found most states have smaller Black-white gaps in access to school counselors than Pennsylvania.<sup>24</sup>

**BLACK STUDENT ACCESS TO BLACK COUNSELORS**

As shown in Figure 4, only 14.1% of Black elementary school students had access to a Black counselor while 35.1% of Black middle school students and 38.7% of Black high school students had access to a Black counselor. Thus, the vast majority of Black students in Pennsylvania were enrolled in schools without even a single Black counselor. Given the recent research on the importance of providing Black students access to a Black counselor, these results are troubling.



Data Source: Authors’ analysis of PDE employment data provided by PDE to Dr. Ed Fuller

**SUMMARY FOF FINDINGS**

Our analyses show Black students in Pennsylvania are less likely to be enrolled in a school with at least one counselor, are less likely to be enrolled in schools with smaller student-counselor ratios, and unlikely to have access to even one Black counselor. Research suggests this lack of access has negative effects on the academic and non-academic outcomes for Black students, including enrolling in college.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Our primary policy recommendation is for the Pennsylvania legislature to mandate that every school employ a full-time counselor and that all schools—especially high schools—maintain a student-counselor ratio of, at the most, 500 to 1. For schools on the state’s targeted assistance list, schools should be required to have a student-counselor ratio of no more than the recommended 250 to 1. This, of course, will require a greater fiscal investment in K-12 schools by the Legislature.

Because counselors are typically former teachers, the state should continue efforts to increase the racial/ethnic diversity of teachers in the Commonwealth. Some policies that would complement existing efforts would include: (1) ensuring access to affordable and high-quality early education; (2) adequately and equitably funding PK-12 education; (3) providing scholarships and/or loan forgiveness programs for students of Color to enter teacher preparation programs.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Our analyses make crystal clear that Black students in Pennsylvania have less access to school counselors than white students. Moreover, the majority of Black students do not have access to a Black counselor. Given the strong research evidence on the academic and non-academic benefits of having access to a counselor—particularly in times of trauma such as in our current times—the Commonwealth must take action to ensure all students have access to school counselors.

**Suggested Citation**

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**Penn State Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis (CEEPA)**

This brief is part of the CEEPA Policy Briefs Series that provides evidenced-based, peer-reviewed analysis of important educational issues in Pennsylvania and across the US. Dr. Ed Fuller is the Executive Director and Dr. Matt Kelly is an Associate Director.

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- <sup>24</sup> See Research for Action Data Dashboard at <https://www.researchforaction.org/educational-opportunity/state-snapshots/>