

Access to Books and School Librarians in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Introduction

While there is not voluminous evidence about the relationship between access to librarians and student achievement, the extant research does suggest a positive relationship such that students that have access to a school library staffed by a qualified librarian tend to have greater achievement as well as growth in achievement, even after controlling for other factors (Krashen, Lee, & McQuillan, 2012; Lance, & Hofschire, 2012; Lonsdale, 2003; Subramaniam, Ahn, Waugh, Taylor, Druin, Fleischmann, & Walsh, 2015). Moreover, this finding is strongest for students living in poverty since they tend to have less access to books at home and increasingly have less access to books through public libraries (Krashen, 2010; Park & Yau, 2014; Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). Further, Constantino (2005) notes that many students in affluent communities have access to more books than students living in poverty have access to through all sources in aggregate. Finally, access to libraries and librarians has also been found to be positively associated with children engaging with literature, developing hobbies, and developing social skills (Jones, 2009).

Data and Methods

In this study of access to books and librarians in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I examine the percentage of students by racial/ethnic group with access to books at home and to a school librarian. The first analysis examines the percentages of 4th- and 8th- grade students reporting having access to selected ranges of books at home for Black, Hispanic, and White students. This data are from the 2014-15 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Students are sampled in such a way that the results are representative of all 4th grade and 8th grade students in Pennsylvania.

With respect to access to a school librarian, I assess the percentage of students by student subgroup enrolled in a school that employs any librarian, regardless of whether or not the librarian is a part-time or full-time librarian. To conduct this part of the study, I used employment data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) website and student enrollment data by race/ethnicity from the Elementary and Secondary Information System (ELSI) from the US Department of Education. Unfortunately, PDE does not provide the number of students by racial/ethnic group for each school in Pennsylvania. PDE does send this information to the US Department of Education which makes the data available through ELSI. The latest year for which this data is available is 2014-2015, thus the results below are for the 2014-15 academic year.

Findings

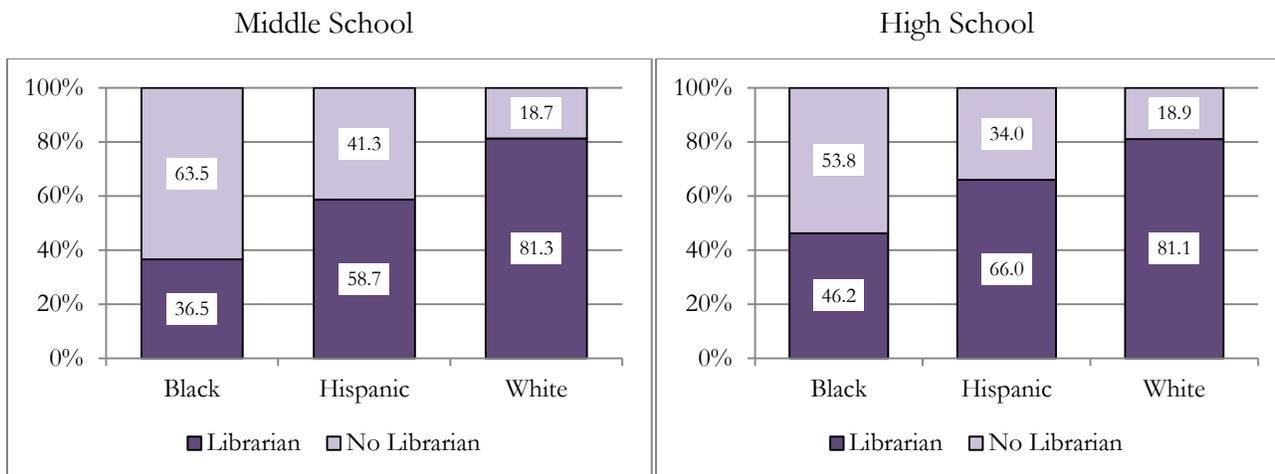
I divide the findings into two sections. The first section documents the percentages of students reporting access to books at home. The first section documents student perceptions of access to books in their home by student race/ethnicity. The data is only available for 4th grade and 8th grade students. The second section uses the PDE employment data to document access to librarians and full-time librarians.

Access to Books at Home

As shown in Figure 1, White students report a far greater number of books in their homes than either Black or Hispanic students. For 4th grade students, greater than 50% of Black and Hispanic students reported having fewer than 26 books in their home while only 19% of White students reported having so few books. In contrast, 42% of White students reported having greater than 100 books at home while only about 17% of Black and Hispanic students reported having so many books.

For 8th grade students, greater than 55% of Black and Hispanic students reported having fewer than 26 books at home as compared to only 27% of White students. At the other end of the spectrum, 34% of White students reported having greater than 100 books at home compared to about 15% of Black and Hispanic students.

Figure 3: Percentage of Middle School and High School Students with Access to a Librarian, by Student Race/Ethnicity (2015)

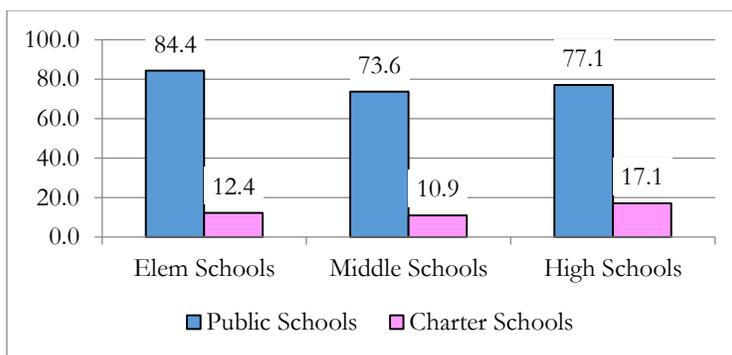


Conclusion

Unfortunately, Black and Hispanic students are less likely than their White peers to have access to a substantial number of books at home and are also less likely than their White peers to have access to a school librarian. In particular, Black students in middle schools and high schools are substantially less likely than White students to be enrolled in a school with a librarian. ***Specifically, the majority of Black students in Pennsylvania middle schools and high schools do not have access to any librarian, much less a full-time librarian.***

One must conclude, then, that the Pennsylvania students most in need of having access to a librarian are the least likely to actually have access to a librarian. This result stems largely from two inter-related factors. First, the rapid and dramatic expansion of charter schools in Pennsylvania urban areas reduces access to librarians since very few charter schools employ a librarian. Indeed, as shown in Figure 4, the majority of students enrolled in traditional public schools have access to a librarian while only a very small percentage of students enrolled in charter schools have access to a librarian.

Figure 4: Percentage of Students Enrolled in Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools with Access to a Librarian by School Level (2015)



Second, in a forthcoming study, I show that schools with greater fiscal resources are more likely to employ a librarian and, thus, provide their students with access to a librarian.

Given the research on the importance of access to a library and librarians and the results of this study, ***the legislature should ensure that all schools in the Commonwealth provide students with access to a library and a librarian so that all students—particularly students of color—have the opportunity the type of access to books that all children deserve.***

References

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