

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION AUDIT

Ontario Public School Boards' Association



August 2021

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1. Purpose of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Audit

In 2020, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA, the Association) passed a motion to conduct an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Audit. The motion read as follows:

Hire an external third party to conduct an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Audit to determine the best approach to combatting systemic racism and oppressive practices introspectively within our own organization with an expected outcome of determining best practices, strategies, and approaches to advocate and support an inclusive OPSBA organization and to support school boards with regard to Anti-Black and Anti-Indigenous Racism.

And that the external third party report back to the OPSBA Board of Directors regularly about the progress of the audit, and provide a final report with recommendations.

This EDI Audit involves the examination of policies, practices, and systems, as well as the corporate culture, to determine whether any of these present a barrier to combatting systemic racism and oppressive practices and advancing equity within school boards.

This review includes an analysis of OPSBA's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges and makes recommendations that need to be considered if the Association is to advance on its own equity journey and support school boards along theirs.

2. Methodology

Data collection for this EDI Audit took place from March to June 2021, and included the following data collection methods:

- The Project Compass Survey, conducted in March and April 2021
- A review of OPSBA policies and documents
- One-on-one telephone interviews, in which 17 staff and 7 members of the Executive Council shared their input and perspectives on this EDI Audit
- Seven virtual small group discussions, in which 18 of 40 Board members participated by sharing their input and perspectives, and
- A focus group with members of the Indigenous Trustees Council.

3. Findings

The findings from the various data collection methods have been used to help identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and challenges in the external environment, through an equity lens.

This analysis will help OPSBA develop a better understanding of where it stands on its equity journey as well as:

- Explore possibilities for new initiatives or solutions to existing challenges or gaps
- Determine where change is needed and what change is possible
- Reveal priorities as well as possibilities, and
- Identify opportunities that might give rise to new possibilities or to challenges that could close a path that once existed.

3.1 Strengths

Strengths are internal factors that are likely to have a positive effect on (or be an enabler to) combatting systemic racism and oppressive practices. The following strengths have been identified through this EDI Audit:

Position in the sector

OPSBA plays a leadership role in the education sector in Ontario. This position provides the opportunity for the Association to work with trustees, school boards, and other partners within the education sector to ensure that equity is embedded throughout the education system and to support school boards to combat systemic racism and oppressive practices.

OPSBA already provides information and education to trustees on a range of topics, including strategic planning, budget setting, community engagement, and assessing the director's performance. As a source of important information to guide the work of trustees, OPSBA has the opportunity to support trustees in embedding equity throughout all aspects of their work.

Span of influence

OPSBA represents 31 English-language public district school boards and 10 public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 across the province.

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OPSBA has the opportunity to lead the sector and influence trustees to acknowledge and understand the ways in which systemic racism and oppressive practices impact outcomes for underserved students.

Ability to bring trustees together

OPSBA has the means and ability to bring trustees together to enable them to share information, learn with and from one another, and collaborate.

Ability to advocate

The Association advocates with the Ministry of Education on behalf of member boards for the conditions that support and improve student achievement and well-being. OPSBA is also a respected stakeholder with whom the provincial government consults on a range of issues. As such, the Association has the ability to advocate with the Ministry regarding systemic change in a wide range of areas, including teacher hiring practices, curriculum, and professional development.

As a key stakeholder in the education sector, OPSBA is also able to advocate with the public to increase confidence in the public education system, increase understanding about the role of trustees, and increase understanding about the key issues of equity facing the education system.

Trustees' role in the sector

As leaders in school board governance, trustees help to ensure that Ontario's education system continues to adapt and transform to meet the ever-changing needs and shifting challenges of a rapidly evolving world. Trustees therefore have the opportunity to ensure that school boards focus on equity, particularly anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism, so that they can better serve the most underserved students.

Trustees' support for equity

The Project Compass Survey found that there is a great deal of support for OPSBA to address equity among its priorities. The survey found that:

- Equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression was among the top five components to be included as part of OPSBA's priority-setting process
- Equity as well as inclusion/diversity/anti-racism were among the five most frequently reported words/concepts for inclusion in OPSBA's Mission Statement
- The five most frequently reported words/concepts for inclusion in OPSBA's Vision Statement included equity/equitable and inclusion/inclusive, and

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- Included among the 10 most frequently report words/concepts for inclusion in OPSBA's Values Statement were equity/equitable, diversity, and inclusion/inclusive/inclusiveness/inclusivity.

OPSBA has begun some foundational work

In recent years, OPSBA has begun to educate trustees about equity through the Annual General Meeting and the Public Education Symposium. These professional development opportunities have helped to create a foundational understanding about issues of equity among many trustees.

Ability to participate virtually

The need to meet virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed directors and trustees to be engaged with OPSBA without the need for travel. While unreliable internet connectivity has created challenges for some, the ability to participate virtually has increased the opportunities for many to participate in these events. It has also reduced the time commitment required of the many individuals who would need to travel from northern, remote, and rural communities to Toronto to participate in these events. Continuing to provide opportunities for virtual learning and participation would increase the opportunities for many trustees to participate in these professional development opportunities.

3.2 Weaknesses

Weaknesses are factors that are likely to have a negative impact on (or be a barrier to) combatting systemic racism and oppressive practices. The weaknesses identified during this EDI Audit include the following:

Trustee composition and equity knowledge

As pointed out by the trustees themselves, the majority of trustees are White, which many feel is a barrier to OPSBA's ability to address systemic racism. While the lack of racial diversity reflects the student population in some parts of the province, in other school districts the racial composition of trustees does not reflect the racial diversity of the student population. Many trustees shared their perspective that greater racial diversity among trustees would offer school boards and OPSBA the depth of knowledge gained from lived experience. Many White trustees also shared feeling ill-equipped to identify and address racism within their respective school boards.

They shared that more racialized trustees would help school boards and the Association better understand, and therefore, address systemic racism. While there is a need to increase the diversity among trustees to better reflect the student population, trustees

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need to deepen their knowledge of equity, systemic racism, and other forms of oppression. The challenge of combatting systemic racism and other forms of oppression must be seen as the work of all trustees, rather than the responsibility of Indigenous and racialized trustees. As such, it is critical that work be undertaken to increase the competence and confidence of trustees to engage in discussions about these issues as well as lead school boards to engage in meaningful work to combat systemic racism and oppression.

Many also shared that because trustees are locally elected officials, there is little that can be done to change the racial diversity of trustees. They noted that OPSBA does not have control or influence over who runs to become a trustee. The Association also does not have control over whom school boards appoint to be OPSBA directors, and therefore they cannot control the racial diversity of directors.

While the focus of this EDI Audit is on racism, equity work includes addressing other forms of oppression. However, what was evident in our discussions with trustees was that they possessed a limited understanding of diversity, with a focus on race to the exclusion of other identities and forms of oppression. As one person noted, "We don't have any diversity at our school board." It is evident that trustees need to develop a better understanding of equity, diversity, and the various forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia) and how they impact students throughout Ontario. This would help to ensure that all trustees see themselves and their school boards as needing to engage in this work rather than viewing it as work relevant only to school boards with large numbers of racialized and Indigenous students.

The discussions with trustees also made it evident that each trustee is at a different point on their learning journey, with some just beginning to reflect on issues of equity and others much farther along in their understanding of the issues. They shared that the professional development they have access to depends on what is offered by their school board, with those from larger boards having access to much more learning and development than their counterparts at smaller school boards. As such, ongoing professional development is needed to deepen trustees' understanding of the issues and their role in combatting all forms of oppression.

Trustees also shared their perception that not all their colleagues understand or see the need to combat systemic racism and oppressive practices. While many trustees are in need of professional development, those with whom we spoke shared their concern that those in most need of this learning choose not to attend equity-related training. They shared their disappointment that not all trustees attended the training on human rights provided by Osgoode Hall Law School.

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Negative perceptions of trustees

There have been a number of incidents in recent years that have shone the spotlight on a few trustees and their lack of knowledge and support for equity. These and further incidents run the risk of undermining the public's confidence in the public education system and their trust that trustees represent the interests of all students.

Trustee engagement

Many of the trustees with whom we spoke shared their perspective that not all trustees understand the time commitment required or the role and responsibilities of the trustee before seeking election. They also shared that people seek election for a number of reasons, sometimes using the position of trustee to begin their political career. They felt that for these and other reasons, some trustees are not fully engaged in their role at the school board, and they exhibit varying levels of engagement at their respective boards and also in OPSBA.

Indigenous Trustees' Council

OPSBA brings together the Indigenous trustees who represent the First Nations communities that enter into an agreement with a publicly funded Ontario school board to provide education services to Indigenous students. The Indigenous Trustees' Council (ITC) elects a chair to represent their interests on the OPSBA Board of Directors. The Executive Council appoints a member to liaise with ITC.

Throughout the consultations with trustees and with ITC, concerns were raised about the relationship between OPSBA and ITC. ITC members shared their perspective that OPSBA did not engage in meaningful consultation with them. They indicated that consultations with ITC members were often an afterthought, with OPSBA consulting with them after decisions have already been made. They also felt that the timelines for providing input did not always provide them with the opportunity to meet and discuss issues as a group. They shared their desire for OPSBA to more authentically consult with ITC and give them sufficient time to consider issues as a group. They also shared their perspective that Indigenous voices should be centred in conversations about equity and systemic racism and also at various educational opportunities such as the AGM and the Public Education Symposium. Otherwise, they feel that their voices and the issues facing Indigenous students will always be drowned out by the larger number of non-Indigenous trustees.

ITC members also discussed the fundamentally different perspective they have about the education system and the needs of Indigenous students. As such, they shared the need to have a voice that is independent of OPSBA, so that they can form their own position on issues, and be involved in the hiring of their own staff to support their work. They shared that OPSBA has much more learning to do to be able to effectively advocate for Indigenous

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students and Indigenous education. Many also felt that OPSBA could make better use of its position to model best practices regarding land acknowledgement and centring Indigenous perspectives that individual trustees can bring back to their respective school boards. OPSBA could develop research and discussion papers to provide leadership on key issues such as changing offensive school names and replacing offensive mascots. They also felt that trustees could benefit from deeper learning about Indigenous history and Indigenous education, and about the obligations of all trustees to represent all students, address systemic racism, and dismantle anti-Indigenous racism.

In discussions with trustees, many shared that they thought the ITC Chair sat on Executive Council. They felt that this demonstrated the importance of ITC and the centring of Indigenous voices at OPSBA. When they learned that this was not the case and the Executive Council appoints a member to liaise with ITC, they raised concerns that this structure might not be effective as it does not allow for the Executive Council to hear directly from ITC or for ITC to engage in OPSBA decision making. While many trustees praised the person currently acting as the liaison, they shared that they would support structural change that would allow the ITC Chair to sit on Executive Council.

Limited understanding of OPSBA

Some trustees also shared that many of their colleagues at their respective school boards have a limited understanding of the role of OPSBA and the role of directors. The lack of information and understanding means that many feel that recently appointed directors have a steep learning curve before they are able to be effective in their role.

Turnover among trustees and OPSBA directors

Trustees stand for re-election every 4 years, and the term of office for each director is 1 year. This has the potential to create a great deal of turnover among directors, which in turn creates a challenge for continuity and the ability of OPSBA to create momentum and build on progress to combat systemic racism and oppressive practices.

Role of OPSBA

While OPSBA and the directors play an important and influential role in the sector, the organization does not have the authority to direct school boards or trustees to make particular decisions. OPSBA can, however, influence decision making by educating and providing information, research, and best practices to trustees.

Diverse nature of the issues and challenges facing each school board

School boards across the province face different issues and have different needs. They also have student populations with very different compositions. For example, some school boards have a higher proportion of racialized students, while others have a higher

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proportion of Indigenous students. There are also those with small proportions of both Indigenous and racialized students. The challenge is ensuring that all directors see that equity is important work that they all should engage in. Any approach to equity must reflect the issues and concerns of each school board. Otherwise, it runs the risk of being seen as Toronto-centric and rejected by those outside of the Greater Toronto Area.

In addition, some trustees shared that their colleagues should not only consider who their school boards are educating, but what they are educating them for. They shared that regardless of where students are, there are a number of reasons why they should learn about the importance of being equitable, inclusive, and anti-oppressive. One reason is that they have peers with disabilities and from diverse gender and sexual identities. Regardless of the racial diversity at their schools, inclusive learning environments should be created for all students. In addition, many students will live and work in other parts of the province and country. So, it is important that students receive an anti-racist education to prepare them to live and work with people from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. These students should therefore be learning about all forms of oppression and their intersections.

OPSBA's recent focus on equity

The board members with whom we spoke shared their concern that OPSBA's focus on equity had only begun in the last few years. As such, they feel that the Association is far behind a number of school boards on its equity journey.

Pace of change

A number of the Board Members with whom we spoke shared their perspective that OPSBA could be more aggressive in its pace of change. They shared that the Association has recently been more reactive than proactive, which some found understandable given the current political and social environment. However, they shared their hope that with the development of an equity strategy, OPSBA will become more proactive in its equity work and will increase the pace at which change is made.

Reflecting equity, diversity, and inclusion in all OPSBA's work

A review of OPSBA's documents, including those on its website, shows that more could be done to embed EDI throughout OPSBA's documents and its work. This will help directors and trustees to integrate equity into all that they do; in this way, equity and anti-oppression will be treated as an "add-in" to their work rather than an optional "add-on." For example, the following weaknesses were identified:

- The Trustee Code of Conduct does not include the duty to comply with the Ontario *Human Rights Code*

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- Equity and anti-racism are not included in OPSBA's five multi-year priorities. In addition, achieving equity and addressing the needs of students from diverse backgrounds has not been embedded throughout its priorities, in particular in the priorities of advocating for the whole child and student well-being; supporting trustees as leaders in public education; and advocating for sustainable and equitable education funding, and
- The Summit on Children and Youth Mental Health does not appear to address the impact of racism on children's mental health and how the education system can support better mental health for all students, particularly Indigenous and Black students.

Black trustees

Unlike the Indigenous trustees, the Black trustees do not have a forum through which they can meet with each other or share insights with OPSBA on the issues facing Black students.

3.3 Opportunities

External factors that are likely to have a positive effect on meeting or exceeding the Association's aims or goals with respect to combatting systemic racism and oppressive practices include the following:

Increased focus by the Ministry of Education on Indigenous and Black students and on creating a more equitable education system

The Ontario government has announced changes to the education system intended to break down barriers for Black, Indigenous, and racialized students and provide all students with an equal opportunity to succeed.

The province will end Grade 9 streaming into applied and academic courses, strengthen sanctions for teachers who engage in behaviour of a racist nature, and provide teachers with additional anti-racism and anti-discrimination training. The province has also eliminated discretionary suspensions for students from Kindergarten up to Grade 3, beginning September 2020. About 10% (6,395) of suspended students were among the youngest learners, in Kindergarten to Grade 3. In addition, 40% of suspensions in those early years were issued for undefined reasons, meaning it is not known why the youngest learners in schools are suspended.¹

¹ Government of Ontario. (2020, July 9). *Ontario taking bold action to address racism and inequity in schools*. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/backgrounder/57542/ontario-taking-bold-action-to-address-racism-and-inequity-in-schools>

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The Ministry's focus on equity will drive much of the work within school boards, making it critically important that trustees have the knowledge and understanding to participate in this work.

Data collection requirements

In addition, in accordance with the *Anti-Racism Act, 2017* and Anti-Racism Data Standards, all school boards in Ontario will be required to collect race-based data by January 1, 2023. The collection of this data and the analysis of academic achievement and well-being for various groups of students will drive a great deal of change within school boards. Again, it is critical that trustees have the knowledge and understanding to participate in these conversations and lead the change that will be required to achieve equitable outcomes for all students.

3.4 Challenges

External factors and conditions that are likely to pose challenges to OPSBA's ability to combat systemic racism and oppressive practices include the following:

Growing Indigenous population across the province

One immediate challenge that OPSBA needs to consider is the growing Indigenous population. The 2016 Census of Canada enumerated 374,395 Indigenous peoples in Ontario, representing 2.8% of the provincial population.² This is the largest number of Indigenous peoples in any province or territory, representing 22% of all Indigenous peoples in Canada. The Indigenous population is also growing at a faster rate than the provincial population. Between 2006 and 2016, the Indigenous population in Ontario grew by 54% (from 242,490 to 374,395). During this same period, the population of the province grew by only 5% (from 12,851,821 to 13,448,494).

In addition to growing at a faster rate than the overall population, the Indigenous population also has a younger age profile than the non-Indigenous population. This means that in Ontario in 2016, children made up a larger proportion of the Indigenous population than the provincial population. While children under age 15 made up 15% of the provincial population, the 89,550 Indigenous children made up 24% of the Indigenous population in Ontario.³ As a result, while Indigenous peoples made up 2.8% of the provincial population,

² The Census of Canada does not fully enumerate people living in First Nations communities. This means that the numbers provided by Statistics Canada undercount the number of Indigenous peoples.

³ Statistics Canada. (2020, October 20). *Aboriginal peoples highlight tables, 2016 Census*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hltfst/abo-aut/Table.cfm?Lang=Eng&S=99&O=A&RPP=25>

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they constitute 4% of Ontario children aged 14 and under. This will vary across the province, as some communities have a higher number of Indigenous peoples.

The Indigenous population in Canada is increasingly living off-reserve. This is particularly true in Ontario, where only 40% of First Nations people with registered Indian status live on reserve.⁴ This means that the majority of Indigenous children and youth in the province attend Ontario's public schools and are not covered by education service agreements between First Nations and school boards. Ontario also has the largest number of remote First Nations communities in Canada, which means that many students will need to leave their communities to complete high school.

The growing Indigenous population along with the fact that not all Indigenous students are covered by education services agreements challenges school boards to ensure that all trustees are knowledgeable about Indigenous issues and can strongly advocate for Indigenous students.

Large and growing Black and racialized population across the province

Canada's reliance on immigration for labour market and population growth means that the student population will be increasingly racially, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse.

Between 2006 and 2016, the racialized population in Ontario grew by 42% (from 2,745,200 to 3,885,585), while the population of the province grew by only 5%. As such, the racialized population increased from 21% of Ontario's population in 2006 to 29% of the provincial population in 2016.

Just over half of all African Canadians (52%, or 627,715) live in Ontario, comprising 4.7% of the provincial population. In addition, over one-third (37%, or 442,015) live in the Toronto CMA, comprising 7.5% of the population of this region. Like the racialized population, the Black population in Ontario is growing at a faster rate than the provincial population. Between 2006 and 2016, the provincial population grew by 5%. Over that same time period, the provincial Black population grew by 32%, from over 473,000 to almost 628,000. As a result, the Black population grew from 3.9% of the provincial population to 4.7%.

Like the Indigenous population, the racialized population has a younger age profile than provincial population. This means that in Ontario in 2016, children made up a larger proportion of the racialized population than the provincial population. While children under age 15 made up 15% of the provincial population, the 784,930 racialized children

⁴ Indigenous Services Canada. (2020, November 3). *Annual report to Parliament 2020*. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1602010609492/1602010631711>

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made up 20% of the racialized population in Ontario.⁵ This means that 36% of the children in Ontario under age 15 were racialized.⁶

The African Canadian population also has a younger age profile than the general population, with 25% of Black Ontarians being under age 15. Similarly, a larger proportion of Ontario's Black population is aged 15 to 24 (18%) compared with the provincial population (13%). In total, 29% of the total provincial population is under age 25 compared with 42% of Black Ontarians.

Statistics Canada projects that the racialized population will continue to grow at a faster rate than the general population, resulting in racialized people representing a larger proportion of the population over the coming years. While the growth of the racialized population will be fuelled largely by immigration, a growing proportion of racialized people are Canadian-born. In 2016, about 32% of racialized people in Ontario and 81% of racialized children under age 15 were Canadian-born.⁷

Projections by Statistics Canada show that Canada's racialized population will more than double between 2006 and 2031, while the rest of the population will grow by only 12%.⁸ These projections estimate that by 2031, nearly 40% of children less than a year old will be racialized. For Ontario, this means that the racialized population is projected to grow from 26% of the population in 2006 to 40% in 2031.

While the city of Toronto has been the primary settlement area for racialized newcomers, in recent decades newcomers have begun to settle directly not only in the municipalities just outside the city, but throughout the province. The COVID-19 pandemic together with more options to work from home have increased the number of people moving out of the Greater Toronto Area and into smaller urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the province. This has increased the racial diversity of many of these

⁵ Statistics Canada. (2020, October 20). *Aboriginal peoples highlight tables, 2016 Census*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hltfst/abaut/Table.cfm?Lang=Eng&S=99&O=A&RPP=25>

⁶ Statistics Canada. (2019, June 17). *Data tables, 2016 Census*) <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?TABID=2&Lang=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=1341679&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=110531&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=120&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=&D1=0&D2=0&D3=0&D4=0&D5=0&D6=0>

⁷ Statistics Canada. (2016, September 15). *Immigration and ethnocultural diversity in Canada*. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm>

⁸ Statistics Canada. (2010). *Projections of the diversity of the Canadian population: 2006–2031*. Cat. No. 91-551-X. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2010001-eng.pdf>

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communities, which is challenging school boards throughout the province to understand and respond to the needs of the increasingly diverse student population.

Ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the past two school years, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced most teaching to go online at an unprecedented pace and scale. This has meant a lot of trial and error for school boards and individual teachers, and a great deal of uncertainty as the Ministry and school boards have responded to increasing COVID-19 infection rates.

These interruptions and the impact on students' learning and mental health are likely to impact the education system for decades, with the potential to deepen the existing inequalities within the education system. From the beginning of the pandemic, many people have highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequities not only in terms of the physical and mental health of students, but also with respect to their education and social and recreational lives. Over the coming years, trustees will need to pay particular attention to how the pandemic and racism align if they are to address the disparities in schooling and education for these students.⁹

In addition, the pandemic has exposed to Black parents the racism experienced by their children. Prior to the pandemic homeschooling was being seen by many Black parents as an alternative to the public school system because of the negative impact of the public school system on their children's learning and mental health.¹⁰ During the pandemic many Black parents have been able to sit in on some of their children's classes, which raised concerns about what their children were learning and the racism they were being exposed to. This has many more Black parents considering homeschooling for their children.

Urban-rural divide

In addition to racial diversity, there are a number of differences between the urban and rural parts of the province that impact educational outcomes and the specific focus on equity for each school board. Some of these include access to reliable and high speed internet and travel time to school. For some students these issues have intersected to impact them in different ways during the pandemic. For example, access to devices and the internet have limited some students' ability to engage with schooling. For other students, being able to access schooling online and from home has been a positive, as it has meant

⁹ James, C. E. (2020). Racial inequity, COVID-19 and the education of Black and other marginalized students. *Royal Society of Canada*. <https://rsc-src.ca/en/covid-19/impact-covid-19-in-racialized-communities/racial-inequity-covid-19-and-education-black-and>

¹⁰ Daniel, K. (2019, September 26). Why more and more Black-Canadian families are choosing to homeschool their kids. *Today's Parent*. <https://www.todayparent.com/kids/school-age/why-black-canadian-families-are-choosing-to-homeschool-their-kids/>

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that they haven't spent hours travelling to and from school every day. The different issues and concerns faced by rural, northern and remote schools across Ontario must be considered in all OPSBA's work, particularly as many face declining enrollments and shifting demographic patterns.

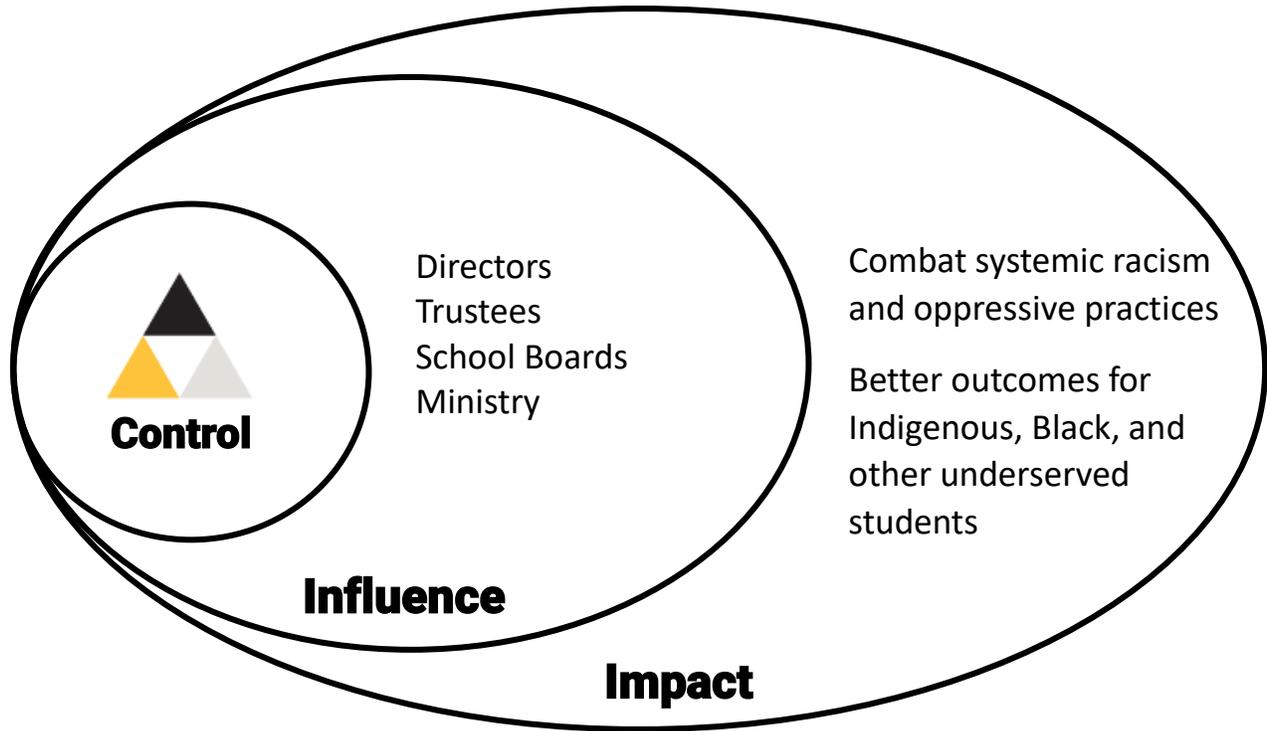
Intersectionality

While it is important to keep a focus on Indigenous and Black students who the data suggests are faring the worse in the education system, it is also critical that school boards also address all forms of oppressions and take an intersectional approach to this work. This approach enables an exploration and analysis of how other forms of oppression are intertwined with and complicated by racial oppression. However, this will require that trustees have a deep understanding not only of the various forms of oppression, but also of intersectionality and the understanding that all oppression is linked.

Upcoming elections

With municipal and provincial elections on the horizon, OPSBA has the opportunity to engage in and shape the conversations about public education and the need to address systemic oppression in education. This will help focus both the attention of the public and politicians on these critical issues.

4. The Road Ahead



In thinking about how OPSBA can advocate for and support an inclusive organization and support school boards to combat systemic racism and other forms of oppression, it is important to be cognizant of what is within the Association's power to control, the areas in which it has influence, and ultimately the impact it would like to achieve on students across the province.

OPSBA has control over its policies, practices, and structures. It is through trustees and the resources that it produces that OPSBA is able to influence school boards. However, while it can offer professional development to trustees, it cannot compel them to attend or to apply what they have learned within their respective school boards. OPSBA is also able to influence educational policy by advocating with the Ministry on behalf of school boards and students.

4.1 Daily operations

OPSBA directly controls its employment policies and practices (addressed in a separate report) and the work of the Association, including:

- Education Program Policy
- Policy Development
- Legislation and Regulation Monitoring and Analysis
- Government Relations
- Communications and Media Relations
- Labour Relations and Human Resources
- Education Finance
- Networking and Facilitation
- Conferences, meetings, and events
- Professional development, and
- Guide to Good Governance

Critical to combatting systemic racism and oppressive practices is ensuring that equity is embedded throughout OPSBA's mission, vision, and values. This will help to ensure that equity is then filtered down into all that OPSBA does, including into its five key priorities, and especially as part of the priorities of advocating for the whole child and student well-being; supporting trustees as leaders in public education; and advocating for sustainable and equitable education funding.

In addition, the priority-setting process should be structured to centre the voices of Indigenous peoples and Black communities; otherwise, these voices may be drowned out by the perspectives of the majority of trustees. Analysis of the issues within the education system is critical to the priority-setting process, as it will enable OPSBA to distinguish between issues that are important and immediate versus those that are longstanding or emerging. To support this work, members of the Policy Development and Education Program Work Teams, as well as the staff that support these work teams, should receive additional training to ensure that they are able to apply an equity and anti-oppressive lens to their work.

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The following recommendations are made to support OPSBA to embed equity throughout all its work:

Recommendation 1: It is recommended that equity, with a focus on combatting systemic racism and other forms of oppression, be embedded into OPSBA's mission, vision, values, and multi-year strategic priorities.

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that OPSBA directors who participate on work teams and the staff that support these work teams receive mandatory training to enable them to do all their work through an equity lens.

Recommendation 3: It is recommended that OPSBA ensure that it has the appropriate staffing to meet the additional work arising from this audit, and that the organization has the appropriate equity and anti-racism expertise to support and guide staff, the Executive Council, and directors.

4.2 Advocacy

Advocating on issues of equity and systemic racism

OPSBA advocates for conditions that support and improve student achievement and well-being. OPSBA believes that all students should be given the opportunity to experience success in school and in life and that education must be supported within a framework of values that ensures young people will become caring, responsible, and productive citizens. OPSBA engages in advocacy on issues that make a difference for students, including education funding, Indigenous education, children and youth mental health, special education, technology in teaching and learning, transportation, and school accommodation reviews.

A review of OPSBA's Twitter account found that the account has been used to share information on public education. It is also used to mark days of celebration and commemoration, including Treaties Recognition Week, Indigenous Awareness Month, Orange Shirt Day, and Black History Month, as well as to promote the webinars and education sessions held by OPSBA as well as various boards and education partners on a range of equity issues.

The Association also prepares submissions and letters to the government on issues that have come up for consultation (e.g., provincial budget, proposed Ministry policy) and on issues of importance to the Association. Since 2014, OPSBA has prepared 125 submissions

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and letters, which are posted on its website.¹¹ Based on the title of these submissions and letters, none was related to equity, Black students, racialized students, or racism. OPSBA has, however, prepared submissions related to various equity-related issues such as the *Anti-Racism Act*, Education Accessibility, Grants for Special Needs, and Ontario Autism Program. There were two letters related to Indigenous students, both of which were from the ITC.

The following recommendations are made to enable OPSBA to better advocate on issues of equity and combat systemic racism and all forms of oppression:

Recommendation 4: It is recommended that the Association increase its public advocacy on issues of systemic racism and other forms of oppression in Ontario's public school system.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that OPSBA use opportunities to advocate with the Ministry of Education on behalf of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized students.

Indigenous trustees

As noted earlier in this report, the majority of Indigenous students in Ontario's public school system are not covered by education service agreements between First Nations and school boards. Indigenous trustees appointed under these agreements represent only a fraction of Indigenous students in Ontario's school boards. As such, there is need for most (if not all) school boards to have Indigenous trustees that can advocate for the large number of Indigenous students in boards without appointed Indigenous trustees.

The following recommendations are made to enable OPSBA to ensure that all Indigenous students are better served by Ontario's public school system:

Recommendation 6: It is recommended that OPSBA advocate with the Ministry for the creation of elected Indigenous trustee positions, with the number of trustees being proportionate to the size of the Indigenous population within the school district.

4.3 Education and learning

OPSBA provides professional development services to support trustees in their role of ensuring that Ontario's education system continues to produce excellent results in student achievement and well-being. The Association can also use its position to educate prospective trustees and provide mandatory training to directors.

¹¹ Ontario Public School Boards' Association. (n.d.). *Advocacy and action*. <https://www.opsba.org/advocacy-and-action/>

Prospective Trustees

Throughout the consultations with trustees, many shared their perspective that OPSBA could play a role in educating people who may be thinking about running for election to understand the role and responsibilities that come with the position of trustee. They felt that an honest discussion with existing trustees would help them better understand the position and would help them make an informed decision to run. This would also provide the opportunity to inform prospective trustees about the issues facing the education system and the issues of equity that need to be addressed to drive positive improvements for all students. This would support them to have the competence and confidence to raise and address these issues in their respective school boards once elected. It would also let prospective trustees know that they need to have a good understanding of issues of equity and that it is the responsibility of all trustees to address these issues. Offering information sessions could also have the added benefit of encouraging people from diverse backgrounds, including Black and Indigenous people, to run for trustee by providing more people with an understanding of the role and importance of trustees in Ontario's public education system.

In addition, OPSBA could play an important role in educating the public more broadly about the important role that trustees play in Ontario's public education system. This may inform more people about this important position and potentially interest some in running for office in the future.

The following recommendations are made to inform individuals about the role prior to their running for office:

Recommendation 7: It is recommended that well in advance of municipal elections, OPSBA hold information sessions for those considering seeking election to become trustees. These sessions should allow existing trustees to provide participants with an understanding of the role and responsibilities of trustees along with an understanding of the key equity issues facing the education sector.

Recommendation 8: It is recommended that OPSBA educate the public about the important role that trustees play in the education system.

Trustees

School board trustees are expected to understand board structure, board functioning, and the board's role. They are responsible for approving policy decisions and how funds are allocated, which affects the educational environment in many ways. These decisions ought to be informed by an understanding of how students learn, how students are taught, how learning is measured, how teachers are supported with professional development, and

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how effectively the community is engaged. If trustees do not have a sound understanding of equity, systemic racism, and various forms of oppression, they could be unknowingly making decisions that deepen racial inequities within school districts. In addition, a lack of understanding of equity means that trustees may not know the right questions to ask, and consequently may not be able to play an active role in challenging the board to address issues of equity.

Many of the trustees with whom we spoke expressed the need for ongoing learning on issues of equity, particularly with respect to anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. While OPSBA isn't able to mandate training for trustees, providing training at the beginning of their term might be the best time to capture trustees' interest and attention. Providing this training at the beginning of their term could be part of the onboarding process and would enable trustees to begin their term with a deeper knowledge and understanding of equity, the scope of their work, and the pressing equity issues in education. It would also provide them with a common language and understanding to support their ability to engage in these conversations with their colleagues at the school board and at OPSBA. This would help trustees have the confidence and competence to address issues of equity at their boards, as many shared that while they wanted to engage in discussions about equity, they hesitated because they didn't feel fully equipped to do so.

Professional development to support trustees in their role should include training that accomplishes the following:

- Provide trustees with the knowledge and understanding that would better equip them to challenge the internal and external policies and systems that have maintained the disparities in the education system for generations. These sessions can help them develop the capacity to systematically change and challenge policies and school board practices that continue to underserve and marginalize students.
- Allow trustees to engage in their own personal journey to deepen their knowledge and understanding of issues of equity, racism, and oppression, and provide them with the language to engage in courageous conversations on these issues. Trustees shared that they could benefit from the opportunity to learn in small groups, with facilitator-led conversations that provide a safe space for them to share and learn.
- Educate trustees on the history of Ontario's education system, including the long-term implications of residential schools and the history of anti-Black racism in Ontario's education system.
- Enable trustees to examine the disparities within their school board in order to initiate and create systemic changes that challenge the status quo and support equity for all students. In addition, because these issues have been in existence for a long time, it is often difficult for many to see them as problematic and resulting

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from issues within the school system. As such, training will help interrupt the long-held beliefs and narratives that have been created to justify the continuation of these inequities.

- Allow trustees to deepen their understanding of the Ontario *Human Rights Code* and their obligation to ensure that education services are delivered in a non-discriminatory manner and do not have an adverse impact on any groups. It would help trustees understand their accountability to promote high academic standards and outcomes for all students while embracing and accommodating differences.
- Increase trustees' understanding of their responsibility to advocate for all children, particularly Indigenous and Black children.

In addition, OPSBA should also consistently embed issues of equity throughout the 21 professional learning modules available on OPSBA's website, the AGM, and the other events offered to trustees, including the Public Education Symposium, Education Labour Relations and Human Resources Symposium, and Regional Council Meetings. This would build on and deepen the knowledge and understanding of all trustees. It would also demonstrate to trustees how and why equity is integral to everything they do.

The following recommendations are made to ensure that trustees have a deep understanding of equity and how it applies to all aspects of their new role:

Recommendation 9: It is recommended that OPSBA develop training for newly elected trustees to support them in understanding equity, systemic racism, and other forms of oppression in connection with their role and responsibilities as a trustee.

Recommendation 10: It is recommended that OPSBA address issues of equity throughout the 21 professional learning modules available to trustees.

Recommendation 11: It is recommended that all OPSBA events embed discussions of equity, systemic racism, and various forms of oppression to help trustees understand that equity is integral to everything they do.

OPSBA Directors

Directors shared that they face a steep learning curve when they take on their role. In the consultations, many shared that they could benefit from further support and learning to help them better understand OPSBA and their role and responsibilities. As directors begin their role or start another term, there is an opportunity to provide training on equity as well as to increase their understanding of OPSBA and their roles and responsibility as a director.

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Directors also shared that ongoing training is needed to help them move beyond a basic understanding of equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression and better understand how to incorporate an equity lens into their ongoing work.

The following recommendations are made to ensure that OPSBA directors have a deeper understanding of equity and to shorten their learning curve:

Recommendation 12: It is recommended that mandatory training be provided to all newly appointed and returning OPSBA directors to deepen their understanding of equity, systemic racism, and all forms of oppression.

Recommendation 13: It is recommended that an onboarding process be developed for newly appointed OPSBA directors to shorten their learning curve and to support them to be more effective participants in the Association.

Recommendation 14: It is recommended that OPSBA provide guidance to school boards to guide their selection of OPSBA directors. This information may include the roles and responsibilities of directors, the level of knowledge needed to be successful, as well as the need to maintain an equity mindset to support OPSBA in combatting systemic racism and all forms of oppression.

4.4 Knowledge gathering and sharing

OPSBA has the opportunity to gather and share knowledge and to facilitate the sharing of information among school boards, trustees, and directors. This can be done through the following means:

Regular meetings with board chairs

While discussions with trustees important, added value could be obtained by convening discussions among board chairs. These meetings could allow chairs to share topical information, improve the Association's understanding of issues and challenges faced by school boards, and provide OPSBA with a better understanding of the equity initiatives underway at school boards.

Networking and information sharing

OPSBA has established a number of opportunities for trustees and directors to gather and share information. The Association provides numerous opportunities for member trustees to become knowledgeable about vital emerging issues, such as the implications of new legislation and policies. The Association also ensures that its members have opportunities to hear from and exchange ideas directly with political leaders, senior Ministry of Education

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staff, federation leaders, and legal experts. This exchange of perspectives is highly valued by trustees.

Many of the directors with whom we spoke shared that while these opportunities are beneficial, more opportunities could be created to support networking and the sharing of information between trustees and directors. They shared that while they valued the programming in the AGM, the Public Education Symposium, and other events, a great deal of valuable information is obtained through the informal interactions at these events. However, oftentimes these informal interactions that allow for information sharing between trustees is by accident rather than by design. They felt that more structured opportunities to share information would be beneficial.

In addition, racialized trustees shared that their White colleagues aren't particularly friendly and didn't take the opportunity to engage with them. Others shared that they found it difficult to meet new people, particularly since trustees have existing relationships that they foster at these meetings and are not often open to meeting anyone new.

Research and policy briefs & best practice guides

OPSBA could also produce a range of research and policy briefs to support trustees to deepen their understanding on various issues of equity and to learn how to embed equity throughout all aspects of their work. These briefs could provide trustees with critical information to help inform and guide their work. Best practice guides that summarize the progressive equity work school boards are engaged in across the province and in other jurisdictions will also help ensure that board decisions reflect the best thinking in the field. These guides can show what equity looks like in practice while also highlighting challenges and successes to document the learnings from these initiatives.

These briefs could also provide valuable guidance on how trustees could integrate equity throughout all their work, including teaching trustees how to:

- Establish and assess equity-related performance of the Director of Education
- Embed equity, with a focus on Indigenous and Black students, into the principles of effective school board governance
- Best monitor evidence of student achievement through an equity lens, and
- Engage constituents from diverse backgrounds, communities, and identities in the creation of policies that affect them.

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The following recommendations are made to facilitate the deliberate sharing of information among school boards, trustees, and directors:

Recommendation 15: It is recommended that OPSBA regularly convene meetings with board chairs to facilitate the sharing of information, improve the Association's understanding of issues and challenges faced by boards, and help the Association better understand what boards are doing regarding equity.

Recommendation 16: It is recommended that OPSBA create structured opportunities for trustees to meet one another and share information at its various events.

Recommendation 17: It is recommended that OPSBA publish research and policy briefs to educate trustees about various equity issues and to deepen their understanding of how to apply an equity lens to all aspects of their work.

Recommendation 18: It is recommended that OPSBA document best practices from Ontario school boards and other jurisdictions to show trustees what equity looks like in practice and to allow them to benefit from the lessons learned and successes of various initiative.

4.5 Strengthening and establishing structures

Indigenous Trustees Council

OPSBA invites First Nations trustees appointed to school boards under the education services agreements and other Indigenous trustees elected through the municipal electoral process to be part of the ITC. The ITC elects a chair to represent their interests on the OPSBA Board of Directors.

Student trustees are secondary students elected by their peers to represent the valuable voice of students at the board table. A school board can have up to three student trustees. Some boards have also introduced the position of Indigenous student trustee.

During the focus group discussions held with ITC members, along with discussions held with other trustees, a number of opportunities were identified to strengthen the role of the ITC. Opportunities were also identified to give an independent voice to the ITC, and to ensure that OPSBA is able to support the large number of Indigenous students who do not live in First Nations communities and are not covered by education services agreements and who are therefore not represented by an Indigenous trustee.

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The following recommendations are made to address anti-Indigenous racism and support Indigenous students across the province:

Recommendation 19: It is recommended that the role of ITC be strengthened by reserving a seat on the Executive Council for the ITC chair, allowing ITC to participate in the hiring of its support staff, and updating the Terms of Reference to clarify the relationship between ITC and OPSBA.

Recommendation 20: It is recommended that ITC be able to have a voice independent of OPSBA and be able to develop and share policy papers and other tools and resources to support school boards to better address Indigenous education and support Indigenous students.

Recommendation 21: It is recommended that Indigenous student trustees across the province be connected with ITC and that they meet virtually a few times a year so that they may benefit from the support and guidance of these trustees.

Recommendation 22: It is recommended that OPSBA formally and authentically consult with ITC on issues that affect Indigenous students and Indigenous education.

Recommendation 23: It is recommended that ITC be able to provide input into the content of the AGM, Public Education Symposium, and other professional development opportunities to ensure that appropriate connections are being made to Indigenous education. Where they see the opportunity, ITC members should lead panels and discussions on issues that affect Indigenous students and Indigenous education.

Black Trustees' Caucus

Black trustees do not have a forum through which to meet with each other nor to provide insights to OPSBA on the issues facing Black students.

The Black trustees with whom we spoke also shared the need for ongoing anti-Black racism training for trustees to deepen trustees' understanding of the issues and to help them improve their confidence and competence to address the issues at their respective boards.

Some Black trustees also shared their concern that the speakers selected for OPSBA events don't always have an equity lens and often speak only to the experience of White students, to the exclusion of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and other underserved students. They shared that more thoughtful selection of speakers is needed to ensure that they can speak to the experience of all students. In fact, they shared that the focus of speakers at these events should be on the students whom the system is failing so that trustees are better able to address the needs of marginalized and underserved students.

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The following recommendations are made to address anti-Black racism and support Black students across the province:

Recommendation 24: It is recommended that a Black Trustees' Council (BTC) be created and that the chair have a seat on the Executive Council, that the BTC participate in the hiring of its support staff, and that Terms of Reference be developed to clarify the relationship between BTC and OPSBA.

Recommendation 25: It is recommended that BTC have a voice independent of OPSBA, and that BTC develop and share policy papers and other tools and resources to support school boards to better address Black education and support Black students.

Recommendation 26: It is recommended that OPSBA advocate for the establishment of Black student trustee positions in school boards where warranted.

Recommendation 27: It is recommended that Black student trustees across the province be connected with BTC and that they meet virtually a few times a year so that they may benefit from the support and guidance of these trustees.

Recommendation 28: It is recommended that OPSBA formally and authentically consult with BTC on anti-Black racism and others issues that affect Black students.

Recommendation 29: It is recommended that BTC be able to provide input into the content of the AGM, Public Education Symposium, and other professional development opportunities to ensure that appropriate connections are being made to systemic racism and anti-Black racism. Where they see the opportunity, BTC members should lead panels and discussions on anti-Black racism and other issues that affect Black students.

Appendix A: Summary of Recommendations

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