

# **Using an Equity Lens: A Guide to Creating Equitable and Inclusive School Environments**

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## **Introduction**

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) is committed to a vision of All Students Achieving Their Full Potential. As guided by the HWDSB Strategic Directions of Achievement Matters, Engagement Matters, and Equity Matters, the HWDSB Equity Policy (Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, n.d.) provides a framework for our Board to work towards creating safe and inclusive learning environments, identifying and removing barriers throughout the organization, providing learning experiences that meet the needs of all students, and facilitating meaningful parent and community involvement. This focus places a high regard and responsibility for both system and schools to commit to a School Effectiveness Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010) in which strategic planning and successful practice take into consideration all diversity factors and by embedding principles of equity and inclusive education into all aspects of the learning environment to support student achievement. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009b).

This article discusses how the HWDSB document Using an Equity Lens: A Guide to Creating Equitable and Inclusive School Environments (Wright, Scime & McLeod 2009) supports the implementation of the HWDSB Equity Policy, and how it can be used as a tool to assist schools in embedding the principles of equity and inclusion in its practice.

## **Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board Equity Policy: Background, Rationale and Key Concepts**

In 1996 the former Hamilton Board of Education and the former Wentworth County Board of Education amalgamated requiring the boards to review all policies pertaining to the new Hamilton- Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB). At this time the two former Boards had policies for Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity as mandated by the ministry in PPM 119 (1993). (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, Background section, para. 1). As the newly formed school district attempted to consolidate the two policies, it was decided after much consultation to develop an Equity Policy. In 2003, approval was granted for the HWDSB Equity Policy that consists of a Policy Statement, Ten Guiding Principles and Five Supporting Guidelines as outlined below:

- Policy Statement

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board is committed to the principles of equity through inclusive programs, curriculum, services and operations, in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Education Act.

- Ten Guiding Principles

1. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board is committed to ensuring equity in all policies, guidelines and operating practices. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will review this commitment annually.
2. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board is committed to providing leadership, at all levels, that fosters an equitable environment.
3. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will recognize and promote active participation from all members of school communities in order to maintain and affect equitable education policies, practices and outcomes.
4. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will support curriculum, learning materials and school practices which reflect and include the principles of equity, as regulated by the Ministry of Education.
5. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will affirm and value students' first languages, while providing their students with the opportunity to acquire competence in Canada's first languages.
6. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will strive to provide appropriate and bias free assessment, evaluation, reporting, placement, and programming to equitably meet the educational needs and to maximize the learning potential of all students.
7. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will provide counseling/guidance/support services that reflect the principles of equity.
8. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will ensure that harassment towards diverse communities by trustees, employees, parents, volunteers, students, and the community at large will not be tolerated.
9. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board's employment policies, practices and procedures will be non-discriminatory, fair and equitable.
10. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board will provide equity training and resources for trustees and all employee groups.

- Five Supporting Guidelines

- Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity
- Anti-Classism and Socio Economic Equity

- Sexual Orientation
- Gender Equity
- Persons with Disabilities

A Policy Steering Committee was established for each of the supporting guideline. Comprised of staff and community members, each steering committee reflects the range of groups and individuals with an inherent interest or involvement related to the particular set of supporting guideline. This is to ensure appropriate representation and consultation as well as to maintain the integrity of the policy development process. This has been a lengthy journey as the Board continues to progress through the Religious Accommodation Guideline. (Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board Equity Policy, n.d.).

### **HWDSB Equity Policy Implementation**

- Model of Implementation

The implementation process of the policy began with a model that required the establishment of Design and Delivery teams. These teams consisted of school administration and system managers who collaborated to develop a process of delivery to share with other system leaders. These system leaders would then in turn adapt the training to meet the needs of their staff by involving the school or department Directions Teams. The Design and Delivery Team also provided input into the content of staff development and a gap analysis tool.

To continue to support Directions Teams to continue to address Equity needs through the School Improvement Planning process and in Professional Learning Communities, Using an Equity Lens: A Guide to Creating Equitable and Inclusive School Environments (Wright, Scime & McLeod 2009) was developed to assist school staff in implementing the HWDSB Equity Policy and connecting it with the School Improvement Plan.

By connecting equity principles with practice, and through reflection questions, this document provides a mechanism that supports the school community to engage in a collaborative inquiry process. It provides a lens that enables the school to reflect upon its own practice in the School Improvement Planning process. The document also provides suggestions for various strategies to assist schools in achieving outcomes expected to result from policy implementation through the planning process. This occurs as professional learning communities work together, using the Lens of Equity, to develop SMART goals that are connected to evidence-based indicators of successful practice, as identified in the School Effective Framework. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010).

The graphic below depicts the inquiry process that is based on the Board's Building Capacity model with Directions Teams leading the equity initiative at the school level. This team approach champions equity throughout the school and models a commitment to creating an inclusive school environment.



### Study Phase

During the study phase, a collaborative inquiry model is used to determine a priority that is based on evidence related to student achievement, community demographics, safe schools surveys, and other pertinent data sets. Referencing the “questions for reflection” provided in the guide, schools may use the outcomes organizer that is also provided in the guide as a method for establishing goals and then connecting this planning phase to the School Improvement Plan.

### Planning Phase

The Planning Phase includes developing and measuring indicators, modifying strategies to meet needs of the learning community, and ensuring that communication to all stakeholders occurs in a timely and meaningful way. This is done within both short and long term timelines.

### Action Phase

The Action Phase is when the initiative is implemented, and when data is collected to measure effectiveness. It is during this phase that barriers and issues will often arise. It is critical at this stage that the school continues to review data and make required and necessary changes.

### Monitor and Review

Monitor and Review is the phase that assesses the success of the implementation of the initiative and simply done through a start-stop-continue framework. Responses to this framework refocuses the professional learning communities back to the Study phase and the process begins again.

- **Areas of Focus for Implementation**

Structured around the HWDSB Equity Policy Guiding Principles and informed by the HWDSB Annual Operating Plan of Knowing Our Students, Knowing Our Staff, and Knowing Our Parents/Community, the following areas of focus as outlined in the Using an Equity Lens document (Wright, Scime & McLeod 2009) provide schools with a comprehensive framework to bridge theory and practice so that the principles of equity and inclusion as encapsulated in all HWDSB policies and procedures are implemented through inclusive programs, curriculum, services and operations at all levels of the organization.

However, this model of collaborative inquiry can be applied in all school districts to support equity and inclusive education policies and practices.

- School Climate/Physical Environment

A supportive and inclusive learning environment is one that acknowledges the life experiences and perspectives of all learners and that of the wider community. It promotes the development of a respect for human diversity and an appreciation for democratic values. This requires a major sustained commitment to the creation of a learning environment conducive to learning for all. This can be accomplished if there is a shared understanding and commitment to a clearly articulated school mission and value statements. These should be evident and visible to all who come into contact with the school, and understood by all stakeholders.

Reflective questions may include:

- How much do students see themselves reflected in the learning environment?
- How does the school know if students, staff, parents, community members feel welcome in the school setting?
- What are the initiatives in place that foster an equitable and inclusive school environment?

- Leadership

Instructional Leadership requires that the administrator ensures a consistent and continuous schools-wide focus, using system and school data to support school improvement planning. Instructional leadership also extends the role of the school administrator to being a leader of leaders. This broadened concept recognizes that schools are complex organizations within which leadership should be dispersed to all adults, especially teachers, in the school setting. Within the demographic and contextual diversity of the school setting, the role of the administrator then becomes one of creating a “community of shared values” according to the school’s vision and mission with a commitment to equity of outcome and to closing the achievement gap. (The Institute for Ontario Leadership, n.d., pp. 10 – 11).

Reflection questions may include:

- What training and resources are available in support of differentiated instruction?
- What strategies are used to embed equity in school practices?
- How do system staff from all departments collaborate and support meeting the needs of all students?

- School Community Partnership

School community partnership recognizes the growing diversity of our community as a strength (Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy). This partnership reflects the school's internal and external environment. It establishes trust and effective communication between parents/guardians and staff because they share a common goal in seeking positive outcomes for their children. Both the school and the home are integral parts of the community and therefore the partnership between the school and the parent/guardian can be effective only when there is a similar relationship of trust and collaboration between the school and the community at large.

Reflection questions may include:

- What does the school know and understand about the social, cultural, and economic context of its community?
- How does the school address and remove barriers?
- What opportunities has the school or system provided to assist the school community to learn about their rights, responsibilities and obligations as stakeholders in education?

#### ○ Curriculum

Curriculum encompasses “all learning experiences the student will have in school. These include school environment, interactions among students, staff and the community, and the values, attitudes and behaviours conveyed by the school.” (Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board Equity Policy). Inclusive curriculum recognizes and values a student's background and allows students to see themselves reflected in their learning environment and that their life experiences are validated.

Reflection questions may include:

- What processes and procedures are in place for reviewing learning materials for bias?
- How are lessons and instructional practices differentiated to address the learning profiles of all students?
- How does the school demonstrate that skills, such as critical thinking, are developed at all grade levels and enable students to examine issues of bias and discrimination?

#### ○ Student Languages

Language is a critical part of identity that connects individuals to their personal, social and cultural lineage and supports positive feelings of self-worth. For English language learners, support is essential for their success. Within this context, schools should be cultural organizations designed to be ‘learning-focused’, rather than as institutions that are ‘instruction-focused’. Organizations which are ‘learning-focused’ pay great attention to the needs of the learner while organizations that are ‘instruction-focused’ pay more attention to the instructor. In a ‘learning-focused’ environment, support for student success may require the use of alternate strategies for English language learners,

especially those who find it difficult to demonstrate their prior learning and knowledge adequately in Standard English.

Reflection questions may include:

- How does the school demonstrate that it respects and values all cultures and languages, including Aboriginal languages?
- Does the school use inclusive, easily understood language in all communication?
- How does the school validate and encourage the use of home language?

#### ○ Assessment

Students need to feel comfortable in their learning environment, and be aware of what they are expected to achieve and how that achievement will be assessed, measured, and evaluated in an objective and inclusive manner. Students and their parents/guardians need to know and understand the purpose for which an assessment is being made and what use will be made of the outcomes of the assessment. Because assessment processes and referrals can be intimidating and uncomfortable for individuals unfamiliar with the system, it is important that communication between all parties is clear, unambiguous and culturally appropriate.

Reflection questions may include:

- How does the school use assessment data to meet the learning needs of all students?
- How does the school demonstrate that it has the same high expectation of success for all students?
- How does the evaluation or assessment of students recognize previous and personal experiences?

#### ○ Support Services

Support services become increasingly essential within the school environment as the complexity and diversity of a school increases. To be effective, support services should be sensitive to the diverse needs and rooted in an accurate bias-free profile of the student. Support staff should understand the factors which operate, or have operated, in the life of the student, and should interact with, counsel and support the student in a culturally appropriate and sensitive way.

Effective support services are not limited to specialists and those with a designated role in the school; it is a function of all teachers, staff and service providers who interact with students.

Reflection questions may include:

- How does the school assess student need and deliver support services that address the various dimensions of equity?
- How does the school involve community and support services in a proactive manner to assist students to reach their full potential?
- How does the school develop accurate, bias-free individual student profiles?

○ Harassment and Bullying Prevention

To ensure that our schools are safe and secure places free from any forms of harassment, teachers and schools must recognize and respond appropriately to harassment when it occurs. Any form of harassment and bullying based on race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities or on any other prohibited grounds that may occur within the classroom or school environment must be addressed.

Reflection questions may include:

- What are barriers that may prevent the reporting of harassment or bullying incidents?
- How are staff equipped to recognize, respond appropriately, report and address harassment or bullying?
- How does the school ensure that safe school policies and processes are understood and communicated clearly to all members of the school community?

## **Conclusion**

It is important to understand that Equity is not achieved by providing identical treatment to everyone regardless of his or her individual circumstance. Equity is only achieved when differences are acknowledged and the stories, ideas, and experiences of our students and their families are recognized as valuable learning tools. The purpose of *Using an Equity Lens: A Guide to Creating Equitable and Inclusive School Environments* is intended to assist schools in achieving Equity of access and opportunity for all students. It provides staff with a framework that can be embedded in the School Improvement Planning process as well as guiding questions to engage them as reflective practitioners and to hear the voices of our diverse community.

Within this framework, the goal of achieving equitable outcomes for students is a shared responsibility between the Ministry of Education, school boards and the entire school community – students, parents/guardians, teachers, administrators, support staff, trustees and members of the community at large. In this culture of engagement as underlined by a climate of high expectations, each stakeholder has an important role to play and contributions to make so that ALL our students will reach their full potential.

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