

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

Ward Forum 5: Trustee Storey, Trustee Moise, Trustee Cary-Meagher

Date: May 9, 2017

Time: 6:30 - 8:30pm

Location: Danforth Collegiate and Technical 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 250 people gathered at Danforth Collegiate and Technical 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. He also shared a poem he wrote entitled, ‘The Power of the Land’.

To follow, the Trustees provided welcoming remarks to the group. The group was encouraged to be open and honest with their opinions and emphasized how crucial this deep-dive into equity is.

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 preventing student wellbeing and achievement at my school?”*

and

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

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

* It is felt that the delivery of Special Education within the TDSB is not meeting the needs of students and their families
  + 1/68 children in Canada are on the autism spectrum, yet there is not a proper autism ISP within the TDSB
  + Of available programs, many children with autism are not able to complete the cognitive tests that qualify them into the programs
  + Teachers and support staff are not given appropriate training
  + There must be a change so that the children who need the most resources don’t consistently get the least
* Islamophobia within schools is also a critical issue, especially with Ramadan in the upcoming months; students sometimes face the challenge of having to explain their beliefs, customs, and lifestyles to people or explain their need for religious accommodation
  + This impacts student activities beyond academic curriculum to graduation, field trips, and celebrations
  + There is inconsistency around checking calendars to plan around Muslim holidays or religious days
  + Often, advocacy must be done by parents and students themselves
  + It is felt that Islamophobia is not being addressed by the TDSB, and parents are feeling left out of school life
  + Principals and teachers should ensure that students feel they belong and are contributing in schools
* It was expressed that children with behavioural challenges and children with learning disabilities should not be together in the same room
* It was expressed that schools need to work on favouritism within schools, or certain students being labelled as ‘bad’
* Schools should be sharing best practices and resources for the Task Force to move forward
* A student shared that they felt issues should be talked about frankly and approach these conversations in a different way beyond setting rules for classroom behaviour
  + Students may respond better to different ways of refreshing the messages
* A question was asked about the resources and funding necessary to enable the ongoing training at all levels that is being discussed by the TDSB
  + Liz was not able to provide an answer on this on behalf of the Board, but provided some background on the Task Force and noted that resource redistribution may come about as a result of this work

Jim Spyropoulos (Executive Superintendent, Engagement and Well-being) then provided some brief background on the vital importance of this work within the TDSB. He began by expressing his gratitude to Elder Dr. Duke Redbird (Aboriginal Education Centre) for his essential work within the TDSB. He began by expressing that although we can feel proud of having made progress in this work, the main reason we’re still here today is because there is still work to do. Equity must permeate every department and every person in the system, rather than be a single committee or department. He highlighted some patterns that are problematic, such as streaming students into Applied or Academic streams. He shared the example of CW Jeffrerys CI, who dismantled their streaming system by implementing an opt-in option for their students; the findings showed that students were doing better in their Academic classes than they were in their Applied classes.

He emphasized the need to place difficult issues on the table, and understand that although a birds-eye view is necessary, focus must be placed on what is happening in individual classrooms. He drew attention to a recent report on student expulsion looking at anti-Black racism. He noted how if 12% of the student population is Black, yet 50% of students being expelled are Black, then there is a trend and gap present that must be dismantled. He also emphasized the relationship between these issues and mental wellbeing. He drew attention to the alarming rate of suicide amongst students and the vital importance of understanding the real, human outcomes of what we’re talking about when we say equity, achievement, and wellbeing. He also noted his sense of hopefulness after witnessing the kinds of conversations emerging out of the Task Force and Ward Forums so far.

He closed by noting that though everyone will have a different idea and experience of equity, we will all start from the same place: with ourselves. He hopes that a system of accountability that will allow the Board to show in concrete, real terms what will happen and how.

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. She emphasized how one of the biggest things affecting the achievement and wellbeing of Indigenous students is a large knowledge gap. She noted how during this year of celebration for Canada’s 150th anniversary, many Indigenous communities across Canada do not see this as a cause for celebration. She drew attention to the inability for Indigenous people to vote until 1960 and the existence of residential schools until 1996, where several generations of youth were forcibly removed from their home and communities and stripped of their cultural identity. Indigenous knowledge has historically been positioned as inferior, so the knowledge gap is pivotal to this conversation.

Tanya then drew attention to the historical and contemporary erasure of Indigenous peoples due to colonization. A Toronto Aboriginal Research Project in 2011 demonstrated that Toronto has the highest population of those three groups in all of Ontario combined. 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 1,000 (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 Murray Sinclair said, made possible through the use of education as the primary tool of education. 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 achievements and contributions of Indigenous knowledge to Canada.

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, which 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; Ideas in place:Ideas in place:Ideas in place for things happening now, and blue 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. During the session, it was emphasized to really consider the word ‘systemic’ when considering moving equity forward. As mentioned, the TDSB knows what the data shows and what needs to be done; this means that we are looking at real systemic issues that are built into the fabric of how the Board functions. A metaphoric anecdote was shared as a model for how to think about this. Often, baby elephants have their back legs tied so that they do not break free. As the elephant gets older, the chain grows thicker. However, in adulthood, the chain is swapped for a rather thin rope which the elephant could easily break. However, since the elephant has been conditioned since birth, the feeling of the rope is powerful enough to keep the elephant from breaking free. The TDSB similarly has some “ropes” holding it back that prevent young people from achieving their true power. Our job right now, as a community, is to uncover some of these chains.

Participants were then asked to share any reflections or ideas that they came up with during the session. Some highlights included:

* Strategies to help alleviate pressures caused by the distribution of wealth across the city by postal code, and creating opportunities for achievement in all schools rather than only affluent ones
* A Vice-Principal shared how they felt that their school was doing a great job addressing equity, but was humbled to hear one of her Early Childhood Educators (ECE) challenge this perception
  + The dialogue was meaningful in surfacing this difference, and will help them move forward in addressing those gaps
* Developing historical resources that go beyond the traditional Euro-centric frameworks and pedagogies would help support conversations around cultural identity, equity, and systems of oppression; otherwise, there are not enough resources available currently to support this work
* There is a high degree of need and passion from lower income communities that want to learn and educate themselves as parents, members of the community, etc. but are restricted by the small budgets of their schools or their Parent Councils
  + Often, lower income and racialized communities struggle with issues around mental and emotional wellbeing, family trauma, etc. that need support
* Leveraging the wisdom and influence of the schools and teachers who are doing an excellent job at infusing equitable learning and practice into their classrooms should be leaned on, so things can happen large-scale

Liz then shared 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.

She then provided some logistical details about the Feedback Form. Each stakeholder group would submit one Feedback Form, so each school would produce up to five 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. She noted that the Task Force will provide tips on how to convene conversations. 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.

It was noted that the Task Force will be circulating tips and strategies on how to convene, facilitate the conversations, and also with specific instructions on the process. The final Feedback Form will also be circulated at that time, after incorporating feedback from all Ward Forums. This will be sent out at the beginning of June to Principals.

It was raised that the Task Force consider amending the language of the Feedback Form so that students starting in Grade 5 could be part of this conversation. A discussion over the process of having collective answers for the Feedback Form was also had, as people raised concerns that this could potentially allow for some people to be silenced by a cultural majority. It was also noted that for many people who experience marginalization themselves, asking people to reflect inwards may not be particularly helpful. It was expressed that people have been talking about what racism and systemic discrimination looks like for years, and that we must listen to people when they say they are not being represented in curriculum or feel unable to participate in their schools. Liz noted how the Feedback Form was designed to encourage an in-person dialogue and moving forward on creating conditions for safety and bravery in schools for people to have these conversations.

It was raised that the TDSB should consider providing external facilitators to help create these spaces of safety and bravery. It was noted that it can be very challenging for someone speak their truth if the system or administration is actually perpetuating the things that keep you silent. If this is not considered, the whole truth will not be seen through this work. It was noted that all of these issues are being considered by the Task Force and will be addressed in the strategies that are developed. If a group requires support to have the conversation please contact Daniel Conforti ([Daniel.conforti@tdsb.on.ca)](mailto:Daniel.conforti@tdsb.on.ca)) in the office of the Associate Director, Christopher Usih.

**Summary of Ideas from Table Conversations in response to the question:**

**What ideas do you have to create the conditions for well-being and achievement for every student?**

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| --- |
| Classroom Climate and Instruction  Ideas in place:   * resources that reflect student realities * inclusive families shown and language used * priority access to tech for those who need it * include all kids in all activities (pizza, trips, agenda, etc.) * teachers tracking students’ extracurricular activities; they want each child to be involved in at least 2 (Leslieville) * continuous PD on equity * challenging perceptions * differentiated instruction * advocacy for special ed. (Sprucecourt PS) * student voice- student led inquiry (Selwyn) * every child in ISP needs to be a part of a regular classroom- class parties, field trips (Leslieville) * inclusive practice - integrated HSP/ Res. in regular classroom * embed learning modalities directly in the school agenda * try to address child needs with technology- give classrooms iPads and computers * parallel tasks   Ideas considering:   * unlearning * teacher questions and education gaps can generate inquiry questions * relevant curriculum * not to pick on children who come from a low-income community * global education - mandatory cultural perspective embedded in curriculum * create classroom environments to allow students to learn in their way starting in jk/sk (Duke of Connaught) * more consistency in differentiating "up" and "down" * inquiry and facilitators (Whitney) * be more creative with instructional resources (Norway) * personalized learning (Norway) * training for teachers who are teaching applied courses- don't dummy down the curriculum * using withdrawal of recess as discipline directly contradicts the benefits of those students who need it most * money for add on experiences in school is a barrier to some families, and the school council fundraising makes up the differences * understand and value every student's strengths and needs as an individual * more cultural books representative of the student population * more D.I to reach needs of all learners- student centered * diversity in alternative schools * stronger cultural connections to the curriculum * DD-ISP reduce student teacher ratio from 10 - 1, to 6-1 or better * share all physical resources e.g. spaces |
| School Climate  Ideas in place:   * striving for cultures of respect * bereavement group to support students * co-teaching * PLC's * teacher collaboration * wellbeing day * mindful Monday * sports teams/clubs * equity committee to provide student voice * working on strategies for effective inclusion of ISP & HSP * open door policy with Principal * annual social justice conferences * young women's empowerment and young men's empowerment conferences annually * mental wellness summit * recess revival- engaging presentation and great idea but students whose families can't afford fresh food can't engage in the program * more diversity in intermediate band/strings, like in the choir * School council should run according to ministry guidelines as opposed to like a club * more diversity in different classrooms * legacy assembly (anti-bullying/students create PSA's) * alternative settings to reduce anxiety * student leadership opportunities (empowerment) * home-made sensory room open to all   Ideas considering:   * anti-oppression and analysis of privilege * more support for students with developmental disabilities * more focus on gratitude * zero days (integrating streams) * school council projects that are collaborative between staff and parents (e.g. fix one issue at the school) to foster collaboration within the school community * harmony week (September) * more psychologists and social workers * build curriculum reflective of student experience * starting in JK, teach equity as part of curriculum * differentiate universal design * change administrative forms from "Mother", "Father", to "Parent 1 and 2" to rid of heterosexism * stop grouping people as "boys" and "girls" * bring better diversity learning to students * get student voice involved in this process. Not a token voice - the whole student body * mandatory training of all staff in anti-racist, anti-oppression annually * more supports for mental health- more understanding by teachers of effects on achievement of mental health * TDSB provide resources for each school to facilitate a brainstorm session on what current school systematic oppression, how to change, how to address curriculum to better teach about different cultural and oppressed groups and history * full inclusion or partial inclusion of autistic students of all cognitive levels * be true to students at the moment * use data to decipher what's really happening * we need an elevator in our school (Malvern C.I) * awareness building in all areas * be responsible and adaptable * restorative practice * being more aware of students cultures and religions - have children speak about their religion, culture and practices. (Norway) |
| Student Voice and Space  Ideas in place:   * student survey (TDSB and school) * equity workshops for students * gender neutral bathrooms * P.D teachers - KAIROS, positive spaces, math inquiry * strong guidance relations with newcomers * survey of students' wants/needs * no sports teams without including special ed. students * mental health awareness week * community involvement from adjoining hospital * we need to build on students strengths and not focus on their weaknesses * social justice club * student newspaper * students write in community newsletter (Selwyn E.S)   Ideas considering:   * buddy bench * positive space room * more student led clubs/initiatives (Selwyn) * student voice and awareness, discussion of current issues in the community and world * remove cognitive test as eligibility requirement for autism ISP * teacher's should know the kids starting in JK, and be aware of their learning and help they may need |
| Family/Caregiver School Relations  Ideas in place:   * open communications between parents and staff (Norway) * daycare * PRO grant - wellbeing * parent council   Ideas considering:   * creating connections/conversations with marginalized families/students * we have a large Chinese community and we need to be better at making them truly feel like a part of the school community * encourage/invite community/parents voices that are not heard * stop speaking in acronyms to parents- speak plainly * workshops for parents on equity and anti-oppression and importance (Secord) * simplify rules, processes and procedures for parents- don't hide behind them * break down barriers between admin, staff, and parents- equal conversation that validates all perspectives |
| School Leadership  Ideas in place:   * social justice club * recess revival * teacher leadership team (Selwyn E.S) * use data to understand failure rates in more holistic ways   Ideas considering:   * PD based on feedback with goals/timelines equity * strategic leadership to support/best practices to strengthen collaboration * systemic issues need to be addressed across the board * consistent messages through communication-investment * more equitable hiring practices * admin that reflects the school population * sharing data more effectively- to reveal systemic issues * principals that understand Autism * breaking down barriers with parents who do not see the equity we teach in schools e.g. different family makeup * performance measures to justify equity goals- for administration * don't be afraid to be uncomfortable- we NEED to talk about it (Leslieville) |
| Community Connections  Ideas in place:   * equity and inclusive school committee with parent equity and equity POR * curriculum development with parent equity committee (Jackman) * open dialogue about mental health/well-being (G.A Brown) * parent involvement-school potluck, family night, chef * citizenship ceremony with an Indigenous community * lunar new year pot luck every year (Leslieville) * Grandparent's day (Leslieville) * family yoga evening * math/literature evening * recess rival- community base (Selwyn E.S)   Ideas considering:   * TDSB should work even more closely with Surrey Place and Geneva Centre for Autism * staff who meet community in the main office, need to acknowledge diversity and backgrounds, and be aware of how they can come across * parent academies * parent information TDSB programs * connecting to disadvantaged groups/school to do volunteer/service * extend reach of parent engagement and participation * extend SAC reach- outreach * staff awareness of the religious holiday and event planning |
| Culture of Professional Development  Ideas in place:   * keep model schools * teachers may care more about equity for themselves than for their students. They may be resistant to changing themselves * external P.D * internal P.D * co-teaching * open learning stance   Ideas considering:   * increased training for all teachers in special education * equity training for staff * train teachers in ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis) * EA's that are registered behavioral therapists * increase PD of cultural proficiency, mental health, starting in teacher's college * teachers need better recruitment and training * serious support and development for teachers to strengthen service to students * massive recruitment and support for diverse teachers * additional P.D of teachers to support complex needs- build strategies/skills/knowledge * the people who sign up are the people who don't need it- education needs to be across the board |