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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *School Counseling to Close Opportunity Gaps*, by Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy.

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# Opportunity Gaps

## Our Ultimate Challenge

Crystal, a ninth-grade Black student in an urban school district, wrote the following short essay in response to the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

*I'm not sure. One of my teachers says that I should go to a cosmetology school. She says that girls like me do well in cosmetology. But I don't know. I want money like Beyonce and I want to make a difference. My friends say that we can make videos and get lots of money. I'm good at videos. I get ok grades (3.0 average) in all of my classes and one teacher told me in 4th grade that I was smart. My cousin said that I should go to the community college so that I can get a job in a office. I thought about dropping out and just working on videos and stuff. I guess I just don't know what I want to be when I grow up.*

At Crystal's high school, there are three school counselors for 1,800 students (a 1 to 600 counselor-to-student ratio). Crystal's school is considered a high-minority/high-poverty school; thus, a majority of its students will be first-generation college students. Twenty percent of Crystal's classmates met ninth-grade reading/literacy standards on the state assessment and 10% of them met state mathematics standards, 4% met writing standards, and 3% met state science standards. There are few advanced (e.g., Advanced Placement [AP]) courses offered at her high school but students are heavily recruited by the local community college. Last year, the graduation rate at Crystal's high school was 72%; if Crystal is one of those 72% who graduate, chances are that she will not have the credits or skills necessary to get a job in her city nor will she have the required courses she needs to apply to the local four-year public university. Based on data,

Black women who graduate from her high school go on to either work or community college; even those with Crystal’s grades do not apply for scholarships to four-year institutions. Unfortunately, Crystal’s lack of options for career exploration and college information is not uncommon among her ninth-grade friends. Crystal has real potential, but she is unaware of options for her future. For snapshots of high school dropout rates by state, ethnicity, and gender, see Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 below.

Another ninth-grade student, Erin, attends a high school 25 miles from Crystal’s school in a more affluent white suburban neighborhood. Her school, with an enrollment of 825, has three school counselors and a college counselor

**TABLE 1.1 States in Which Status Dropout Rates for Black and Hispanic 16- to 24-Year-Olds Are Higher Than, Not Measurably Different From, or Lower Than the Status Dropout Rate for White 16- to 24-Year-Olds; 2013-2017**

STATUS DROPOUT RATE FOR BLACK YOUTH			
Higher than the rate for white youth	Not measurably different from the rate for white youth	Lower than the rate for white youth	Not available/ does not meet reporting standards
AL, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, FL, GA, IL, IN, IA, KS, LA, MD, MI, MN, MA, MO, NE, NV, NJ, NY, NC, OH, OK, PA, SC, TN, TX VA, WA, WI	DE, KY, NM, OR, RI, SD, UT, WV	None	AK, HI, ID, ME, MT, NH, ND, VT, WY
STATUS DROPOUT RATE FOR HISPANIC/LATINX YOUTH			
Higher than the rate for white youth	Not measurably different from the rate for white youth	Lower than the rate for white youth	Not available/ does not meet reporting standards
AL, AZ, AR, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, ID, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, NE, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, ND, OH, OK, OR, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, WA, WI, WY	AK, HI, ME, MT, WV	None	VT

**NOTE:** *Status dropouts* are 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed a high school program regardless of when they left school. People who have received GED credentials are counted as high school completers. Status dropout rate gaps between white students and Black and Hispanic students in Washington, DC could not be calculated because the dropout rates for white students were suppressed in Washington, DC.

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2013-2017.

**TABLE 1.2 Percentage of High School Dropouts (Status Dropouts) Among Persons 16-24 Years Old by Gender and Race, 2014-2019**

YEAR	TOTALS				MALE			FEMALE		
	ALL RACES	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC
2014	6.5	5.2	7.4	10.6	5.7	7.1	11.8	4.8	7.7	9.3
2015	5.9	4.6	6.5	9.2	5.0	6.4	9.9	4.1	6.5	8.4
2016	6.1	5.2	6.2	8.6	5.8	8.2	10.1	4.6	4.3	7.0
2017	5.8	4.6	5.7	9.5	5.0	7.0	11.5	4.3	4.4	7.4
2018	5.7	4.5	5.8	9.0	5.1	6.0	10.4	3.8	5.6	7.5
2019	5.2	4.5	5.6	7.5	5.3	6.6	7.8	3.8	4.6	7.1

**NOTE:** *Status dropouts* are 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and who have completed a high school program, regardless of when they left school. People who have received equivalency credentials, such as the GED, are counted as high school completers.

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2013-2017.

(a 1 to 275 counselor-to-student ratio). Erin's school was considered a "blue ribbon school" last year because 50% of its senior class had taken at least two AP courses by graduation. Erin's uncertainty about the future is similar to Crystal's; however, Erin's aspirations are nurtured through internships and work experiences created by her teachers and counselors. Erin's chances for realizing her dreams are not as slim as Crystal's. At Erin's school, students receive in-school tutoring and test-taking support, and many of the parents provide college application support for their students, starting in tenth grade. Ninety-seven percent of Erin's ninth-grade class met reading standards and 96% met math standards. Eleventh-grade students in Erin's high school had an average ACT score of 24.3; 87% of the students met state standards in reading, 89% met standards in mathematics, 84% met standards in writing, and 89% met standards in science. The high school graduation rate was 98% last year. And 40% of last year's graduating class went to the local four-year public university. Although undecided about her career, Erin (also with a 3.0 grade point average [GPA]) will be well on her way to meeting her life's goals.

As Crystal enters tenth grade and prepares for her future, she will likely experience a trail of activities designed to help her *survive* high school, whereas Erin will experience activities designed for her to *thrive*. Crystal's high school journey is already characterized by roadblocks and mishaps while Erin's journey is full of joy and validating moments in which she is surrounded by people who believe in her abilities. That is not to say that Crystal will not succeed, but she will need educators who believe in her, and she will need to have fortitude, resolve, and a network of support, faith, and good fortune. She will certainly need more opportunities in school than she has now. Without additional intervention from the educational system, educators, and community, Crystal is far more likely to have a series of jobs but not a career. And, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the dramatic shifts in schooling have exacerbated prospects for opportunities for high school students like Crystal. She will likely have experienced personal loss, disrupted support networks, and inadequate academic support due to COVID-19.

The disparities between Crystal's and Erin's stories are all too familiar and can be echoed across the United States. Crystal's and Erin's disparate experiences represent what we think of when we think of *opportunity gaps*. The lack of opportunity creates gaps or extreme disparities among students of different racial groups, students who live in low-income, impoverished communities, and students who live in affluent, middle- to high-income communities. Education injustice is not new, and many educators have attempted to address it by tweaking school and classroom practices here and there. Nevertheless, the disparities persist because we fail to intentionally make bold changes to policies and practices that perpetuate the unevenness of how we educate children and, more importantly, to our uneven belief system about which groups of students matter!

## SCHOOL COUNSELING AND EDUCATION DISPARITIES

Most school counselors would say that they are doing all they can do to help students like Crystal. And there is no shortage of well-meaning school counselors. School counselors, by and large, report that they are concerned about education disparities and believe that they are doing everything they can to close gaps in opportunities. One missing link, however, is that many school counselors are not trained in nor have the knowledge of the root causes of racial injustices in education. In most cases, school counselors will know how to invite Crystal's parents/guardians to participate in school events, how to work with Crystal in a small group to develop resumés, and how to counsel Crystal about peer relationships. However, school counselors are rarely prepared to challenge Crystal's teachers regarding their low expectations of Black and Latinx students or to advocate for policy changes that will ensure that all students have access to academic support for college-track courses. These are the types of counselor activities that are needed to ensure Crystal's success and her ability to persevere and overcome obstacles to achieving her dreams. As a professional school counselor, counselor educator, and university administrator with extensive background in systems change, I believe that we will not move the "equity needle" until school counselors change the framework from which they work. This book is a plea to the school counseling profession to rise up and restructure school counseling programs to directly and intentionally disrupt systems and policies that have failed students like Crystal.

## IDENTITY LABELS

Throughout history, dehumanizing names and refusal to manipulate language to refer to adults of color (e.g., Mr., Mrs., Dr., Professor) have perpetuated ideas about which groups are inferior and which are superior. For these reasons, the decision about the capitalization of Black and Brown in this book was essential to address. "Black" and "Brown" will be capitalized in the text and these terms will be used to describe the unified and shared oppression and political interests of people of African descent, Latinx and Hispanic origins, Asian origins, and Indigenous populations. In some places, *people of color* or *students of color* will be utilized to describe Black and Brown people. In June 2020, AP News changed its usage rules to capitalize the word *Black* when used in the context of race and culture but will continue its practice of not capitalizing "white." *The New York Times* followed suit and has now changed its policy to capitalize *Black*. In this book, the AP News standards will be utilized.

## WHERE WE HAVE BEEN, WHERE WE ARE, AND WHERE WE ARE HEADED

Systemic racism has a long history in U.S. public education, stemming from the country's long-standing history of racist practices, from the enslavement of Africans during the pre-Civil War period to overpolicing in Black and Brown communities

in the 21st century. In the 1930s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) focused on dismantling racially segregated public schools, and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) became one of the most consequential legal judgments centering on school segregation. However, it would take many years and intense resistance before all public schools were desegregated.

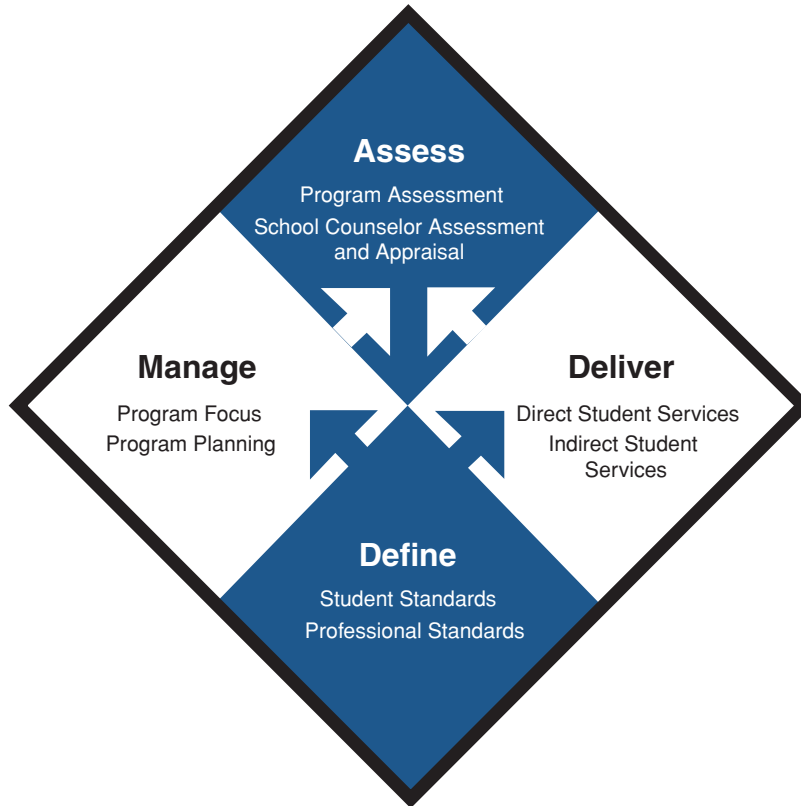
In addition to desegregation resistance, many states enacted overt methods and policies that further segregated students. Black children in redlined neighborhoods were barred from accessing schools in white neighborhoods. And even though redlining was banned in 1968 by the Fair Housing Act, redlined neighborhood schools still experience segregation via less taxpayer funding for education as a result of lower property values. Today, two out of three Black, Latinx, and Native American students attend schools that are classified as “high minority,” and those schools are funded well below their suburban counterparts. While *Brown v. Board of Education* was a landmark decision for education in the U.S., it was ultimately unsuccessful in fully integrating schools and creating equal education for all.

For many years, school counselors have, to some extent, been a part of the perpetuation of educational inequalities in schools by supporting damaging student discipline systems, harboring low expectations, denying the culture and history of oppressed populations, and most importantly, by denying students the opportunity to enter or remain in academic tracks that lead to successful postsecondary opportunities. Although the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has professed a commitment to admonishing racism and bias in the profession, there is still an urgent need for school counselors to act on it.

ASCA’s National Model recommends that school counselors organize their programming along four school counselor behaviors: define, manage, deliver, and assess (see the diagram in Figure 1.1 below). In its fourth edition, the current ASCA National Model emphasizes accountability, school counselor competence, mindsets and behaviors for student success, and ethical standards. Also included in the National Model are guidelines for the delivery of counseling services (e.g., direct student services, indirect student services) and an emphasis on program evaluation and assessment. Neither the National Model nor the recognition attached to the model (e.g., Recognized ASCA Model Programs [RAMP]) specifically require that school counselors dismantle and disrupt systems of oppression, such as structural racism, that ultimately cause long-standing gaps in student outcomes. Without a mandate, school counselors will continue to tweak their programs but avoid bold overhauls of their existing programs.

In recent years, ASCA has attempted to respond to racial injustice through the offering of additional resources for school counselors and a Standards in Practice statement. However, dismantling racist counselor practices is not explicit. While the mention of racism in ASCA materials is important, the absence of an intentional focus on correcting long-standing racist policies and practices is disheartening.

**FIGURE 1.1** ASCA National Model Diagram



**SOURCE:** Reprinted with permission from the ASCA.

Students like Crystal who will not be adequately served by school counselors because of systemic and structural policies that subject Black girls to harsher discipline, low teacher expectations, and lack of educational opportunities will still be underserved. This is where this book will help. What else do school counselors need to do *beyond* the ASCA National Model to help all students achieve and thrive?

In this book, the emphasis on an antiracist approach to school counseling is offered as a complementary construct to social justice–focused school counseling. Amid the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color and continued racial injustice in schools, taking stock of school counselors’ roles in ensuring the development of antiracist schools is warranted. According to a recent survey conducted by EdWeek Research Center (2020), 84% of teachers want to teach from an antiracist perspective but only 14% feel they are well-equipped to do so. In a similar fashion, school counselors, by and large, want to serve and nurture all students from an antiracist perspective, yet they have few resources for improving their practice. This book offers an antiracist, socially just framework from which school counselors must work to fully see the humanity and potential of every student.



## THE POWER OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

School counselors must assume the power that they have in schools, power that enables them to either dampen the dreams of students or help them to realize their dreams. As evidence, I have heard the following statements from adults:

- “My counselor said that I would never get into college . . . that’s why I never applied. I wish I hadn’t listened to her.”
- “My counselor really believed in my ability. If it hadn’t been for him telling me that I was capable, I probably would have ended up like my friends—hanging out and getting into trouble.”

These statements are evidence that school counselors have an enormous amount of power that, if channeled in the right direction, would help ensure that all students succeed. Research (e.g., Lapan et al., 2012) has indicated that students who have greater access to school counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs are more likely to succeed academically and behaviorally in school, particularly for students in high-poverty schools. And there’s promising research to illustrate the power of school counselors with Black and Brown students. For instance, Leon et al. (2011) found that school counseling interventions designed to be culturally and linguistically appropriate can make a significant difference in increasing academic outcomes of Latinx students.

Of course, counselors are not the only people in a school who will make important decisions about students. However, school counselors can act as an advocate for change, a social justice and antiracist strategist, and an equity leader! Again, school counselors are in a strategic position to create change through their relationships with many stakeholders. This book will propose six key functions that will align with this strategic positioning.

## OPPORTUNITY GAPS VERSUS ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

As mentioned previously, education disparities based on race and income continue to plague the U.S. On a variety of measures, such as high school completion, college participation, Advanced Placement course enrollment, and standardized achievement tests, Black and Brown students and low-income students have significantly lower rates of academic attainment. This gap has become more widely known as the “achievement gap” and denotes when groups of students with relatively equal ability don’t achieve in school at the same levels.

The term *achievement gap*, however, doesn’t accurately reflect the basis or reason for the gap. Actually, the term *achievement gap* is laden with deficit perspectives. For instance, some educators see the achievement gap as a result of

something that Black and Brown students and parents didn't do. Statements such as "Native American students don't value school and education" and "If only Black parents cared more about their children's homework, they would do better in school" are common when discussing achievement gaps. However, there are larger structural issues, based on racist ideas, that deny students and their parents access to opportunities that result in varying attainment and achievement levels. For school counselors, it's important to focus on correcting accessibility to opportunities—gifted education, college-prep coursework, extracurricular activities, counseling services, and information about jobs and scholarships. If school counselors focus on fixing access to opportunities, they are not furthering racist ideas but are providing the resources and opportunities for student success.

Why focus on opportunity gaps at all? One reason for widespread concern over opportunity gaps across student groups is that it involves substantial social and economic costs. Low educational achievement is associated with a greater number of health disparities, higher unemployment rates, lower earnings, higher crime rates, and a greater dependency on social services. The social costs of these outcomes can be staggering. Another reason for the widespread concern over opportunity gaps is that the racial diversity of the U.S. population is steadily growing; new statistics project that the U.S. will become "minority white" in 2045. During that year, whites will comprise 49.7% of the population, in contrast to 24.6% for Hispanics, 13.1% for Blacks, 7.9% for Asians, 3.8% for multiracial populations, and .9% who identify as "other." (Frey, 2018).

Opportunity gaps in schools are complex and parallel other societal gaps, such as income or wealth gaps, housing gaps, and criminal justice gaps. Although it is impossible to discuss the education opportunity gap without discussing these other societal disparities, opportunity gaps seem to be most prevalent in those schools that are not attending to issues of racism and racial equity.

Ever since racial categories were developed to facilitate slavery and colonial expansion in the 15th century, racism has been about building structures of unequal resource and power on notions of human difference (i.e., skin color). Social justice in education refers to a commitment to challenging social, cultural, and economic inequalities imposed on individuals arising from racism and dynamics that create differential distribution of power, resources, and privilege. Racism in schools involves the unequal measurements of intelligence, potential, and human worth based on static racial lines and accepting the distribution of unequal opportunities and the production of racially based disparities as normal. Antiracism, on the other hand, requires that educators make strategic, intentional everyday decisions to counter these ingrained tendencies. Acquiring an awareness and acknowledgment of antiracism and social justice is a logical goal in decreasing opportunity gaps. That is the focus of this book.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE GAPS

Although schools may have little influence over community factors, what goes on in schools could lessen their negative effect. For decades, policymakers, researchers, and school reformers have sought ways in which schools could address opportunity gaps. Strategies have focused on school funding, teacher quality, student motivation, school organization and management, school climate, and school accountability. More recently, however, some conservative political groups have challenged school districts to omit any activities related to racism, equity, diversity, or inclusion in schools. Essentially, these groups want to ignore the gaps. The following pages offer a look at where education inequities and opportunity gaps exist.

### AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES

The U.S. educational system is one of the most unequal in the world, and students routinely receive dramatically different learning opportunities based on their race, social status, or location. In contrast to European and Asian countries that fund schools centrally and equally, the wealthiest 10% of U.S. school districts spend nearly ten times more than the poorest 10% of school districts.

Resource disparities limit schools. Predominately white schools tend to be much better funded and have all-around better resources than predominately Black, Latinx/Hispanic, or Native American schools. The same relationship holds true for schools in low-poverty versus high-poverty areas. According to The Century Foundation (2020), the U.S. is underfunding public schools by nearly \$150 billion annually, robbing millions of children—predominantly Black, Brown, and low-income children—of the opportunity to succeed.

There is persuasive evidence that this factor contributes to opportunity gaps. For example, in the 1990s, variation in education spending largely overlapped with variation in student outcomes. In general, where states invest more in public schools, students tend to achieve higher scores and perform better (Education Trust, 2001).

### HARSH DISCIPLINE AND OVER-SURVEILLANCE OF STUDENTS

Black, Latinx, and other non-white students overwhelmingly experience what is called the “school-to-prison pipeline,” a trend in which overly punitive school discipline policies push students out of school, criminalize them, and then push them into the criminal justice system. For instance, Black students make up 15% of grade school students, yet account for 31% of law enforcement referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Recent data revealed that more than 1.5 million students across the nation attend a school with a school resource officer (SRO) or

police officer but without a school counselor! In these schools, students who have disagreements or typical problems with friends are more likely to be reported to law enforcement rather than a helping professional. Sadly, these referrals have disproportionately impacted Black and Brown students.

Research (e.g., Nance, 2017) has also shown that public schools serving primarily Black and other non-white students rely on more restrictive security, including metal detectors, locked gates, security cameras, random sweeps, and school police. The extent to which the increased security is related to race and ethnicity, rather than grounded in legitimate safety concerns, is further proven in research studies. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority—some 62%—of the occurrences of major school violence happens in schools that serve primarily white students.

## STANDARDIZED TESTS

Despite the move to decreased standardized high-stakes testing, standardized tests are still utilized by many districts and higher education institutions. The gaps between Black, Latinx, and Native American students' scores when compared to their white and Asian peers remain wide. For instance, on the 2019 fourth-grade reading test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average score of white students was 230, Latinx/Hispanic students' average score was 209, African American students' average score was 204, Asian students' average score was 237, American Indian students' average score was 204, and multiracial students' average score was 204. Among racial/ethnic groups, white and Black fourth-grade students scored lower in reading in 2019 compared to 2017; however, the 2019 average scores for white and Black fourth-graders were not significantly different from their scores a decade ago. Compared to 1998 and to 1992, average scores were higher in 2019 for all reportable racial/ethnic groups (white, Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students). In essence, the difference in standardized test scores and participation rates has remained, although students' scores have increased overall (see Figure 1.2).

College admission standardized tests have a long history of perpetuating racial inequities. Geiser and Atkinson (2013) indicated that irrespective of the quality or type of school attended, high school GPA proved the best predictor not only of freshman grades in college but also of long-term college outcomes such as cumulative GPA and four-year graduation rate. Nevertheless, the SAT and ACT are still highly utilized for college admissions, even though test-optional university admissions has become more popular and effective.

Here are examples of the racialized college admission test gap: In 2020, the average SAT score was 523 on the math section, slightly below the College Board's college readiness benchmark score of 530. The average scores for Black (454) and Latinx/Hispanic students (478) are significantly lower than those of white (547) and Asian

**FIGURE 1.2 SAT Participation and Performance by Race Class of 2020**

RACE ETHNICITY	NUMBER	PERCENT	TOTAL MEAN SAT SCORE
American Indian/Alaska Native	14,050	1%	902
Asian	223,451	10%	1217
Black/African American	261,326	12%	927
Hispanic/Latino	569,370	26%	969
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	5,107	0%	948
White	909,987	41%	1104
Two or More Races	89,656	4%	1091
No Response	125,513	6%	996

**SOURCE:** The College Board (2020). Copyright © 2020. Reproduced with permission.

students (632). The proportion of students reaching college readiness benchmarks also differ by race. Over half (59%) of white and Asian test takers met the college readiness math benchmark compared to less than a quarter of Black students and under a third of Latinx/Hispanic students. There are similar patterns for other sections of the SAT as well as for the ACT. For too long, these test scores have been taken as a proxy for individual intellectual merit when they have always correlated more highly with demographics than with academic performance. Over the last decade, race has become a higher predictor of SAT/ACT test scores than parent education or family income. With regard to income, a 2015 analysis found that students with a family income of less than \$20,000 scored lowest on the test, and those with a family income above \$200,000 scored highest—and we’re not talking about a couple of points. The average reading score for those students whose family income is below \$20,000 is 433, but the average for those with an income of above \$200,000 is 570.

The College Board, in response to the gap in SAT scores, created an “adversity score” to level the playing field. In doing so, the College Board treated adversity as a handicap to be accommodated while missing an opportunity to address a myriad of factors that make SAT scores either lower or higher than they should be for different racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic statuses. While the adversity score effort was good, it missed the mark by not acknowledging the adversity of racism and ignoring the impact of social privilege on test score gaps. As a result of backlash, the College Board dropped the adversity score.

An example of social privilege is the recent college admissions scandal in which parents paid for test proctors, hired test stand-ins, and paid for the right psychologists to sign off for their students to receive more time on the test. For wealthy parents with significant social capital, boosting their students’ SAT and ACT scores is not difficult.

## HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education in the U.S. has a long history of perpetuating racism and the systematic reproduction of white racial privilege. For hundreds of years, college/university enrollment trends have illustrated unevenness based on race. For instance, in the paper, *Separate & Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege* (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), the researchers found that since 1995, 82% of new white enrollments have gone to the 468 most selective colleges, while most enrollments for Latinx/Hispanics (72%) and Blacks (68%) have gone to two-year and four-year open-access schools.

For many years, the conversation about equity in higher education has focused on the serious gaps in access for Black and Brown students. Awareness has also been growing that getting into college is not enough; Black and Brown students are also much less likely to graduate (college persistence). There are serious inequities even among students who do graduate from college. Using federal data on the type of credentials students earn and the majors they study, research has found that compared with white students, Black and Latinx graduates are far more likely to have attended for-profit colleges and less likely to have attended four-year public or nonprofit institutions. Black and Latinx/Hispanic graduates are significantly underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields such as engineering, mathematics and statistics, and the physical sciences.

According to a study last year by the Institute for College Access and Success (2019), 54% of Black, Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander students who attended public colleges in 2016–2017 were enrolled at two-year institutions. In comparison, 23% of those attending institutions that offer master's degrees that year were people of color.

## COURSE-TAKING PATTERNS

Disparities exist in high school students' course-taking patterns. Data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)'s High School Longitudinal Study (2016) indicate that Asian students earned more high school credits in math than students of every other racial/ethnic group. Additionally, white students earned more credits (3.7 credits) than Latinx/Hispanic students (3.5 credits) and students of two or more races (3.5 credits). Asian students earned more credits in science (3.9 credits) than white students (3.4 credits), and both Asian and white students earned more credits in science than students in any other racial/ethnic group. There were no measurable differences in the number of credits earned in computer and information sciences by racial/ethnic group. White students earned more credits in engineering and technology (0.2 credits) than students in any other racial/ethnic group.

A higher percentage of white students earned their highest math credit in precalculus (22%) than Latinx/Hispanic students (17%), students of two or more races (16%), and Black students (16%). The percentage was also higher for Asian students (22%) than students of two or more races and Black students. A higher percentage of Asian students (45%) earned their highest math course credit in calculus than students of all other racial/ethnic groups. The percentage earning their highest math course credit in calculus was also higher for white students (18%) than students of two or more races (11%), Latinx/Hispanic students (10%), and Black students (6%).

Nationwide, admissions officers at selective colleges look for students who have challenged themselves academically. But not all students get the chance to build a stellar transcript. Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Native American students are less likely to attend high schools that offer advanced courses, such as physics and calculus, and they're less likely to participate in those courses when they are offered. Black and Brown students are less likely to go to high schools that offer a college-prep curriculum. About one-quarter of high schools that serve the highest percentage of Black and Latinx/Hispanic students don't even offer a second year of algebra, even though two years of algebra are usually required for college-level courses in math and science. Fewer AP courses are available to non-Asian students of color in aggregate, and even when courses are available, non-Asian students of color are less likely to take them (Quinton, 2014). Furthermore, research suggests that many students of color would have found success in AP coursework based on subsequent standardized test data (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). Thus, equitable access to AP course offerings is an important issue and is impacted by the informal pathways to AP related to identification criteria, teacher expectations, and counseling behavior (Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

The news is not all bad. Today, there are more Black and Latinx/Hispanic students taking academically rigorous courses than in the past. But researchers have found that schools in racially and linguistically diverse or high-poverty areas often offer fewer college-preparatory courses (particularly advanced-level math) to begin with. This is a problem because research has shown that student enrollment in higher-level math courses and challenging courses overall—in topics such as calculus, algebra, trigonometry, chemistry, and advanced English—in high school has strong, positive effects on a host of postsecondary educational outcomes and is associated with higher wages in adulthood, both directly and indirectly through its impact on educational attainment (Long et al., 2012; Rose & Betts, 2004).

## **TEACHER DIVERSITY, EXPERIENCE, AND EXPECTATIONS**

A growing body of literature (e.g., Holt & Gershenson, 2015) suggests that student outcomes are impacted by the demographic match between teachers and students. Studies have also indicated that white teachers expect significantly less academic

success from Black students than do Black teachers. Findings from an American University and Johns Hopkins University study (i.e., Gershenson et al., 2018) found that when a Black teacher and a white teacher evaluate the same Black student, the white teacher is about 30% less likely to predict that the student will complete a four-year college degree. White teachers are also almost 40% less likely to expect their Black students to graduate high school. By setting low expectations, teachers run the risk of perpetuating education disparities because they do not encourage Black and Brown students to follow a rigorous curriculum. On a related note, the teacher workforce is overwhelmingly white and female. The number of Black and Brown teachers is declining, whereas student diversity is increasing. See Figure 1.3 below:

Teaching experience is also an important factor when examining opportunity gaps. Low-income students and Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Native American students are more likely to be taught by less-experienced teachers than are white students. Researchers have cited this factor as one of the most critical variables for explaining opportunity gaps. There is a correlation between higher teacher certification scores and higher student achievement scores. Teachers in districts where there are high percentages of Black or Latinx students tend to have lower scores on their certification tests. For instance, in an examination of 30 studies over 15 years, Kini and Podolsky (2016) found the following:

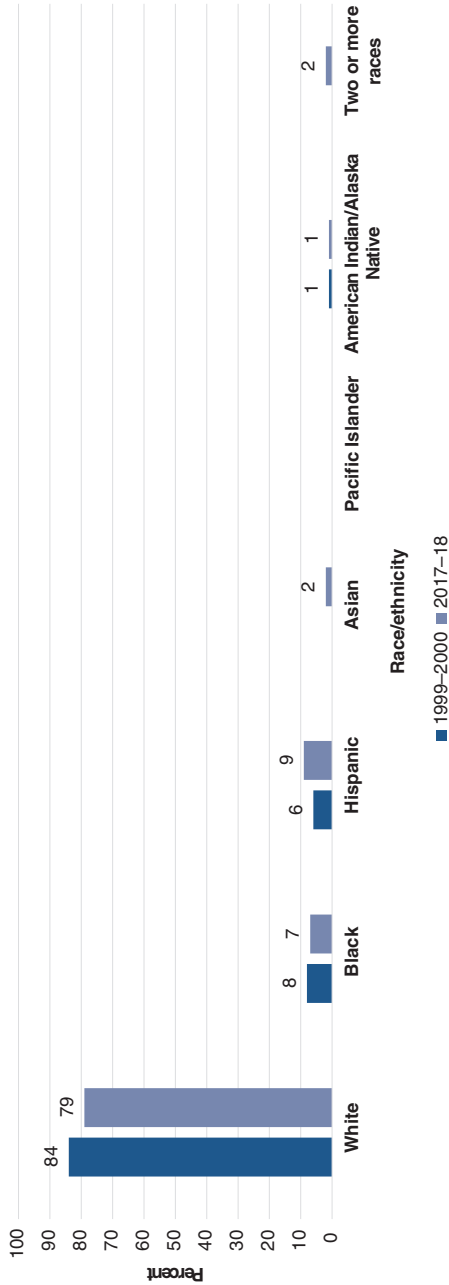
1. Teaching experience is positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher's career. Gains in teacher effectiveness associated with experience are most steep in teachers' initial years but continue to be significant as teachers reach the second (and often third) decades of their careers.
2. As teachers gain experience, their students not only learn more, as measured by standardized tests, but they are also more likely to do better on other measures of success, such as school attendance.
3. Teachers' effectiveness increases at a greater rate when they teach in a supportive and collegial working environment and when they accumulate experience in the same grade level, subject, or district.
4. More-experienced teachers support greater student learning for their colleagues and the school as a whole as well as for their own students.

## **CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AND COMPETENCE**

Educators' lack of cultural responsiveness and competence can negatively impact the education of students. Educators who lack cultural knowledge, awareness, and skills to work with diverse students are less equipped to nurture their academic and social/emotional development. Recent research findings (Larson et al., 2018;



**FIGURE 1.3 Percentage Distribution of Teachers in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools by Race/Ethnicity: School years 1999-200 and 2017-2018**



1999-2000: data not available for Asian, Pacific Islander, and Two or more races  
 2017-18: Pacific Islander percentage rounded to zero

**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Education (2000). NCES, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Public School Teacher Data File, Charter School Teacher Data File, Public School Data File, and Charter School Data File, 1999-2000; National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), Public School Teacher Data File, 2017-2018. See also Table 209.22.

**NOTE:** Data are based on a head count of full-time and part-time teachers rather than on the number of full-time-equivalent teachers. Separate data on Asians, Pacific Islanders, and persons of Two or more races were not available in 1999-2000. In 1999-2000, data for teachers who were Asian included those who were Pacific Islander, and teachers of Two or more races were required to select a single category from among the offered race/ethnicity categories (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian/Alaska Native). Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Mackay & Strickland, 2018) suggests that there is a positive relationship between teacher cultural responsiveness and student outcomes (e.g., behavior, belongingness). Howard and Terry (2011) found in their research that overall student outcomes, graduation rates, and college attendance rates increased when culturally responsive pedagogical practices were used with Black students in Oakland, CA.

In addition to the cultural responsiveness of teachers, there is also the impact of counselor cultural responsiveness and competence. With rising mental health concerns among students of racially diverse backgrounds, the lack of culturally responsive counselors is profoundly unjust. For instance, Native American children have traditionally reported the highest depression rates of any racial group, and the suicide death rate for those between the ages of 15 and 19 is more than double that of their white peers. Yet, Native American children lack access to mental health services from highly trained, culturally responsive counselors. The National Tribal Behavioral Health Agenda, a blueprint for tribal behavioral health needs and proposed policy solutions, identified a lack of culturally competent care as a key barrier to effective treatment for mental health problems among Native teens. Indian Health Service hospitals, which are more likely to provide culturally competent care, are not easily accessible; most are built on tribal lands, but only 22% of Native Americans live on reservations.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GIFTED EDUCATION**

Racial disparities in special education, including gifted education, are widespread. For decades, research has documented that Black students are disproportionately identified as having disabilities, particularly behavioral and emotional disturbances. In 2016, 12% of Black children in the U.S. received disability services, whereas 8.5% of white children received those services. The disability rate for Latinx/Hispanic students was 9.4% nationally. Conversely, a couple of recent studies have found that Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Native American students are actually less likely than similar white students to be identified as having disabilities and to obtain special education services at schools. Morgan et al. (2015) purports that his research illustrates stronger evidence that there may be bias, and white students are more likely to be identified with a disability and receive services. Hence, there are more Black and Brown students who are not receiving services.

The relationship between special education and harsher discipline is another pervasive problem in today's schools. Nationally, among secondary students with disabilities, 24% of Black students, 15% of Native American students, and 11% of white students were suspended at least once in 2017–2018. These disparities are even greater in many large districts, where the risk for suspension for Black secondary students with disabilities was well above 40% and 33% for Native American students. The disparities widen when discussing different categories of disabilities. For example, students with “emotional disturbance,” a category in

which Black students are overrepresented, have a 37% risk for being removed for discipline and the highest risk for being educated in a correctional facility.

In addition, Latinx and Asian American students are underidentified in cognitive disability categories compared to white students, raising questions about whether the special education needs of these children are being met (Losen et al., 2014). Once identified, most students of color are significantly more likely to be removed from the general education program and educated in a more restrictive environment.

Losen and Orfield (2002, pp. xv–xxxviii) report even more disturbing statistics:

- Among high school youth with disabilities, about 75% of African American students, as compared with 47% of white students, are not employed two years out of school. Three to five years out of school, the arrest rate for African Americans with disabilities is 40%, as compared with 27% for whites.
- The identification of African American students for mental retardation is pronounced in the South. Southern states constituted nearly three quarters of the states with unusually high incidence levels, where between 2.75% and 5.41% of the African Americans enrolled were labeled as mentally retarded. The prevalence of mental retardation for whites nationally was approximately 0.75% in 2001, and in no state did the incidence of mental retardation among whites rise above 2.32%.
- Poverty does not explain the gross racial disparities in mental retardation and emotional disturbance, nor does it explain disparities in the category of specific learning disability or any medically diagnosed disabilities.

Like special education, gifted education in the U.S. has embedded racial disparities. Black students make up nearly 17% of the total student population nationwide. Yet less than 10% of students identified as gifted are Black. A shocking 53% of remedial students are Black, however. This disparity across tracks is what educators call *racialized tracking*, in which Black and Brown students get sorted out of educational opportunities and are relegated to a pathway to lower socioeconomic possibilities. Sixty percent of students in gifted education are white, according to the most recent federal data, compared to 50% of public school students overall. Black students, in contrast, made up 9% of students in gifted education, although they make up 15% of the overall student population.

Many factors contribute to this gifted education disparity. Gifted education has racism in its roots. Lewis Terman, the psychologist, who in the 1910s, popularized the concept of IQ that became the foundation of gifted testing, was a eugenicist. And admissions for gifted programs tend to favor children with wealthy, educated parents, who are more likely to be white. Black students are regularly excluded from schools' conceptions of what it means to be gifted, talented, or intellectually advanced.

## ■ ■ ■ Thinking About Students With Special Needs

What is the process for identifying students for special education and gifted education at your school? Are there a disproportionate number of students of color in special education programs and underrepresentation of Black and Brown students in gifted education? If so, has your staff discussed what to do about it? What are the possible racist and biased beliefs that are driving special education and gifted education identification processes?

### THE GAPS ACROSS THE EDUCATIONAL CONTINUUM

Although opportunity gaps are typically seen as a problem affecting school-age children, gaps in opportunity happen early on. Consider, first, that not all mothers in this country have the same odds of making it through their pregnancy alive. In some places in the U.S., Black women are as much as 12 times as likely to die from childbirth as white women are (Creanga et al., 2015). Also, consider that nationally, the infant mortality rate for Black babies is more than twice as high as it is for white babies. And we know that children who grow up in poverty face disadvantages that hamper healthy development. A gap in early vocabulary development between children in poverty and their higher-income peers is evident as early as 18 months of age. Research shows that these differences have lasting effects on a child's academic success later in life.

Nationwide, early childhood education is more segregated than kindergarten and first grade, even while enrolling a similar number of students. Early childhood programs are twice as likely to be nearly 100% Black or Latinx/Hispanic, and they are less likely to be somewhat integrated (with a 10% to 20% Black or Hispanic enrollment share; Urban Institute, 2019). Studies also consistently show that low-income and Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and Native American children have already fallen behind well before they enter kindergarten. These children, as young as three years old, already perform far below average on tests of school readiness.

Early childhood education, particularly when it is high quality, is associated with higher levels of school readiness and subsequent academic achievement. Historically, children from low-income families have been less likely than their more-affluent peers to be enrolled in such high-quality programs, leaving federal government and state and local governments to invest in early childhood education options, particularly for low-income families (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Preschool is expensive, typically costing far more than other informal care arrangements. A report by Child Care Aware of America (2014) found that the average annual cost for center-based care for an infant was higher than a year's tuition and fees at a four-year public college in 31 states. Costs for center-based care vary across states and with child age. In 2013, for example, the average cost of

full-time center-based care for a four-year-old ranged from \$4,515 in Tennessee to just over \$12,320 in Massachusetts. Given the high costs, it is not surprising that the use of center-based care increases with family income.

Also, preschool attendance differs by race. For instance, Hispanic and American Indian 3- to 4-year-old children have lower enrollment rates (43% and 45%, respectively), while Asian, white, and Black children are enrolled at higher rates (56%, 50%, and 53%, respectively). These differences in early childhood educational experiences may contribute to longer-term educational and health inequities (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2019). Black children are less likely to attend amply equipped preschools with small classroom sizes and trained teachers. State budget cuts in the wake of the coronavirus could make it that much harder for children of color to enroll in quality early education programs.

## ■ ■ ■ Thinking About Barriers to Learning

Think about the challenges that many low-income families experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown (e.g., loss of family members to COVID-19, lack of healthcare, unemployment, lack of childcare, lack of internet connectivity). How do these challenges impact the education of students immediately and over time? What are some of the factors and policies that led to a disproportionate number of Black and Brown families being impacted by COVID-19? What is the role of school counselors during crisis situations when low-income and Black and Brown families are disproportionately impacted?

### COMMUNITY AND HOME FACTORS

Although school counselors have less control over what takes place in the community than in the school, there are certain factors we need to be aware of in order to do our work most effectively. If low-income students are not thriving in school, it may be due to a variety of community-based factors, such as food scarcity, lack of housing, overpolicing, and unemployment. These conditions influence students' ability to learn.

Another community factor is the legacy of racism and racist ideas that plague many communities and affect the belief that one can or cannot succeed. The belief that some children cannot learn at high levels persists, and when children believe that society does not expect them to succeed, or when they themselves believe they cannot succeed, they do poorly in school.

In general, Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Native American, and low-income children are less likely than affluent white children to have parents with high levels of educational attainment. Combined with lower family income and parents' hectic work

schedules, the extent to which parents can foster positive opportunities for learning at home is limited. Opportunities such as having access to books and computers may be more limited for racially diverse and low-income children. Finally, a family speaking a language other than English at home can also affect a child's learning opportunities.

## STUDENT FACTORS

There has been some research to indicate that students' emotional and social development contributes to their academic outcomes. For instance, research has suggested that Black students can become anxious about displaying negative racial stereotypes in their academic work. The result, researchers say, is a kind of vicious cycle in which Black students can be so worried about seeming stereotypically ungifted academically that their anxiety actually makes them perform worse than they could normally. This phenomenon has been called *stereotype threat* (Steele, 1997).

Peer pressure and identity issues have also been cited as contributing to the academic outcomes of minoritized youth. Peer pressure related to academic success has been correlated with ridicule or demeaning behaviors. However, peer pressure has been correlated with motivating students to get better grades, too. There is some dispute as to the effects of peer pressure on Black students. Some researchers (e.g., Ogbu, 1994), for example, have pointed to a phenomenon in high-minority schools whereby Black students who perform poorly actually criticize their academically successful peers for "acting white." Researchers have charged that Black students tend to idolize a youth culture that scorns academic achievement. However, other researchers (Connell et al., 1994) have argued that such a culture exerts no special power on Black students in particular; instead, they claim that Black students are no more likely to dislike or scorn school than are white students. Peer relationships and academic outcomes is an area of research that needs to be examined more deeply, given the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and other social movements that uplift the voices of minoritized youth.

The mental health of Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Native American, and other students of color is a critical factor that should not be underestimated in impacting student outcomes. Amid concentrated job losses and financial insecurity, disproportionate rates of contracting and becoming seriously ill from COVID-19, and centuries of racial injustice and anti-Black racism, the disparate mental health needs of many Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Indigenous, and nonblack people of color are exacerbated.

Anxiety, depression, and suicide are all on the rise, and victims of suicide are getting tragically younger. There has been nationwide divestment from mental health programs and many remaining programs are more punitive than restorative. Laws

such as the Florida Mental Health Act, also known as the Baker Act, can even subject students to involuntary institutionalization simply for disruptive behavior in class. The Baker Act allows law enforcement officers, school counselors, and medical personnel to petition for someone who is perceived as being a danger to themselves or others to be institutionalized for 72 hours. In Florida, the Baker Act has been invoked more than three times every school day, but little policy or practice change has been done to prevent the growing use of the Baker Act unevenly across race, gender, and income (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021).

From education to income to environment, structural racism undergirds many risk factors for mental illnesses. As a result, there are racial disparities in rates of diagnosis, treatment access, and prognosis. According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2017), not only are Black and Brown people in America less likely to have access to mental health services, but when they do receive care, it is often of lower quality than the care their white peers receive. In schools, Black and Brown students are less likely than white students to say they could reach out to a counselor if they needed mental health support (Craft et al., 2020).

Many Black and Brown students who are most at risk of COVID-19–related trauma are in schools and districts that already lacked full mental health services prior to the pandemic and risk being hardest hit by cuts due to state budget shortfalls (Education Trust, 2020). This is especially true for tribal populations, which have some of the highest rates of coronavirus cases and some of the lowest education funding. There is no one way to address Black and Brown students' mental health because there is no one mental health need for all Black and Brown students. Across racial groups, there can be vast differences in underlying causes of mental illness, social stigmas, and access to effective treatment. Understanding these differences is critical to ensure that resources are allocated in a way that will improve mental health outcomes for all students.

## **WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CLOSING OPPORTUNITY GAPS?**

The Education Trust took an initial look at student data from high-poverty schools and was able to verify that there were, in fact, schools where low-income students were significantly outperforming schools containing students from middle- to high-income backgrounds (Parrett & Budge, 2012). This analysis by the Education Trust led to numerous efforts geared toward learning about high-performing, high-poverty (HP/HP) and high-minority schools and how other schools with similar characteristics could improve.

According to the research of Parrett and Budge (2012), there are hundreds of public schools across the United States that enroll large numbers of

underachieving students who live in poverty and these schools have successfully reversed the long-standing traditions of low achievement and high dropout rates. High-poverty schools do not become high performing by chance. Chenoweth and Theokas (2011) state, “These schools do, however, have something that helps explain their success: They all have excellent school leaders.” (p. 57). Although this is not the only trait found by researchers among HP/HP schools, it is by far the most common trait that contributed to the overall success of the school. In fact, one study conducted by Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded that up to one-quarter of all school effects on achievement can be contributed to leadership.

In 2000, the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) published a study of HP/HP schools in Wisconsin (Manset et al., 2000). They found that these schools had some common characteristics. Each had more than one of the following:

1. purposeful and proactive leadership,
2. data-based decision making and program monitoring,
3. a sense of community,
4. high expectations for students,
5. staff-initiated professional development,
6. opportunities for staff interaction,
7. curriculum aligned with state standards,
8. use of local and state assessment data,
9. parent and community involvement, and
10. alternative support programs.

In addition, several other studies have identified commonalities among successful schools. One of the federal Comprehensive School Reform models, Success for All (Slavin et al., 1998) identified the following characteristics of schools that were instrumental in closing the gap:

1. leadership,
2. commitment of the entire staff,
3. extensive professional development,
4. early literacy support, and
5. data-driven instructional decision making and student monitoring.



Though this research is helpful, it is unclear how these school reform components translate to school counselor practice. In 2003, the Education Trust and MetLife Foundation established the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC) to ensure that school counselors were trained and ready to help all groups of students reach high academic standards. The Center’s initiative—the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI)—has been one of a few school reform initiatives focused on school counselors. Based on the work of the TSCI, a small number of school counselor education programs modified their training protocol to include more of an equity perspective, and aspects of their training curricula (e.g., data-driven practice, accountability, equity) were integrated into the ASCA National Model. See elements of Transformed School Counselors in Figure 1.4.

After the TSCI, the National Office of School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) was formed by the College Board to advance the equity work of school counselors, particularly related to college readiness and college going. NOSCA, with partners such as the ASCA and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASSP), tapped distinguished researchers and practitioners to gather information from surveys, case studies, in-depth interviews, and data analysis. The staff of NOSCA’s most significant contribution was the distribution of the *Eight Components of College Readiness and Counseling*, which focused on developing college readiness of those students historically underrepresented on college campuses. NOSCA ended in 2012–2013.

Although the TSCI and NOSCA provided some movement in the school counselor profession to address issues of equity, social justice, and racism, there is still much to be done. And given the recent shift in the education landscape due to the

**FIGURE 1.4** Elements of Transformed School Counselors

Counseling
Coordination of Services
Consultation
Leadership
Advocacy
Collaboration and Teamwork
Managing Resources
Use of Data
Technology

**SOURCE:** Education Trust (1997).

COVID-19 pandemic and the country’s attention to racial justice, it is time for school counselors to be more intentional and bolder in their actions to disrupt racist and oppressive policies and practices in schools. The antiracist and social justice–focused functions offered in this book will hopefully begin to fill a void in the literature and in the work of school counselors.



## Counselor in Action

Download data from your state’s Department of Education website. Choose a school in an urban, suburban, and rural district. Examine accessible student and community data, including attendance, graduation rates, college-going rates, and so on. Also search for data about each school’s community. Community and district data might include district school segregation data, special education data, gifted/talented data, unemployment rates, deaths due to COVID-19, poverty index, number of high-quality preschools, number of health care facilities, homelessness rates, and so on. Discuss the school and community data with your colleagues and uncover opportunity and access gaps as well as policies that perpetuate and maintain these gaps. What would you do to correct the gaps?

## Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think school counselors and school counseling professionals have been absent from the table when instituting new initiatives pertaining to school and policy change, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do you explain the lack of a gap between Asian American students and white students in reading and math? What does the model minority myth mean to you? How does the model minority myth influence inequities and injustices in schools?
3. In your community, what efforts are being made to close opportunity gaps between students? Write down a few efforts that come to mind. Are these efforts successful? Why or why not? Is there community resistance to overcoming opportunity gaps? Why and how does this resistance impact your school community?