

# Achievement Gap Critique

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In 1999 the TDSB adopted its Equity Foundation Statement and Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation. The document was the result of an intense community struggle to ensure that the newly amalgamated school board adopted the best practices and policies from its legacy boards.

The structure of the Implementation documents was in turn drawn from the structure of the Ministry of Education's 1993 PPM 119 that required Boards across the province to develop anti-racism policies. PPM 119 reflected years of struggles and experiments in different Boards that had led to a consensus that in order to achieve equity, all aspects of the education system needed to work in concert. It was not just a matter of changing curriculum, or having an affirmative action program, or in service for selected teachers or new research and demographic questions. While each of these areas was important, it was recognized that we would not achieve equitable schools by focusing on any one of these areas to the detriment of others.

The Equity Foundation Statements and Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation also recognized that equity was measured by the narrowing of achievement gaps.

“We believe that equity of opportunity and equity of access to our programs, services and resources are critical to the achievement of successful outcomes for all those whom we serve and for those who serve our school system.” Equity Foundation Statement

It is therefore important to evaluate the Achievement Gap Task Force's Draft Report in relation to the Board's equity policy.

The five implementation documents all rest on ten pillars:

- 1) Board Policies, Guidelines and Practices
- 2) Leadership
- 3) School community partnerships
- 4) Curriculum
- 5) Language
- 6) Student Evaluation, Assessment and Placement
- 7) Guidance
- 8) Employment and Promotion Practices
- 9) Staff Development
- 10) Harassment policies

A brief survey of the Draft Report suggests that not all of these ten pillars have been addressed by the Task Force, nor are they reflected in the document. We would therefore

conclude that there are serious gaps in the Task Force's work that will limit the effectiveness of any efforts to close the achievement gap.

## Demographic data

(Directions for Consideration 1-5)

The first five Directions for Consideration focus on better deployment of demographic data collected. These are important recommendations. They are the foundation of institutional knowledge of the nature of the gaps we are facing. For this reason the reliability of such data is of utmost importance. Those of us who remember both the survey of TDSB employees and students will recall that the level of employee response was low. In fact, a former Equity Advisor opined that had this data collection been ordered by the OHRC, the level would have been judged as non-compliance. The student survey lacked basic preparatory work in many schools, and at the time, we were flooded with anecdotal reports that participating students and teachers took the process less than seriously, which also reflects on data.

The first TDSB survey may therefore provide a somewhat weak baseline to measure progress. The implementation of upcoming employee and student surveys will be of utmost importance. Since the use of such research is the foundation for work around the achievement gap, the Directions for Consideration should therefore include a recommendation that the next employee survey take place with full consultation and cooperation of employee groups to ensure a response rate greater than 80%, and that prior to completion of student surveys, schools conduct educational work to explain the purpose and importance of this research to ensure that teachers and students understand and fully cooperate in the collection of data.

## The Task Force's focus

Directions for consideration 6,11 and 12, fall under pillar eight, Employment and Promotion Practices.

Numbers 7 to 10 and 13 would be part of Staff Development.

Directions for consideration 14 to 19 are generally about curriculum supports—pillar four in the equity policy.

## Missing Pillars:

### Board Policies, Guidelines and Practices

While the Report talks about “systemic racism,” the taskforce has not considered how the first pillar of the Equity Policy—Board Policies, Guidelines and Practices—may be contributing to the achievement gap. For example, the former TDSB Zero tolerance policy was found to contravene the Ontario Human Rights Code. The new Progressive

Discipline policy has resulted in a dramatic fall in suspensions and expulsions. This change in policy has had an important impact the relationship between racialized students and their schools. Other Board policies need to be similarly evaluated in any effort to deal with systemic racism.

## Leadership

The second pillar of the equity policy is Leadership. Leadership sends out signals to the system about what it considers important. These signals will orient the practices of those throughout the system. The fact that the Equity department has recently been dissolved and its senior staff redeployed, and that Equity is no longer named in the Board organizational chart sends a strong message to the system that it is no longer a priority. Its replacement by “Inclusive Schools; Student, Parent and Community” does not signal the same history or scope. Inclusivity is a subset of the efforts that must be employed to work towards equity.

The shift away from Equity also limits the scope of the Task Force Report. The concept of equity and the five implementation documents previously allowed the board to think about intersectionality—how all these aspects of identity combine to produce inequities in school achievement.

The one piece of intersectionality that the Task force has not ignored is the question of socio-economic equity (pg 12). Economic changes in society over the last twenty years has led to an alarming increase in poverty among racialized groups in Toronto. It is therefore essential to consider how poverty intersects with racialization to limit student achievement and the Task Force has attempted to do so.

That said, the Directions for Consideration are largely about continuing present programs that provide material support for these communities. We must recognize that the dramatic increase in poverty will require an expansion of programming. This section is limited by the conceptualization of “The System Challenge” on page 5 of the report. “Responding to the needs of this diverse urban community is not an easy task for schools in the RDSB, *particularly in the context of resources which are shrinking relative to needs.*” (emphasis mine)

The shrinking of resources is not a context. It is a political decision. The Task Force needs to make a clear statement on the unacceptability of this shrinkage in a time of increased needs. It should be calling on the Board to make renegotiation of the funding formula its major public political issue.

It is similarly important to consider the roles that the other equity areas—gender, sexual orientation and disability—play in the production of the achievement gap among racialized students. The achievement differential between Black boys and Black girls, for instance, cries out for a gender analysis. To simply define underachieving groups by race or culture—Aboriginal, Black, Hispanic, Portuguese and Middle Eastern background—and not look at differentiation within these groups on the basis of gender, sexual

orientation and disability is a serious shortcoming of the Task Force's approach. To take a very practical example, the fact that the Boys Engagement Strategy which examined the gender achievement gap was not developed in conjunction with the Achievement Gap Task Force illustrates a major blind spot.

### School Community Partnerships

Perhaps the most important area that receives short shrift in the Task Force Report is the third pillar of equity—School Community Partnerships. This is evident in the makeup of the Task Force itself—“superintendents of education, principals, vice principals and central staff.” With all due respect, these are precisely those who have been presiding over the system's continuing inequities for the last decades. They need to be held accountable for the system's failure to address the achievement gap in the first place. How reflective are they of the groups who are failing to achieve? The fact that they conducted a “whole day” of hearings with parents, community, staff and students cannot be considered adequate. Partnership supposes some sort of equality between partners. Partnership requires actual involvement of parent, community and student leaders in the process of such work to hold board staff accountable.

Although the sections “What other school districts have done” and “TDSB Best Practices in Schools” reference work with parents and communities, these are not reflected in the Task Force Directions for Consideration.

One of the major principals of Anti-racist Education as developed in the 80s and 90s is that the motor force of anti-racist change is the struggle for justice of oppressed groups. The major failing of the Task Force Report is that it does not envisage racialized communities or racialized students as being a force that pushes for institutional change. This cannot happen as long as parents, students and community are excluded from any real power in their schools or in the Board.

The one point in Board history, in the old TBE, where we actually saw schools responding to the needs of marginalized communities and making major transformations on the ground was in the early 80s when the TBE had an active, independent, School Community Relations Department. This department helped organize parents and community and equip them with the skills they needed to be a major force in their schools. Parents and community sat on hiring committees for principals. They influenced the promotion of superintendents. They intervened in teacher evaluation criteria. They had a voice in the allocation of school budgets. They pressed the Board for adequate resources and curriculum changes. Principals, administrators, teachers and trustees had to listen, and had to respond, because they were held accountable by their school communities. Their careers could depend on it.

Bureaucratic organizations are accountable to power. As long as racialized groups are excluded from real power at a school and system level, as long as the Board does not allocate resources for support, skills building and community development to equip them

to be effective advocates, their needs will never be met. Despite fine words and policy documents, their children will fall behind.

The Task Force has not contemplated how to empower communities or students in any of its recommendations.

### Curriculum

Many of the Report's recommendations focus on "culturally responsive instruction." Yet, increasingly restrictive ministry expectations, rubrics etc that regiment the curriculum shrink the kind of flexibility teachers can exercise in terms of adapting the curriculum to respond to the needs of their diverse students. The bottom line for teachers is evaluated by how their students perform on culturally non-responsive standardized testing. We need to be asking why existing curriculum fails to engage racialized students and developing new approaches which do. We need to be enriching the educational experience of these students. This will require a commitment to resources that goes far beyond the provision of workshops to teachers.

### Language

The next pillar of the Equity Policy that the Task Force has failed to address is Language. If we look at the groups who are failing to achieve several groups stand out. The Portuguese are not a racialized group. Members of the Spanish Speaking Community may or may not be racialized. Both groups are identified primarily by language. Although they are two of the five identified groups there is little in the report that addresses their particularity. The same could be said of Middle Eastern students although they are increasingly racialized in a time of growing Islamophobia. It is unacceptable that home language, newcomer status and ESL resources are not addressed in this report.

### Guidance

The Report fails to address the issue of Guidance, pillar seven of the Equity Policy. Guidance is central to the placement of students and their success in schools.

### Employment and Promotion

Although some of the recommendations would fall under the pillar of Employment and Promotion Practices the document seems to have little to say about successes or failures in terms of making staff more reflective of the communities they serve, and how to address that question.

The Report talks about "culturally responsive instruction" and about establishing "a procedure for creating opportunities and incentives for teachers with particular skills and interests to work in schools where they are most needed." (pg 9) "Culturally responsive instruction" is made more difficult when representatives of particular culture are largely

absent from the teaching staff. This is therefore an important recommendation, but half-hearted as long as it does not take into account an evaluation of progress in employment equity efforts.

### Staff Development

Although the emphasis on staff development is important, it does not address the declining resources available for staff development over the last decades. It also seems to pin the blame for the achievement gap on teacher inadequacy. It does not consider the constraints on teacher practices which are a result of the Policies, Guidelines and Practices of the Board, Employment conditions etc. For example, all the workshops in the world about “culturally responsive instruction” will do little to change teacher practices if their performance is to be evaluated by culturally non-responsive standardized testing of their students, if their classrooms are too large to deal with particular students, if students are hungry or overcome by problems that require social work support.

### Harassment

Finally, access to a procedure to resolve cases of Harassment is the tenth pillar of the Board’s Equity policy. The Task Force has not investigated students’ ability to access the Human Rights Office or other complaint procedures. What outreach has there been to students? Do they understand that they have recourse when facing racial discrimination and harassment? Or in the face of a hostile environment do they just disengage and drop out?

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the Task Force makes some worthwhile recommendations in the areas of Curriculum, Employment and Promotion, and Staff Development , but its failure to consider what has been learned over the years about other areas central to equity strategies aimed at narrowing the achievement gap limits its approach. This is reflected in the make-up of the Task Force itself, in the absence of consideration of factors that contribute to the achievement gap other than race and socio economic status, and the failure to address other pillars of the Board’s equity policy.