

Lack of Asian staff at YRDSB a concern, finds study

The York Region District School Board needs to ensure staff reflects the 'diversity of the student population,' finds a recent report commissioned by the YRDSB.

In Naming Systemic Racism, Acknowledging Complicity, and A Commitment to Action: Anti-Asian Racism in the York Region District School Board, report authors Dr. Mary Reid & Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad recommend that the YRDSB perform an equity audit of current leadership positions 'including teachers, principals, and superintendents' to establish a baseline when it comes to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). Pointing out that 49 per cent of the student population self-identify as Asian, this baseline, they recommend, should be made public for the sake of transparency, along with the setting of yearly goals to 'increase representation of Asian identities' in these positions.

'All hiring, promotion, and advancement processes and practices should be done by panels (at least three members) with at least one member belonging to an equity-deserving group,' they said. 'Criteria for hiring, promotion, and advancement should highly value lived experiences amongst other factors such as number of years teaching, qualities of resilience, and embodiment of heart-felt anti-racism values. Questions asked as part of interviews should promote innovative thinking that challenges normalized educational policies and practices to create more inclusive schools, as opposed to criteria that prioritizes how eloquently interviewees can speak and boast about their achievements. Information on how many people were interviewed, what was their identity, the procedures used for ranking applicants, and making final decisions should be tracked and reported to identify where there is continued discrimination and bias.

'Further, tracking when and how often racialized candidates are not successful in the promotion process is also necessary as it will shed light on the colonial structures that create barriers for them. YRDSB must consider how to level the playing field for equity-deserving groups, especially those who are not successful in their bid for a position, e.g., application to be a vice-principal or principal. Practices and processes must be implemented for all equity-deserving staff to further develop their leadership skills and competencies, e.g., shadowing, administrative coverage, school and system initiatives. Beyond tracking, reporting should move beyond the actions taken by YRDSB, focusing on the impact realized or not realized by Asian students, staff, parents, and community.'

The authors go on to call on the YRDSB to commit to ongoing professional learning opportunities for educators and administrators that 'amplify Asian voices and identities.'

'When asked 'to what extent are Asian identities represented in senior leadership positions that impact policies, practices and initiatives within the YRDSB, the average response by educators surveyed was very low at 3.19,' the consultants found. 'This low average puts a spotlight on the structural racism that impacts the daily lives of Asian employees. Similarly, when students were asked, 'to what extent do you see Asian leaders in your school?' the average response was 5.78.'

'Across the nine municipalities of YRDSB, our survey results indicated that Markham, Richmond Hill, and Vaughan comprised the highest percentages of Asian students and educators. Almost 70% of Asian students indicated Markham as their school area, with almost 15% attending schools in Richmond Hill, followed by Vaughan with approximately 11%. Similarly, the largest percentage of educators noted Markham as their workplace at almost 50%, followed by Richmond Hill at 15.09%, and Vaughan at 13.21%. It appears that intentional efforts have been made to hire Asian educators in these municipalities, as stated by an educator, 'Asian recruitment in YRDSB for advancement, hiring, and promotion is very evident in densely populated areas with Asians families.' Despite such efforts for diversity hiring, YRDSB's equity employment audit found that 'the [teacher diversity] gap is particularly large for East Asians and Southeast Asians as well as those from the Middle East and West Asia.

'It is necessary to bridge the teacher diversity gap, where there are disparities between racialized teachers who serve racially diverse schools. Hiring educators that reflect the diverse student population is invaluable.'

But, in making these recommendations, the report also cautions against 'tokenization' of Asians in the workplace. Diversity allows for varied contributions and perspectives in the workplace but 'hiring just a few racialized staff does not equate to sincere representation nor does it guarantee power dynamics within a school that fosters inclusion.'

'Diversity of representation does not guarantee inclusion. Inclusion involves the creation of relationships with students and their families to identify their immediate and long-term needs, and then investing in providing them with a curriculum and services that are culturally reflective of who they are.'

'There is a fine line between tokenism and representation. Tokenism occurs when institutions hire a small number of underrepresented individuals to give the appearance of inclusion and diversity. Essentially tokenism is a performative measure that ultimately fails to create spaces that foster culturally responsive practices.'

By Brock Weir
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