

**Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Enhancing Equity Task Force**

Ward Forum 1: Chair Pilkey, Trustee Stiles, and Trustee Malik

Date: May 1st, 2017

Time: 6:30-8:30pm

Location: Bloor Collegiate Institute

AIM:

* To introduce Equity and why achieving equity for all is critical for student well-being and achievement
* To train school teams to lead a conversation about Equity and gather data that will establish an equity baseline for every school

A group of approximately 100 people gathered in the cafeteria of Bloor Collegiate Institute.

Liz Rykert (Facilitator, Meta Strategies) introduced the evening, welcoming Elder Dr. Duke Redbird (Aboriginal Education Centre) to lead a land acknowledgement to open the evening, also touching on the history of Indigenous peoples on this land and their presence going forward. To follow, the Trustees provided welcoming remarks to the group.

Liz provided context about the Ward Forum, the Enhancing Equity Task Force, and framing around the work. It was emphasized that this was not a consultation asking how the TDSB is doing on equity, but rather a chance to have conversations happen in every school about where we find ourselves now, get some concrete measures of progress as we move forward, and find localized approaches at schools.

It was confirmed, based on a question from the audience, that TDSB Director John Malloy committed to providing anti-racism training at all levels of the Toronto District School Board while in attendance of the Black Lives Matter Freedom School #TeachIn earlier in the day (reference: <https://blacklivesmatter.ca/demands/>). It was clarified that the training was for broad anti-racism training, not anti-Black racism training specifically. It was also raised that as training is being rolled out, it must be kept in mind that simply building awareness won’t lead to actual impact, and that biases remain and thus warrant more robust strategies of shifting behaviour.

Jeewan Chanicka (Central Co-ordinating Principal of Equity and Achievement) then acknowledged that the success that some students have seen within the TDSB have not been felt by all students. He noted how many Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students aren’t being lsupported the system and how we must rethink the idea of schools of being sites of community development. Quotes from Carl James and Paul Gorski about the barriers of racism and classism were shared and the group was asked to discuss them.

One participant noted that when something new is implemented, it must be accompanied by ongoing support, and not be implemented in a top-down fashion. A student who runs equity workshops for their high school classes and teachers noted that the TDSB has a responsibility to ensure their teachers are not perpetuating issues that contribute to inequitable practices and outcomes. The centrality of the Judeo-Christian, Western perspective in the education was flagged as problematic, as it is fueled by the systemic idea that there is a superior system which does not incorporate other lenses such as the 100,000 years of Indigenous education or African, Asian, and other systems of knowledge. Participants noted some very serious, traumatizing experiences they have endured in the system stemming from racial bias.

A question was raised by a representative from the Dovercourt Boys and Girls Club, which is a community organization in the neighbourhood that makes up a vital part of the education ecosystem outside of school hours. They asked how they and other community organizations/partners would be involved in this process. This feedback was noted and the Task Force will follow-up.

Jeewan continued to examine the various factors impacting the TDSB’s work on educational equity and the complexities of identity. He shared an anecdote from his own Principal days, when he inadvertently made an ablest comment by saying he wished for the whole school to run to school. Though his intent was not to harm, his impact was that he left out a group of people who may not be able to run. He noted how, despite the TDSB’s best intentions, the current impact is not meeting what is needed.

He then noted some things that the TDSB is currently doing, including a Vision for Learning that incorporates a Leadership Capacity Plan for senior staff. The Integrated Equity Framework is also a part of this body of work, which was developed based on public consultations where some key areas were identified to focus on. These items are available here: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/AboutUs/DirectorofEducation/VisionforLearning.aspx>. A student asked how the equity training at all levels of the TDSB would unfold and how often it would take place, but there are no answers yet for these specifics. A group member emphasized how the demands put in place by Black Lives Matter were crafted by parents, students, and community organizations specifically addressing racism in the school system, and asked how the Task Force was planning on responding to them. The Task Force will consider all feedback moving forward.

A question was asked about who the members of the Task Force are. A list of the Task Force members, which includes parents, teachers, administrators, community organizations and individuals, and members of special committees, will be circulated to Ward Forum attendees. Copies of the list will also be available at all future meetings.

Jeewan emphasized the need for the community to help hold the TDSB accountable. Questions around transparency and accountability were raised, with some anecdotes from the past shared about instances the TDSB lacked accountability. The TDSB emphasized its commitment to establishing an actual, open form of accountability and that they would not back down from difficult conversations. He noted that structures drive practice, and that it was no longer okay to continue with how things always have been. He described how structures are artefacts of values and attitudes, and that the TDSB is working on developing policies and procedures that demonstrate this awareness and hold itself accountable to it. He introduced the idea of a survey based on the Equity Continuum developed by OISE, and its role in drawing out the voices that are not often heard.

Jeewan concluded by asking the group for support in thinking creatively, especially regarding things outside of the TDSB’s control. He emphasized how the TDSB is not asking for patience, because the community has been patient. He shared how as a father of three children and as someone who came out of hidden homelessness, the realities we face are close to his heart. He expressed the TDSB’s commitment to this work and how, ultimately, it’s for the community and the well-being of our children.

Tanya Senk (Central Coordinating Vice-Principal, Aboriginal Education) then provided some history and background on Aboriginal Education, emphasizing how First Nations, Inuit, and Metis students all attend TDSB schools. A Toronto Aboriginal Research Project in 2011 demonstrated that Toronto has the highest population of First Nations, Inuit and Metis people in Ontario. Tanya explained the idea of being hidden in plain view, and the challenge of self-identification amidst deeply entrenched colonialism and institutionalized racism against Indigenous peoples. Of approximately 240,000 Indigenous students in Toronto, it is estimated that only about 1000 (0.3%) self-identify as Indigenous.

She further emphasized the importance of creating safe cultural contexts together, especially given the diverse, complicated, and often mixed identities of Indigenous students. She called attention to the Aboriginal Education Centre and its role in addressing the knowledge and achievement gaps we see, and to the fact that not only were Indigenous children denied the truth of their identities, histories, languages, spirituality and cultures, but other students were also denied the truth of these as well.

Tanya then pointed to some specific points from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action for Canada that relate to education. She also pointed to a number of other recommendations and actions from the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and recently two significant TDSB motions regarding Indigenous education: the land acknowledgement recognizing the enduring presence of Aboriginal peoples, and the development of curriculum resources that educate on reconciliation and treaties.

She closed by noting the importance of honouring and talking about the significance of Indigenous knowledge, especially in the year of Canada 150. The erasure and disenfranchisement endured by Indigenous peoples was, as Senator Marie Sinclair said, made possible through the use of education as the primary tool of education (refer to slide 26). Now, barely 60 years after Indigenous peoples were granted the right to vote in 1960, education must be used as the key for reconciliation. Canada’s Indigenous peoples cannot be positioned as the pitiful Other. Rather, we must work to highlight the historical and ongoing achievements and contributions of Indigenous knowledge to Canada.

Jeewan then asked the group to keep the question of “Have we heard you?” at the forefront of their minds as we moved to talking about the survey tool for schools to contribute to. Liz’s email (liz@metastrategies.com) was provided to the group as a means of contact for feedback or questions, and TDSB Trustees were also identified as contacts within the Board.

The group had several questions and pieces of feedback. One participant expressed how students in their school often don’t have a voice, and how surveys can leave many people out. Another participant asked whether the TDSB was looking at some of the really large structures, like specialty programs and special education, the intersectionality of those with race, how boundaries for schools work, and other processes that contribute to shifting demographics within schools. Liz noted the Task Force’s work in incorporating these things into the work, but invited additional input from the group.

It was raised that a general survey of this nature would not capture the subtlety of equity issues happening in and between schools, and how it often feels like policies are made without taking into account actual knowledge from the schools. It was further noted that the TDSB must demonstrate that they want to hear the voices of the community and leverage the people who could help contribute to this dialogue. Another participant shared frustration over hearing that there is no funding for this type of work, and questioned whether the five school boards were working in alignment with each other. They shared the option of having one strong public school board that included French learning and options for religious learning.

It was asked why this survey was not integrated with the parent-student survey recently done by the TDSB. The data from this survey will provide information that can be considered relative to the census, which focuses on the individual voice. It was also partially an issue of timing, as the census was already underway as this work unfolded.

It was raised that we must take into account that the system isn’t necessarily broken, but rather was built in an intentional way. The TDSB must take responsibility for translating what is written on paper to how it unfolds on the ground. It was illustrated how some students must travel 1.5 hours to get to an arts school because they live in a marginalized community, and how ‘good’ schools are often situated in affluent areas.

Maria Yau, from the TDSB Research department, gave some logistical notes about the survey and invited people to have a conversation at their table and provide feedback. Each school would form a team based on stakeholder group (administrators, support staff, parents, students, and teachers), to have a conversation and a Team Lead would record a collective answer to each question. The actual surveys will be circulated online for Team Leads to fill out. It was emphasized that these surveys are not evaluations, and that answers such as ‘not sure’ would be valid. Schools could also change their answers down the line as conditions and processes improve, based on that school’s localized strategies. The survey was put together as a discussion tool for schools, and the baseline aggregate data will provide snapshots for schools to think about moving forward.

Many questions and concerns over reporting a collective voice were raised, specifically regarding losing the individual voice in this process. It was noted for instance how power in schools is shared in different ways, and how even the most engaged parent may not be able to answer most of these questions as many things happen behind closed doors. Concerns over the language and accessibility of the survey were raised, as well as the low willingness of students to open up about their experiences the older they get.

The group generally agreed that the presentations and front-loading during this session took a lot away from what the group could say, and recommended that future meetings be structured in a way that people could be given more voice. It was noted that the meeting could have been run with a stronger equity lens applied, emphasizing that the focus should be put on hearing the voices of participants. The need for more exercises of trust and relationship-building between parents, students, and the board to move away from performative allyship was also noted.

To close, the group was invited to stay back to deliver more feedback or to provide feedback via email. The Task Force will also circulate a list of upcoming ward forum dates should people wish to come back to contribute again, in a setting that has incorporated all of the feedback from tonight.

Summary of Collected Feedback:

* Intentionally incorporate community partners and organizations into this work
* Spend more time during the upcoming Ward Forums allowing the group to provide feedback and input
* Focus on trust and relationship building
* Simplify the language on the survey and make it more accessible to folks
* Follow up with John Malloy and bring the Black Lives Matters demands in front of the Enhancing Equity Task Force to consider moving forward
* List of Task Force Planning Group and Working Group members to be circulated