

Dismantling anti-Black racism in our schools: Accountability measures are key

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Education is built on the belief that people can be more. In the words of [the 20th-century American sociologist and writer W.E.B. DuBois](#), an important anti-racist leader and figure in the development of African

American education, "[what people are depends on the way they have been educated, the way ... their possibilities have been developed and drawn out.](#)" Du Bois's speeches and writings on the education of Black students were part of his larger concern about Black children's well-being and the uplifting of Black communities.

In other words, for education to be truly a [process of encouraging and embracing discovery](#), everyone needs to be accommodated in the classroom.

Canada is [known for its excellent education](#), but this reputation can hide the realities of its Black students. [With ample data demonstrating the effects of systems](#) that [undermine educational opportunities of Black students](#), it's clear that access to education in Canada isn't equitable and inclusive. Canada's kindergarten to Grade 12 education systems should receive a failing grade until anti-Blackness is addressed.

Way to improve

The [Toronto District School Board's \(TDSB\) Center of Excellence for Black Student Achievement](#) offers a way to improve with a new targeted approach to addressing anti-Blackness. The center offers a model based on strategic community engagement that school boards across Canada can learn from and enact.

I am a Ph.D. [student](#) researching Black youth and families' experiences in education, and I support research for this TDSB initiative [proposed by Black community members and education stakeholders](#).

Mutual relationships

Decades after DuBois, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued that [in](#)

[order for learning to happen, relationships need to be mutual.](#)

Unfortunately, for Black students in Canada, this has rarely been the case.

Even [as governments develop policies](#), [some teachers shift their practices](#) and [anti-racist educators and scholars demand more from classroom teachers](#), the schooling experiences of Black children and youth reveal an ongoing struggle with anti-Black racism.

Behind this failure stand governments and [school boards](#) that have fallen short on accountability measures that ensure no Black child or youth is left behind in fulfilling their potential.

Given that [education is a human right](#), our education systems and communities must continue to address the systemic and institutional barriers that prevent Black youth from claiming it.

Reducing barriers in education

At the Center of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, the aim is to develop an education system where anti-Blackness is dismantled with targeted anti-racist policy and practice. This involves introducing accountability measures to counter the full spectrum of [educators' discriminatory practices](#) that devalue Black life.

The TDSB launched this initiative as one response towards developing solutions and responding to ways Black students and families continue to encounter barriers in education. Community members and education stakeholders in dialog with the board identified [nine mandates](#) to pursue. These include combatting anti-Black racism, identifying ways to improve Black students' success and achievement and access to resources like scholarships, networking and mentoring from within the community.

More importantly, many of the [programs and initiatives](#) offered to Black students reveal a commitment to improving [students' academic outcomes](#) and overall well-being across the TDSB. Through evidence-based research, staff document student responses to programming, and then amplify student voices to improve educators' work in classrooms, and to enhance student learning experiences.

Black students' well-being

As [the Center of Excellence for Black Student Achievement](#) continues to grow its staff, the current team including graduation coaches and kindergarten to Grade 12 learning coaches. The latter support schools and staff with building an inclusive and anti-racist approach and practice to support Black students' well-being.

Staff understand that improving Black students' education involves a system-wide targeted approach. Together we look for and create opportunities to build educators' understanding of practicing anti-racism in the classroom and school environments. We provide strategies, instructional programming and resources through ongoing professional development.

With the support of the program co-ordinator and principal, the team developed several programs for Black students. For example, there is a [Black Girls' Book Club and a Saturday program affiliated with York University and the University of Toronto](#) that sees Black students learn about youth participatory action research.

There is a summer leadership program to provide Black students with experiential learning opportunities. This is done [in collaboration with various community organizations and businesses](#) to support Black students to develop their leadership skills, build networks, improve job readiness skills and knowledge about various careers.

Black students engage with universities to learn more about STEM programs. One such [initiative with the Faculty of Engineering Secondary School at the University of Ottawa](#) provided students the opportunity to take computer science courses while gaining credits toward their Ontario Secondary School diploma.

A call to action

Facing anti-Black racism and committing to addressing it means teachers and administrators are called on to develop school plans, curriculum, safe classroom spaces and policies, as well as teacher education, to ensure Black students receive the same access, resources and support as their white counterparts. This emphasis on sameness is important because it supports the fight for rights to education under the law. This is key to aiding Black youth in their academic success.

Equal education opportunity for Black youth is a fundamental human right.

If the majority of the white and racialized teachers graduating from teacher education programs having no previous experience using anti-oppressive, anti-racist or decolonial practices, [their teaching](#) will continue to harm Black students' well-being and academic outcomes.

Increase Black children's engagement

School boards in Canada have the opportunity to take many steps to focus on the experience of Black people in the curriculum, and increase Black children's civic engagement and success in school.

These steps could include creating Black studies courses, [developing teachers' racial literacy](#) and using [culturally responsive teaching practices](#). As part of their commitment to disrupting anti-Blackness, teachers can

commit to critically [transforming their own understandings and practices to transform Black students' learning experiences](#).

The problems Black youth encounter in [education](#) are real. Researchers and community advocates have identified educational disparities, and we are beholden to take action to solve them. Until Black children and youth feel accepted, respected and protected, our work is not done.

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