

Asian students, staff in York Region District School Board feel 'low sense of belonging,' according to study

Awareness campaigns need to take place within the York Region District School Board community on how to report 'microaggressions, discrimination and acts of violence', according to a recent report commissioned by the YRDSB.

Increasing awareness of these incidents, and how to have them addressed, is one of the key findings of 'Naming Systemic Racism, Acknowledging Complicity, and A Commitment to Action,' a study on anti-Asian racism within the YRDSB authored by Dr. Mary Reid and Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad.

The objective of the study, according to the report, is to 'amplify the voices of Asian educators, students, staff, and community members across the YRDSB; legitimize struggles, barriers, discrimination, and racism experienced by Asian members of the YRDSB; create more equitable and inclusive school environments through commitments to action based on existing gaps identified; and identify systemic barriers faced by Asian students, educators, staff and community members, envisioning the elimination of these pervasive obstacles through a series of recommendations.'

'Sadly, systemic racism is a lived reality for Canadians with Asian heritage, culture and lineage who continue to experience microaggressions and micro-invalidations including in schools as students, parents, educators and administrators,' the study found, defining microaggressions as 'indirect and subtle forms of discrimination against members of marginalized groups. Such acts include unintentional incidents of invalidation, exclusion and otherizing. For example, asking Asian people 'where are you really from?' implies they are a foreigner and do not belong in Canada.'

The first recommendation stemming from the study, as reported by The Auroran last week, was to increase Asian representation within the school curriculum. This goes hand-in-hand with the second recommendation: methods to improve what's described as a 'low sense of belonging.' While the study says students and educators 'generally felt welcomed at school,' this sense of belonging didn't necessarily follow for Asian members of the YRDSB community.'

To foster a sense of belonging, the study recommends an annual conference or symposium to give a 'platform' to students, parents, educators, staff and community members to 'engage with various issues and topics impacting Asian identities.'

'Part of the day should be dedicated exclusively to Asian identity gatherings to facilitate mentorship opportunities and healing spaces,' said the authors, citing 'affinity groups' as a way to share concerns and opportunities throughout the year. 'The other components of the conference should be open everyone as the content, presentations and guest-speakers provide opportunities for others to learn about anti-Asian racism and how to be an ally and work in solidarity with others to dismantle all forms of oppression in schools and in the community.'

'Community agencies should also be invited to present and share the services they offer to support families. This would facilitate partnerships between schools and community agencies to create continuity of care as part of holistically supporting students and families and their unique needs within each geographical area.'

The study also recommends the creation of an online hub dedicated to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) where educators, administrators and staff can access 'leaders, speakers, educational content, elders and other community members' who will share their experiences and expertise.

'This will help people who do not know where to begin to connect with relevant people and organizations and ultimately support their local school needs,' said the authors. 'This initiative will also deepen people's understanding of intersectionality and help disrupt the notion that Asian identities are monolithic and all have the same needs.'

Working in concert with these recommendations is an effort at the start of each school year for the entire YRDSB community to

learn more about what constitutes microaggressions, discriminations, and acts of violence and how to report these acts through existing tools at the school board level.

This is critical for the Asian community as anti-Asian hate is often dismissed as a 'joke' or highlighted as a 'positive' stereotype, the report found.

One such 'positive' stereotype referenced in the report is the 'model minority myth,' defined as 'the belief that all Asians achieve universal success in their careers and in education, specifically in the field of math and science, rooted in the hard-working values they possess.'

The model minority myth was largely experienced by all participants through constant microaggressions and invalidations experienced. Significant number of incidents were shared about Asians being the model minority. The large number of references to the model minority myth gives evidence that Asian members of YRDSB struggle to be their authentic selves if they do not fit the stereotype. An educator recalled when a fellow teacher stated to them, 'Oh, I didn't know Asians knew how to dance. I thought all they knew how to do was study.' In another example, an educator explained, 'one of my co-workers who I respect dearly, tells me like, you know, when I look at Asian parents and Asian kids, they're always ahead. And this is something that I envy.' The co-worker believed they were complimenting and positively promoting Asian identities, and blatantly unaware of their bias. Sadly, feelings of shame, embarrassment, and reduced self-worth are often the consequences when Asians contradict the model minority stereotype, exacerbating their low sense of belonging.'

The YRDSB, they found, needs to review existing reporting tools on these and more aggressive incidents.

Currently, only administrators are authorized to input incidents of hate into RESOLVE (the current reporting mechanism) and Report IT is designed for reporting students' inappropriate behaviours, and not staff members. Hence, incidents involving employees at the Board are largely communicated to the principal or superintendent, making it difficult to report anonymously.

There should be an option where incidents can be reported anonymously. This would encourage greater participation and mitigate fear from reprisals. Instructions on how to navigate the platform and submit reports should be presented in various languages through translations, making it accessible to the community so that English language learners and new immigrants to the country feel supported. Once a month, different EDI policies at the district level should be highlighted and shared with all stakeholders via online newsletters and the YRDSB website.

Awareness is the key in creating an inclusive culture where everyone has a shared responsibility to improve teaching and learning conditions both within schools and in the larger community surrounding schools. At the district level, data should be collected geographically to identify schools or municipalities where there are a greater number of incidents reported. Those schools with higher incidents of harm should be surrounded with more resources and funding allocation to address the root causes of the problem. Overall, statistics both at the board level and by geography should be shared with the public through an annual report as well as the actions taken by the district. This helps to build trust with the community and ensures institutional accountability and transparency.'

Next Week: Ensuring an increase in Asian staff representation at the YRDSB.

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