

Expect More: Summary and Draft Recommendations of the Enhancing Equity Task Force Report

The Toronto District School Board is a leader in equity, but it recognizes that more can be – and must – be done to support students, especially the most marginalized. The Board’s commitment to finding solutions in partnership with the community is evident through the creation of the Enhancing Equity Task Force – a collaborative effort between the TDSB and its communities. The Task Force’s mandate was to bring people together, learn from each other and explore what’s working, what isn’t and how to improve it.

Over the past year, the Task Force led a community engagement process to explore what equity strategies have worked and identify where challenges remain. Conversations were sharpened by asking: if we largely know what the problems are and what needs to be done, what is keeping us from making progress?

The recommendations that follow offer guidance to the TDSB on how to enhance delivery of an equitable education by providing direction for resource allocation and developing mechanisms to track progress. And, perhaps most importantly, seek to answer the question: now what?

How Were People Involved?

- Task Force Planning Group included Trustees, community members, community organizations, academics, unions, staff and students
- Four Task Force Working Groups
- Eight Task Force Joint Ward Forums reaching 1,300 community members
- Outreach to students and parents
- Enhancing Equity Task Force Summit for TDSB staff and community leaders
- Staff support (Research, Leadership Team)

What did the Task Force Hear?

Input fell into eight key categories:

- **Barriers to equity including inequities between schools, students, and neighbourhoods**, socio-economic issues and structural issues like programs and policies. (*report pages 13, 14*)
- **Bias and discrimination** including racism, Islamophobia, biased curriculum and materials, biased teachers and staff. (*report pages 14-16*)
- **Need for more inclusivity including** cultural representation and appreciation, needs of newcomers and refugee families, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation, learning styles. (*report pages 16, 17*)
- **Need for more student voice** including opportunities to engage students meaningfully and ensuring students have access to caring adults in schools. (*report page 17*)

- **Need for more authentic parent and community relationships.** *(report page 18)*
- **Special Education** including improving parent engagement in decision-making, exploring better support models and addressing accessibility issues. *(report page 19)*
- **Need for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission Task Force.** *(report pages 19, 20)*
- **Need for more professional learning for everyone.** *(report page 20)*
- **Need for accountability and transparency on equity issues.** *(report pages 20, 21)*

What Patterns and Themes Emerged?

- **The problems of social and economic inequity are greater than the Toronto District School Board.** *(report page 22)*
- **Divisions between and within schools.** Wherever there were divisions between schools, traditionally marginalized students ended up being under-represented and not having equitable access to these opportunities as other students. *(report pages 22, 23)*
- **Developing a mindset of true partnership and mutual respect with students, parents, caregivers and communities.** *(report pages 23-24)*
- **The need for monitoring, transparency, tracking and reporting.** There is no central system for recording or tracking incidents based on discrimination, racism or hate in schools and, when incidents do occur, how they are dealt with varies widely. *(report pages 24-25)*

From all of this, one clear vision emerged: equitable access to specialized programs in strong neighbourhood schools including:

- Equitable learning opportunities, free of barriers, for all students to reach their full potential;
- Programming and staffing that is reflective, relevant and responsive to the cultures, identities and needs of the students and the community served;
- A school culture that is safe, welcoming, caring and actively stands against bias and discrimination including racism and hate; and
- Active engagement with parents/caregivers and the community as authentic partners in promoting students' learning and well-being.

Enhancing Equity Task Force Recommendations

To achieve this vision of transforming every TDSB school into a strong neighbourhood school, the Enhancing Equity Task Force proposes the following six areas of recommendations for the Board to consider for action.

- A) Ensure Equitable Educational Experiences and Opportunities for All Students in All Schools
- B) Ensure Equitable Access to Funding and Resources among Schools
- C) Meaningfully engage Students, Parents/Caregivers and the Community in Building a Culture of Equity in School
- D) Address School Safety, Incidents and Complaints through an Equity and Anti-Oppression Stance
- E) Ensure Equity in Staff Employment, Transfer and Promotion
- F) Provide Equity Training for ALL

Read the Full Recommendations from the Report: *Pages 30-34*

(A) Ensure Equitable Educational Experiences and Opportunities for All Students in All Schools

- Eliminate disparities *between* schools: The Task Force recognizes that specialized schools and programs, along with optional attendance, while benefitting certain populations, have inadvertently resulted in greater competition and disparities between schools. In many cases, these schools and programs have served to limit enriched learning opportunities for students, especially those from the most marginalized communities, who experience barriers to accessing optional attendance. Therefore, it is recommended that:
 - Resources and supports be realigned so that all schools, at least every cluster of local schools, can offer a variety of specialty programs.
 - Once this in place, and ALL students have equitable access to enriched programming, optional attendance should be phased out.
 - Establish practices that will see all students reading by Grade 1, graduating to Grade 9 into high schools where all students are placed in Academic classes, and graduating Grade 12 with 30 credits or with a Certificate.
- Remove structural barriers *within* schools: It is acknowledged that barriers exist within schools for some students, inhibiting their opportunity to reach their full potential. These barriers are due to placement of students based on assessments of perceived ability by educators/administrators/professionals. Therefore, it is recommended that:
 - Destreaming for Grades 9 and 10 be phased in with new programming supports, and be built on the exploratory work of the Board's Equity and Inclusive Schools department on "Sifting, Sorting and Selecting" (San Vicente, Ramon, & Seck, 2015).¹

¹ San Vicente, R., Sultana, F., & Seck, N. (2015). Sifting, sorting & selecting: A collaborative inquiry on alternatives to streaming in the TDSB. Final Report. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board.

- Special Education programs, in particular the Home School Program and the Gifted Program, be reformed, taking into account the principles of the recent recommendations made by the Special Education Advisory Committee (2016-17), specifically in terms of:
 - Appropriate placement and integration of students with special education needs into regular classes with the necessary supports.
 - Ensuring that every teacher has the skills to support ALL students, including those with special education needs, in the classroom.
 - Eliminating both physical and attitudinal barriers against students with disabilities and those who are racialized or historically marginalized.
 - Ensuring that all families, including those new to Canada and whose first language is not English, can respectfully navigate the Special Education system with confidence.

(B) Ensure Equitable Access to Funding and Resources Among Schools

- Distribute funding and resources equitably among schools: Recognizing that discrepancies among schools also occur due to disparities in school fundraising capacity, which leads to inequitable access to and quality of resources, such as technology, the Task Force recommends that:
 - Extra funding be directed to schools with higher levels of need, as in the case of the Model Schools for Inner Cities program, but based on multiple measures in addition to the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI). Additional sources of information can include, but are not limited to:
 - Supplementary data on ongoing changes in schools.
 - Input based on student voice and community consultation.
 - Annual school resource audits of school needs and assets.
 - An ad hoc cross-sectional, interdisciplinary group, including parents and community members, be formed to examine how current resources are generated and distributed, and to develop a solution for ensuring greater equity among schools with different socio-economic status. This includes reviewing the LOI, the Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) and school based fundraising practices.

(C) Engage Students, Parents/Caregivers and the Community in Building a Culture of Equity in School

In addition to equitable provision of funding, resources and programming to schools, the culture of individual schools needs to be equity-driven in order to ensure that students, parents/caregivers and the community are all engaged in building strong neighbourhood schools. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- Student Engagement: All students need to feel that they belong, are heard and are cared for through the creation of more inclusive, representative and relational cultures ² in school:
- Equity-based Curriculum: This includes the incorporation of equity courses and content into the curriculum; relevant subjects that reflect student demographic characteristics and the population of Toronto; and lessons on Indigenous rights and land recognition.

This incorporation should be supported by:

- A team of equity specialists in the practical application of equity curriculum and course content integration.
- Training and access to materials such as Model Schools for Inner Cities' social justice curriculum, Africentric curriculum or Indigenous education.
- Partnering with research faculties – e.g., Aboriginal Partnership with York University, and Centre for Urban Schooling from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Student voice, leadership and support: Create in-school support systems to:
 - Foster student self-advocacy and empowerment, including student and peer leadership.
 - Ensure that students have dedicated caring adults in school to mentor and advocate with and for them.
- Parent and Community Engagement: Building on Model Schools for Inner Cities' "School as the heart of the community" successful practices, all schools should:
 - Engage families as authentic partners in the education of their children, especially those from historically marginalized or currently underserved communities.
 - Develop community partnerships with social agencies, such as Community Health Centres, public libraries, and the City of Toronto, and non-profit groups.
 - Function as a resource and gathering space, especially for underserved communities (e.g., medical, employment related, social/emotional, recreational, childcare, adult education³).

(D) Address School Safety, Incidents and Complaints from an Equity Lens

It is acknowledged that current suspension and expulsion practices have a disproportionate impact on students from racialized backgrounds, students from low-income families, and students with special education needs. It is also recognized that discrimination, racism and hate do exist in schools, and that transparent and accountable steps need to be in place to address incidents experienced by anyone in the school system (students, parents, staff) ensuring everyone knows what to do if something happens. In order to bring consistent expectations and have accountability fall within the existing management structure, it is recommended that:

- Current suspension and expulsion practices be reviewed by:

² Fund LAEN (Latinx, Afro-Latin American, Aba Yala Education Network) programs. Follow through on the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services' Black Youth Action Plan.

³ Existing examples to model on include Northview Hub and Nelson Mandela Park Public School's Open School Project.

- Conducting quantitative and qualitative research on school safety.
- Examining staff bias and reasons for the over-representation of some populations such as Black students being suspended and expelled.
- Gathering input from those most impacted including students and decision-makers.
- Preventative and alternative dispute resolution, restorative justice and mediation approaches be considered while acknowledging Provincial regulatory constraints:
 - Increase the number of youth outreach workers and support programs run by community groups, especially those that are representative of student demographics.
 - Review and end the Student Resource Officer (SRO) Program;
 - Increase funding for the Indigenous Led Restorative Justice Program.
 - Consider and follow through on recent recommendations made by the Black Student Achievement Advisory Committee.
 - Create a central structure for handling and overseeing student complaints, and advocating for students in that capacity. A parallel process should be in place in each school with information clearly stated in school agendas and websites and in accessible and multiple languages.
 - Develop or acquire a system to gather and track reports of incidents and complaints related to inclusion, discrimination, racism and hate and report this information to the Board of Trustees including outcomes and strategies used to seek resolution and prevention.

(E) Ensure Equity in Staff Employment, Transfer and Promotion

To ensure that staffing models and delivery reflect equity and the diversity of the community served by the Board, it is recommended that:

- Employment Equity practices, including hiring, transfer, and promotion, be implemented across all levels of the Board with the following in place:
 - Collect and analyze data on hiring practices using an equity lens.
 - Examine and act on inequities in staffing promotion and transfer processes – ensure employment equity.
 - Prioritize the hiring of diverse staff with an equity lens and that are representative, especially in terms of racialized backgrounds, of student bodies and the multicultural nature of Toronto.
 - Provide training for staff with hiring responsibilities on diverse hiring practices.
 - Create more flexible staffing structures and processes at the local school level to achieve greater equity – e.g.,
 - Move principals every 5-7 years, but also ensure that there is flexibility where appropriate.
 - Allow local schools to add statements of hiring needs based on community-specific needs, and staff needs and choices for the school.
 - Aside from school superintendents, the hiring panel for the school principal panel should have representation from other stakeholder groups including parents, caregivers, students, and community representatives.
- Work in partnership with Labour Unions to discuss how to align transfer and surplus processes, design continuous learning plans, and how best to collectively serve students.

(F) Provide Equity Training for ALL

Knowing that authentic and sustainable change cannot be effectively realized without transforming the mindset and deepening the understanding of all stakeholders, the Task Force recommends that:

- Systematic and comprehensive equity training needs to be in place for all stakeholder groups with the following considerations:
 - The content should focus on examining bias, power, privilege, and existing laws and policies, as well as on practices, frameworks, and pedagogies that critically examine and address anti-oppression, anti-racism (specifically anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism), and specific challenges faced by Indigenous students, those with physical and intellectual disabilities and those facing Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia, and other forms of historic, institutional discrimination.⁴
 - Apply an equity framework to all professional development learning activities, with the understanding that this learning will have an impact on all aspects of educational programs and services. Furthermore, professional learning will enhance student learning when considering the needs of students who are most underserved, most pushed-out, most marginalized and are most impacted by the barriers in our systems and structures.
 - The audience for the training should be all stakeholder groups including the Senior Leadership team, school administrators, educators, support staff, as well as the Board of Trustees, students, parents, and caregivers. Joint training can be delivered across departments and levels of the Board, and with Labour Unions.
 - The training should be delivered by experts, supported by centrally assigned principals and K-12 learning coaches.
 - The professional learning should be ongoing to encourage an environment of continuous learning and improvement.
 - There should be clear accountability for staff by having, for example, annual, online equity assessments for staff as part of equity training, with an 80% pass rate required.

⁴ For example, the training can help teachers to open up their perspectives and expectations of students by self-evaluation of perceptions and biases. Another example is a teacher bias pilot project which aimed at understanding teacher bias in student assessment using moderated marking, i.e., students marked by multiple teachers, those in different schools.