

Research Brief 2023 – 3:

Examining Inequities: Black Student Access to Counselors in Pennsylvania

Ed Fuller, PhD and Zoë Mandel, PhD

Introduction

While evidence suggests all student groups are experiencing an increase in mental health issues, Black students have experienced fairly [significant increases](#) in depression, anxiety, and suicide. Fortunately, Black students are actually more likely to [seek out assistance](#) from a counselor and are also [more likely to benefit](#) from the help of a counselor, [especially a Black counselor](#). 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.

School counselors help address students' mental health, socio-emotional, and academic needs. This is particularly important for Black students, many of [who live in poverty](#) and experience [racism](#) on a daily basis, both of which can affect mental health and other student outcomes. Yet, in Pennsylvania, schools are [not mandated](#) to provide students with a counselor or meet a specific student-counselor ratio.

Despite this greater importance, we find that Black students in Pennsylvania have less access to school counselors than their white peers and, moreover, 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.

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Importance of Counselors

Recent research concludes **counselors play a critical role in the educational experiences of students, providing resources that improve student [mental health](#), [academic achievement](#), [student attendance](#), [student behavior at school](#), and [post-secondary readiness](#)**. More specifically, 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.

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Most recently, Mulhern found that counselors have a **causal effect** on these outcomes-- meaning counselors have an independent effect on students apart from other factors.

In addition, school counselors help to address the social and personal factors that may impede a student's academic success such as feelings of belongingness, academic and educational aspirations, self-efficacy, and social identities. ¹⁴ This is particularly true for Black students who are consistently subjected 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. ^{15,16} 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.

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. This is particularly important for Black students who are substantially [less likely to be placed into Advanced Placement classes](#) when compared to their white peers. Even more troubling, recent data reveals that many Pennsylvania school districts are [twice as likely to suspend Black students](#). Increasing access to Black counselors could significantly reduce these negative outcomes for Black students. Furthermore, because school counselors often encourage students to attend colleges based on their own experiences, Black school counselors are uniquely positioned to advocate for [post-secondary enrollment](#), including [attendance at Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#).

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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.

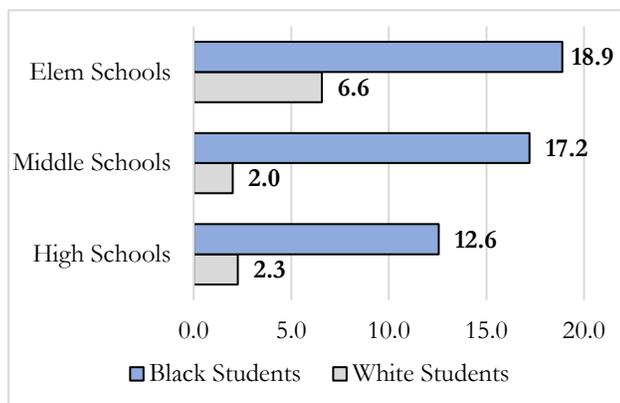
Barriers to Student Access to School Counselors

Many factors contribute to the accessibility of school counselors. In prior years, reduced school budgets have required many school counselors to [serve more than 1,000 students](#), well beyond the recommended 250:1 ratio. Increasing counselor caseloads have consistently been found to have a detrimental impact on high school graduation rates, selectivity of college attended, and post-secondary completion. In addition, 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](#).

Black Student Access to Counselors

As shown in **Figure 1**, a far greater percentage of Black students than white students were enrolled in schools *without* a counselor. Indeed, the gaps were 12.3 percentage points at the elementary school level, 15.2 percentage points in middle schools, and 10.3 percentage points in high schools. Thus, Black students were more likely than their white peers to be enrolled in a school without any counselor. This difference is partially explained by the greater enrollment of Black students in charter schools which are less likely to employ a counselor.

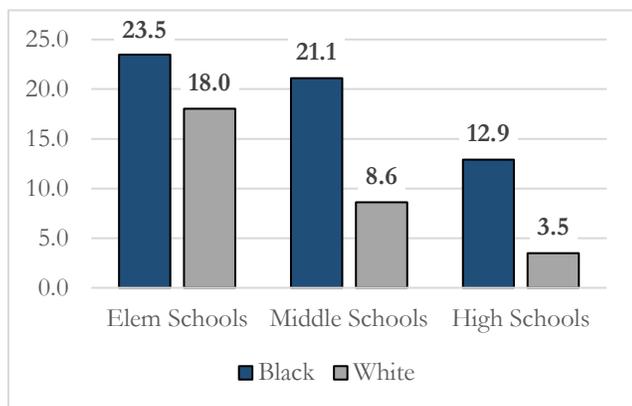
Figure 1: Percentage of Black and White Students Enrolled in Schools without Any Counselor (2022)



Data Source: Authors' analysis of PDE employment data and Future Ready Index data from the PDE website

Figure 2 shows the percentages of students enrolled in schools *without* a full-time (FT) counselor. While the gaps between Black and white students were not nearly as large as the gaps between Black and white student access to any counselor, the gaps at the middle- and high- school levels were still rather large.

Figure 2: Percentage of Black and White Students Enrolled in Schools without a Full-Time Counselor (2022)

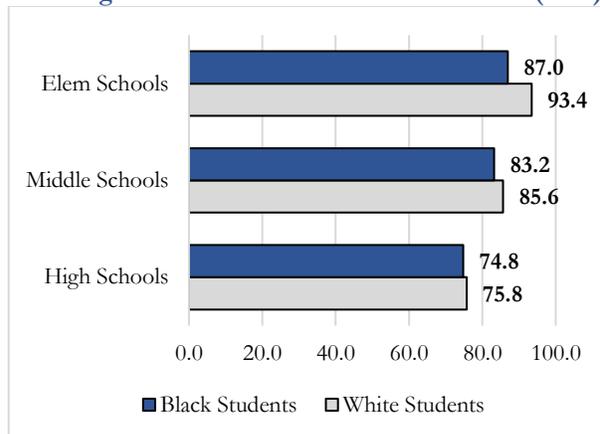


Data Source: Authors' analysis of PDE employment data and Future Ready Index data from the PDE website

While the gaps between Black and white students were not nearly as large as the gaps between Black and white student access to any counselor, the gaps at the middle- and high- school levels were still rather large. Specifically, the gap between Black and white students *without* access to a FT counselor was greater than 12 percentage points at the middle school level and slightly more than nine percentage points at the high school level.

As shown in **Figure 3**, there is little difference between the percentages of Black and white students enrolled in schools meeting the recommended 250:1 student-counselor ratio at any school level. The greatest difference was at the elementary school level where white students were actually slightly less likely than Black students to be enrolled in a school that did not meet the recommended 250:1 student-counselor ratio. Note, however, that very few students of either race were enrolled in schools that meet the recommended level. For example, at the high school level, only about 24% of both Black and white students were enrolled in schools that met the recommended 25:1 student-counselor ratio.

Figure 3: Percentage of Students Enrolled in Schools Meeting the 250:1 Student to Counselor Ratio (2022)

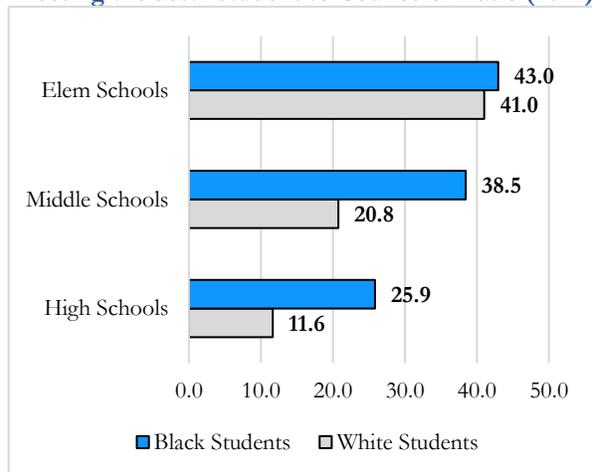


Data Source: Authors' analysis of PDE employment data and Future Ready Index data from the PDE website

When examining the percentage of Black and white students enrolled in schools meeting a less restrictive 500:1 student-counselor ratio, we found larger differences between the two groups of students as shown in **Figure 4**.

The most substantial gap was at the middle school level, with nearly an 18 percentage point difference between Black and white students. At the high school level, the gap was about 14 percentage points while the elementary school level gap was just two percentage points. Thus, Black students in secondary schools were more likely than their white peers to be enrolled in a school not meeting a 500:1 student-counselor ratio.

Figure 4: Percentage of Students Enrolled in Schools Meeting the 500:1 Student to Counselor Ratio (2022)

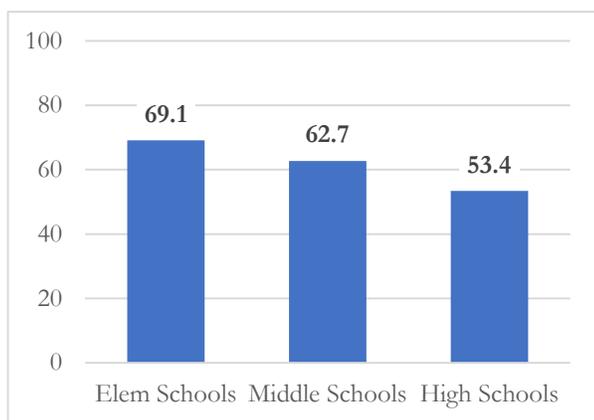


Data Source: Authors' analysis of PDE employment and Future Ready Index data provided from PDE website.

Black Student Access to Black Counselors

Figure 5 documents the percentage of Black students enrolled in a school that does not employ any Black counselors. Across all three school levels, the majority of Black students in Pennsylvania were enrolled in schools without a single Black counselor. Lack of access to a Black counselor was greatest at the elementary school level where 69% of Black students were enrolled in schools without any Black counselor. The lowest percentage was at the high school level. But even here, 53% of Black students did not have access to a Black counselor. Given the recent research on the importance of providing Black students access to a Black counselor, these results are troubling.

Figure 5: Percentage of Black Students Enrolled in a School without at Least One Black Counselor (2022)

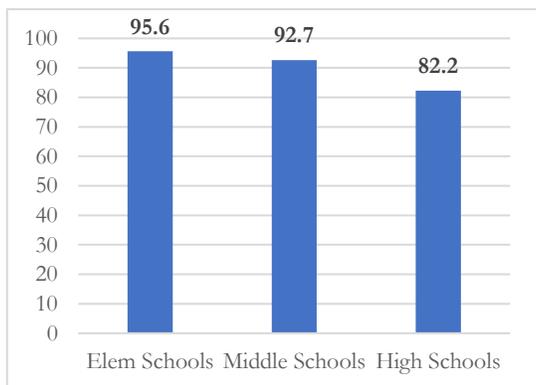


Data Source: Authors' analysis of PDE employment and Future Ready Index data provided from PDE website.

Access to Counselors for Black Male Students

Finally, **Figure 6** documents the percentage of Black male students without access to a Black male counselor by school level. As shown below, nearly all Black male students in elementary schools and middle schools in Pennsylvania do not have access to a Black male counselor. At the high school level, about 82% of Black male students do not have access to a Black male counselor. Given that Black male students are most likely to be ensnared in school discipline measures and least likely to enroll in college, the lack of access to a Black male counselor is problematic.

Figure 5: Percentage of Black Male Students Enrolled in a School without at Least One Black Male Counselor (2022)



Data Source: Authors' analysis of PDE employment and Future Ready Index data provided from PDE website.

Summary of 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 Recommendations

Our primary policy recommendation is for the General Assembly 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 General Assembly.

Because many counselors are former teachers, policymakers should continue efforts to increase the racial/ethnic diversity of teachers in the Commonwealth. This includes supporting existing efforts such as those presented by #PANeedsTeachers and creating new strategies to recruit and retain educators of Color. 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 show 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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Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis

This brief is part of the CEEPA Research and Policy Brief 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.

