

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

Ward Forum 3: Trustee Gough, Trustee Tonks, Trustee Glover, Trustee Minhas

Date: May 4, 2017

Time: 6:30 - 8:30 pm

Location: Kipling Collegiate Institute

PURPOSE:

* To hear from participants the ideas they have about creating the conditions for all students to succeed
* To introduce how we are operationalizing equity because it is critical for student well-being and achievement
* For school teams to learn how to lead a conversation about what is happening in their school to gather data that will establish baseline on equity for every school

A group of approximately 200 people gathered at Kipling Collegiate Institute.

Liz Rykert (Facilitator, Meta Strategies) introduced the evening, welcoming Barbara Felschow

 (Central Coordinating Principal, Aboriginal Education Centre) to lead an acknowledgement to open the evening recognizing the historical and on-going presence of Indigenous people on the land.

To follow, the Trustees provided welcoming remarks to the group. Liz then provided a quick overview of the meeting’s purpose.

Forum participants were invited into an ‘Impromptu Networking’ exercise, where people rapidly shared challenges and expectations with each other and made new connections. People were invited to reflect on and talk about:

*“What are some of the challenges, barriers and biases preventing student wellbeing and achievement at my school?”*

*“What do I hope to get from and contribute to the session tonight?”*

The conversation was rich and lively, surfacing a range of ideas:

* Conversations on how to meaningfully engage with students in a school; an example was given of a group of students who are kinesthetic learners, and asking how to support their contributions to the classroom, help them feel welcome and engaged
* How to assess how students and parents are doing with their mental health and wellness
* Examining assumptions that staff at schools can make about parents and vice versa
	+ Relatedly, another discussion centered around respect and dignity; how to ensure that parents can be assured that regardless of socio-economic, ethnic, religious, and other backgrounds of our students, that they are treated with respect and dignity
* Perceptions of equity and the state of equity issues in schools may be different depending on where you sit in the Board, or in the context of specific communities and schools
* One group member shared their eye-opening visit to the Aboriginal Education Centre from an equity lens that would change their practice, posing the question of how to honour the achievements and contributions made by Indigenous peoples rather than focusing on negative narratives
* A teacher from an arts-oriented school expressed concern over the distribution of specialized programs such as the IB program
	+ Such programs should be shared equitably so that every student who qualified to such a program would get access to it
* A group member noted how the school system structure could be examined to have more robust, integrated schools in the future with a wide range of grades, special education programs, and specialized programs to apply a broader approach to education that does not cater to a specific group

Karen Murray (Vice Principal, Amesbury Middle School) then provided some brief background on the vital importance of this work within the TDSB. She opened by noting that the elephant we are putting on the table today is an issue that could actually break the table. She noted how the TDSB has been a forefront Board that has been brave for a long time; it was the first Board to collect demographic data, put out that data, and begin talking about some of the things that we’re not doing to ensure all of our students are meeting success. However, the elephant on the table is that this work has been going for decades, yet there are still students not able to reach those levels of achievement and wellness. We must ask what is happening within the system, and whether educators are equipped to navigate the complex, diverse, and contested identities that students bring into our classrooms and schools.

This sparked a short discussion about how early in a child’s lifecycle issues of difference, stereotypes, bias, and race can begin happening. Karen shared some research that demonstrates children recognizing difference as early as six months old, which can be formative in shaping their perceptions later on. She recognized how every single person in this meeting comes to the table with a different idea of what equity is, and how complex that makes this issue. It was recognized though we won’t eliminate all of our stereotypes. Using a graphic image of children watching a ball game she described how we can examine the difference between equality, equity, and liberation and understand the hard work that is required to get there. Karen also identified a fourth stage, being active participation for people, not just ‘watching the game’. To get there, we need to name the problems, acknowledge where the challenges remain, and work together to make progress and find a way forward.

Karen then shared a quote from a recent Carl James report examining anti-Black racism in the city, and a Paul Gorski quote examining barriers associated with socio-economic status. She closed by emphasizing the need to think about the intersectionality of the multiple identities that people hold, and to avoid looking at communities in isolation.

Barbara then provided some history and background on Aboriginal Education, from what she has learned from her time at the Aboriginal Education Centre as a non-Indigenous person. She identified knowing three things that are vitally important for her understanding as a non-Indigenous person:

1. Self-determination that Indigenous peoples have in educating their children
2. Self-governance, an understanding of the right that Indigenous peoples have on this land and that this right comes from their long-standing history and establishment on this continent
3. Self-distinct recognition of Indigenous peoples

She spoke to the fact that many educators say they don’t have any Indigenous students in their school, emphasizing that only about 1,000 out of 240,000 (0.3%) Indigenous students in the Board self-identify as Indigenous. She related this to Karen’s points about whether we are creating the conditions for safety within schools for Indigenous students, and the importance of creating safe cultural contexts together. She called attention to the complexity of Indigenous identity, especially given many Indigenous peoples do not fit the stereotypical idea of what an Indigenous person looks like.

She 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 Murray Sinclair said, made possible through the use of education as the primary tool. Now, barely 60 years after Indigenous peoples were granted the right to vote in 1960, education must be used as the key for reconciliation.

The group was then invited to form small conversations in their school groups to discuss the conditions for wellbeing and achievement in their specific school. People were invited to consider seven broad areas: Classroom Climate and Instruction, School Climate, Student Voice and Space, Family/Caregiver-School Relations, School Leadership, Community Connections, and Culture of Professional Development. These seven areas were adapted from OISE’s *Equity Continuum: Action for Critical Transformation in Schools and Classrooms.*

Groups, comprised of administrators, educators, parents, teachers, and community members, were invited to consider what things are already in place at their school, and ideas that could be implemented after this meeting that would improve conditions for everyone. A handout was provided for participants to write their ideas down together. Two colours of post-it notes were provided to record individual ideas; pink for things happening now, and green for ideas for the future. These post-it notes were then put up onto large flipchart paper, based on the seven categories.

The conversation, energy, and activity across the group was rich, generating many ideas during the activity. Participants were then asked to share any reflections or ideas that they came up with during the session. Some highlights included:

* Participants feeling educated from hearing different points of view and perspectives, wishing that these kinds of discussions could be modeled more in classrooms
* Students expressed the value and significance of being a part of this dialogue, not only to provide student input but also to gain an understanding of this broader work moving forward
	+ Specifically, students also felt it was very rewarding to present their voices to parents, administrators, and guidance counsellors during this activity

A full list of the ideas are provided below.

Margaret Douglin (TDSB Research) then presented a Feedback Form tool developed by the TDSB to support every school in having these conversations across different stakeholder groups (administrators, educators, parents, students, and community organizations/partners). Although this is not compulsory, the hope is that each of the 580 schools participate. Results from these Feedback Forms would allow the Task Force to hear from each school, help establish a baseline to guide future work and track progress, and identify localized strategies to improve student wellbeing and achievement to act on. The data would also help inform the recommendations formed by the Task Force over the summer, which would be brought back to the community in a Fall round of Ward Forums to get feedback on.

Margaret then provided some logistical details about the Feedback Form. Each stakeholder group would submit one Feedback Form, so each school would produce up to 5 submissions. They would be submitted online. Each stakeholder group would assign a Team Lead, and work together to find a collective voice to report on the Form. The questions are modelled off the seven areas discussed at this meeting. She drew attention to a Comment Box at the bottom of the Form, which would allow for nuance and context to be added. For example, if it was difficult to reach an agreement on a particular question, or it was difficult to get feedback from specific groups of people, this could be noted in the Comment Box.

It was emphasized that the Feedback Form would be used as an aid to facilitate discussions at each school, and is not an evaluation. The baseline information established at each school would, in many ways, serve to tell the story of each school. Team Leads would assume responsibility over convening and engaging with people who may not typically participate in these conversations.

The group was asked for their feedback not only on the Feedback Form, but also how they might approach having these conversations in their schools. Some concerns were raised about how gathering a collective voice may actually reinforce existing systemic biases. However, detailed census data will provide a balance to the collective perspective. Additional feedback suggested that anywhere referencing parents should be amended to say ‘parents/caregivers’, and to add a response option for “no consensus reached”. The group also felt the timeline to complete the Feedback Form was too short. This tool and approach has not been tried by the Board before, and though the conversations that must take place may be uncomfortable they will hopefully result in meaningful dialogue.

Summary of Collected Feedback about the Feedback Form:

* Amend any reference of ‘parent’ to read ‘parent/guardian
* Extend the due date for the Feedback Form
* Add a response option for ‘No consensus reached’ or something similar

**Summary of ideas generated in response to: What ideas do you have to create the conditions for well-being and achievement for every student?**

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| Classroom Climate and InstructionIdeas underway: * bring culture into the education that is representative of the society we live in; validating identities (Albert Campbell)
* mental well-being: Minds-up - strategies (Malvern JPS)
* the students should understand the purpose of school
* healthy competition motivates students to do better

Ideas we are considering:* supporting students with play in schoolyard (Malvern)
* inclusive curriculum checklist with indicators (Victoria Park C.I)
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| School ClimateIdeas underway: * value all race/religions/cultures (Mary Shadd)
* have mental health discussions all year round (CCI)
* multicultural night (Cedarbrook)
* have a week off in November, start school in August (CCI)
* focus on changing individuals VS. changing systems
* teachers trying their best for students to learn, with a variety of strategies
* safe space (CCI) more inclusion in our menu options (Halal and beef hot dogs at excursion) (George Beck P.S)
* equity and wellbeing must be valued by all staff- not just lip service (Albert Campbell)
* increased supervision/visibility (Malvern JPS)
* more school exposure via social media (Malvern JPS)

Ideas we are considering:* staff and student shout outs (Mary Shadd)
* e-mailing information as opposed to sending letters
* teachers should accommodate (Cedarbrook P.S)
* improve translation services (Malvern JPS)
* if one "ss" isn't doing well, encourage as opposed to shunning (Cedarbrook)
* moving on up day
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| Student Voice and SpaceIdeas underway: * prayer room for all religions (Cedarbrae C.I)
* asking class representative for changes
* honoring students' voices
* activities, video, through ECO and the environment (Malvern JPS)
* students involved in many different ways (Cedarbrook)
* student voice becoming an integral part of the curriculum (C.D.F)
* student clubs/activities (Cedarbrook)
* more students participating in announcements and assemblies
* establish student voice forums (requires training for students) (Albert Campbell)

Ideas we are considering:* clubs for younger students ( Cedarbrook)
* equity walk (CCI)
* more trust and freedom for students in the future
* student council to allow for student voice (already doing) (CDF)
* student leaders organized "well-being" week
* knowing the emotional intelligence of someone's opinions
* mental health and well-being day, and daily quotes
* helping students devise strategies to solve problems (Malvern JPS)
* home clubs for kids to get help
* teachers should take further steps to find out what is keeping students from giving their all
* teach students how to advocate for themselves (Albert Campbell)
* talk to classes about equity and how to show it to everyone
* gender-neutral washroom (Cedarbrae)
* mental health week (CCI)
* younger students to do morning announcements (Gr.4 or 5) (Cedarbrook)
* use of electronics as distraction (Cedarbrook)
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| School LeadershipIdeas underway: * model and teach forgiveness and mercy
* PD for staff around Aboriginal peoples "Blanket"
* more small groups to help/encourage students who are timid to participate
* set the tone/reflect on ideas
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| Community ConnectionsIdeas underway: * snack program (feeding minds) (Golf Road)
* make the school feel more welcoming for all (Cedarbrook P.S)
* different fundraising- get us more supplies
* treaty acknowledgement (CCI)

Ideas we are considering:* before and after school partnerships (Malvern JPS)
* building professional development opportunities with a focus on equity
* addressing info and resources language barriers/welcoming new families
* increase volunteers (Malvern JPS)
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| Culture of Professional DevelopmentIdeas underway: * make PD meaningful: rather than ONE workshop, schedule a few on the same topic to allow for reflection/discussion and implementation- repetition helps (Albert Campbell)

Ideas we are considering:* professional learning that makes a difference to practice culture of PD
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