

Dismantling anti-Black racism strategy based on feedback from students, parents, teachers

Black students may have been encouraged away from academic programs due to teacher bias, according to a study carried out by the York Region District School Board.

These are among the findings in a comprehensive study released last week by the Board (YRDSB) as they launched their Dismantling Anti-Black Racism Strategy.

Presented last Monday in an online presentation featuring YRDSB officials, trustees, community leaders, and consultants who led the study, the background report outlines a number of troubling barriers that have been faced every day by students and parents in getting ahead.

“While anti-Black racism in education has been well-documented, a steering committee felt it was important to ensure we heard from those in the YRDSB school community in order to understand how it manifests, specifically in this Board, so we can create a strategy that reflects the reality of the YRDSB,” said Tanna Turner of Turner Consulting, who was among the leads on the report and strategy.

“In total, almost 800 individuals participated in the conversations and provided input on the development of the strategy through online surveys, small group discussions and one-on-one telephone interviews. The themes [are] reflected in the background report and mirror what we heard over and over through our consultations, and certainly what we hear in other school boards. It reflects what research shows of the issues affecting Black students and staff throughout the education system.”

As reported in The Auroran last week, the resulting report offers six key strategies in “dismantling” anti-Black racism including normalizing conversations around anti-Black racism, “operationalizing” anti-racism, measuring inequities and progress, building organizational capacity, building capacity and commitment within York Region, and using an evidence-based approach to tackle the issue head-on.

But the background study reveals some stark realities, including the roots of anti-Black racism in Ontario's education system, racist learning environments, and previously mentioned teacher biases.

“Certainly, we heard that teachers, school administration, and other staff have biases on Black children and act on these biases to stream Black students into applied programs of study and away from academic, gifted, French immersion and other specialized programs,” said Ms. Turner. “We heard how these biases impact the discipline that Black students experience when issues occur and that Black students are more likely to be suspended and given harsher suspensions than their White and other racialized counterparts.

“We also heard that Black students often experience a racist learning environment, either because of what is or isn't included in the curriculum or the behaviours of other students, which sometimes are left unaddressed by the adults in the building. We heard about how Black History Month or school spirit days, rather than being used to celebrate the achievement of Black people and inspire Black students, instead have the impact of isolating and marginalizing them.

“Parents and community organizations also shared their experience of being dismissed, ignored or criminalized when they try to advocate for their children and the fear of how their advocacy may in fact impact their children because of the reprisal that educators and school administrators may take out on the children. We also heard from Black teachers and school administrators about how they are treated by their colleagues and the reprisal that they sometimes face when they advocate for Black students or engage in anti-racism work.”

As the YRDSB continues its work rolling out their Dismantling Anti-Black Racism Strategy, next steps include the development of the implementation plan. This work is already underway, according to Louise Sirisko, Director of Education for the YRDSB.

?Through these conversations, we continue to learn about the hurt and the harm of systemic anti-Black racism and how we, as a School Board, must do better by our students and staff. As a Board, we must focus our goal of addressing unfair outcomes and strengthening inclusive and affirming learning and working environments for Black students and staff.

?I sincerely apologise for the instances where anti-Black racism has occurred and I stand committed to leading this important work of dismantling anti-Black racism in our schools and workplaces that have been clearly structured and extensively outlined in the strategy. It represents our unwavering commitment to our steering committee, to Black students, to Black families and to Black staff.?

Added Cynthia Cordova, Chair of the YRDSB: ?Black students and staff do not feel their learning and working environments are as equitable and inclusive as they should be. For a Board that works to provide safe learning and working environments, this is simply not acceptable. At the trustee level, our Board has embedded the principle of equity and inclusivity in the trustees' multi year plan. The priorities outlined in the plan guide our organization's work and represent the trustee's commitment? and reflects the input received through many community consultations.

?Our Dismantling Anti-Black Racism Strategy is a living document. This means that we will review, update and adjust as needed to respond to the latest data and feedback and serve our staff, students and communities. Achieving our goal will take time. The full implementation of our strategy is anticipated to take place over a five-year timeframe. We hope our students, staff, families and community members will continue to support us on our journey.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter