

Student Voices

Student Experiences of Racism & HDSB's Strengthened Commitments to Anti-Racism



© Halton District School Board (2021)

Acknowledgments

The Halton District School Board (HDSB) expresses gratitude to the students who graciously volunteered their time to participate in the virtual conversations on the HDSB's response to racism. We are immensely thankful for the students' willingness to share their difficult experiences while engaging in positive and constructive conversations to help the HDSB improve its response to racism in order to ensure that schools and HDSB's sites are free of racism and all forms of discrimination.

Quotations

Unless noted, all quotations represent student voice, edited where needed, for clarity and grammatical accuracy.

Suggested Citation

Halton District School Board (2021). Student Insight on the HDSB's Response to Racism - *Summary of Findings*. Burlington, Ontario.

Contributions, Facilitations and Authorship

This report and initiative, commissioned by the Director of Education, is a result of a collaboration between HDSB's secondary students, the Research and Accountability Department, staff from the Indigenous Rights & Education, Human Rights & Equity Department, and the HDSB's Human Rights and Equity Advisor.

Director's Office

Curtis Ennis, *Director of Education*

Indigenous Rights & Education, Human Rights & Equity Department

Alexiis Stephen - *Secondary Instructional Program Lead*

Eric Keunne - *Secondary Instructional Program Lead*

Erin Walsh - *Elementary Instructional Program Lead*

Karamjit Sangha-Bosland, *Equity Instructional Program Lead*

Kelly Gray, *Equity Instructional Program Lead*

Tammy Hardwick, *Equity Instructional Program Lead*

Superintendent of Education

Rob Eatough, *Indigenous Rights & Education, Equity & Inclusion*

Human Rights and Equity Advisor

Jewel Amoah, PhD - *Human Rights and Equity Advisor*

Research & Accountability Department

Rossana Bisceglia, PhD - *Manager of Research and Accountability*

Marija Glisic, PhD - *Research Officer*

Kate Vautour - *Research Assistant*

Jing Xu - *Research Assistant*

Table of Contents

Director’s Foreword	4
Executive Summary	6
Background	8
Findings	12
Theme 1: Identify, Deconstruct and Recognize Microaggressions	13
Theme 2: Accountability	14
2.1 Student Accountability	15
2.2 Repairing Harm	17
2.3 Monitoring and Enforcement	18
2.4 Educator, Administrator and System Accountability	18
Theme 3: Harmful Impact	21
3.1 Disproportionate Impact of Student Burden and Consequences	22
Theme 4: Education & Enhanced Awareness	23
4.1 Student Responsibility	24
4.3 Redefine Racism	26
4.4 Educators’ Capacity	27
Theme 5: Representation (Identity)	28
Theme 6: Implementation	30
6.1 Effective Implementation	30
HDSB Current Practices, Renewed & New Commitments	33
Current Practices	33
Renewed System Commitments	35
New System Commitments	37
Conclusion and Next Steps	38

Director's Foreword

We are grateful for the courage of students to speak their truth about how racism, discrimination and hate impacts them. Without them this report would not have been possible.

The Halton District School Board encompasses a Region of five municipalities, Georgetown and Acton (Halton Hills), Burlington, Milton and Oakville. Within these municipalities there is an ever expanding diversity of communities. This diversity presents an opportunity to draw upon varied talents, voices and perspectives to strengthen the board's commitment to equity and inclusion and to serve the needs of every student.

Across the province, we have seen numerous reports of individual acts of racism and systemic discrimination. As a society we have various tools in place to address individual targeted acts of discrimination. Although these acts may occur, there are various methods of accountability to provide redress of those who are impacted by discrimination generally and racism in particular. The challenge has consistently been in acknowledging and dismantling systemic racism. Throughout the HDSB, we are committed to dismantling systemic barriers that function to inhibit the full inclusion and success of students and staff.

In recent months, the media has been inundated with stories of pain, harm and struggle of students and parents/guardians encountering racism in schools. As a microcosm of the larger society, we cannot deny that this reality is also present in HDSB schools. However, we have committed ourselves to confronting this ugly reality and to creating and sustaining more inclusive, positive and affirming educational experiences for Indigenous, Black and racialized students and for all students within our care.

This Student Voices report was an opportunity to hear directly from students about their experiences of racism within the board and strategically redouble efforts to respond in ways that reflect accountability and provide assurances to students that their experiences and perspectives matter.

"There is really no such thing as the "voiceless." There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." — Arundhati Roy

Students spoke and we listened.

Students reported a need for a more visible system response to racism and discrimination. But separate from this immediate response, there must be clear, accountable and sustainable measures to embed a culture of anti-racism that will have a transformative impact on student achievement and well-being. We have heard the students on this expressed need and have reviewed our practices and frameworks to ensure that we have the tools in place to address the identified need. In response to student voice, this Report outlines strategic ways to enhance our commitments and strengthen our communication efforts so that not only are we aware of the initiatives that are in place, but students and the wider community are also apprised of these initiatives and engage us in honest and open conversations about the the ongoing impact of our intentional efforts to identify and respond to racism.

Students request that the Board commit to improving practices to respond to racism and discrimination in order to support student achievement and well-being of every student.

Students' request for change must be answered. And in answering, we will honour our commitment with transformative change.

As I shared with school and system leaders in August when I first joined the board,

"We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do this. Whether we do it or not must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we have not done it so far." - Ron Edmonds

Thank you to our students for their candour, courage and openness in sharing their truths. Thank you to school-based staff, system leaders and everyone who recommits everyday to create safe inclusive learning environments that are hostile to racism and all forms of discrimination and hate. I am confident that together we are creating in the HDSB a better version of what our world should be.



Curtis Ennis
Director of Education

Executive Summary

Introduction

During the month of June 2021, the Halton District School Board (HDSB) conducted a series of virtual conversations with secondary school students. The purpose of these conversations was to gather student insights on the HDSB response to racism, in reply to a number of complaints raised by students and families with respect to incidents of racism in HDSB's schools.

Methodology

The opportunity to participate in the virtual conversations was communicated to all secondary students by email and advertisement posted on HDSB's social media accounts (e.g., Twitter, Instagram). Students were asked to complete a registration form expressing interest and to specify two preferred dates/times of the session they wished to attend. In advance of the session, students were emailed a consent form which required the signature of a parent/guardian in order to participate.

During the conversations, students were asked to comment on the following questions:

1. Based on your experience of racism and discrimination, what action or actions would you consider to be an effective response?
2. What does an effective anti-racism response look like?
3. Thinking about the present, what action or actions do you think currently exist to address racism/discrimination in your school?
4. What processes or resources are you aware of that currently exist to address racism or discrimination in your school?
5. How would you like to see students involved in the elimination of racism and discrimination in HDSB?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The sessions were conducted using Google Meet and, with parental/guardian consent for students under 18 years of age, recorded to obtain a full transcript of the conversations. HDSB staff from the Indigenous Rights & Education, Human Rights & Equity Department, the Research and Accountability Department and the Human Rights and Equity Advisor facilitated the virtual conversations with assistance from a research assistant for technical support and note-taking.

Sample Size

A total of 24 students participated in one of five sessions. The students ranged from Grade 9 to 12+. 83.33% (N=20) identified as racialized, 45.83% (N=11) identified attending a secondary school in the East, 41.67% (N=10) a school in the West and 12.50% (N= 3) a school in the North area of Halton.

Findings

Students' feedback was analysed, extracting themes representing commonalities and differences in comments. The following six themes emerged:

- Theme 1: Identify, Deconstruct and Recognize Microaggressions
- Theme 2: Accountability (of students and staff)
- Theme 3: Harmful Impact (of racist and discriminatory acts)
- Theme 4: Education & Enhanced Awareness
- Theme 5: Representation (of student and staff identity, and in instructional materials)
- Theme 6: Implementation of Response Strategies

Further, in response to the concerns raised by students, HDSB leadership has reviewed its existing practices and commitments and has identified ways to strategically enhance, monitor and communicate these initiatives. This renewed commitment is summarized below.

Current Practices

HDSB's commitments to equity and inclusive education are operationalized through a number of documents including, but not limited to the following, the:

- [2020-2024 Multi-Year Plan](#)
- [Equity and Inclusive Education Policy](#),
- [Human Rights Equity Action and Accountability Plan: *The Way Forward*](#),
- [HDSB Discriminatory & Harmful Language Protocol](#),
- Use of identity-based [Student Census](#) and staff data,
- Implementation of the [Administrative Procedure \(AP\)](#) for responding to [Public Concerns](#).

Renewed System Commitments

HDSB renews its commitments to providing learning environments that are free of racism and discrimination. The renewed system commitments are listed below:

1. Continue to Strategically Align Anti-Racist Initiatives with System Priorities
2. Continue to Centre Anti-Colonial Classroom Strategies and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP) with Educator Practice
3. Continue to ensure System Accountability and Awareness for Anti-Racism

New System Commitments

In addition to the aforementioned commitments, the HDSB will expand its commitments to creating learning environments free of discrimination and racism through the implementation of the following additional system initiatives.

1. Explore the Establishment of a System Racism Response Team
2. Implement the Graduation Coach for Black Students Program
3. Recognize Student Leadership on Anti-Racist Actions
4. Strengthen Community Engagement

Conclusion and Next Steps

The intent of this report is to highlight student voice with respect to their experiences with racism and discrimination, and the need for immediate and ongoing action to fully and authentically support their academic achievement and well-being. This report should serve as a springboard for deeper conversation, reflections and actions. It is noteworthy, that while the focus groups centred on racism and, in particular, anti-Black racism, students were united in their expression that their experiences were not unique to Black identities. The experiences apply across all identified grounds of discrimination including Indigeneity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, etc. Albeit, the recommendations that are specific to anti-Black racism might need to be customized for other identities and intersectionalities. The HDSB is committed to creating and sustaining anti-racist and anti-oppressive learning environments that affirm and honour students' identity; thereby authentically supporting student achievement and well-being.

Background

Introduction

During the month of June 2021, the Halton District School Board (HDSB) conducted a series of virtual conversations with secondary school students. The purpose of these conversations was to gather student insights on the HDSB response to racism, in reply to a number of complaints raised by students and families¹ with respect to incidents of racism in HDSB's schools.

Methodology

The opportunity to participate in the virtual conversations was communicated to all secondary students by email and advertisement posted on HDSB's social media accounts (e.g., Twitter, Instagram). Students were asked to complete a registration form expressing interest and to specify two preferred dates/times of the session they wished to attend. In advance of the session, students were emailed a consent form which required the signature of a parent/guardian in order to participate.

During the conversations, students were asked to comment on the following questions:

1. Based on your experience of racism and discrimination, what action or actions would you consider to be an effective response?
2. What does an effective anti-racism response look like?
3. Thinking about the present, what action or actions do you think currently exist to address racism/discrimination in your school?
4. What processes or resources are you aware of that currently exist to address racism or discrimination in your school?
5. How would you like to see students involved in the elimination of racism and discrimination in HDSB?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Students' feedback was analyzed, extracting themes representing commonalities and differences in students' comments.

The sessions were conducted using Google Meet and, with parental/guardian consent for students under 18 years of age, recorded to obtain a full transcript of the conversations. Where

¹ On April 19, 2021, two students emailed the Director, the Ministry of Education and various other provincial and municipal elected officials to voice their concerns of a lack of accountability for racism in schools. The students also delegated the HDSB Board of Trustee and Halton Regional Council. Further, the students initiated the [Change.org petition](#) entitled *HDSB Students Face Anti-Black & Other Racism Daily and It Needs to Stop* .

parental/guardian consent for the recording was not obtained (two sessions), written notes were taken during the session. HDSB staff from the Indigenous Rights & Education, Human Rights & Equity Department, the Research and Accountability Department and the Human Rights and Equity Advisor facilitated the virtual conversations with assistance from a research assistant for technical support and note-taking.

Sample Size

A total of 24 students participated in one of five sessions.² The students ranged from Grade 9 to 12+. 83.33% (N=20) identified as racialized³, 45.83% (N=11) identified attending a secondary school in the East, 41.67% (N=10) a school in the West and 12.50% (N= 3) a school in the North area of Halton.

Adequacy in sample size was determined through theme saturation. This refers to the extent to which participants identify new content, topics or information (referred to as themes), in each subsequent conversation. Once commonalities in themes are achieved, and there is a lack of new information shared by participants, additional conversations and information gathering is not required.

Empirical guidelines indicate that conducting two to three focus groups is sufficient to identify 80% of the most prevalent themes within a particular topic, and that 90% of the themes are identified within three to six focus groups⁴. Furthermore, a smaller number of sessions is needed where the purpose of the study is to identify core issues of a specific topic and where participants are not stratified by particular characteristics (e.g., differences across gender identity).⁵ Hence, the five sessions corresponding to 24 students is within the accepted empirical range for qualitative study aimed to identify main issues of specific relevance to a particular population.

² The feedback from the cohort of 24 students should be considered as being consistent with feedback received in various formal and informal channels during the 2020-2021 academic year as well as in previous years. Given the timing of this initiative at the end of the school year and the context of what has been a very challenging time for students due to the pandemic, school closures and other issues, the participation rate might have been lower than it otherwise could have been under different circumstances. However, across the 24 participants, and the feedback received from previous initiatives, there was a high level of consistency in the information gathered. This indicates that participants' comments represent valid and reliable accounts of students' experiences within HDSB rather than an isolated sample of students.

³ "Racialized" was defined as: Black/African or Caribbean descent, East Asian, Latino/Latina/Latinx, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, South Asian, Southeast Asian. In conversation, some students use the language of "persons of colour" to refer to themselves or other members of racialized communities.

⁴ Gues, G., Namey, E., & McKenna K. (2016). How Many Focus Groups Are Enough? Building an Evidence Base for Nonprobability Sample Sizes. *Field Methods*, 29(1), 3-22.

⁵ Hennink, M.M., Kaiser, N.B., Weber, B.M. (2019). *What Influences Saturation? Estimating Sample Sizes in Focus Group Research*, 29(10), 1483-1496.

Last, it is noteworthy that sample size is not of great importance to discussions of human rights and social justice issues, specifically within the context of historically marginalized communities. The Anti-Racism Directorate states:

“Even small racial disproportionalities and disparities can be the result of systemic racism and can have tangible impacts on an individual’s or group’s quality of life.”⁶

The feedback gathered from the 24 students corresponds to anecdotal data that the board has been responding to for a number of years. The feedback is also remarkably similar to students' experiences from surrounding school boards. Hence, the small sample size should be interpreted within this larger context of societal patterns and not serve to distract or dismiss student experiences. The ARD notes the limitations of focusing on the samples when discussing inequities and states:

“For small groups, tests of statistical significance may not show that significant differences exist in the sample used, even when they do exist in the population.”⁷

It is also worthy to note that during the 2020/21 academic year, the HDSB renewed and instituted a series of initiatives to directly acknowledge and respond to systemic discrimination, including but not limited to anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamaphobia, antisemitism, ableism. etc. As such, the virtual conversations, although presented as focusing specifically on racism also invited students to comment on all forms of discrimination experienced by students in the HDSB.

⁶ Ontario Government (2018). *Anti-Racism Data Standards - Order in Council 897/2018*.

⁷ Ontario Government (2018). *Anti-Racism Data Standards - Order in Council 897/2018*.

Findings

Students' feedback indicate that challenges with racism and discrimination and a lack of response and accountability for racism in secondary schools are a systemic problem and not isolated to a few schools.

"I feel like the issue right now is we're trying to focus on the students themselves rather than on the problem, because there is a larger problem."⁸ (Grade 11 student)

Notably, in addition to incidents of racism, students commented on additional forms of discrimination that, from their perspective, also do not stimulate effective responses from administration, educators and peers.

"So not trying to detract from the talk about racism here, but in terms of other discrimination, mainly against the 2SLGBTQ+ community, I feel like when we talk about discrimination against them, not being taken really seriously by school administration, teachers and even other fellow students....."⁹ (Grade 10 student)

In light of students' recognition that there are similarities in the experiences of racism and discrimination of racialized students and students from other equity deserving communities, the feedback summarized herein should be interpreted as not being exclusive to racism but rather applicable to other equity deserving communities, such as gender identity, creed, sexual orientation, disability, etc. Within this context, six themes emerged from students' feedback, and are presented in the following sections of this report.

Themes

1. Identify, Deconstruct and Recognize Microaggressions
2. Accountability (of students and staff)
3. Harmful Impact
4. Education & Enhanced Awareness
5. Representation (of student and staff identity, and in instructional materials)
6. Implementation of Response Strategies

⁸ June 2, 2021 transcript

⁹ June 2, 2021 transcript

Theme 1: Identify, Deconstruct and Recognize Microaggressions

When offering their insights on responses to racism, the students were careful to indicate that the scope of racism was not limited to blatant overt acts of discrimination, but also included seemingly small, but far from benign comments, gestures, facial expressions, jokes or innuendo. The small things, referred to as “microaggressions”, despite their seemingly fleeting or off-handed character are no less impactful. And certainly constant exposure to microaggressions constitute harm to individual wellbeing, self-confidence and healthy relationships in the classroom environment. These microaggressions are still acts of aggression and the experience of having to endure and recover from these is something the students would like to see changed.

“.....there's little microaggressions,you don't have to do something awful as saying the N word, or being really aggressively racist. There are little things that can really trigger people and make them upset that aren't talked about. And that are just like, oh, 'you're being too sensitive'. And I feel like there's many other microaggressions that are viewed as normal.”¹⁰ (Grade 10 student)

Students note that not all acts of racism are blatant. However, “subtle actions” of racism and discrimination are a concern that equally undermine student sense of belonging, safety and overall well-being, such as overt racism and discrimination.

“I've heard teachers say the microaggressions are like people being too sensitive.....or they don't really have an effect on you, which is also untrue.”¹¹ (Grade 10 student)

Students report that microaggressions are overlooked and/or “unnoticed” by educators, and that there is a lack of understanding of the impact of microaggressions on students’ well-being and sense of safety. When students report microaggressions to educators/administrators, students feel that the response is one of victim blaming (e.g., students being too sensitive) and/or undermining the incident, as opposed to one of accountability, support and education. More compassion and sensitivity is needed in response to reports of microaggressions. Students would welcome enhanced capacity in administrators, educators and peers to:

¹⁰ June 10, 2021 transcript

¹¹ June 10, 2021 transcript

1. understand that microaggressions can take many forms, some of which are very subtle but yet harmful and negatively impact students
2. recognize that the microaggressions are happening, and to behave as allies in disrupting the microaggressions to ensure students are not harmed and/or
3. to repair any harm that the microaggressions may have caused to students' well-being.

“Ever since George Floyd was murdered, my school has been listening or trying to change. And so sometimes when we have [classroom discussions] no one speaks up.....the fact that everyone is silent, it felt to me, like they just want me to talk because I'm the only coloured person in the room. And that's just another microaggression for me. And the question, it wasn't even like a personal experience kind of personal question....anybody could answer these kinds of questions. So the fact that they were ...putting them on me, or I'm the one who always has the answer. It wasn't something that should make them feel uncomfortable, but yet they were still uncomfortable.that's just another form of a microaggression. Like those kinds of things, those kind of actions, even when you're not talking, it's still harmful.”¹² (Grade 11 student)

Students recognize that their experiences are not unique to their specific school and/or limited to a set number of teachers, but rather that they are a symptom of a larger systemic issue. While students recognize the board values equity and inclusion, they would like the board to focus on the “*root of the issue*” as opposed to focusing on smaller initiatives, and taking a more intentional anti-racist stance.

“...I think the HDSB is focused on tackling smaller matters that are still equally important. But I feel like they misread the big picture in terms of trying to be anti-racist [...] we have to start implementing a proper system that will integrate all people of colour within our curriculum, because right now even though there are small changes being made within four years.....[there isn't] huge changes being made. We were changing a few texts, but we weren't changing the mass ideology behind what we're learning in classes. And the way of critical thinking has been the same. And I think we should move more forward into changing that. And then we can focus on [.....] individual students after that.....first we focus on systemic racism.”¹³ (Grade 11 student)

Students reported that when microaggressions go unnoticed and/or unchallenged, their sense of safety and belonging in the classroom is compromised. This impacts their enjoyment and ability to learn, and engage with their peers authentically.

¹² June 10, 2021 transcript

¹³ June 2, 2021 transcript

Theme 2: Accountability

2.1 Student Accountability

Students recognize that to be effective, racism response strategies and/or policies require a strong commitment to accountability. Students' overwhelmingly also called for enhanced accountability from their student peers.

The sentiment that participants communicated is that everyone has a role to play in addressing racism. The call for a collective school or classroom community response reflects that racism and discrimination impact everyone, not only those who are the immediate and direct targets.

".....when the teachers don't protect the students, students like me will stand up to other kids and cause more conflict and the students will just fight among each other.....I was targeted alongside my friends and the teachers would just look away..... it was reckless on the teacher's part to look away because it was easier not to deal with."¹⁴ (Grade 12+ student)

Students recognize that enhanced accountability measures are needed to respond to incidents of racism and discrimination. Students felt that measures of accountability are either lacking, inadequate or ineffective.

"But I just think that like warnings are not enough. They were never enough. And I think that teachers that enable this kind of behavior are the people that are giving these kinds of warnings. So if students that have this racial bias are aware that these teachers are enabling it, and those same warnings come from these teachers, they're just going to know that teachers will not do anything about it and they're just going to keep doing it. So I believe that suspension is like a perfectly appropriate response. I don't believe that it's inappropriate in any way at all, because these people do need to reflect on this and just a warning will not be enough to teach these kids that it's inappropriate behavior."¹⁵ (Grade 9 student)

¹⁴ June 10, 2021 transcript

¹⁵ June 9, 2021 transcript

Students note the following current response strategies are inadequate in being able to address racism:

- School emails in response to racist incidents, although raising awareness, do not deter further acts of racism and discrimination. Rather, for students at the receiving end of the racism and discrimination, the gesture feels more performative in nature rather than a supportive response that repairs harm and deters further acts.
- The in-class conversations, while welcomed by students, often lack the deep critical analysis needed to shift students' mindset and are surface-level at best. These conversations, if carried out without adequate educator understanding of the issue at hand, may result in further burdening racialized students with the responsibility of educating and holding their peers and educators accountable.
- Students support suspension as a consequence to racism and discrimination, students recognize that suspensions are not an impactful response if implemented without efforts to educate the suspended students, in order to shift their mindset.

In addition to and/or in lieu of these responses, students suggest implementing the same process currently in place for addressing serious student misconduct. Students perceive differences with regard to keeping students accountable for infractions related to racism and discrimination versus other forms of misconduct often of a less serious nature than racism.

"..... the approach to plagiarism is a really good example of how there are systems in place to reprimand students for doing wrong in school. So there is evidence that it is possible."¹⁶

(Grade 12+ student)

Students would like to see heightened consequence for incidents of racism and discriminatory acts, similar to what is in place for other student conduct infractions. Students would also like to see these referenced explicitly in the HDSB Code of Conduct.

"It is disheartening because we spend so much time reporting these things or bringing up these issues to someone with more authority to deal with them and not having that response is really hard."¹⁷ (Grade 11 student)

¹⁶ June 10, 2021 transcript

¹⁷ June 10, 2021 transcript

Students recognize that racism and discrimination have an educational component and therefore they welcome enhanced efforts to increase awareness among their peers, as long as this happens within a context of monitoring and accountability.

"...so I think it depends if it's an elementary school student, I definitely agree, there's room to educate and to grow. But when you get to my age, there's not a single person who doesn't know what racism is, who doesn't know what's okay."¹⁸ (Grade 11 student)

Students welcome a progressive discipline approach to responding to racism and discrimination, so that their peers have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and change their behaviour, but are also held accountable for their conduct.

For students who continuously engage in racism and discriminatory acts, despite previous strikes, warnings and other opportunities to reflect and change their behaviour, students feel that an appropriate response includes the formal documentation of the incidents given the harmful effects of racism and discrimination.

"So at this point it's not a matter of ignorance, it's arrogance, and it's a refusal to accept that you can't say certain things.....If you're going to suspend kids who got in a fight, I would expect the same, even if it's verbal, because it has the same impacts. And I would argue even more long lasting traumatizing impacts than a fight.....it's not like we throw around swear words at school.....people know what the consequences for swearing is. So the same applies for any kind of racial slur or racist comment. So I personally do think suspension is an adequate consequence. I don't think warnings are appropriate for people my age."¹⁹ (Grade 11 student)

2.2 Repairing Harm

An additional component of accountability and enhanced response to racism and discrimination, includes repairing harm with students at the receiving end of the racist and/or discriminatory acts. Presently, students describe that it is quite normative to not have adults check in to provide support and repair harm. Students request that an apology from the perpetrator is facilitated by the adults involved in responding to the incident, in addition to keeping the students informed that consequences have been implemented (while respecting privacy and confidentiality).

¹⁸ June 9, 2021 transcript

¹⁹ June 9, 2021 transcript

"[...] I would have preferred for someone to apologize to tell me that there will be action taken, but more importantly, I want them to see action because I've had a lot of false promises made to me and nothing eventually happened. When it comes to me, I just want an apology and a confirmation that things will happen."²⁰ (Grade 10 student)

2.3 Monitoring and Enforcement

Students also propose an accountability framework that includes monitoring and enforcement such that there is a way of measuring the depth and sustainability of behavioural change that follows education and awareness.

*".....there really needs to be an emphasis on preventative measures, teaching the students, why they shouldn't do these things, why they shouldn't say these things. I feel like it's a missed opportunity that people my age haven't had this in elementary school even."²¹
(Grade 11 student)*

"There should be people in the school that are devoted to doing this kind of interpersonal, intercultural conflict resolution."²² (Grade 12+ student)

Even in school communities with robust/enhanced diversity, there are still challenges in identifying and responding to discriminatory behaviour. As students indicated:

*"Because ... in my particular school, I think I'm blessed to have such a wide spectrum of identities and people who come from racial backgrounds. But again even with that, you can still see these microaggressions take place. If not daily, like maybe twice or three times a week."²³
(Grade 10 student)*

2.4 Educator, Administrator and System Accountability

In addition to seeking a pronounced measure of accountability for building and sustaining anti-racist learning environments, students are also seeking a measure of transparency: students would like to know that a process for keeping students and staff accountable has been

²⁰ June 2, 2021 transcript

²¹ June 2, 2021, transcript

²² June 10, 2021 transcript

²³ June 2, 2021 transcript

initiated, while respecting the privacy of the individuals involved. Students are not aware of the process for reporting official complaints about staff.

"I think if there is a permanent record of.....tracking students and staff, that is a very important part."²⁴ (Grade 12+ student)

"And it's really difficult for students to speak up within class [when educators make racist comments] because first of all, if it's their own teacher, I know how difficult it can be to tell somebody that your teacher said something."²⁵ (Grade 11 student)

Furthermore, students perceive inconsistencies in educators' response to students' racist and discriminatory acts. Students would like educators to hold their student peers accountable and respond consistently and constructively to racist and discriminatory behaviour.

"And I know.....of teachers [who] preach all this equity stuff and then just go on and turn the other cheek, if several students in their class are acting inappropriately. So if we were going to call them out, we'd have to say I know that you saw that these kids were, [for example] associating mentions of terrorism with South Asian kids. Did you have any plan for making them discontinue that behavior? There's no way to dance around the subject. I believe you have to be super direct and just say what they're doing and call them out on it."²⁶ (Grade 9 student)

It is noteworthy that racist and discriminatory acts that occur in the class do not go unnoticed by students. Students indicate that the silence, often following the occurrence of racism and discrimination, is due to fear of speaking up.

"...when something racist happens within the classroom, students are afraid of speaking up or they'll just be quiet even though they know it's wrong."²⁷ (Grade 11 student)

Students would welcome a clear process for reporting incidents of racism and discrimination perpetuated by staff, that is independent of their school. This would support students in restoring a sense of safety and hope that their concerns will be taken seriously and that they will not be targeted for reporting the incident.

²⁴ June 10, 2021 transcript

²⁵ June 2, 2021 transcript

²⁶ June 9, 2021 transcript

²⁷ June 10, 2021 transcript

"[.....] I honestly think that because I've had so many experiences where I've really felt unsafe, or [if] it's maybe even my teacher perpetuating it or I don't feel necessarily safe to talk or comfortable with that teacher....there also should be some sort of way where students can report these without having to directly have to go through their teacher and have to confront that authority. Because I know that is definitely a limiting factor for a lot of students who do want to address these issues or maybe report them in some way."²⁸ (Grade 11 student)

Students attribute some of the inaction in response to witnessing and learning about racism and discriminatory acts in the classroom to educators' and administrators' discomfort in speaking about racism and discrimination. Students perceive that for some educators the discomfort pertains to a lack of knowledge needed to engage in deep and meaningful conversations with students about social justice and human rights issues. For others, students perceive that the discomfort is a symptom of the staff's implicit bias and racist perspectives.

"I know that like some of my friends say that they can tell that their teachers really don't want to discuss it. And they'd prefer to rather move on to teaching like class and stuff, which obviously is something that is bad and not constructive to promoting conversation."²⁹ (Grade 10 student)

*"Especiallyeven my teachers at school who may not even realize the things that they may be saying or perpetuating are- do have racist undertones or are racist in some ways."³⁰
(Grade 11 student)*

Students suggest that in order for educators to be held accountable, there must also be an active process of raising awareness amongst educators so that they know exactly what they are being held accountable for and are receiving education to adjust their thinking and behaviour. This will promote a more responsive environment that is supportive of the needs of students.

²⁸ June 10, 2021 transcript

²⁹ June 2, 2021 transcript

³⁰ June 10, 2021 transcript

Theme 3: Harmful Impact

The harmful impact of racism, discrimination and inaction from authority figures and peers, on students' well-being cannot be overstated. Students shared that the harm these experiences produce have long-lasting and permanent effects on their sense of safety, belonging, trust and overall well-being.

"I had a really bad experience in an elementary school when reporting an instance of racism. I actually had my vice principal repeat the slur to me. And that's something that has really stuck with me. And just I don't know, it's just something that I had to bring up because it's so bad and something should have been done there and I reported it to someone higher up and nothing happened."³¹ (Grade 11 student)

The impact of racism persists beyond the sting of the moment and the lack of accountability response deepens and sustains the harm.

"[.....]I need the consequences to be severe, like telling a kid, oh, you shouldn't be making racist comments. That's not okay. We all know people with racially biased mindsets. They're not going to change if you just say that's not okay, you have to stop doing that. We need to actively look for ways that we can get these kids to change.....it's not enough to just reprimand them and then just let them go. And also, there's a lot of teachers who enable like racist behavior sometimes. And so we also need to look at holding teachers accountable because they may not be explicitly being racist, but not stopping a kid who looks at every brown kid in the room when we talk about 9/11, for example, that's enabling racism and we need to be holding those teachers accountable as well."³² (Grade 9 student)

Students are adamant in their call for action and accountability in responses to racism. A simple caution or verbal admonishment has often proven to be insufficient to ground the cultural change and accountability that is necessary for a truly inclusive environment. Students are looking for a clear indication that not only will racist behaviour and commentary be addressed with the perpetrators, but that the addressing of these incidents is connected to a perceptible

³¹ June 2, 2021 transcript

³² June 9, 2021 transcript

behavioural change that contributes to a more safe and inclusive environment. Students are looking for evidence that the response strategies implemented result in the desired change.

3.1 Disproportionate Impact of Student Burden and Consequences

Students have identified that the reluctance and, in some instances, inability of school staff to effectively respond to racism means that students bear the burden of response on their own behalf as well as that of their peers. In order to reduce the load on students, school staff will need to embrace enhanced responsibility to address racism in schools and classrooms.

"In my grade 10 English class, I know our teacher said the N word multiple times. It was in the context of To Kill a Mockingbird, but we weren't actually reading the novel. When the teacher had said the N word twice, they were talking about like history and stuff like that. But we didn't give consent to hear that. And I feel like that's something that students should be able to provide consent to hear, even if it's learning about history or reading a book, like that's just not okay. Period, I think. And I think that was really confusing for a lot of the students in our class. And I do remember that somebody tried to speak up about that, but they got shut down entirely."³³
(Grade 11 student)

Moreover, in addition to carrying a weight that should be borne by staff, racialized students perceive a disproportion in the way in which they are held accountable as compared to white students.

"...white counterparts do not face the same consequences that students of colour would if they spoke up, like whether that be consequences from other peers in the form of shaming or bullying or anything like that, or maybe even just the response from staff."³⁴ (Grade 11 student)

Students consistently expressed the need for anti-racist teacher role models. Students are conscious not only of what teachers say and do, but also of the instances when teachers choose not to (re)act and when comments go unaddressed.

³³ June 9, 2021 transcript

³⁴ June 9, 2021 transcript

"...trying to move the paradigm to talking about discrimination more actively, but there still is a disconnect from what they're trying to promote and what the teachers tell us in class."³⁵
(Grade 10 student)

In instances where the teachers are still building their anti-racist role model capacity, students propose that school and classroom culture reflect a more concerted effort to talk openly about race and racism. The stigma of racial identity and racism as a forbidden subject is, in part, what places a disproportionate burden on students and enhances their anxiety and discomfort. An intentional practice of discussing race and racism in an open, reflective and critical manner will go a long way toward building and sustaining an inclusive culture in schools and classrooms.

³⁵ June 2, 2021 transcript

Theme 4: Education & Enhanced Awareness

4.1 Student Responsibility

As suggested earlier in the context of the disproportionate burden borne by racialized students, students feel that the key to promoting a climate of racial justice is enhanced awareness of race, racism and the impact that racism has on students, particularly in the moments that it occurs.

Presently, racialized students feel that they hold the primary responsibility for educating their peers and adults in authority figures about race, racism and social justice issues. Students describe holding this responsibility as exhausting and isolating.

“And so I think it's really important for students to build healthy relationships with other students who are, equally passionate about this work and eliminating racism to feel like there's a community and that we're not all alone in this fight because the people that I've talked to this year, a lot of students have stated that as hard as they're trying, it's just too much sometimes.

And you do feel hopeless or frustrated a lot because it takes so long to create the change that you want to see. So as much as I want to see students involved in this elimination of racism I also want to see students get the support that they need.”³⁶ (Grade 11 student)

Students would welcome strong allyship with their white peers and educators so to be released from holding the responsibility of addressing racism and discrimination. In a truly inclusive and fair environment we are all responsible for addressing and removing discrimination and harm.

4.2 Curriculum

Students welcome the opportunity to learn about race, racism and social justice, and wish that the curriculum would be more reflective and inclusive of those topics. There was consensus among students that there are missed opportunities for critical thinking and analysis with regard to social justice issues, even in subjects like history class that would lend itself easily to deep and critical discussions around equity and inclusion.

³⁶ June 9, 2021 transcript

"And another thing is the curriculum. There's like in like history class or like English class, there's a really small unit and sometimes never about for example, black history or even Indigenous history or like the same issues they're facing today. It's either a really short unit, maybe one week or one talk about it or sometimes never. And we need to have those kinds of discussions and we need to be learning about those things so that people can be aware of the issues occurring instead of remaining in ignorance and lack of education. So that's really important.....for me personally, I want to know about my history. At my school never even really did anything or even heard about Black history month until last year when me and another teacher got talking about it. That's really- that's- I'm I just- I don't understand that."³⁷ (Grade 11 student)

Students indicate that when specific topics around race, racism and social justice, are introduced in class, this is sometimes done in a way that produces harm and further exacerbates stereotypes and prejudices.

".....its representation of Black people in the system is always from a place of inferiority. It's like this person grew up in an awful neighborhood....Or we talked about slavery, which is nothing anyone can connect to. I've never once read a book about a Black role model that didn't come from poverty and was already accomplished. And I feel like we could be reading books about Michelle Obama or someone like that you could relate to and who you want to be, I think is something important."³⁸ (Grade 10 student)

".....pathologizing people of color and limiting them to their trauma is so harmful, especially in the classroom setting because it completely diminishes us to only our trauma or this racism that we've overcome."³⁹ (Grade 11 student)

Students would welcome the opportunity to engage with curriculum that invites social justice and brings human rights issues to the forefront. This includes engaging in discussions around privilege and power structures across society.

"A really important thing that also needs to be implemented into education possibly in an equal amount is the fact that white people hold privilege, cause it's [one thing to say] don't be mean to colored people, but it's another thing to recognize that you have power over minorities to use that voice and help minorities."⁴⁰ (Grade 9 student)

³⁷ June 10, 2021 transcript

³⁸ June 10, 2021 transcript

³⁹ June 10, 2021 transcript

⁴⁰ June 9, 2021 transcript

In conclusion, students place great value in the impact that classroom discussions can have to further enhance awareness and understanding of racism and discrimination. Students feel that well facilitated classroom discussions about racist incidents when they occur have the power to foster a more inclusive environment and strengthen student awareness as well as accountability.

4.3 Redefine Racism

Similar to the comments in Theme 1 regarding microaggressions, students feel that part of the challenge in getting satisfactory redress on incidents of racism is a lack of understanding as to what constitutes racism or racial discrimination.

This also includes enhancing understanding that the focus of any discourse on racist and/or discriminatory incidents ought to be on the impact, rather than the intent. The focus on impact encourages individuals to reflect on the consequences of their actions, not merely their intent, hence increasing a sense of accountability. This way, it is hoped that people will be more reflective of their actions and commentary beforehand. This reflection should consider the identities of every student within the classroom and learning environment, and not simply the perspective that is informed by one's own identity.

"I think there's also a need ...to redefine what racism is, because I see a lot of this mindset that yes, racism is bad and people who are racist are bad, but they don't really understand to what extent racism is bad.....they don't realize that biases affect everyone regardless of your race. And even within communities, there is conflict and disagreement and the redefinition and the clarification of racism is needed.sometimes it's an indirect uneducated response to something, or it is just literally just being a bystander that could be seen as that. And if we redefine it and understand that, like this affects the way we make decisions split second without our own control and we need to understand other people, and we need to understand other cultures in order to actively participate in overcoming this as a whole and not just targeting, this idea that racism is a big, scary monster that's out to get you."⁴¹ (Grade 12+ student)

⁴¹ June 10, 2021 transcript

Students feel that this lack of clear understanding on the importance of focusing on the impact and what constitutes racism, results in incidents being disregarded or dismissed or not reflecting the seriousness that the students claim.

The process of defining and redefining racism evolves as social context evolves. Students are seeking a learning environment that acknowledges and is responsive to these social context changes. The skills of defining, navigating and redefining contexts will be invaluable to students of all identities as they move and engage collaboratively during their school career and beyond.

4.4 Educators' Capacity

Students are conscious of not painting all teachers with the same brush. However, they denote distinct differences in how teachers are able to respond to incidents of racism and offer students meaningful support. For instance, students seem to believe that there can be a generational divide that correlates to comfort in addressing racism in the classroom and that younger teachers are more accepting of differences in student identity, than older teachers.

".....teachers really not knowing how to help us or really what to do."⁴² (Grade 11 student)

Moreover, students note that educators who have themselves been victims of racism are more likely to have honest and reflective conversations about racism in the classroom. The sense from the students was that teachers whose identity provides them with a certain degree of privilege avoid speaking about racism, and this is largely because they don't fully understand the scope and impact of the issue.

"And also, they didn't understand the situation because they were- this particular teacher was white and all the kids that were fighting were not. So, she didn't even know the appropriate response. So honestly it wasn't even on her. There was nothing in the system. It feels like there's nothing in the system to reprimand kids like this staff like this with these implicit or explicit biases towards other people of colour or different ethnic or religious backgrounds that are visible."⁴³ (Grade 12 student)

This connection between teacher identity and the creation and support of safe and inclusive classroom spaces is also connected to the need for enhanced diversity in teacher representation, as well as diversity in instructional materials.

⁴² June 10, 2021 transcript

⁴³ June 10, 2021 transcript

Theme 5: Representation (Identity)

Identity matters. Students have indicated that the occurrence of racism and any subsequent response is greatly impacted by the level of awareness and comfort that educators have on this issue. In learning environments where the majority of staff are white, students have identified a challenge in their own level of comfort in reporting these incidents, as well as dissatisfaction in how the issues are addressed.

Further, the lack of racialized teachers not only creates challenges in identifying and responding to incidents of racism but results in a lack of positive role models and mentorship.

"I haven't had a teacher of colour yet and I'm in grade 10. And not even only for me to look up to a teacher that I could fully connect and relate to, but also so other students see it's normal to see people of colour in charge of them and empowered and that's another important thing that needs to be addressed."⁴⁴ (Grade 10 student)

As well, open discussion is needed about diverse identities in the classroom setting, whether this be in the context of curricular materials or matters in society or in the news. Students have indicated that expanding conversations related to diversity in school and society enhances the capacity of both students and staff to navigate these discussions. Such navigation fosters a more inclusive learning environment.

"I feel like students can't really engage with any talk about discrimination in general at school, if it's not being integrated into the curriculum and they can't see meaningful examples [like what] Africville in Halifax is, [the] Chinese laborers who help build the Canadian Pacific railway, to the boats from India and Europe that were turned away during World War II. There's so many meaningful conversations that can be had over those issues. And, we just skip over themit's important to realize that just examining small things in our nation's history, even though they might not seem meaningful to people who aren't in visible minority communities, they mean a lot for students who identify as racialized, or who are of different sexual identities, etc.

It's really important to see examples of the groups that they identify with represented there in history.we're a country that's built on different people,so I think we have to start looking at how we can integrate discussion about these types of groups within history in particular, because that's something that I feel gets glossed over by students because they can't really relate to it."⁴⁵ (Grade 10 student)

⁴⁴ June 10, 2021 transcript

⁴⁵ June 2, 2021 transcript

"I think when we talk about decentering whiteness in all aspects of our lives I think part of that is recognizing that it's not just thinking about, white students and how they feel, but maybe also about the victims of racism and how they feel and how it's going to impact their success in school."⁴⁶ (Grade 11 student)

The theme of representation is not only about which identities, histories and positional power are reflected in the classroom and in curriculum materials, but also about how the aspirational inclusive and equitable society is reflected in curriculum. For example, currently three HDSB schools⁴⁷ offer the English course Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis and Inuit Voices (NBE3) as the only Grade 11 English credit option, and two additional schools offer the course as an available English credit option. This curricular emphasis on Indigenous content communicates how embedded Indigenous voices are to the historical and contemporary construction and interpretation of Canada. It is expected that by the 2024-2025 school year, the NBE3 course will be the only Grade 11 English credit option offered in HDSB.

"I think, obviously the board's number one priority is education. So I think putting the response into our education would, should be the priority. Like for example, at my school in grade 11, we have an NBE course. So we learn about- we learn- it's our English course, so it's mandatory for all students to take, but it focuses on indigenous peoples and their history and also their current rights in Canada. And that was one of the most enriching experiences of my entire life, because not only was I learning the English curriculum, but I was also doing it from a completely different lens than I had ever done before."⁴⁸ (Grade 11 student)

It is clear that diverse/racialized educators can function as inspirational role models for Indigenous and racialized students. But what is just as important, though less clear, is that educators who represent identities that have been historically un-represented or under-represented in the educational sector, can serve as role models for all students. It is helpful for all students to see Indigenous and racialized educators in positions of power in the educational sector. This includes classroom teachers, educators in leadership roles and school administrators. Role models are important in the classroom, but also important in all levels of the education sector.

⁴⁶ June 9, 2021 transcript

⁴⁷ Milton District High Second, Virtual Secondary School and Acton District High School

⁴⁸ June 9, 2021 transcript

Theme 6: Implementation

Students indicate that their issue was not so much that there were no processes or policies to address discrimination in the learning environment, but rather that these processes were not fully implemented. Weak implementation also suggests the absence of a process of monitoring, enforcement and accountability.

6.1 *Effective Implementation*

Students provided insights into what effective implementation of racism response protocols would look like in an ideal school setting. The example of the HDSB Discriminatory and Harmful Language Protocol was used, as this was an initiative that was supported by comprehensive system communication and awareness raising strategies. The challenge with the 2020-2021 school year however was with the COVID-19 pandemic, the multiple and protracted school closures, and the online learning environment.

"I had a really good history teacher. And he spent the year educating himself quite a bit, he went to seminars and really learned about different perspectives. He was able to teach us a lot. And he went into depth about the protocol and all that it entailed. So I heard about it. Since it's new, we're not really [seeing it] in the halls being implemented yet. So I haven't seen it used at least in like my classes, but not to say it hasn't and I think it's a pretty good protocol, because it makes sure that these incidences are tracked.."⁴⁹ (Grade 10 student)

The virtual environment did not facilitate a lot of immediate direct responses to racist and harmful language. From the students' perspective, the issue was not so much with a lack of teacher awareness about the protocol and the accompanying responsibilities but rather the lack of opportunities to engage with the protocol in a robust learning environment.

*"...So I think when the procedure stuff [Harmful Language Protocol] first came out my teachers, what they did is they broke it down and they put it onto a slide show. Obviously, since we didn't have announcements this year everything switched to online in December they put it into a slide deck that would be played in every classroom. And I don't think every teacher in every class actually played the slide deck, but I know that at least from the administrative position at my school, they did try to implement it. So, I guess that would be sharing resources."⁵⁰
(Grade 11 student)*

⁴⁹ June 10, 2021 transcript. The student comment refers to the fact that for a large portion of the 2020-2021 school year, learning was done online in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19.

⁵⁰ June 9, 2021 transcript

Outside of the classroom environment, students commented on the role of others in the school environment intentionally and successfully implementing strategies to reflect diverse representation in empowering ways. A breadth of identity and experiences can be reflected in a range of curricular and library resources.

And I also know that my librarian she's been making virtual libraries all year long. Like for Black history month, she did an anti-racism library and it was really cool. It had a bunch of really great resources and books and also movies that people could watch obviously for free and it had access through the school. So that I think that would be another resource that was shared. I know that resources are being created. I just don't know how many students knew about them, but that might also just be because we were virtual this year.⁵¹ (Grade 11 student)

On the other hand, some students indicated that it is one thing to issue system wide messages and sharing of resources, but it is another thing entirely to implement the resources with fidelity across the system.

"I just think that obviously they're going to put out things from the system level, but it just doesn't have the impact that maybe they want it to have. If every person within the system doesn't agree with it, or isn't actively trying to implement it. Like you can't just put things out and expect that it's going to magically change everything."⁵² (Grade 11 student)

Students also commented that the depth of implementation should be supported by student voice and not solely by administrators and staff.

"Regarding the discriminatory and the harmful language protocol. I think another problem with it is a lot of students like myself don't know it exists. Like literally until this focus group. I did not know that was a thing. And if a lot of students don't know what this is and don't know the protocol, then, it's not really a proper resource is it? Like, if we don't know it exists, then it's, then we can't really use it. Therefore it's not a helpful resource. So if we were going to keep the discriminatory and harmful language protocol in place, we would need to actively educate students on the fact that it's an existing policy and the contents of the policy."⁵³ (Grade 9 student)

Students interpret the challenges in implementation as enabling systemic racism. Students desire active, intentional and visible efforts to dismantle the systemic barriers within the

⁵¹ June 9, 2021 transcript

⁵² June 9, 2021 transcript

⁵³ June 9, 2021 transcript

educational system. This requires ongoing conversations and critical inquiry into how things have come to be the way they are and how to engage in transformational change to support student inclusion and empowerment.

"But this is where the point I keep repeating comes in about holding teachers accountable. If they're failing to educate students, then they are enabling racism. And there's no other way I could see that because they're the teacher, it's the teacher's responsibility to show us and educate us on the discriminatory and harmful language protocol or whatever they have set in place regards to any sort of discriminatory behavior.

And if they're not showing that to us while also being aware that it exists, I don't know why maybe they deem it unimportant. Maybe it's like a waste of their time, whatever it is. That's enabling discriminatory acts in our class. And so that's another piece about holding teachers accountable. Is this another example of enabling discriminatory behavior."⁵⁴ (Grade 9 student)

In conclusion, students perceive the absence of concerted efforts in raising awareness and dismantling racism as complicit support for racism. Students identify that inaction and silence have the same negative impact as direct acts of racism. Given the pervasiveness of racism in broader society, efforts to quell its occurrence in school and classroom environments must be active and not passive.

⁵⁴ June 9, 2021 transcript

HDSB Current Practices, Renewed & New Commitments

In response to the concerns raised by students, HDSB leadership has reviewed its existing practices and commitments and has identified ways to strategically enhance, monitor and communicate these initiatives.

Students are hopeful and optimistic that the board will continue to implement strategies to alleviate racism and foster inclusive teaching and learning environments for every student. Likewise, HDSB is committed to incorporating principles of equity and inclusive education into all aspects of its operations, structures, policies, procedures, guidelines and practices, consistent with the principles of the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Current Practices

HDSB's commitments to equity and inclusive education are operationalized through a number of documents including, but not limited to the [Equity and Inclusive Education Policy](#), [The Human Rights Equity Action and Accountability Plan: *The Way Forward*](#), and the [HDSB Discriminatory & Harmful Language Protocol](#) and the [2020-2024 Multi-Year Plan](#).

Through its [Multi-Year Plan for 2020-2024](#), commitment to Equity & Inclusion, the HDSB will champion supportive and inclusive practices to ensure equitable access to positive opportunities and outcomes for all. This commitment is supported by the following strategies:

- Identify and eliminate racism and discriminatory barriers in the board;
- Implement culturally responsive instruction and anti-oppressive practices;
- Acknowledge and respond to the disproportionate representation of student identities in all areas of achievement.

[The Equity and Inclusive Education Policy](#) reflects the HDSB's commitment to create and maintain a safe, inclusive learning and working environment for students, their families, employees and members of the public. The policy informs decisions regarding board actions across multiple areas including policies and procedures; leadership; school and community relationships; religious accommodations; curriculum and assessment practices; and actions to create a school climate free from discrimination and harassment. These actions are supported

and guided by [Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy \(2009\)](#) and [Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan \(2017\)](#). Most importantly, these actions align with proactive and response measures under the Ontario *Human Rights Code*.

[The Human Rights Equity Action and Accountability Plan: The Way Forward](#) outlines four key areas of focus, specific strategies to guide the work, and related actions and accountability measures to be undertaken to effect positive change in outcomes throughout the duration of the plan and beyond. Aligned with the goals identified in the Halton District School Board's Multi-Year Plan (2020-2024), *The Way Forward* provides specific actions to which the Board will be held accountable by students, staff, families and the community. Measurement of the progress and impact of *The Way Forward* will be ongoing throughout implementation and in collaboration with the HDSB Human Rights & Equity Action Committee (HREAC).

The HDSB acknowledges and recognizes that discriminatory and harmful language causes pain and trauma to individuals to whom it is directed. Thus, the HDSB created the [Discriminatory and Harmful Language Protocol](#) to provide clear expectations for how staff respond when harm is caused. This protocol responds to discriminatory language used against people based on the protected grounds in the Ontario *Human Rights Code*. This protocol will be followed by students and staff to promote a school environment free from discriminatory language. Should incidents of discrimination or hate occur in our schools, HDSB staff are committed to responding quickly using the Discriminatory and Harmful Language Protocol. Staff respond by:

- interrupting the language;
- providing an explanation why the language is harmful and discriminatory;
- ensuring support is provided for those harmed; and
- reporting the incident to school administration for further follow up and accountability.

Identity-Based Data

The HDSB is committed to the use of identity-based student and staff data in order to inform and monitor strategies and actions identified to improve outcomes for all students and staff, as indicated in the *The Way Forward*, Priority: 3.1 *Identity-based data collection*. The data and analyses from the [Student Census](#) conducted in 2021 will provide the ability to examine student outcomes (e.g., engagement, achievement and well-being, etc.) across identity groups to identify areas of disproportionate representation. The Student Census data can also be compared to the Staff Census to determine the extent of variation in the racial identity of students and staff.

Escalation Process

The Administrative Procedure (AP) for responding to [Public Concerns](#) has been set out to help members of the public, staff and trustees expeditiously deal with questions and/or concerns. As outlined in the AP, it is the practice of the HDSB that public concerns and questions should be addressed at the level closest to the issue. A visual representation of the AP is available [here](#) and on the public HDSB website.

Renewed System Commitments

In response to the student feedback and experiences, HDSB renews its commitments to providing learning environments that are free of racism and discrimination as detailed below.

Commitment #1: Continue to Strategically Align Anti-Racist Initiatives with System Priorities

The challenges identified by the student feedback as well as recommendations proposed by the students also align with ongoing system priorities to address racism, colonial oppression, other forms of systemic discrimination and support initiatives that are focussed on student inclusion, achievement and well-being.

Students felt that while in some instances, there were policies, practices and procedures in place to respond to racism, these were not implemented effectively nor consistently, nor was there sufficient promotion. The consistent implementation of policies, practices and procedures to address racism is vital, and should be accompanied by a clear system of accountability that monitors and enforces system and school based actions. In the absence of a clear and effective system of accountability, what exists is merely performative action.

“An effective response is also doing much more than sending an email home. You get those like Halton district emails that are like, we have noticed there is racism going on in the school. And we want you to know that we know it's there and their form of action just feels more performative than anything and an effective anti-racism response would be me actually seeing perpetrators and racist people facing severe consequences, like suspension. We need students to see that there's action being taken in the school for minorities to feel safe, attending school.”⁵⁵
(Grade 9 student)

⁵⁵ June 9, 2021 transcript

The HDSB is committed to ensuring that implementation of existing commitments and priorities address racism concerns. Existing system frameworks that will be insightful in terms of ongoing and proposed operational initiatives to directly address racism are the [Multi-year Plan for 2020-2024](#), [Equity and Inclusive Education Policy](#), [The Human Rights Equity Action and Accountability Plan: The Way Forward](#) and the [HDSB Discriminatory & Harmful Language Protocol](#).

Commitment #2: Continue to Centre Anti-Colonial Classroom Strategies and Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP) with Educator Practice

Students welcome increased accountability to ensure that equitable, accessible and inclusive teaching and learning practices are implemented, as well as to identify and respond to barriers to student achievement and well-being.⁵⁶ This includes enhanced educator capacity to proactively create and sustain anti-racist school and classroom environments, and system accountability to support and monitor consistency and impact of the implementation of anti-colonial pedagogies.

The board is committed to continue to establish clear parameters and enhance awareness and accountability on terminology that honours student dignity and respect. The board is also committed to implementing clear and consistent strategies to repair harm and restore student dignity when harmful language is experienced by students. The board is further committed to enhancing and consistently applying accountability measures for the use of harmful language within all HDSB sites and property (e.g., classrooms, hallways, outdoor spaces, etc.).

Specifically, the board is committed to enhance the consistent implementation of the HDSB Discriminatory & Harmful Language Protocol across the system.

Commitment #3: Continue to ensure System Accountability and Awareness for Anti-Racism

Both the acknowledgement of the existence of systemic racism and the commitment to strategies for its elimination are dependent upon principles of transparency and accountability.

⁵⁶ Detailed actions related to this commitment are reflected in the [Human Rights Equity Action & Accountability Plan 2020-2024: The Way Forward](#), see Area 1: Classroom Instruction, School and Workplace Practices, priority 1.1

Students are mindful that responses to racism may not always be perfect, but what they need to see are active efforts to make improvements.

The board is committed to implementing anti-racism learning opportunities that focus on creating and sustaining an anti-racist culture, throughout the board, for all staff/employee groups and board leadership (union and non-union). Such opportunities would also focus on classroom practices and pedagogy to support student achievement and well-being. This is aligned with [The Human Rights Equity Action & Accountability Plan: The Way Forward](#) Priority 1.1: *Strengthening inclusive and culturally responsive and relevant teaching, curriculum, assessment and resources.*

Further, the board is committed to establishing processes to support the transparent monitoring and enforcement of accountability metrics to address systemic racism. This may include but not limited to policies, administrative procedures, job performance competencies and review processes.

This is aligned with [The Way Forward](#) Priority 2.1: *Accountability for equity and human rights*, and Priority 2.3: *Create and enhance school board structures to promote and ensure human rights and equity.*

New System Commitments

In addition to the aforementioned commitments, the HDSB will expand its commitments to creating learning environments free of discrimination and racism through the implementation of the following additional system initiatives.

1. Explore the Establishment of a System Racism Response Team

Based on student feedback, there is a need for an appropriate range of responses for racism infractions. It is recommended that the establishment of a system racism response team is explored. The response team would oversee the implementation and accountability of appropriate actions and would monitor and respond to reports of racism and discrimination submitted through a confidential system (to be developed). Further exploration of this initiative may involve staffing and funding implications.

2. Implement the Graduation Coach for Black Students Program

The Ministry of Education has provided funding for graduation coach(es) dedicated to support Black students in completing secondary education and accessing their choice of options for post-secondary pathways. Following pilot initiatives in the 2019-2020 school year in neighbouring boards, the HDSB has now received Ministry funding to implement the Graduation Coach for Black Students Program for the 2021-2022 school year. Coach(es) would be member(s) of the Black community/ies, have established ties within Black community/ties and various identity perspectives which will enable coach(es) to effectively support Black students in achieving their graduation and career pathway goals.

This recommendation aligns with themes of Representation identified by students. Representation pertains to students' wanting a Black adult mentor, within the school setting, with whom they can connect with.

3. Recognize Student Leadership on Anti-Racist Actions

Students highlight the need for a school and school board culture that strives toward anti-racism and full inclusion and celebrates achievements towards this goal. A truly inclusive and anti-racist environment must be promoted for it to be achieved. As an example, students offered the example of implementing a Director's award and other similar initiatives, to recognize student leadership on anti-racist initiatives.

4. Strengthen Community Engagement

Ongoing communication and collaboration with community groups and stakeholders representing diverse identities will support the HDSB to implement, monitor and revise the anti-racism initiatives and racism responses to ensure the strategies meet the needs of the students and communities. Establishing an ongoing process of communication with community stakeholders will help to ensure that responses to racism are consistent with community expectations.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The intent of this report is to highlight student voice with respect to their experiences with racism and discrimination, and the need for immediate and ongoing action to fully and authentically support their academic achievement and well-being. This report should serve as a

springboard for deeper conversation, reflections and actions. It is noteworthy, that while the focus groups centred on racism and, in particular, anti-Black racism, students were united in their expression that their experiences were not unique to Black identities. The experiences apply across all identified grounds of discrimination including Indigeneity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, etc. Albeit, the recommendations that are specific to anti-Black racism might need to be customized for other identities and intersectionalities. The HDSB is committed to creating and sustaining anti-racist and anti-oppressive learning environments that affirm and honour students' identity; thereby fully supporting student achievement and well-being.