

New Leader

Practical strategies for student achievement

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Student Achievement Division

An Equity Journey

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In 2010, our new Director of Education, Ken Thurston, breathed new life into York Region District School Board's (YRDSB) equity journey when he announced that equity would become one of the Board's five priorities.

He also insisted that every school and workplace have an equity goal in improvement plans. Even though our Board had been on this journey since 1993 with the development of the Anti-Racism and Ethnocultural Equity policy, having equity in the Director's Annual Plan re-energized many who always felt that equity and inclusion were not "distracters" from the "real work" of schools, but were foundational to student success and well-being. Ken's annual plan, coupled with his blog reflections that, "diversity is our strength, equity is our commitment, and inclusion is our goal," signaled we had clear and committed leadership. Equity-minded educators always understood that students learn and grow best in learning environments where they feel respected, safe and included regardless of their social identities or socio-economic status. They also knew that explicit and deliberate work has to be undertaken to create these places of learning and this was confirmed by our Director's vision.

Of course, equity work had been done prior to the arrival of our new Director. Our Race Relations Advisory Committee (RRAC) and our Sustaining Equity Education and Diversity System-Wide

(SEEDS) committee are just two examples. RRAC allowed for community voice in the areas of race relations and anti-racist education and SEEDS brought us significant and extensive cultural proficiency training. Work was also done to support our secondary LGBTQ students, which meant Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in the majority of our secondary schools and a very active group of GSA staff advisors who meet as a network to share ideas for supporting this group of marginalized students. As well, our Board holds three different equity-themed conferences – Fusion and SpeakOUT for secondary and Together We're Better for elementary students.

Building this new vision into our work became our challenge. Our approach was two pronged. First, we went about making the structural changes that would give meaning to the new vision. A Superintendent of Equity and Engagement was established, and I was asked to take on this role. Along with other system responsibilities, I took on the task of bringing alignment and coherence to this important work. Part of that coherence meant transforming the former Cultural Community Services Unit into the Inclusive School and Community Services department.

Led by a principal, this department consisting of Teacher Liaisons, Community Resource Facilitators and Reception Centre staff would do the heavy lifting to implement our strategy. As well, after a very challenging process with some feeling concerned we were abandoning our commitment to anti-racist education, RRAC became the Equity and Inclusivity Advisory Committee (EIAC), which looked at equity with a much broader and more inclusive lens. It is a perspective that I have dubbed the "big tent" approach.

We collapsed SEEDS and EIAC into a large regional committee called the Equity Strategy Steering and Action Committee (ESSAC). This large volunteer staff committee, with its six workgroups, developed a focus for the year and determined projects and activities that aligned with our vision and with the Ministry's Equity

and Inclusive Education Strategy. Some of the actions coming out of these workgroups include the soon-to-be-distributed positive space stickers along with required training, webcasts on using demographic data and instructions for engaging in equitable hiring.

Another webcast developed by a workgroup offers support on conducting interviews that are equitable and inclusive. The hiring workgroup engaged an external consultant to conduct a survey of our occasional teacher hiring and the resulting report and work plan is currently making a difference in our recruitment, hiring and retention practices. As well, we have started the process to implement our Every Student Counts survey, another product of one of our workgroups. There is no question that the work of ESSAC is making a difference for equity in YRDSB.

The YRDSB's Equity and Inclusive Education policy and procedures is now revised to reflect the eight focus areas of the provincial strategy and the renewed and interactive Religious Accommodation Guidelines are just about ready for implementation.

Making the structural changes was crucial, but it is understood that in order to effect change in schools and classroom, "where the rubber hits the road," structural change has to be accompanied by cultural change. After all, schools get their true meaning from culture, and changing this culture is YRDSB's second prong of our approach to equity. We are guided by the belief that schools are well placed to have positive impact on the lives of all young people, regardless of ancestry, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical ability, race, sexual orientation, faith, socio-economic status or any other social identity. Like Robert Marzano, we believe effective schools can go a long way to overcome stu-

dents' demographic backgrounds. We also believe that we can explicitly and deliberately work to help ensure that our schools are places with a goal to challenge society's inequities and not merely reproduce them.

With this in mind, we are now in the fourth year of our Equity Symposium where school administrators, department managers, equity designates and other staff come together to hear key messages regarding implementing equity and inclusivity in their schools and work sites. Targeted support is also given to develop or implement equity goals in the school/department Improvement Plan by reviewing achievement and demographic data.

Other support for cultural change includes our six-module Foundations of Equity course, Engage in Equity posters, school and worksite Equity Scans and EGALÉ Canada training. We are also very proud of our budding partnership with ETFO York Region to deliver a multi-part 'possibility series' where teachers and administrators learn to ensure that classrooms are home to good teaching and not to what Haberman calls, "the pedagogy of poverty." This is critical because, contrary to popular belief, York Region has census tracks where poverty rates are growing faster than the Ontario average.

YRDSB'S journey to equity has now grown into a quest for inclusivity. We have put the structures in place to support sustainable change and we are unwavering in our efforts to shift mindsets in schools and workplaces so that when the doors of our buildings swing open each morning, the wonderfully diverse students and staff who clamour in will feel safe, respected and included.

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A Few Suggestions on the Road to Equity and Inclusivity

- Champion a broad view of equity where students and staff of *all* social identities feel included;
- Notable commitment to equity and inclusivity by senior leadership, including the Director;
- Include equity goal in all improvement plans – DAP, BIPSA, SIP. This sends a clear message that equity is not a sidebar but is foundational to student achievement and well being
- Work to develop a plan for equitable hiring, promotion, and retention;
- Develop Equity leaders among school and department staff;
- Implement Equity Walks by school superintendents and school leaders;
- Make Equity an integral part of school visits by superintendents;
- Ensure that community voice is heard and considered;
- Develop clear protocol to respond to issues of discrimination and harassment;
- Have courageous conversations about identifiable groups of students who consistently underperform and develop explicit and deliberate strategies to close the gap.