

We Need Supportive Spaces That Celebrate Us: Black Girls Speak Out About Public Schools

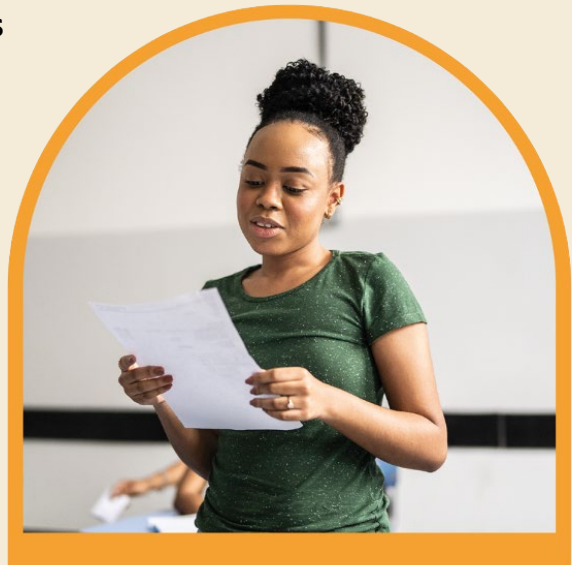
*A Companion Guide to the 2023 ELC Report**

Black Girls: A Necessary Focus

- Anti-Black racism “is any attitude, behavior, practice, or policy that explicitly or implicitly reflects the belief that Black people are inferior to another racial group.” (*definition from Center for the Study of Social Policy*) (p. 11)
- The combination of anti-Black racism and sexism means that Black girls face deeply entrenched barriers to receiving well-resourced, high-quality public education. (p. 7)
- Black girls have lived experience and expertise about conditions in their schools. They have unique knowledge, and we have an obligation to learn from them. (p. 7)
- We must prioritize Black girls if we want to create and sustain just education spaces. (p. 7)

Recommendations to Create Supportive Spaces

We partnered with student experts and youth-led and youth-serving organizations to host focus groups and feedback sessions focused on what conditions must change so that schools are responsive to Black girls’ needs. Black girls identified each of the following recommendations as an essential and overdue measure needed to create supportive school environments. The recommendations the Black girls identified are supported by student- and parent-serving organizations, research, and current best practices at the local, state, and national level.



1. Schools need to hire, retain, and support more Black teachers, administrators, and staff.

- Representation matters. A racially diverse staff has an especially positive impact on the academic success of Black students, while positively impacting all students, regardless of their racial identity. (p. 18)

* Read our full report [here](#) to learn more about the eight recommendations student experts identified to create more just education spaces and address anti-Black racism in our schools. (Page numbers listed here refer to the page numbers printed at the top of each page of the report.)

- Pennsylvania’s classrooms are shockingly unreflective of the students they serve, underscoring the urgent need for more Black teachers. During the 2020-2021 school year, 48% of school districts had no teachers of color. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has recognized this disparity and is working to correct it. (pgs. 17-18)
- A lack of Black teachers and administrators, especially Black women who share identities and may share lived experiences, leaves many Black girls feeling alone and unwelcome in school. (p. 17)
- Students observed Black teachers who experienced racism and mistreatment leaving their jobs, which students experienced as traumatic losses. (p. 17)

2. Black girls need access to supportive and affirming adults at school.

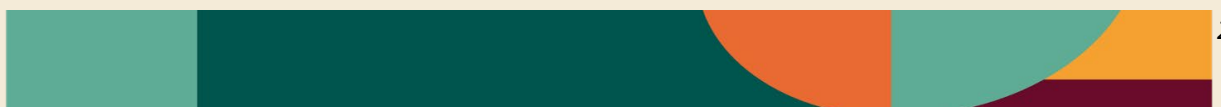
- Black girls are often denied support when they need it most, even when adults in their schools were supposed to help them. (p. 18)
- Black girls need school staff who believe in their ability to succeed and who actively take on the responsibility of supporting them at school. (p. 19)
- Black girls shared how instrumental supportive staff have been in their growth as students and people. (p. 19)

3. Schools must implement culturally responsive and affirming curriculum.

- Students need and deserve to learn about historic and current contributions of Black people who have shaped our community and world. (p. 19)
- Black girls yearn for and need curriculum that is inclusive of their identities and experiences. (p. 19)
- Black girls found that it is transformative for their learning when Black teachers use examples based in their cultural experience to explain subject matter. (p. 19)
- Teachers need access to training and tools to cover essential subject matter like anti-Black racism, discrimination, and American slavery in a way that avoids perpetuating harm or singling out Black students. (p. 19)

4. Dress and grooming codes, if used, must be fair and inclusive and must affirm students’ cultural and gender expression.

- Black girls identified the ways schools create and enforce racist and sexist dress codes. These rules make them feel unwelcome and punished for the ways their bodies look in required uniforms and for their racial, cultural, or gender expression. (p. 22)



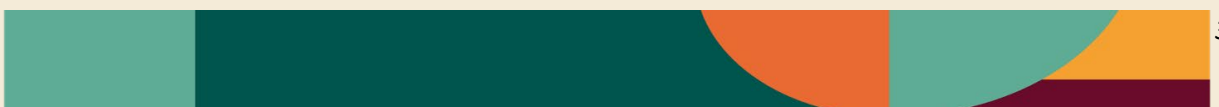
- Echoing findings well-documented in research, student experts described how the enforcement of dress codes reinforced adultification bias by sexualizing Black girls and treating them as more adult-like than their white female classmates, even when they were following the same school rules. (p. 21)
 - Adultification bias is a term that describes the misperception of Black girls as being less innocent, more sexual, more culpable for misbehavior, and more adult-like than white peers of the same age. (p. 21)
- Schools often punish and racially discriminate against Black girls for their hair texture or for wearing protective hairstyles like afros, braids, or locs in violation of students' rights. (p. 22)
- Schools must revise rules to prohibit discrimination on the basis of body shape and hair texture or protective hairstyle and affirm students' rights to express their culture and gender. (p. 22)

5. Schools must provide culturally affirming mental health supports and increase the number of school-based mental health providers who have shared lived experiences and identities with Black girls.

- The dire lack of mental health support in Pennsylvania schools is a barrier to learning. Mental health support is essential for students to thrive. (p. 24)
- 20% of Pennsylvania public schools have either no school counselor or ratios of more than 550 students per counselor. (p. 25) Black girls also reported that even if a counselor was present, the counselor focused only on academic issues, or was only available to support students after they were experiencing a mental health crisis. (pgs. 23-24)
- Students need all adults at school to proactively check in on their well-being and create opportunities to discuss in-school or out-of-school trauma. (p. 24)
- Black girls specifically called for access to mental health professionals who share their identities and experiences. (p. 24)

6. Police should be removed from schools.

- Police in school do not create safe spaces or positive school climates. The presence of school police does not make teachers feel safer nor does it change students' behavior. (p. 26)
- Police are not substitutes for resources or supports. We must invest in local communities instead of investing resources in police. (p. 27)



- Black girls are uniquely harmed by police presence in school and report being unsafe as a result. They are also more likely to attend schools with a police presence due to systemic inequities. (pgs. 25-27)
- Black girls are unfairly targeted for more aggressive and severe punishment even though they follow the rules as often as white classmates. (p. 26)
- When police are misused as disciplinarians, Black girls’ minor and age-appropriate behaviors are recast as “criminal.” These punishments then increase the likelihood that Black girls will come into contact with the police and juvenile or adult justice system. (p. 26)
- Black girls face police more often in schools because schools with more students of color and students living in poverty have many more law enforcement officers than schools that are white and well-resourced. (p. 26)

7. Schools need sufficient resources to fully educate Black girls and support their academic success.

- The majority of Black girls in Pennsylvania attend schools that are grossly underfunded and are therefore unable to provide a high-quality public education. (p. 28)
- Black and Brown students in Pennsylvania have less access to educational opportunities than Black and Brown students in other states, while white students in Pennsylvania have more opportunities than most of their peers across the nation. (p. 28)
- Black girls can point directly to the types of resources and opportunities they need in their schools to help them thrive, such as more course offerings, smaller class sizes, and access to culturally responsive mental health professionals. (p. 28)

8. Schools must adequately respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

- Due to structural inequalities, students from communities of color are less likely to have consistent internet or computer access. Technological barriers had a significant impact on the opportunities students had to learn during the pandemic. Schools must invest so that no students are getting left behind. (p. 29)

