

Framework for Engaging With Advocacy Groups



November 2024



COUNCIL OF ONTARIO
DIRECTORS OF EDUCATION

CONSEIL ONTARIEN DES
DIRECTIONS DE L'ÉDUCATION

Disclaimer

None of the information or guidance contained within this framework constitutes legal advice. Readers are strongly recommended to use this framework alongside their professional judgement and school board policies and procedures, and to consult with experts within their school board when deciding on the best approach to engage with advocates and advocacy groups and to address issues when they arise.

This document

This is meant to be a living document and will be updated as needed. Please let us know how you've used this document and what content you found useful.

We also ask that you let us know how future versions of the document can be improved to better meet your needs.

Please send your input to info@ontariodirectors.ca.

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About CODE

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1990 to provide Directors of Education with a common voice. CODE works with the Ministry of Education to advise and strategize on issues of programs and operations affecting the delivery of public education in Ontario.

CODE includes directors of education in the French Catholic, French, Catholic, and public school boards, represented by the following affiliate members:

- Conseil ontarien des directions de l'éducation catholique (CODEC)
- Conseil ontarien des directions de l'éducation publique (CODEP)
- English Catholic Council of Directors of Education (ECCODE)
- Public Council of Ontario Directors of Education (PCODE)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the individuals and organizations that have worked with CODE to contribute to the development and finalization of this document.

CODE consulted with a number of organizations serving First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Black, Muslim, Jewish, and 2SLGBTQIA+ students, as well as students in foster care and students with disabilities. Their experiences advocating for students was valuable to understanding what ought to be included in this framework.

We also consulted with members of various principals and superintendent associations, including:

- Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario
- L'Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles de langue française de l'Ontario
- L'Association des gestionnaires de l'éducation franco-ontarienne
- Le Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario
- Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association
- Ontario Principals' Council
- Ontario Public Supervisory Officers' Association

The development of this document was also guided by the knowledge and expertise of an Advisory Committee. We thank the following committee members for their contributions to this important work:

- Prince Ehoru, Superintendent of Leadership and Parent Engagement, Ottawa Catholic School Board
- Sita Jayaraman, Senior Manager, Human Rights and Equity, Halton Catholic District School Board
- Anthony Jeethan, Human Rights and Equity Advisor, Lakehead District School Board & Superior-Greenstone District School Board
- Yohana Otite, Human Rights and Equity Advisor, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
- Alicia Ralph, Human Rights, Equity & Accessibility Commissioner, Upper Grand District School Board
- Sheryl Robinson Petrazzini, Director of Education, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
- Maryam Safdar Ali, Human Rights and Equity Advisor, District School Board of Niagara

And finally, CODE would like to thank Turner Consulting Group for expertly guiding this process and reflecting the perspectives and input from the various communities and associations consulted with in this document.

Introduction

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Since Ontario's public school system was first established in the 1800s, advocates and advocacy groups have been integral to ensuring that all students are well served by it. They have advocated for the right of Indigenous students to an education, access to desegregated and equitable learning opportunities for Black students, inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, safe and caring learning environments for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and the rights of students who practice non-Christian religions.

For the most part, the journey to equity within the Ontario public school system has been initiated and advanced by students, parents/caregivers, and advocacy groups. This history is summarized in [Appendix A](#) to help the reader understand the importance of advocates and advocacy groups within the education system. In some cases, students themselves recognized that they or their fellow students were being treated unfairly and staged walkouts, delegated to trustees, and launched court cases to secure their rights. Parents/caregivers have staunchly advocated for their children with teachers, school leaders, system leaders, trustees, and provincial governments.

For many parents/caregivers, it is easier and safer to advocate for change when their children are grown and no longer in the public school system. Not only do they have more time to devote to this work, but they also feared that their children, if still in school, would be punished for their advocacy. They have worked alone and formed groups to collectively advocate for their children. When discussions and lobbying were ineffective, they used the courts to exercise their children's right to education.

There are many groups established to advocate solely with the education system. Some advocacy groups were focused on creating social change more broadly and have also focused their attention on the education system because of the importance of education to the lives of people from diverse communities, backgrounds, and identities.

Many school boards and school leaders are actively and intentionally listening to the concerns raised by students, parents/caregivers, and advocates. They have willingly worked with students, families, and communities to address the inequities experienced by individual students and to make systemic changes. Others have resisted the efforts of students, parents/caregivers, and advocacy groups to create change. As a result, change has come as a result of Ministry policy, human rights decisions, or court decisions. The increased diversity of today's student population detailed in [Appendix B](#) means that advocates continue to be important to identifying and addressing inequities in the education system.



Point to Remember

Equity does not happen by chance. Inequities are identified and addressed primarily through the ongoing advocacy by marginalized and underserved groups. This framework is meant to support school board staff to continue to work with students, parents/caregivers, and the advocates that support them to exercise their right to education in Ontario.

Framework for Engaging with Advocacy Groups

The long history of exclusion and failure of the education system to achieve equitable outcomes for students from the equity-seeking groups has precipitated the need for students, parents/caregivers, and communities to advocate for change. It is often because of their work that inequities are identified and systemic change achieved. Advocacy groups support students and parents/caregivers to address issues as they arise, educate them about their rights and how their individual issues connect to larger systemic issues, and equip them with the skills to speak up and advocate for themselves when other issues arise.

Advocacy groups are uniquely positioned to help school boards address individual issues and support systemic change. They have a deep understanding of the oppression experienced by students and often have lived experience. In addition, advocacy groups often have spent years working with the communities they serve and have earned their trust.

There are many organizations that support students and families from diverse communities, backgrounds, and identities to exercise their right to education and learning spaces that are free from harassment and discrimination. Many of these organizations provide a range of other services to students and families such as system navigation because of the high need for these supports. Many organizations that serve various communities report that the main reason families in Ontario reach out for support is for school-related issues. As Autism Ontario shares,¹

Parents often report feeling overwhelmed, intimidated, and helpless when they are left to advocate for their child's rights in school. Families are often left on their own to navigate issues like soft suspensions and school exclusions. It can leave parents and caregivers feeling like there is a struggle, barrier, and opposition at every corner.

1 Autism Ontario. *School Advocacy Toolkit*.
<https://www.autismontario.com/programs-services/positive-advocacy-resources/advocacy-school>



In response to the ongoing inequities experienced by Black students, in 2021 the Government of Ontario created the Student and Family Advocates (SFA) initiative, which offers community-based and culturally relevant advocacy supports to Black students and families in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Ottawa, and Hamilton.² Seventeen funded organizations help Black students and families connect to supports and services. They also serve as system navigators to help students and families overcome barriers when navigating school processes and systems. As the Ministry of Education describes the program, SFAs:³

work directly with families to develop individual strategies for helping you and your child to overcome barriers when navigating school processes and systems. The advocates will provide a range of supports, which may include:

- supporting you and your child to navigate through elementary, secondary and postsecondary school systems
- advocating for your family during processes like disciplinary practices and parent-teacher communications
- helping you and your child access community resources and services
- building a relationship with your family inside and outside of schools
- providing leadership, advice and support to schools on anti-Black racism
- cultivating positive outcomes for Black children, youth and families in schools
- working with community partners, participants and schools to amplify the voices and experiences of Black students and families to activate changes in education systems.

Despite the progress that has been made to improve education equity for Ontario students, inequities continue. With this comes the continued need for students, parents/caregivers, and communities to advocate for the rights of students.

CODE secured funding from the Council of School Boards' Officials (COSBO), a committee within the Ontario Association of School Business Officials (OASBO), to develop this framework to support school boards to more effectively engage with advocates and advocacy groups. This framework is not meant to be prescriptive, nor is it meant to address every issue a principal, superintendent, or director of education will encounter when engaging with advocates and advocacy organizations. Instead, it is meant to provide basic guidance for working with advocates and advocacy groups to positively resolve the concerns and issues of students and their parents/caregivers. Users of this document are encouraged to also reference school board policies and procedures, consult with school board colleagues, and use their professional judgement to determine the best approach to resolving the concerns and issues.

2 Government of Ontario. *Student and Family Advocates Initiative*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/student-and-family-advocates-initiative>

3 Government of Ontario. *Student and Family Advocates Initiative*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/student-and-family-advocates-initiative>

This framework

This first section provides an introduction to and overview of this framework.

Because the approach one takes to engaging with advocacy groups will have a significant impact on the working relationship and the outcomes of that relationship, Section 2 provides principles for engaging with advocacy groups.

In Section 3, we remind users of the legal framework within which they operate when engaging with advocacy groups. This will serve as a reminder of the school board's obligations to both students and staff, the limits of the information that can be disclosed, and the legal parameters of the working relationship with advocacy groups.

Section 4 offers considerations for when meeting with advocates and advocacy groups. The relationship between the school board and advocacy group is often one of conflict. Conflict is neither destructive nor constructive, until we make it so. The guidance in Section 4 will help you use that conflict to drive self-reflection and advance equity.


Appendix A reviews the history of advocacy in Ontario to help the reader understand the important role that students, parents/caregivers, communities, and advocacy groups have played in advancing the right of all students to equitable education.

Appendix B discusses the current context and the need for this framework. It summarizes data from Statistics Canada regarding the changing demographic composition of the provincial population, and hence the student population across the province. It also summarizes some of the key information about the ongoing inequities experienced by students from marginalized and underserved communities.

This framework can be used selectively to meet your particular needs. To this end, we recommend that you:


- Read through this document to become familiar with its content
- Use this framework as a resource when interacting with advocates and advocacy groups

Throughout this document, you will see the following symbols to help you understand the material:



Tips/Resources

We will provide tips or resources that help you deal with particular issues as they arise.



Point to Remember

This symbol identifies key points that are important for you to remember.

Defining advocates and advocacy groups

An advocate or advocacy group is an individual or group that assists students and their parents/caregivers in navigating the education system and articulating their concerns in order to have them addressed. Advocates play a key role in ensuring that the concerns of students and parents/caregivers are heard and addressed effectively.

An advocate can serve as a support person or representative when their role is to assist parents/caregivers in specific, issue-based meetings and provide direct support or help to communicate concerns.

An advocate can be a family member, friend, or another person. An advocate can also be part of an advocacy group that, while supporting parents/caregivers to address the issues their child faces, can also operate with a broader, more systemic purpose to address larger issues beyond the individual case. This distinction is critical in understanding their respective roles within the context of school-level parent meetings and ensuring the appropriate involvement based on the purpose of the meeting.

While there is no explicit legal provision in the *Education Act* requiring school boards to meet with advocacy groups, Regulation 181/98, s. 5(3) states that “parents have a right to a representative of their choosing to attend meetings with school personnel to support or speak on their behalf.” While this language applies to parent/caregiver meetings specific to special education, it can be applied to meetings involving any other concerns.

Advocates are somewhat different from support persons. The chart below helps to distinguish between the two for the purposes of this framework.

SUPPORT PERSON V. ADVOCACY GROUP	
SUPPORT PERSON	ADVOCATE/ADVOCACY GROUP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A support person is present to assist parents/caregivers in dealing with specific issues raised at meetings with school/board staff. • A support person’s role can be to provide emotional support, translate, help to clarify the parent’s points, or assist in understanding complex information. • The support person’s involvement is situational, temporary, and issue-based. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocates or advocacy groups are present to assist parents/caregivers in navigating the education system and/or assist them with issues their child is experiencing. They may be there to provide guidance to the parent/caregiver and/or to speak on their behalf. • Some advocates or advocacy groups have a more systemic, big-picture purpose. They often seek to influence policy or address larger, systemic issues rather than focusing solely on the specific meeting’s purpose. This broader agenda may not align with the immediate purpose of the meeting, which is to resolve a parent/caregiver’s present concerns.



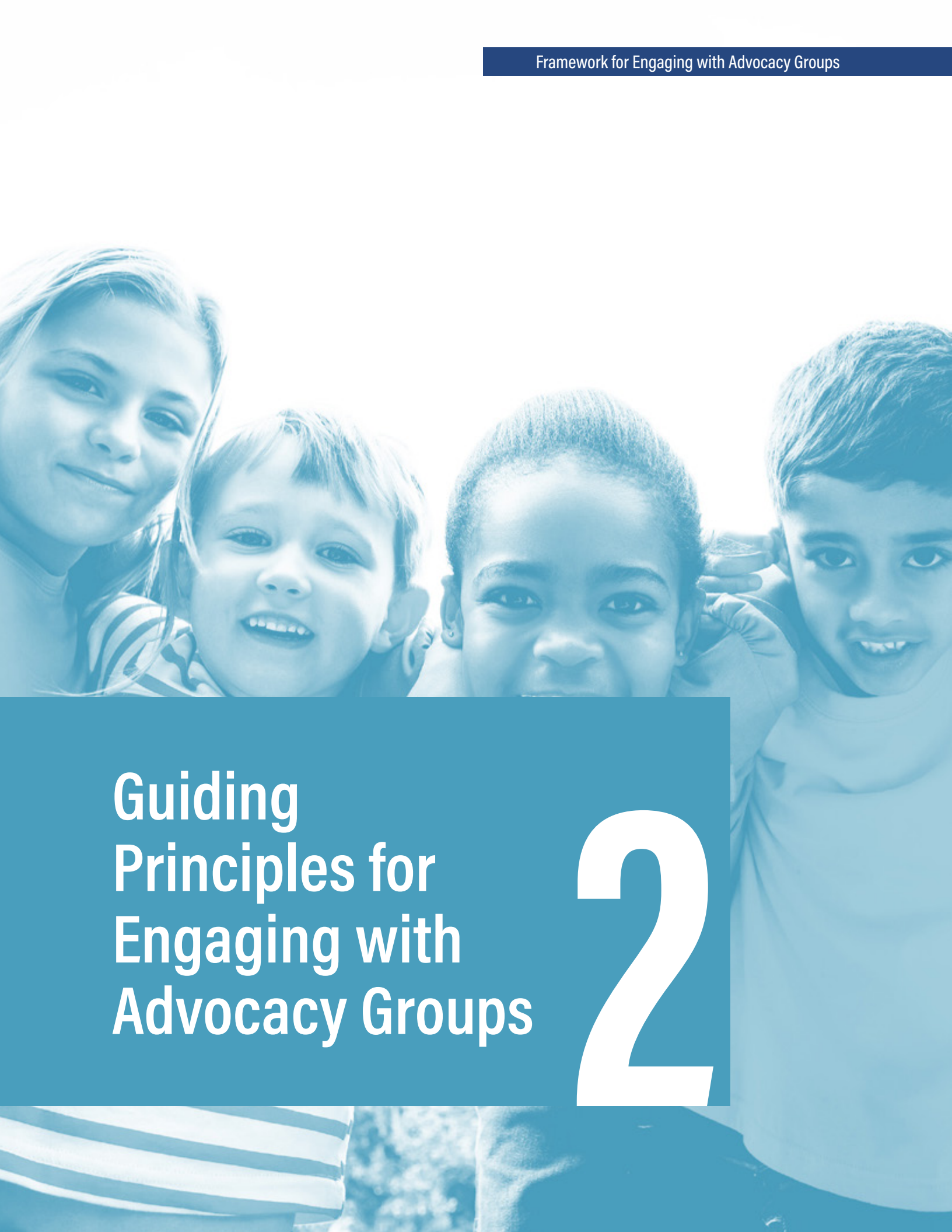
This framework addresses interactions with advocates and advocacy groups as they support parents/caregivers to address issues specific to their child. While it may apply to an advocate or advocacy group's role in advocating for systemic change, that is not the focus.

For many students from diverse communities, backgrounds, and identities, the school system historically was not designed to serve them. It has historically and currently been a constant struggle for these students to benefit equitably from Ontario's public school system. Oftentimes, parents/caregivers of these students must be involved if they are to reap the benefits of Ontario's public education system. When issues arise, they are often not easily resolved by speaking with the teacher; it often requires discussions with the principal, superintendent, director of education, and trustee. When commitments are made to address the issue, they are often not implemented, meaning the continued advocacy of parents/caregivers is required. These parents/caregivers often feel disrespected, unseen, and unheard and may seek the support of an advocate or advocacy group to be treated more respectfully by the school and school board staff. This could be the support of a family member or friend, their Band, or a community group.

These parents/caregivers may also experience challenges in employment, housing, health care, and other aspects of their lives. Understanding and navigating Ontario's complex education system while also dealing with these challenges, and trying to understand and meet their child's growth and learning needs, may create additional challenges for them.

Advocates and advocacy groups play an important and necessary role in supporting parents/caregivers to advocate for the rights of their children. They help parents/caregivers understand the rights of their children and themselves. They share information about school board policies and processes, many of which are not readily and clearly communicated to parents. They help facilitate communication with school board staff and help ensure that student and parent/caregiver concerns are heard and addressed by the school board. They want to work positively and in partnership with school and board staff to support student learning.

This framework uses a broad definition when referring to advocates and advocacy groups. It includes any individual or group that provides support and assistance to students and their parents/caregivers in navigating the education system and articulating their concerns to have them addressed.



Guiding Principles for Engaging with Advocacy Groups

2

The approach one takes to engaging with advocates and advocacy groups will have a significant impact on whether they are able to establish a working relationship, whether they can work collaboratively with them, and how issues are resolved. This section provides some guiding principles that school and school board staff can use to support positive engagement with advocates and advocacy groups.

Equity mindset

School and school board staff should adopt an equity mindset when working with advocates and advocacy groups. An equity mindset includes acknowledging that inequities are historically and currently embedded throughout society in Ontario and in its public education system. With the existence of inequities comes the need for parents/caregivers to advocate for equitable access to education for their children.

An equity mindset also includes keeping students and families at the centre of the discussion. This may mean putting egos aside and acknowledging that, despite our best intentions, even the most well-meaning and competent staff may perpetuate harm.

This also means we should acknowledge that staff come into the education system with biases and worldviews that can influence their understanding of the experiences of marginalized students and their interactions with these students. We recognize that these biases may get in the way of understanding and resolving issues facing individual students.

Having an equity mindset requires that one reflects on their identity and social location and identifies their biases in order to best work with advocates to resolve the issues facing individual students and make systemic change. We should all proactively self-reflect and commit to self-improvement so we can engage with advocacy groups to advance equity.

I believe that advocacy groups have such an influential, impactful voice ... and their sage advice and thoughtful perspectives are critical to the robustness of the IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility)-related policies and/or procedures created. Regular meetings with these groups have been invaluable to the collective work in equity.

~ Supervisory Officer



Cultural responsiveness and cultural humility

School and school board staff should be culturally responsive when working with advocates and advocacy groups that represent students and parents/caregivers from diverse communities. This means understanding and being respectful of the historical experiences these communities have had with the education system. It also means understanding and being respectful of the backgrounds and cultures of students and their families.

Staff should also recognize and respect that parents/caregivers come to the school environment with their own wealth of cultural knowledge. This knowledge could be an important contributor to understanding and addressing the issues students are facing.

Staff should approach each interaction with cultural humility and start with an examination of their own beliefs and cultural identity. This includes the ongoing practice of self-reflection regarding how one's own background and experiences impact the situation or interaction.



Resources

What is Cultural Humility? The Basics. University of Oregon.

<https://inclusion.uoregon.edu/what-cultural-humility-basics>

Sovereignty

Indigenous communities have the right to control their children's learning and education. This requires that school and board staff collaborate with Indigenous parents/caregivers and communities to strengthen Indigenous education and support the success of individual Indigenous students.

Advocates play an important role in Ontario's public education system

Advocates play an important role in advancing equity in Ontario's public education system. Our interactions with advocates and advocacy groups will be grounded in dignity, respect, and compassion for their work as community partners.

Value lived experience

Students, parents/caregivers, and communities are experts on the oppression they experience. They can provide valuable insights into their experiences and how those experiences may differ from that of other students, parents/caregivers, and communities. Whether or not we have the same experience and understanding of the education system, we will listen to, and believe, their lived experience to gain a deeper understanding of their issues.

Continuous learning

We are committed to continuous learning about equity, human rights, racism, and all forms of oppression that impact students, parents/caregivers, and communities that we serve. We will be proactive about expanding our knowledge about these issues and the role that school boards play in addressing these issues. We will provide opportunities for ongoing learning and training for school board staff in these areas. We also commit to having the courage to sit with discomfort and take action rather than being paralyzed by the fear of saying and doing the wrong thing.

While the focus may currently be on addressing the issue for one student, their experience is likely not unique. We will use their experience to identify and address systemic issues that impact other students from the same community, background, or identity.

Open and transparent communication

We will be a trustworthy partner when working with advocates and advocacy groups. We will collaborate with them to support students and their parents/caregivers to address specific issues and make systemic change. We will ensure that we are transparent and will share important factual information about school boards, their functions, the parameters of their authority, and relevant policies and procedures. We will also share information about resources available and the process for accessing them.

We will facilitate healthy and ongoing communication with students, families, advocates, and community groups. Communication will be clear and simplified as much as possible.

Accountability

We will commit to being held accountable for taking action to address the issues raised. We will also hold community members accountable for their role in helping to provide input and facilitate appropriate and positive resolution of issues. We will ensure that any commitments made are realistic, implemented on a timely basis, and properly resourced.

Be flexible, creative, and innovative

We understand that doing things as they have always been done creates and reinforces barriers for some groups of students. This requires us to be deliberately flexible, creative, and innovative in developing solutions to support students, address specific issues, and make systemic change.



Student-centred, trauma-informed approach

We will keep the focus of the work with advocacy groups on the students. We recognize that our common goal is to resolve current issues facing individual students and make systemic change to proactively support academic achievement and student well-being in our system today and in future years. Interest-based discussions as opposed to position-based discussions work best in achieving these outcomes.

We recognize that parents/caregivers must be meaningfully involved in planning, problem solving, and decision-making related to their children's education and well-being. Parents/caregivers are their children's first teacher and strongest advocate. They have unique knowledge about their children and have a right to contribute to the resolution process. Parent/caregiver voice should also not be appropriated, overshadowed, or misconstrued by any advocate, community group, or school board staff.

We will also take a trauma-informed and contextual approach to serving the needs of students from diverse communities, backgrounds, and identities so that we are conscious of not perpetuating harms caused by various forms of oppression. We acknowledge that trauma also has an intergenerational aspect to it that can further compound experiences of oppression.

We commit to creating safe spaces in which we can engage with advocacy groups and where the physical and psychological safety of students, parents/caregivers, advocates, and staff are prioritized at the highest level.

Ensure accessibility

We recognize that parents/caregivers, advocates, and advocacy groups may need supports to participate meaningfully in meetings. As such, we will ask about any accommodation needed, remove identified barriers, and provide accommodations that may be needed to support meaningful participation.

Legal, Ethical, and Policy Considerations

3

This section reminds school board staff of the legal, ethical, and policy framework within which school boards operate. It reinforces the need to focus on the rights of students, the information school boards can share, and the resolutions available to them.

There are commitments and legislation that protect student rights and freedoms, including the right to equity and accessibility, the freedom from discrimination, and the right to privacy.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

Articles 14 and 15 of UNDRIP⁴ states in part:

Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.

States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (minority language education rights)

Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* enshrines protection for minority language rights to French-speaking communities outside of Québec. It states that Canadians who are of a French linguistic minority population in Ontario (e.g., French is their first language learned and understood or they have received their primary school instruction in Canada in French) have the right to have their children receive primary and secondary school instruction in French. This applies not only to the Francophone population in Ontario, but also to newcomer Francophones as well.

Truth and Reconciliation

The National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), regarding residential schools in Canada, included 94 Calls to Action in its final report. School boards are responsible for reconciliation and implementing the vision of the TRC, including the Calls to Action specifically related to education.

4 United Nations. (2007, September 13). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf



Ontario Human Rights Code

Under the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (the Code), school boards are responsible for creating working and learning environments that are free from discrimination and harassment based on Code-protected grounds such as race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. Everyone, including students, parents/guardians, staff, community partners, and advocacy groups are responsible for upholding the Code.

The Code also requires that school boards deliver educational services free from discrimination.

The Code requires that investigations of human rights complaints be impartial, timely, fair, and address all relevant issues.

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) was passed in 2005 with the goal of making Ontario fully accessible by the year 2025. The standards mandate how organizations must remove and prevent barriers for employees and others with disabilities who interact with the organization. Currently, the AODA establishes standards in five key areas: customer service, employment, information and communications, transportation, and public spaces. In addition, two new standards are being developed: health care, and education.

The AODA requires that school boards remove barriers to accessibility within the school environment, including during meetings.

Occupational Health and Safety Act

Under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA), school boards are responsible for creating psychologically and physically safe work environments that are free from violence and harassment. They are responsible for promoting health and safety in workplaces and facilitating the return to work and recovery of employees who experience personal injury during their employment or who experience an occupational disease.

Like the *Human Rights Code*, the OHSA requires that school boards be proactive in ensuring that working and learning environments are free from violence and harassment. It also requires that complaints are investigated when raised.

Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act

School boards in Ontario have the authority to collect personal information under privacy legislation such as the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (MFIPPA).

This law sets out rules for school boards regarding the collection, retention, use, and disclosure of personal information, including information related to students and employees. School boards have an obligation to protect student information and the release of this information to a third party, including advocacy groups. In particular, school boards must ensure that they have the consent of parents/guardians when discussing and sharing student information with an advocacy group.

MFIPPA also gives the public a right to access general records held by a school board including policies, guides, emails, meeting minutes, and procurement records.⁵ There are exceptions to the types of information that can be accessed. For example, if a record contains someone else's personal information, such as information related to a teacher or another student, in many cases MFIPPA requires that this information be redacted or removed from the record before access is granted.

MFIPPA provides for protection of personal information held by governments, including an employee's personal information. Employee information includes disciplinary action taken against an employee following an investigation.

In addition, collective agreements and school board policies often contain provisions governing employee privacy rights.

The Education Act establishes the legal framework for education in Ontario.

Education Act

School boards operate under the legal authority of the *Education Act*, which regulates the powers, roles, and responsibilities of school boards, directors, supervisory officers, principals, and teachers, as well as the rights and responsibilities of students and parents/guardians. The *Education Act* supports a strong public education system in order to provide all students with an opportunity to fulfill their potential and develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, and caring citizens that contribute to society. As per the *Education Act*, every student (regardless of identity) is entitled to an equitable and inclusive learning environment. The focus is on student achievement and well-being, closing student achievement gaps, and maintaining confidence in Ontario's publicly funded education system.

5 Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario. (2019, January). *A Guide to Privacy and Access to Information in Ontario Schools*.

<https://www.ipc.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/guide-to-privacy-access-in-ont-schools.pdf>

In Ontario, four school systems are publicly funded:

- English public
- English Catholic
- French public
- French Catholic

Special education programs and services

The *Education Act* and its regulations provide for special education programs and services for “exceptional students” with behavioural, communicational, intellectual, and/or physical disabilities, free of any fees on the part of their parents/caregivers.

Special education programs are based on and modified by the results of continuous assessment and evaluation that includes a board plan with special objectives and an outline of educational services that meet the needs of the exceptional student. At the student level, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are required for all students who have been formally identified with special learning requirements.

The *Education Act* also governs the appointment to and operation of Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs). SEACs consist of volunteers who meet regularly to provide advice and/or support for the delivery of special education programs and services for students with special education needs.

Education Services (Tuition) Agreements

Section 188 of the *Education Act* permits school boards to enter into agreements with a band council, a First Nation education authority, or Crown–Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC). Most First Nation communities have schools and, upon completion of the schooling offered in the community, students transfer into public or private schools to further their education.⁶

The Minister of Education has several agreements to improve achievement among Indigenous students. These agreements describe the relationship between funded First Nations communities and Ontario’s publicly funded education system.

In addition, individual school boards may enter into agreements for additional services and supports with individual First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. Staff should be aware of these agreements and how they impact the services offered to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students.

⁶ OPSBA’s Guide to Good Governance 2018-2022.
https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/OPSBA_Good_Governance_Guide_2018-2022_Chapter6.pdf



The Ministry of Education also provides school boards with direction and expectations in the form of Policy and Program Memoranda (PPM).⁷

PPM 119: Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools

PPM 119⁸ (issued in 2013) requires school boards to develop, implement, and monitor an equity and inclusion education policy that includes a religious accommodation guideline. It is designed to promote compliance with the Ontario *Human Rights Code* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

PPM 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct⁹

This memorandum from the Ministry of Education provides direction on the authority and responsibility of boards to develop, implement, enforce, review, and assess codes of conduct for their school communities.

PPM 128 sets requirements for school boards to develop and update their own codes of conduct consistent with the Provincial Code of Conduct.

⁷ Ontario Ministry of Education. Education in Ontario: policy and program direction. <https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction>

⁸ Ontario Ministry of Education. Policy/Program Memorandum 119. <https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-119>

⁹ Ontario Ministry of Education. Policy/Program Memorandum 128. <https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-128>

PPM 170: School Board Communication With Parents

PPM No. 170¹⁰ (effective beginning in the 2024-2025 school year) outlines requirements and provides direction to school boards on communication with parents, strengthening service standards, and ensuring consistent and reliable information is made available to parents. School boards are required to provide parents/caregivers with information to support their active engagement in their child's education and develop and comply with a protocol setting out standards for acknowledging and responding to parent inquiries.

Increased parent involvement strengthens parent-school partnerships, supports student success, and fosters a shared sense of community and responsibility for the child's education. By providing relevant information to parents and responding promptly and effectively to their inquiries, school boards and educators can positively influence and encourage parent engagement. When their inquiries are acknowledged and addressed, parents/caregivers develop confidence in the school board and the school's ability to meet their child's educational needs.

The Ontario College of Teachers Act and the Ontario College of Teachers also issues standards for professional and ethical conduct.

Ontario College of Teachers Act, Professional Misconduct Regulation

The Ontario *College of Teachers Act's* Professional Misconduct Regulation¹¹ provides the standards of professional conduct for members and delineates what would be considered misconduct. This includes making remarks or engaging in behaviours that expose people to hatred on the basis of a protected human rights ground, abuse towards a student, the unauthorized release of information about a student, etc.

The College has a process to raise a concern or complaint against one of its members, which includes related investigation and complaint resolution processes. The complaint resolution process allows for certain complaints to be resolved without an investigation or hearing. The College ensures that it protects the public interest while also ensuring that members receive impartial treatment during investigations and hearings. If a member is found in violation of professional misconduct or to be incompetent, there are a range of disciplinary consequences the College can take, including revocation of a member's certificate. Members may appeal the College's decision to the Divisional Court.

10 Ontario Ministry of Education. Policy/Program Memorandum 170. <https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-170>

11 Ontario College of Teachers Act, 1996. Professional Misconduct. <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/970437>

Ontario College of Teachers Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession

The Ontario College of Teachers' (the College) Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession¹² and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession¹³ provide the foundation for the professional conduct of teachers. The ethical standards promote care, respect, trust and integrity. These standards are meant to guide educators in their teaching and actions within the education system. The Standards of Practice indicate that ethical knowledge is a core dimension of professional knowledge for educators and that school cultures, pedagogies, policies, and practices should reflect the highest ethical standards to help achieve success for all students.

The purpose of these standards is to ensure that teachers reflect upon and uphold the honour and dignity of the teaching profession, identify their ethical responsibilities, guide their decisions, and promote public trust and confidence in the teaching profession.

Furthermore, the College's professional advisories also provide beneficial guidance on important issues in education. These advisories apply to all College members such as teachers, vice-principals, principals, supervisory officers, and directors of education.

Professional Advisory on Anti-Black Racism

In 2021, the Ontario College of Teachers also issued a professional advisory that addresses anti-Black racism¹⁴ in education which reflected a recent amendment to the Ontario *College of Teachers Act*. The Act now stipulates that "making remarks or engaging in behaviours that expose any person or class of persons to hatred on the basis of a prohibited ground of discrimination under Part 1 of the Human Rights Code" is an act of professional misconduct. The guidance provided in the advisory are meant to help educators critically reflect on their practice.



12 Ontario College of Teachers. Ethical Standards.
<https://www.oct.ca/public/professional-standards/ethical-standards>

13 Ontario College of Teachers. Standards of Practice.
<https://www.oct.ca/public/professional-standards/standards-of-practice>

14 Ontario College of Teachers. Professional Advisory on Anti-Black Racism.
www.oct.ca/-/media/PDF/professional_advisory_ABR/Professional_Advisory_ABR_EN.pdf

The Government of Ontario also requires that school boards have additional policies and agreements in place to foster positive relationships with those in the school community.

Parental and Public Concern Policies

Parental and public concern policies are meant to foster a strong and positive relationship with parents/caregivers, students, and the community by helping to resolve concerns in a fair, respectful, and effective manner.

These policies provide the sequential steps parents/caregivers can take to raise their concerns and have them addressed. These steps include speaking with their child's teacher and, if the issue is not resolved, escalating the issue to the principal, the superintendent, and the director of education. Trustees are often a conduit for providing parents/caregivers with information about how to get an issue resolved through the proper channels. This ensures that the issue resides within the appropriate administrative level of authority.

These policies also highlight the right that parents/caregivers have to representation of their choosing in attendance at meetings with the school board, subject to the limitations in board procedures. Such representatives include community advocates.

These policies also specify the matters that staff cannot share with parents/guardians, including personal details or disciplinary measures related to other students and staff.

Joint Protocols for Student Achievement (JPSA)

Joint Protocols for Student Achievement (JPSA) are protocols agreed to between the school board and partnering Children's Aid Societies (CASs). These protocols assist in the care of the CASs to have access to learning opportunities and supports that can help them in their academic journey. Students in the care of a CAS often face barriers to academic success and going on to postsecondary education and employment. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Education jointly developed an External Working Group of educators, CAS representatives, and youth formerly in care to assist in developing a Provincial Protocol template, which is customized by each school board and partnering CASs.



Engaging with Advocacy Groups

4

Framework for Engaging with Advocacy Groups

Community engagement involves taking a strategic approach to engaging with the board's community-based stakeholders. This includes communicating regularly with them, actively building relationships, and managing interactions to achieve specific outcomes for the organization and the community itself.

Engagement also includes:

- Knowing who the advocacy groups are in your school community
- Proactively reaching out to meet with them
- Gathering their input and feedback when developing policies
- Collaboratively working with them to address systemic issues

We should be proactive. Should we only be engaging with advocacy groups when there is an issue? We should be reaching out to them to invite their review of policies and seek their help when addressing systemic issues. This would be very important to building relationships and trust.

~ *Human Rights and Equity Advisor*



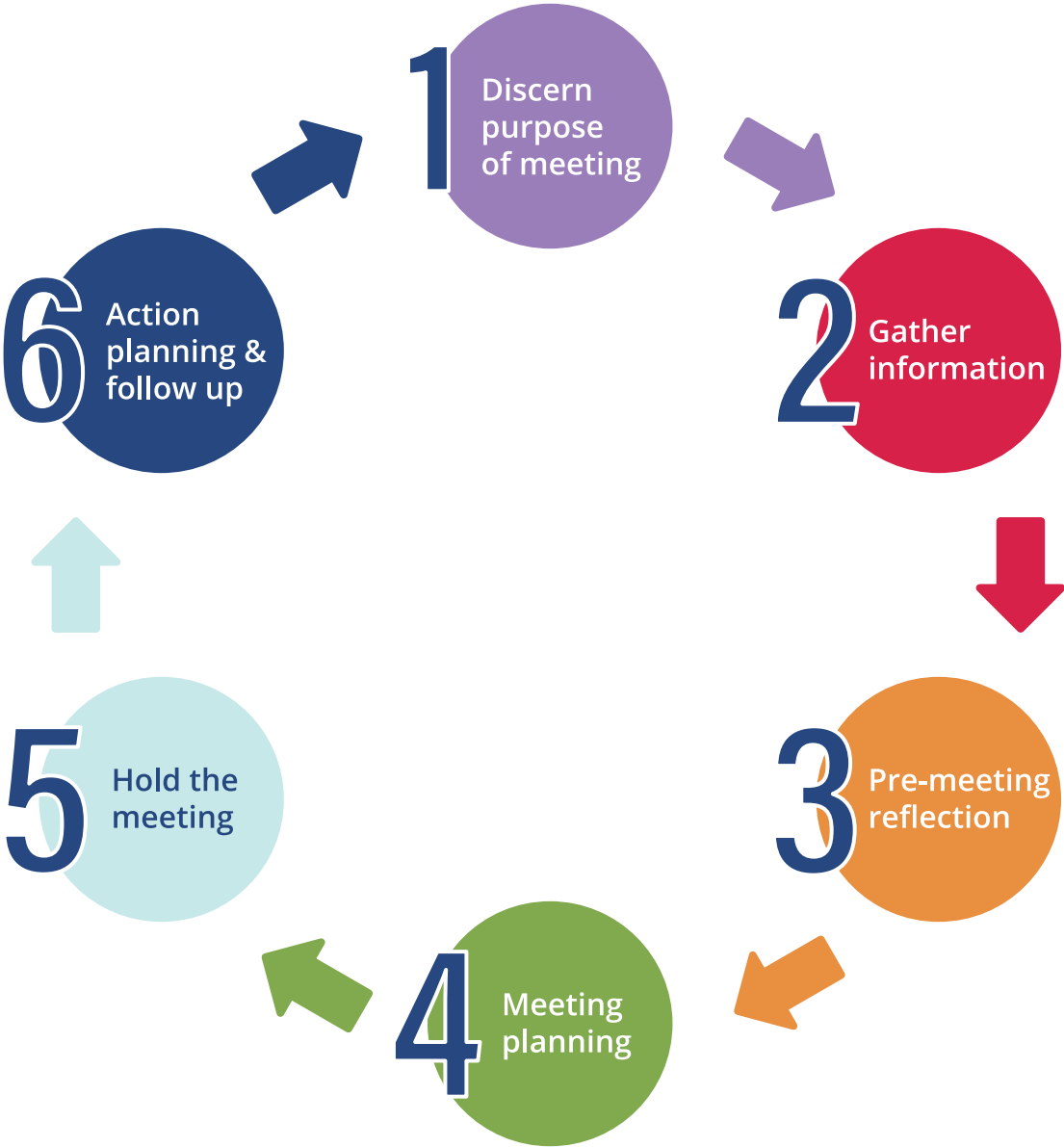
Establishing a working relationship with advocacy groups will help you work collaboratively with them when an issue arises with a student.



Meeting considerations

5

The following are important meeting considerations that will help ensure meetings between school/board staff and advocates/advocacy groups occur in a respectful, inclusive, safe, and accessible manner.



1) *Discern purpose of meeting*

When you get a call from an advocate/advocacy group for a meeting, you should ask for the particulars so you understand the purpose of the meeting, can prepare for the meeting, and have the right people in that meeting. You want to find out:

- The name of the student
- The issue that they would like to speak about
- The name(s) of those who will be attending the meeting
- Whether the meeting will be in person or virtual
- Whether they have consent from the parent/caregiver for the school board to share information about their child
- Whether anyone requires accommodation to participate in the meeting.

Point to Remember

Keep in mind that parents/caregivers have the right to have an advocate or advocacy group support them when dealing with the resolution of student issues. Parents/caregivers should not be prevented from bringing support with them. There is no legislation that prevents them from having an advocate at a meeting.

An issue will likely not be resolved in one meeting. You should let the advocate know that the first meeting is an initial meeting to hear what the issues are. Mention that you will need time to investigate the issue and would be happy to set up another meeting with them to determine next steps within a reasonable timeframe.

Point to Remember

Parents/caregivers may invite additional people to a meeting with the school to address an issue. The number of people in the meeting with them may depend on:

- The supports they need
- Past experience with the school
- Feeling unsafe interacting with the school

2) Gather information

Now that you understand the purpose of the meeting, you will need to conduct some research, including:

- If you don't know about the advocacy group, research them to better understand who they are and the groups that they represent.
- Learn more about the issue from the teacher or other staff involved.
- What do you know about the issues that students represented by this advocacy group often face (e.g., anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Palestinian racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, etc.)?

Seek first to understand and create healthy boundaries for discussions. Becoming defensive or shifting the blame does not work.

~ Supervisory Officer



3) Pre-meeting reflection

Now that you have an understanding of the purpose of the meeting and the issues of concern, you may want to engage in some self-reflection to mentally prepare for the meeting. Oftentimes, the meeting may be about a student's experience of racism or other forms of oppression. How prepared are you to acknowledge what parents/caregivers are sharing without being defensive? Parents/caregivers are often angry, as they believe their child has been mistreated because of their identity. How prepared are you to acknowledge that this might be the case, regardless of the best intentions of the staff involved? It is best to come to a meeting with an open mind and without any preconceived ideas that would limit positive relationships and/or intent.



Resources

Positionality and Self-reflection

(Equity-based Co-creation Microcredential, Open Library)

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/equitybasedcocreation/chapter/positionality-and-self-reflection/>

Here are some additional self-reflection questions to consider before the meeting:

- How have you engaged in critical self-reflection around your own ideologies, beliefs, and/or biases tied to the concern being brought forward?
- How prepared are you to handle the emotions and/or “tone” that will likely come up in the meeting?
- What learning do you require to gain a better understanding of the issues that will be discussed?
- Do you understand the importance of cultural safety? How will the school or site team engage in the meeting with this as a necessary condition?
- Are you prepared to hear what will be shared at the meeting? Are you prepared to listen past the emotion to understand the underlying issues?

While the meeting may be uncomfortable, it is important that you are able to distinguish between a heated discussion and an abusive interaction. It is also important that you don't prioritize your discomfort with the topic, the parents/caregivers' emotions, or being directly challenged by the advocate over the needs of the student. And it is important that you understand when a meeting may become abusive and harmful and be prepared to end the meeting. This chart will help you discern when a meeting is uncomfortable versus when it is abusive.

HARASSMENT IS NOT...	HARASSMENT IS...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about racism and other forms of oppression • Being accused of participating in racism and other forms of oppression • Being called racist, ableist, homophobic, etc. • Parents/caregivers being upset, frustrated, or angry because of how their child has been treated • Raised voices or a “harsh” tone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serious or repeated rude, degrading, offensive, or threatening remarks or behaviours • Unwanted physical contact • Being called derogatory names

White fragility may arise when issues of race and racism are raised. You need to ensure that you are not conflating your discomfort with being unsafe. Just because you feel uncomfortable, it does not mean you are unsafe.

These feelings could simply reflect a discomfort speaking about race and racism, a lack of self-reflection, and/or a poor understanding of oppression and privilege. It is also important to be aware that the same behaviours may be perceived as threatening because of the parent's race/gender.

DISCOMFORT VS. UNSAFETY ¹⁵	
Discomfort tells us that there's something we need to do, address, or change. Discomfort is mediated by our cognitive brains and gives us the ability to choose how we respond to our discomfort.	Unsafety is a call to action: to examine, consider, and decide.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressions of emotion • Raised voices • Harsh tone • Critique of the system • Critique of actions by board staff, including yourself • Asking challenging questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwanted physical contact • Threatening language

It is natural to desire safety and comfort; unfortunately, our bodies can confuse the two. Both discomfort and feelings of unsafety may manifest in similar ways, creating a high level of physical discomfort. When we feel in danger, our bodies bypass our cognitive brain and can go into fight, flight, or flee mode. While these feelings are related, they are not interchangeable.

4) Meeting planning

- Set goals for the meeting (e.g., to understand the issue, to identify solutions to a student issue).
- Identify who should attend this meeting. This will depend on the goals you've established for the meeting.
- Define the duration of your meeting. There may be many issues to discuss, and everyone's time is valuable. You may need to set a time limit for the meeting. You should let the parent/caregiver and advocate know of this time limit prior to the meeting.

15 Menakem, R. (2022, June 23). *Safety, comfort, and how psychologytoday.com tried to censor me.* <https://resmaa.com/2022/06/23/safety-comfort-and-how-psychologytodaycom-tried-to-censor-me/>

5) Hold the meeting

You are encouraged to use the following considerations to guide the meeting:

Opening the meeting

- Parents/caregivers may already feel overwhelmed, anxious, or intimidated, so you should develop a friendly and approachable demeanour. But be sure not to be too informal or jovial, as such an attitude may suggest that you are not taking the meeting seriously.
- If appropriate, recognize that one's own positionality informs one's perspectives and reactions during the meeting. This may change or shift the climate/tone of the meeting and ultimately impact the response from parents/caregivers and advocates (positively or negatively).
- Set out the parameters of the meeting (e.g., this is an introductory meeting to help me understand the issues, we have one hour, before we close today we will set a follow-up meeting, etc.).
- Introduce yourself, your role, and why you are in the meeting. If any other board staff are in the meeting, have them introduce themselves and provide the same information.
- Ask that those accompanying the parent/caregiver introduce themselves and their role. This will be particularly important if there are several people in the meeting. If clarity is needed, clarify who is speaking on behalf of the parent/caregiver and who is there to provide support.



Discussing the issue

- Prioritize hearing from students and/or parents/caregivers. But recognize that sometimes they have asked for their advocate to speak on their behalf.
- Notice when you or other staff are engaged in defensive reactions (e.g., guilt, fragility, anger, tone-policing, taking things personally) and reflect on this after the meeting.
- Listen to understand, not to defend. Ask for clarification as needed.
- Be prepared to intervene to refocus the conversation on the needs and concerns of students, parents/caregivers, and the community.

Responding to concerns

- Acknowledge harm when described and apologize when required.
- Acknowledge that systemic racism, oppression, and discrimination exist and we still have much work to do in the board and within our schools.
- Name the specific forms of oppression being discussed.

Wrapping up the meeting

- Ask for a follow-up meeting to continue the discussion after you've had time to conduct an investigation or consult with other board staff.

The long legacy of marginalization by the education system is not going to be undone by one meeting with one really good superintendent. It is going to take time. If one meeting is not productive, that doesn't mean that you give up the relationship. If you value the relationship, you put in the work.

~ *Human Rights and Equity Advisor*



Addressing Harassment

When a meeting has become abusive, you, as the leader, should be prepared to immediately address it. Here is some guidance on how to do this. You should review this section before the meeting and be prepared to intervene if the meeting crosses the line into harassment.¹⁶

1 STOP THE HARASSMENT OR HURTFUL BEHAVIOUR

- Interrupt the comment or behaviour: "I'm going to have to stop this here."

2 IDENTIFY THE HARASSMENT AND NAME THE HURTFUL BEHAVIOUR

- Label the harassment: "You just made a harassing comment."

3 REFOCUS THE DISCUSSION

- Refocus the discussion back to the issues being discussed: "While I understand you are angry because of the situation, the language you are using is abusive. Let's refocus the discussion on the issue that the student is experiencing."

4 ASK FOR CHANGE IN FUTURE BEHAVIOUR

- Personalize the response: "Let's take a few minutes for everyone to calm down. That way we can return to focusing on the issues."
- Check in with the victim at this time: "Let me know if you're okay to continue with this meeting. If the name-calling continues, I will end the meeting. We want everyone to be safe at this school."



¹⁶ Adapted from Peel District School Board, How to Handle Discrimination and Harassment in 3 Minutes.

<https://www.peelschools.org/documents/53208bbc-8a24-4337-b398-8064f9f61600/How%20to%20Handle%20Discrimination%20and%20Harassment%20in%203%20Minutes.pdf>



Acknowledge harm

Acknowledging the harm done to the student helps validate their experience and acknowledges your commitment to addressing the issue. You can convey that you truly feel sorry and care about the student who was hurt without laying blame. This is important because you may need to investigate to better understand what has occurred. Acknowledging harm has three elements:¹⁷

- **Acknowledge the offense:** Acknowledge that the student has been harmed and that the parent/caregiver is rightly upset/angry because of what happened. Avoid using vague or evasive language or wording that minimizes the offense or questions whether the victim was actually harmed.
- **Express remorse:** If you regret the error or harm, say so. This is all part of expressing sincere remorse.
- **Offer to investigate:** Let them know that you have a responsibility to investigate the situation and commit to investigating and getting back to them. You may need to speak to the other people involved or examine the options available to you through the board's policies and procedures. Let them know that you will need to do this before you can decide on appropriate next steps.



¹⁷ Adapted from Corliss, J. (2023, December 21). The art of a heartfelt apology. *Harvard Health Publishing*.

www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-art-of-a-heartfelt-apology-2021041322366

The words you use to acknowledge harm matter. Here are some examples of good and bad ways to acknowledge harm.

EFFECTIVE WORDING	WHY IT WORKS
<p>"I'm sorry this happened to your child. We are short-staffed, but that's no excuse for this oversight. [Name of the student] is important to us and I will ensure that we rectify this situation."</p> <p>"I'm sorry this happened to your child. We have been making a focused effort to address anti-Black racism because we know how pervasive it is in the education system. Clearly, we have more work to do. All our students are important to us, and I will ensure that we investigate and rectify this situation."</p> <p>"I'm sorry this happened to your child. We have policies that should be applied equitably to all our students. It shouldn't have happened. I will investigate what happened so that we can ensure it doesn't happen in the future."</p>	<p>Takes responsibility and explains but does not excuse why the mistake happened. It expresses remorse and caring and promises reparation.</p>
INEFFECTIVE WORDING	WHY IT WON'T WORK
<p>"I'm sorry you feel that way."</p>	<p>Does not accept responsibility; instead, it places the issue on the parent/caregiver's feelings.</p>
<p>"Mistakes were made."</p>	<p>Use of passive voice avoids taking responsibility.</p>
<p>"I apologize for whatever happened."</p>	<p>Language is vague. The harm to the student is not acknowledged.</p>

6) Action planning and following up

After the meeting with parents/caregivers and their advocate, you need to ensure that an adequate follow-up occurs. This shows that you have taken the issue seriously and will take the necessary next steps and actions.

Before closing the meeting, be sure to clarify:

- How parents/caregivers want you to communicate with them going forward. Do they want you to communicate directly with them, with their advocate, or with both? If they want you to communicate with the advocate, you must have a signed agreement on file permitting you to share information with the advocate.
- How much time you will need to conduct the investigation and/or consult with board staff. Share this information with those involved.

Sometimes the solutions proposed by parents/caregivers and their advocates include actions that are outside of your authority or are not reasonable, given the infraction. This might include suggestions to disclose confidential information, termination of an employee, or expulsion of a student.

It is important for all parties to understand the parameters of what is and is not possible and/or within the school board's control, and this will depend on the unique circumstances of the situation. How reasonable proposed solutions are will impact the productivity of meetings that are ultimately convened to take actions in the best interests of students.

In subsequent meetings, when everyone has a full understanding of the issues, you may need to share that the solution you are proposing is consistent with the law, board policies, and collective agreements.



De-escalation techniques

It is understandable that meetings between school boards and advocacy groups can get heated and lead to intense and escalated emotions. These are some de-escalation techniques adapted from the Crisis Prevention Institute¹⁸ (CPI) that you are encouraged to use to diffuse tensions:

- **Practice empathy, compassion, and non-judgement:** Even if what someone is saying to you seems absurd or irrational, maintain a non-judgemental position and avoid dismissing the person's feelings. For that individual, their feelings are very real. Also, keep in mind that students and families from communities that have been underserved by the education system have a very different experience of the education system than members of the dominant group.
- **Respect personal space:** Try to stand at least one metre away from a person who is in an escalated state. This helps decrease their anxiety and helps them regulate their emotions. If you need to enter the other person's personal space, you should clearly and calmly state why you are doing so.
- **Allow for pauses and time to make decisions:** Taking breaks when needed allows for everyone to pause and process what is happening so they can make the decision that is appropriate for the circumstances. This break can also be used to practice some mindful breathing exercises, which can help de-escalate heightened emotions.
- **Use non-threatening verbal cues:** The more the individual in front of you is losing control of themselves, the less they are able to process your words. As a result, they become more emotionally reactive to non-verbal communication. Be aware of your gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice. Ensure that your tone and body language are neutral. Try to minimize the amount of talking you are doing.
- **Set boundaries:** If someone's behaviour is disrespectful, belligerent, defensive, or disruptive, set boundaries that are clear, simple, and enforceable. Offer concise and respectful choices and consequences.
- **Focus on feelings:** Although it is important to remain factual, when dealing with escalated emotions, it is more important to focus on how the person is feeling. Some people have a hard time expressing their feelings when they are emotionally agitated. Listen closely to the person and use supportive responses that acknowledge the person's feelings (i.e., "That must be upsetting. How did that make you feel? I know how hard that must have been for you.")



18 Crisis Prevention Institute. (2022, June 28). *CPI's top 10 de-escalation tips revisited*. <https://www.crisisprevention.com/blog/general/cpi-s-top-10-de-escalation-tips-revisited/>



- **Ignore challenging questions:** Try your best to ignore verbal challenges or challenges to your authority. But do not ignore the person. Unless there is a legitimate danger to anyone's safety, these types of challenges are usually simply meant to engage you in a power struggle. If you find yourself in a situation like this, redirect the other person's attention to the issue at hand.
- **Avoid overreacting:** Remain calm, rational, and professional at all times. While you cannot control a person's behaviour, you can control how you respond to them. How you respond to the behaviour will directly impact whether the situation escalates or defuses.
- **Wisely choose what you insist upon:** Be thoughtful in deciding which rules are negotiable and which are not. For example, if someone does not want to compromise on a particular issue, can you park that issue and work on another related issue instead? Options and flexibility may help you avoid wasted time and energy on issues that have come to a standstill.
- **Allow for silence:** Not every minute needs to be filled with talk and discussion. Sometimes silence is the best course of action, especially in heated situations. Silence can give everyone a chance to reflect on what is happening and how to proceed.



Meeting considerations

References to “decorum” and “professionalism”

References to “decorum” and “professionalism” are often used to dismiss the feelings of students and parents/caregivers and perpetuate their oppression. These references require that students and/or parents/caregivers not show their humanity and emotions and prioritize the feelings of board staff.

You should focus on the concerns of the parents/caregivers rather than the way they are expressing these concerns.

Staff should understand where anger and aggression are coming from (a place of fear, pain, trauma, mistrust, feeling oppressed, etc.) if these behaviours are exhibited by parents. They should help redirect these emotions constructively.

~ *Supervisory Officer*



Resources

Professionalism or Socialized White Supremacy

(National Association of Student Personnel Administrators)

<https://www.naspa.org/blog/professionalism-or-socialized-white-supremacy>

Understanding power dynamics and the need for an advocate

When meeting with advocates and advocacy groups, it is important for you to have a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics that exist between the school board and parents/caregivers.

Many school board staff have extensive knowledge of board policies and have access to extensive staff resources, including lawyers. Parents/caregivers often have limited knowledge of their rights and school board policies. Most do not have ongoing access to lawyers. Advocacy groups help to level the playing field for parents/caregivers.

The identities of staff involved in the issue can also impact the power dynamics of the situation, particularly when staff have dominant identities (e.g., are White, non-disabled, heterosexual/cisgender, etc.) in contrast to the marginalized identities of students and their parents/caregivers. When parents/caregivers don't see their identities reflected in the school or school board, they may feel intimidated or unwelcome in school board spaces. They may also feel that the board does not understand the racism and other forms of oppression that their child is facing.

The spaces themselves must also feel welcoming to parents/caregivers and students from diverse communities, backgrounds, and identities. Visual symbols and greeting protocols at the school that affirm student identities may highlight a significant difference in whether people feel welcome.

Where the meeting is held should also be considered. Often the meeting is held in the principal's office, which can be intimidating for some parents/caregivers. You should consider if you can meet in another place in the school or another location entirely.

School boards are often criticized for having many staff and specialists at the table when discussing an issue with parents/caregivers. For example, a parent/caregiver will often come alone to a meeting and will find a superintendent of education, principal, vice-principal, teacher, child and youth worker, psychologist, and graduation coach on the other side of the table. Parents/caregivers often see this as a way to intimidate them. Parents/caregivers and advocacy groups may attempt to address this power imbalance by bringing more people to the meeting with them.

Similarly, school board leadership and staff have also communicated feeling “unsafe” when attending a meeting where the board is outnumbered by community members and advocates. Consideration should be given to which staff needs to be in attendance at the meeting and whether they have a direct role to play in the resolution of the situation.

If I get a complaint from a First Nations community, I'm not asking them to come to my office. I'm taking a superintendent and the principal with me and we're going to the community. We're going to a space that is neutral and safe. We're not sitting at a table across from each other at a board office, in a way that is adversarial and colonial. We're letting the community dictate what that space is going to look like. Would they like us to sit in a circle? Would they want an Elder present? Would they want to open with a prayer, smudge, or blessing?

~ *Human Rights and Equity Advisor*



Accessibility and barrier removal

Accessibility and barrier removal are key components to ensure that parents/caregivers and advocacy groups are able to fully participate in meetings.

When organizing meetings, parents/caregivers and their advocates should be asked if they require accommodation to participate in the meeting. The school board should work with them to provide the needed accommodations (i.e., American Sign Language, closed captioning, notetakers, interpretation/translation, etc.).

If physical accessibility concerns are identified, staff should conduct a site check to ensure the room selected for the meeting is accessible and the site includes accessible features such as accessible parking spots and paths of travel, ramps, accessible washrooms, automatic doors, Braille markings for wayfinding, clear signage, etc. If some of these features are not available, the school board would need to ensure volunteers can assist in opening doors, greeting visitors, guiding them to elevators, showing them where the meeting room is, etc.

Use plain language

Those within the education sector often use “edu-speak” or “edu-babble,” which can be confusing and exclusionary to those who don’t work in the education sector. At worse, some people may feel that this language is used in a deliberate attempt to confuse them. When speaking with parents/caregivers, advocates, and advocacy groups, use plain language so everyone in the room can understand what you are saying and engage in the conversation.



Considerations when a parent or advocate wants to record the meeting

Parents/caregivers or advocates may want to record the meeting as a record of the conversation and the commitments made. You should consult with board policies and lawyers to determine what to do should they mention that they would like to record. Below are some considerations.

- Consider why they feel a recording is necessary. It often reflects their past experiences and a lack of trust with school and board staff.
- Consider having someone take minutes of the meeting and noting the action items. Let those in the meeting know that you will share a copy of the minutes with them.
- You may not legally be able to stop them from recording the meeting. In fact, they have no obligation to let you know that they are recording the meeting. Ontario follows the one-party consent rule to recording conversations. This means that if they are part of the conversation, they have the legal right to record it without informing the other participants.
- However, if you are in a meeting and want to record it, as a board employee, you need to seek and receive permission from all participants.
- If the parent/caregiver or advocate is recording the meeting, you may also wish to make a recording yourself.
- If you agree to have the meeting recorded, consider agreeing only to an audio recording rather than a visual recording. You should also try to ensure that the meeting is not being live-streamed.

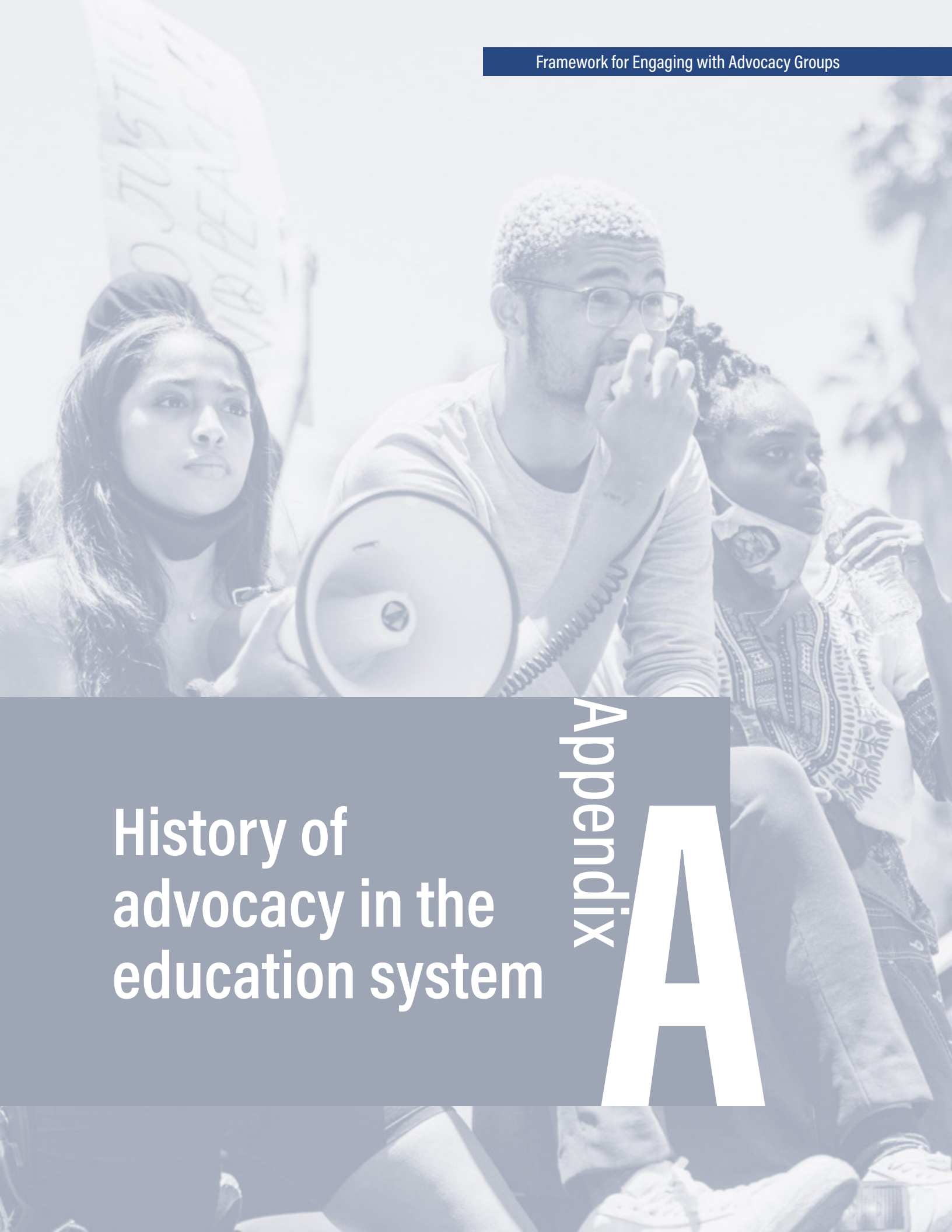


If a parent says they are going to record this meeting, we'll say that's okay and, "We're going to make a record as well, if that's okay with you, just so we both have a record of this conversation." If it is a virtual meeting and they have an AI recorder on, we'll ensure we have access to a copy of the recording and save it. ... If that's what that community or family needs to feel safe in that meeting, why would we deny it?

~ *Human Rights and Equity Advisor*

With the current advancements in technology, you can assume that you are being recorded. So, the real issue becomes one of transparency and respect. You should be using your leadership skills to ensure that decorum is maintained in the meeting and that you meet your commitments. So, the recording should not be the thing that stops the meeting.

~ *Director of Education*



History of advocacy in the education system

Appendix

A

This section explores the history of Ontario’s education system. While it was designed as a “public” school system in the mid 1800s, it was not designed to educate all students.

Ontario’s public school system was not designed to educate students with disabilities, who were often institutionalized. For 114 years, segregated schools operated and were enshrined in law, which excluded Black students from schools primarily in southwestern Ontario. The federal residential school system had the primary goal not of educating Indigenous students, but of assimilating them into White Canadian culture.

Francophone parents fought to have their children educated in French. Full public funding was not offered to French-language schools until 1968, which meant that Francophones had to pay for private secondary schooling up to that time. While 2SLGBTQ+ students have participated in the school system, their right to access education free from harassment and discrimination was not upheld.

Ontario’s colonial and racist past echoes through school boards today. It lingers in the composition of the teacher population, in student codes of conduct, in dress codes, and in what and how students are taught, which values knowledge produced by White people and Eurocentric ways of learning.

Understanding this history is important because it helps us recognize and understand the experiences of marginalized students in our schools today and the need for students, parents, and advocacy groups to continue to advocate for access to education free from harassment and discrimination and for the supports needed to achieve academic success within the school system. This section is intended to remind school boards that equitable access to education has come as a result of the continued work of advocacy groups, who continue to play an important role in advancing equity in education.

The role of advocacy groups continues to be important because of the subtle and systemic nature of oppression impacting students. Although explicit forms of discrimination have largely been removed from education policies, heteronormative, ableist, sexist, racist, as well as colonial ideologies and behaviours continue to be issues in the education system. Over time, they have become embedded within school policies and practices, the curriculum, teaching practices, and educator attitudes.¹⁹

This advocacy is also more important today because of the vocal and aggressive resistance to equity and the efforts to roll back the progress that has been made.

History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.

~ James Baldwin

19 Carr, P. R. (2008). The “equity waltz” in Canada: Whiteness and the informal realities of racism in education. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 3(2).

	Events impacting Indigenous students
	Events impacting students with disabilities
	Events impacting Black and racialized students and students from diverse faith communities
	Events impacting 2SLGBTQ+ students
	Events impacting Francophone students

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
1700s to 1863	Enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples in Canada were not permitted to attend school.
1786	The first French-language Catholic school is established in Upper Canada in Sandwich. It is run by Notre-Dame de l'Assomption parish priest François-Xavier Dufaux.
1800s	Children with many types of disabilities are institutionalized and kept out of general classrooms and schools.
1828	<p>The Mohawk Institute opens in 1828 in Brantford. It was run by the Anglican Church and served as the archetype for the 139 residential schools that would operate in Canada over the next 145 years. These schools were not designed to educate Indigenous students, but instead to assimilate them. Students were subjected to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.</p> <p>Indigenous communities, parents, and children fought against residential schools. Communities and parents resisted by petitioning the government. Families resisted by hiding their children when the Indian agents came searching for them. Children resisted in numerous ways, including running away, setting fire to residential schools, and misbehaving in order to be expelled.</p>
1845	The first secondary school was founded in Ottawa.
1847	While overseeing the establishment of Ontario's public school system, the chief superintendent of schools, Egerton Ryerson, advocates for Indigenous children to be educated separately from White children through residential schools and later day schools.

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
1850	<p>In response to advocacy by White parents, Egerton Ryerson, superintendent of education for Upper Canada West, amends the Common Schools Act to add the Separate Schools Clause. This allowed for the establishment of separate schools for Catholics, Protestants, and Black people.</p> <p>In many parts of Ontario, particularly in the southwestern region, Black families were required to pay taxes to fund the public schools that their children were not allowed to attend. Black communities were vocal in their opposition to these racist practices, frequently lobbying trustees and the government for change, and taking the government and local school boards to court. At the same time, many Black communities opened and operated their own schools.</p>
1858	<p>The first school for deaf children in Ontario, the Upper Canada Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, is opened in Toronto. Permanent facilities were established in Belleville and the school was renamed the Ontario School for the Deaf in 1913 and the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in 1974.</p> <p>In 1963, the province opened its second school (what is known today as the Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf in Milton) and a third school in 1974 (the Robarts School for the Deaf in London). All three continue to educate deaf students today.</p>
1860	<p>Federal day schools, operated by the government and church, were established for Indigenous children to attend while living at home. These schools existed until 2000.</p>
1863	<p>The Separate Schools Act, with support from Prime Minister John A. MacDonal, passed in the Union Parliament, restoring the rights of Catholics and Protestants to support their own church-run schools in Ontario.</p> <p>The Separate Schools Act also gave Catholic trustees all the rights and powers of their public school counterparts. Catholic schools were allowed a share of the Common School Fund by the Canadian government and the ability to raise their own school taxes.</p>
1867	<p>The British North America Act (Constitution Act 1867) is passed and includes Section 93, which secured the educational rights of the Catholic minority.</p>
1871	<p>The <i>Education Act</i> is passed, establishing the educational system and making schools free, and attendance compulsory.</p>

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
1885	The Public Education Ministry decrees that English is to be used in teaching and converts French-language schools into English-French bilingual schools.
1910	Franco-Ontarians organized the Association canadienne-française d'éducation de l'Ontario (ACFÉO) to protect and promote the French language. They were opposed by the Orange Order, which demanded English-only education.
1912	Regulation 17 requires that English is to be the only language of instruction and communication in bilingual, public, and separate schools after Grade 2.
1913	Regulation 17 is amended to permit French as a subject of study for one hour per day.
1927	<p>The Scott-Marchard-Côté Commission report recommends that both French and English languages should be on an equal footing in elementary school teaching and communication. The report also recommends that school inspectors should be bilingual, and in French-language schools, of Francophone origin.</p> <p>Premier Howard Ferguson introduces a new policy promoting bilingual instruction.</p>
1930	Catholic trustees organized as an association to leverage their knowledge and experience in support of targeted advocacy efforts to achieve funding and opportunities for Catholic schools across the province.
1930s	In the 1930s, strong amendments to Catholic allocation of business and corporate taxes were made. The Catholic Taxpayers Association began lobbying the provincial government for better allocation.
Up to 1940s	Most Francophone students leave school at the end of elementary school because there is no French-language secondary school, except in certain communities where Francophones represent a strong majority. Francophones can only receive a secondary education in French at private schools.
1944	Regulation 17 is struck from Ontario Statutes.
1950	The Royal Commission on Education in Ontario issues the Hope Report, which recommends an expansion of special education programs to serve children with learning disabilities.

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
1950	The Royal Commission on Education in Ontario also finds that the status of French-language education is inadequate. It recommended that French-language instruction be limited to the first six years of elementary school.
1951	The ACFÉO challenges nearly all of the Hope Commission's recommendations on the grounds that it would have the effect of limiting French-language instruction in Franco-Ontarian schools.
1962	The Ontario <i>Human Rights Code</i> is proclaimed, prohibiting discrimination in signs, services (including education), facilities, public accommodation, and employee and trade union membership on the grounds of race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry, and place of origin.
1963	The Canadian Association for Children with Learning Disabilities is formed to represent and support children with learning disabilities by providing information and advocacy.
1964	In response to the activism of Black parents, newly elected Black MPP Leonard Braithwaite calls for the provincial government to remove the separate school clause from the <i>Education Act</i> , paving the way to desegregate Ontario schools.
1965	The last racially segregated school in Ontario, School Section No.11 in Colchester, is closed.
1966	Chanie Wenjack dies of hunger and exposure after escaping a residential school near Kenora. His death leads to the first official inquiry into the treatment of Indigenous children in residential schools.
1967	The ACFÉO submitted a brief to the Government of Ontario asking for a system that would bring together public and private Franco-Ontarian secondary schools. Premier John Robarts responded by creating the Committee on French-Language Schools in Ontario, chaired by Roland Bériault.
1968	The Hall-Dennis Report, entitled <i>Living and Learning</i> , gives support to the integration of all but the most severely disabled students, ultimately reinforcing the right of every individual to have equal access to learning services that best service their needs.
1968	The Hall-Dennis Report recommends that the Ministry of Education develop programs for students studying primarily in French and learning English as a second language.

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
1968	Bill 121 provides for the creation of schools or classes within elementary schools to ensure that Francophone students are taught in French. Bill 122 enables public funding of French-language public secondary schools.
1968	The Bériault Report lays the foundation for a French-language school system in Ontario, encompassing both elementary and secondary schools.
Late 1960s	The Black Education Project (BEP) is founded in Toronto in response to streaming, high dropout rates, lack of quality education, and the over-identification of Black students as having special education needs. BEP offers free educational programs, after-school programs, tutoring, and summer camps. It also advocates with the Toronto Board of Education for better outcomes for Black students.
1969	The “Equal Opportunity for Continuous Education in Separate Schools of Ontario” brief was sent to the premier and minister of education. This was a major step towards obtaining full funding for Catholic schools. The brief enjoyed the support of all Catholic partners, including the bishops. In 1971, the brief was rejected by then Premier Bill Davis.
1971	Francophone students at the Sturgeon Falls Secondary School, with the support of their families, boycotted classes and prevented others from registering in attempts to make the bilingual school exclusively French-speaking, given that 1,200 of its 1,600 students were Francophone.
1975	Through the Declaration of Rights of Disabled Persons, the United Nations declares that persons with disabilities have the same human rights as other people.
1976	The secondary school in Sturgeon Falls becomes a French-language school, with a separate English-speaking school opening in 1976.
1980	Bill 82 amends the <i>Education Act</i> to recognize the rights of students with disabilities to an educational program specific to their needs. It was not until these amendments that school boards began to provide special education programs and services for all students with special education needs.
1982	Section 23 of the <i>Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms</i> guarantees constitutional protection of elementary and secondary school French-language educational rights.
1982	The Ontario <i>Human Rights Code</i> is amended to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability.

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
1985	A Jewish parent, Muslim parent, and atheist parent filed a lawsuit under the <i>Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms</i> related to the Lord's Prayer in Ontario public schools, known as <i>Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education (1988)</i> . They won the lawsuit and the decision stating that the reciting of the prayer, and non-Christian students opting out by sitting in the hallway, violated the Charter. Subsequently, the Lord's Prayer was removed from Ontario public schools.
1985	Bill 30 is passed by the Ontario Legislature, granting full public funding to Catholic schools through to Grade 13.
1986	Sexual orientation is included as a protected ground of discrimination in the <i>Ontario Human Rights Code</i> .
1990	The Supreme Court of Canada rules unanimously that Article 23 of the Charter provides the right for Francophones to administer and control their education outside of Quebec.
1990	Report of the Royal Commission on Learning recommends the integration of students with special needs into regular classrooms with classroom support as necessary.
1990	The Canadian Civil Liberties Association and parents of students enrolled in/previously enrolled in the Elgin County School Board brought a lawsuit (Elgin County case) challenging the constitutionality of the religious education curriculum offered by this board. The curriculum required that two periods of a half hour each per week must be devoted to religious education in each Ontario public school. The applicants argued that it violated section 2(a) freedom of religion rights under the Charter because it coerced minority children into participating in religious education classes intended for members of the majority religion of Christianity.
1990s	School board policy is challenged through a series of human rights and court cases. They conclude that it is discriminatory for the Peel District School Board to prevent Sikh students from wearing the kirpan to school.
1995	The provincial government mandated the establishment of school councils consisting of representative parents, community members other than parents, teachers, and the principal. The purpose was to bring parents and teachers together for the local management of their schools. School councils were granted "advisory" powers in regards to school plans and budgets, but they were not given site-based decision-making authority.
1996	Last residential school in Canada is closed.

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
1997	<p>Ontario creates two new school systems with four public French-language boards and eight Catholic French-language boards. Francophones in eastern Ontario prepare to sue the province over a funding formula that unfairly favoured public boards that automatically receive more assessment than Catholic boards. The province replaced the assessment system with equal, per-pupil funding for all four types of boards: English Catholic, English public, French Catholic, and French public.</p>
1999	<p>The United Nations Human Rights Committee found Canada in violation of the equality provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in response to a complaint by Ira Waldman that he had to pay thousands of dollars in tuition fees to get his sons the same sort of faith-based (Jewish) education that Catholics in Ontario got for free. In November 2005, the United Nations Human Rights Committee censured Canada again for failing to "adopt steps in order to eliminate discrimination on the basis of religion in the funding of schools in Ontario."</p>
2000	<p>The <i>Safe Schools Act</i> introduces a strict "zero tolerance" approach to disciplining students with suspensions and expulsions.</p>
2002	<p>A student sues the Algoma District School Board because he was not allowed to start a school club for 2SLGBTQ+ students. He later uses the money from the settlement to found Jer's Vision: Canada's Youth Diversity Initiative, which in 2015 becomes the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity.</p>
2002	<p>A student sues the Durham Catholic District School Board. The case concludes with the board being directed by a judge to allow a gay student to bring his same-gender date to the high school prom.</p>
2005	<p>Responding to concerns from the Black and disabled communities, the Ontario Human Rights Commission files a complaint against the Ministry of Education, arguing that the <i>Safe Schools Act</i> was having a discriminatory impact on racialized students and students with disabilities. The complaint was settled in 2007 with a commitment to amend the regulations to include mitigating factors prior to suspending or expelling any student.</p>
2005	<p>The Ontario Ministry of Education releases <i>Education for All</i>, which promotes differentiated instruction. This report helps assist educators to help students achieve grade-level expectations, including students with exceptionalities or disabilities.</p>

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
2007	Pink Shirt Day is started in Nova Scotia when two Grade 12 students see a Grade 9 student being bullied for wearing a pink shirt. The two Grade 12 students intervened but wanted to do more to prevent homophobic and transphobic bullying. They decided to purchase pink shirts and got other students to stand in solidarity by also wearing pink. Pink Shirt Day quickly spreads nationally.
2008	The first elementary Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) in Ontario is started in Kitchener and paves the way for more GSAs in elementary schools.
2011	Egale Canada conducts the Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools. The report outlines the devastating effects of discrimination on 2SLGBTQ+ students and those with 2SLGBTQ+ families.
2011	A boy dies by suicide after experiencing anti-gay bullying that began in Grade 7. It also leads to the Government of Ontario passing the <i>Accepting Schools Act</i> (Bill 13) in 2012, which mandates clearer and stricter bullying responses in schools. It also mandates that all publicly funded schools in Ontario must allow students to start a GSA if they want one.
2012	The Ontario <i>Human Rights Code</i> is amended to include protections for gender identity and gender expression.
2015	Students protest to highlight anti-Black racism at the Toronto District School Board after a Black Grade 8 student was sent home for wearing her hair in a natural style deemed “too poofy and unprofessional.”

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
2015	Diverse faith communities protest Ontario's new sex-ed curriculum ²⁰ on the basis that it conflicts with their religious beliefs and parental rights. This caused thousands of parents across Ontario to keep their children at home during the protests. As a result, the Peel District School Board (PDSB) created a "Facts Matter" ²¹ multi-lingual guide to help clear up some of the misinformation circulating about the new curriculum. Local faith and community groups were invited to information sessions and supported this guide. At the PDSB, parents do have the option of removing their children from sex-ed lessons but they are not exempt from topics on inclusion, 2SLGBTQ+, and gender identities.
2016	The Peel District School Board requires Muslim students participating in Friday prayers at their schools to use six pre-approved sermons. The Muslim community finds the policy unacceptable and the board suspends the policy. ²²
2016	Premier Kathleen Wynne issued an official apology to Franco-Ontarians for the adoption of Regulation 17 and its harm to their communities.
2016	In 2012, a Hamilton father brings a human rights case against the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board for what he considers false teachings according to his Greek Orthodox faith. He argues that the school should notify him in advance of any curriculum being taught that include 2SLGBTQ+ issues. In 2016, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice rejects the request stating, "allowing Turloukis to 'isolate' his children from aspects of the curriculum would be conflicting with 'competing legislative mandate and Charter values favouring inclusivity, equality and multiculturalism.'"

20 CBC News. (2015, April 28). Wynne heard the 'calls' about sex-ed messaging from Peel school board chair. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/wynne-heard-the-calls-about-sex-ed-messaging-from-peel-school-board-chair-1.3052174>

21 Rushowy, K. (2015, November 5). Peel board's sex-ed guide gets help from faith, community groups. The Toronto Star. https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/peel-board-s-sex-ed-guide-gets-help-from-faith-community-groups/article_7d6d59e8-05c0-5715-9245-7c5322aeb12d.html

22 CBC News. (2016, November 9). Muslim community slams Peel District School Board over 'stigmatizing' Friday prayer restrictions. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/muslim-community-slams-peel-district-school-board-over-stigmatizing-friday-prayer-restrictions-1.3842892>

YEAR	EVENTS AND ADVOCACY
2016	Legal Aid Ontario offers funding to community agencies that work primarily with Black students and their families to support Black students who are in conflict with the education system.
2017	Resulting from advocacy from the Muslim community, trustees of the Peel District School Board vote to accommodate Muslim students by allowing prayer rooms in schools. ²³
2021	Students at Waterdown District High School protested in response to an announcement by the principal reminding students that their shoulders and stomachs must be covered. In response, student trustees at Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board brought forward a motion that identified the existing dress code policy as being sexist and outdated. The motion was passed by trustees and a series of new dress code guidelines were issued.
2022	Students at a Conseil des écoles catholique du Centre-Est (CECCE) school stage a protest after the school began strictly enforcing its dress code, which students identified as sexist. This led to the board issuing a new gender-neutral and inclusive dress code in January 2023.
2023	"1 Million March 4 Children" draws protests in dozens of cities over transgender inclusive education and school policies. Counter protests in support of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion were also held.

23 Global News. (2017, January 11). Peel District School Board votes to accommodate Muslim Friday prayer. <https://globalnews.ca/video/3175786/peel-district-school-board-votes-to-accommodate-muslim-friday-prayer>

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Current context and need for this framework

Appendix

B

There are currently over two million children enrolled in publicly funded schools throughout Ontario, which is the most diverse province in the country. While many communities have identified disparities in educational outcomes and experiences for students, school boards have only recently started to collect and analyze data to better understand these concerns and assess the extent of these disparities. This section provides an overview of the size of these communities and some of the key issues students from these communities are experiencing in the education system.

2.1 Indigenous students

Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) are one of the fastest growing populations in Canada and make up an increasing proportion of the provincial population.

YEAR	INDIGENOUS POPULATION			TOTAL POPULATION	
	#	% OF POPULATION	RATE OF GROWTH SINCE 2006	#	RATE OF GROWTH SINCE 2006
2006	242,490	1.8%	—	12,851,821	—
2016	374,395	2.8%	54%	13,448,494	5%
2021	406,585	2.9%	68%	14,223,942	11%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006, 2016, 2021.

As Table 1 shows, the Indigenous population in Ontario grew at a much faster rate than that of the provincial population—68% versus 11% respectively. This resulted in the Indigenous population increasing from 1.8% of the provincial population in 2006 to 2.9% in 2021.

The proportion of Indigenous students in each school division varies across the province, with some school boards reporting that Indigenous students make up 20% to 40% of their student population. As Table 2 shows, the majority of the Indigenous population resides outside of the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA) and the city of Toronto.

TABLE 2. INDIGENOUS POPULATION ONTARIO, TORONTO CMA, AND CITY OF TORONTO. 2021.					
	INDIGENOUS POPULATION			TOTAL POPULATION	
	#	% OF GENERAL POPULATION	% OF TOTAL INDIGENOUS POPULATION	#	% OF TOTAL PROVINCIAL POPULATION
Ontario	406,585	2.9%	100%	14,223,942	100%
Toronto CMA	44,635	0.7%	11%	6,202,225	44%
City of Toronto	22,925	0.8%	6%	2,794,356	20%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2021.

As the table shows, while 44% of the provincial population lives in the Toronto CMA and 20% in the city of Toronto, only 11% and 6%, respectively, of the Indigenous population live in these parts of the province.

Another key characteristic of the Indigenous population is that it is younger than the non-Indigenous population. Of the Indigenous population, 22% were aged 14 years and younger in 2021, compared with 16% of the non-Indigenous population.²⁴

As previously mentioned, across Canada, the education system was focused not on educating Indigenous children, but on assimilating them. Residential schools were championed by Egerton Ryerson, chief superintendent of schools, who believed in the forcible assimilation of Indigenous peoples into White British culture. The first residential school opened on the Six Nations reserve in Ontario in 1851. The Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, was run by the Anglican Church and served as the archetype for the 139 residential schools that would operate in Canada over the next 145 years. Indian residential schools inflicted horrific trauma on Indigenous children, who suffered neglect, malnutrition, and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. The last residential school in Canada was closed in 1996.

24 Statistics Canada. (2023, June 21). *Table 98-10-0271-01—Knowledge of Indigenous languages by single and multiple knowledge of languages responses and Indigenous identity: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations with parts.* <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810027101-eng>

While the federal government is responsible for funding and support for First Nations students who attend band-operated schools in their First Nations communities, the vast majority of school-aged Indigenous children in the province are enrolled in the Ontario public education system.²⁵ Despite this, public schools often do not meet the complex needs of Indigenous students due to the ongoing legacy of colonialism and residential schools.²⁶ While gaps in academic achievement and graduation rates continue unabated, Indigenous students and their families are often blamed for their perceived inability to succeed in schools.²⁷ It is critical for school administrators to understand this larger context of colonialism and its negative consequences for Indigenous communities including their lack of trust in the school system, housing problems, food insecurity, lack of access to transportation, behavioural challenges, increased risk of mental health challenges such as suicide, broken families, kinship systems due to colonial racism, and the preponderance of Indigenous children in foster care. All of this has a serious impact on the experiences and futures of Indigenous students within the public school system, as well as other parents/caregivers.

Compounding the issue is that there are few Indigenous teachers in Ontario schools,²⁸ resulting in Indigenous students often being taught about Indigenous culture by White, settler teachers. Although they may be well-intentioned, these teachers are often ill-equipped and unprepared to adequately teach about Indigenous histories and current realities,²⁹ largely because they themselves were not taught about Indigenous peoples in the Ontario public school system or in teacher education programs. Teachers also carry biases about Indigenous peoples with them into the classroom, influencing their academic expectations of and interactions with Indigenous students and their families. Some of these biases may manifest in the ways that Indigenous rights and traditions around smudging ceremonies, harvesting, etc. are treated by the school system if there is a lack of awareness around the legal duty to accommodate these activities.

25 Quan, D. (2017). Unlocking student potential through data: Final report. *Ontario Ministry of Education*.
<https://news.yorku.ca/files/Feasibility-Study-Unlocking-Student-Potential-through-Data-FINAL-REPORT-Feb-2017.pdf>

26 Toulouse, P.R. (2013). Beyond shadows: First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success. *Canadian Teachers' Federation*.

27 Hare, J., & Pidgeon, M. (2011). The way of the warrior: Indigenous youth navigating the challenges of schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 34(2), 93-111.

28 People for Education. (2019). What makes a school? People for education annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools 2019. *People for Education*.

29 Whitlow, K.B., Oliver, V., Anderson, K., Brozowski, K., Tschirhart, S., Charles, D., & Ransom, K. (2019). Yehyatohsereyenter: A Haudenosaunee model for Onkwéhon:we (Indigenous) education. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 42(2), 553-575.

In 2007, to improve access to education for Indigenous students, the Ontario Ministry of Education implemented the Aboriginal Education Strategy (currently named the Indigenous Education Strategy), which aims to improve the academic achievement of Indigenous students in Ontario and ensure that all children learn about Indigenous cultures, experiences, and perspectives.

The Ministry also released guidelines to support school boards in developing voluntary, confidential self-identification processes for Indigenous students. Parents and guardians of Indigenous students, and Indigenous students that are 18 years of age or older, have the right to voluntarily and confidentially self-identify as First Nation, Métis, and/or Inuit at the student's school. Schools, school boards, and the Ministry of Education use this information to better understand how to direct funding and programs to support Indigenous student well-being and success.

The Ministry of Education launched several initiatives to help achieve this goal. In 2014, the Ministry mandated that all school boards establish Indigenous Education Councils (IECs) to guide school boards in developing stronger relationships with Indigenous communities, share information, and identify promising practices to support Indigenous students.³⁰ Since 2014, 25 school boards in collaboration with Indigenous families, communities, organizations, and IECs have been developing local education programs and initiatives to meet the needs of Indigenous students. School boards have also received funding for a full-time Indigenous Education Lead to support this work. The Ministry of Education has also embedded learning opportunities about First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, histories, perspectives, and contributions into provincially mandated curricula.

Sometimes there is a gap in understanding the unique differences between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, including the nuances between those who live in rural areas and in Indigenous communities and those who live in urban areas. There are also challenges that Indigenous communities experience in transitioning between northern communities and southern communities, which comes with its own challenges around accessing relevant supports.

It is also important to ensure that there is equitable representation from all Indigenous communities on IECs. In addition to school boards having IECs, they must also have a full-time position of an Indigenous Education Lead to support this work in conjunction with senior board administration (including the superintendent responsible for Indigenous education), school board staff, and IECs.

Additional supports provided by the Ministry for Indigenous students are Indigenous Graduation Coaches and Alternative Secondary School Programs, which in partnership with Indigenous Friendship Centres offer culturally relevant education programming and learning supports for Indigenous students working toward graduation.

30 Ontario Ministry of Education. (2021). *Indigenous education in Ontario*. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/aboriginal/supporting.html>

2.2 Racialized students

Ontario's racialized population is also growing at a faster rate than the provincial population. Largely fueled by immigration, racialized people are making up an increasingly large proportion of the provincial population.

TABLE 3. RATE OF POPULATION GROWTH, RACIALIZED AND TOTAL POPULATION. ONTARIO. (2006-2021).

YEAR	INDIGENOUS POPULATION			TOTAL POPULATION	
	#	% OF POPULATION	RATE OF GROWTH SINCE 2006	#	RATE OF GROWTH SINCE 2006
2006	2,745,200	21%	—	12,851,821	—
2016	3,885,585	29%	42%	13,448,494	5%
2021	4,817,360	34%	75%	14,223,942	11%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2006, 2016, 2021.

As Table 3 shows, the racialized population in Ontario grew by 75% (from 2,745,200 in 2006 to 4,817,360 in 2021), while the population of the province grew by only 11%. This resulted in the racialized population increasing from 21% of Ontario's population in 2006 to 34% in 2021.

Statistics Canada projections show that the racialized population will continue to grow at a faster rate than the general population. These projections show that Ontario's population will reach close to 18 million by 2036, with the racialized population increasing to 48% of the provincial population.³¹ While the growth of the racialized population will be fuelled largely by immigration, a growing proportion of racialized people are Canadian-born. In 2011, about 31% of racialized people in Canada were born here.³²

Historically, the racialized population in Ontario has been concentrated in the city of Toronto, though in recent decades greater numbers have moved into the Toronto CMA, which includes the regions surrounding the city of Toronto. As Table 4 shows, while 44% of the provincial population resides in the Toronto CMA and 20% in the city of Toronto, 73% of the racialized population resides in the Toronto CMA and 32% in the city of Toronto.

31 Statistics Canada. (2017, January 25). *Immigration and diversity: Population projections for Canada and its regions, 2011 to 2036*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>

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

TABLE 4. RACIALIZED POPULATION ONTARIO, TORONTO CMA, AND CITY OF TORONTO. 2021.					
	RACIALIZED POPULATION			TOTAL POPULATION	
	#	% OF GENERAL POPULATION	% OF TOTAL RACIALIZED POPULATION	#	% OF TOTAL PROVINCIAL POPULATION
Ontario	4,817,360	34%	100%	14,223,942	100%
Toronto CMA	3,501,275	56%	73%	6,202,225	44%
City of Toronto	1,537,285	55%	32%	2,794,356	20%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2021.

These traditional settlement patterns are changing as governments have recognized the need to ensure that newcomers are not concentrated in the Toronto CMA and have helped to settle refugees and newcomers throughout the province. In recent years, rising housing prices in Toronto and the availability of work-from-home options have resulted in many racialized families moving farther away from the city of Toronto. This has further increased the racialized population in these communities, contributing to the ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of communities across Ontario.

Currently, Ontario residents identify with over 250 ethnicities and speak 171 different languages. In Ontario, 16% of the population reported being affiliated with a non-Christian religion, with the largest and fastest growing being Muslim (7%) and Hindu (4%).³³

33 Statistics Canada. (2022, October 26). *The Canadian census: A rich portrait of the country's religious and ethnocultural diversity*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>

2.3 Black students

Similar to the racialized population, the Black population in Ontario is growing at a faster rate than the provincial population. Between 2006 and 2021, the provincial population grew by 11%. Over that same time period, the provincial Black population grew by 62%, from over 473,000 to almost 768,000. As a result, the Black population grew from 3.9% of the provincial population to 5.5%.

Statistics Canada projects that by the year 2036, the Black population in Canada could increase to between 2 million and 2.5 million people and could represent between 5% and 5.6% of Canada's population.³⁴ This means that the Black population in Ontario could increase to between 1.1 and 1.4 million people and could represent 7% of the provincial population at that time.³⁵

The data shows that the Black Canadian population has a younger age profile than the general population, with 25% of Black Ontarians being under age 15, compared to 16% of the population. Similarly, a larger proportion of Ontario's Black population is aged 15 to 24 (18%) compared with the provincial population (13%). In total, 29% of the total provincial population is under age 25 compared with 42% of Black Ontarians.

Historically and currently, Black students have not benefited equally from the public school system in a province that developed a public education system that has been lauded as an "education superpower."³⁶ Instead, Ontario schools have been described as spaces in which anti-Black racism is reproduced and perpetuated against Black children. As Robyn Maynard writes:³⁷

For many Black students, though, schools are places where they experience degradation, harm, and psychological violence. Even as education environments continue to under-serve many communities from different backgrounds, there are unique dimensions to the experiences of Black youth, who experience schools as carceral places characterized by neglect, heightened surveillance, and arbitrary and often extreme punishment for any perceived disobedience. Because Black youth are so often not seen or treated as children, schools too often become their first encounter with the organized and systemic devaluation of Blackness present in society at large.

34 Morency, J., Malenfant, E.C., & MacIsaac, S. (2017). Immigration and diversity: Population projections for Canada and its regions, 2011 to 2036. Statistics Canada. Ottawa: Ministry of Industry. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>

35 This estimate assumes that 57% of Canada's Black population continues to reside in Ontario.

36 Coughlan, S. (2017, August 2). How Canada became an education superpower. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-40708421>

37 Maynard, R. (2017). *Policing Black Lives*. Fernwood Publishing.

For as long as they have been in Ontario, Black communities have been advocating for access to education. In southwestern Ontario, there is a long history of White communities restricting access to publicly funded schools by Black children. This included lobbying Egerton Ryerson, chief superintendent of schools, who added an amendment to the *Common Schools Act*, to allow for legally segregated schools. Black communities fought for access to a public education system that their taxes helped fund, but which their children were not allowed to attend. Instead, they were segregated into schools that were inadequately funded or not funded at all.

Despite the efforts of Black communities to desegregate Ontario schools, Ryerson, a notoriously racist individual,³⁸ and many of his colleagues resisted these efforts. The provision of the *Common Schools Act* that allowed for segregated schools remained in effect until 1964 when Leonard Braithwaite, Ontario's first Black MPP, put forward legislation to repeal that section.³⁹ The last segregated school in Ontario closed in 1965.

Since the 1970s, the Toronto District School Board saw an increase in the number of Black students from the Caribbean. At this time, the board had begun to collect demographic data on students and was aware that Black students were experiencing disparities in academic achievement and well-being.

Over the following decades, numerous studies have confirmed what Black students, parents, and communities have identified: that Black students are experiencing anti-Black racism and the school system fails to meet their needs. In 2017, the report *Towards Race Equity in Education* analyzed the data available from the Toronto District School Board, the only Ontario school board that collected race-based student data at the time.⁴⁰ The report conducted a quantitative analysis of student achievement data for the 2006–2011 high school cohort and supplemented that analysis with consultations on the experiences and perspectives of teachers, parents, and Black students. The study found that:

- ▶ Black students were less likely than their White or other racialized peers to be enrolled in the academic program of study: 53% of Black students, 81% of White students, and 80% of other racialized students were in the academic program of study.

38 Ng-A-Fook, N., Ingham, M. & Burrows, T. (2018). Reconciling 170 years of settler curriculum policies: Teacher education in Ontario. In T.M. Christou (Ed.), *Curriculum history of Canadian teacher education* (pp. 125-143). Routledge.

39 Henry, N. (2019). *Anti-Black racism in Ontario schools: A historical perspective*. Turner Consulting Group.

40 James, C.E. & Turner, T. (2017). *Towards race equity in education: The schooling of Black students in the Greater Toronto Area*. York University.

- ▶ Black students were over twice as likely to be enrolled in the Applied program (39% compared with 16% of White and 18% of other racialized students) and three times as likely to be in the Essentials program (9% versus 3% of White and 3% other racialized students).
- ▶ Black students were less likely to graduate from high school: At the end of the five-year period, 84% of White students and 87% of other racialized students had graduated from high school, compared with only 69% of their Black peers.
- ▶ Black students were less likely to apply to an Ontario college or university: Only a quarter of Black students (25%) in this cohort had applied and were accepted to an Ontario university. By contrast, almost half (47%) of the White students and 60% of other racialized students in this cohort applied and were accepted to an Ontario university.
- ▶ Black students were more likely to be identified as having special education needs: A greater proportion of Black than White and other racialized students were identified as having non-gifted exceptionalities (14% versus 10% and 4%, respectively) and non-identified special needs and/or an Individual Education Plan (12% versus 6% and 5%, respectively).
- ▶ Black students were less likely to be identified as gifted: Of the White students in this cohort, 4% were identified as gifted compared with only 2% of other racialized students and 0.4% of Black students. This means that of the 5,679 TDSB Black high school students in the 2006–2011 cohort, only 23 had been identified as gifted.
- ▶ Black students were more likely than their White and other racialized peers to have been suspended and expelled: By the time they finished high school, 42% of all Black students had been suspended at least once compared with only 18% of White students and other racialized students. Of the 213 students who were expelled over the five-year period (2011–2012 to 2015–2016), 48% were Black.

Through the consultations with Black students, parents, and teachers, many connect the gaps to the stereotypes held by teachers about the abilities of Black children, the lack of identity affirming curriculum, and the harsher disciplining of Black students. As the report notes, these stereotypes and the racism of low expectations begins in kindergarten and continues into high school with Black students being streamed into applied programs of study, special education classes, and even English as a Second Language classes, without appropriate testing to confirm their need for those classes or programs.

Another key issue of concern is the composition of the teacher workforce, which remains predominantly White and female. This gap between the racial diversity of the teacher workforce and the racial diversity of students, referred to as the “teacher diversity gap,” has been shown to impact student outcomes. Research in the United States focuses on the impact of Black teachers on outcomes for Black students. These studies have found that Black teachers are more successful at supporting the achievement and well-being of Black students than their non-Black counterparts.

These studies show that Black teachers provide more than representation to students. They don’t hold the biases that White teachers have and also have the cultural understanding needed to support better outcomes for their Black and other racialized students. One study found that Black students who have even one Black teacher during elementary school are more likely to graduate from high school and consider going on to post-secondary education.⁴¹ Another study found that Black students with Black teachers experience less school discipline and fewer office visits.⁴² Additional studies show that White students also benefit from having racialized teachers. One study found that White students show improved problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity when they have teachers from diverse backgrounds.⁴³

41 Gershenson, S., Hart, C. M. D., Lindsay, C. A., & Papageorge, N. W. (2018). *The long-run impacts of same-race teachers*. NBER Working Paper No. 25254.
https://aefpweb.org/sites/default/files/webform/42/LongRunMismatch_AEFP.pdf

42 Lindsay, C. A., & Hart, C. (2017). Exposure to same-race teachers and student disciplinary outcomes for black students in North Carolina. *Psychology*, 39(3), 485–510.
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Exposure-to-Same-Race-Teachers-and-Student-Outcomes-Lindsay-Hart/185d2b03214b3ba8a3b1e6d5ba1590bdf071d536?p2df>.

43 Motamedi, J.G. (2019, February). How teachers of color can make a difference in the classroom and beyond. *Education Northwest*.
<https://educationnorthwest.org/insights/how-teachers-color-can-make-difference-classroom-and-beyond>

2.4 Immigrant and refugee students

As the baby boom generation ages and continues to retire in increasing numbers, Canada's reliance on immigration for labour market and population growth has increased. This has resulted in continued high levels of immigration.

Statistics Canada data shows that between 2006 and 2021, the immigrant population in Ontario grew by 24% (from 3,398,725 to 4,206,585), while the population of the province grew by only 11%. As such, the immigrant population increased slightly from 28% of Ontario's population in 2006 to 30% of the provincial population in 2021.

Statistics Canada projects that by 2036 immigrants could comprise up to 36% of the provincial population.⁴⁴ If the composition of immigration remains similar to what has been observed in recent periods, about 80% of newcomers will be racialized, with between 59% and 61% born in Asia and 15% to 18% from Europe. In addition, in 2036, between 31% and 36% people in Ontario will have neither English nor French as their first language and between 17% and 21% will be affiliated with a non-Christian religion or faith.

In addition, Canada has continued its commitment to resettle refugees and has welcomed almost 100,000 refugees between 2015-18, of whom almost half (43%) were children under the age of 17.⁴⁵ As the climate crisis, conflict, and wars continue to displace people around the globe, the number of refugees Canada welcomes will continue to increase.

The result is that the student population in communities across the province will continue to see an increase in the number of newcomers, English-language learners, and students who are from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups and communities.

Immigrant and refugee children face several challenges in the Ontario school system. Some come from countries with more advanced education systems and are placed in classrooms with students of the same age, but with lessons that are not challenging. Some live with families with limited income and resources. Others may be English-language learners and may be learning to integrate into Canadian culture. Refugee students may have spent years experiencing adversity and trauma, such as violence, separation from family, and lengthy stays in detention centres prior to arriving in Canada. Refugee children also experience stressors, such as loss of connection to family, friends, and culture, as well as community violence whilst in Canada. As a result, refugee students are at an increased risk for mental health issues. The number of challenges they face and are able to overcome highlights the resilience of immigrant and refugee children, youth, families, and communities.

44 Morency, J., Malenfant, E.C., & MacIsaac, S. (2017). *Immigration and diversity: Population projections for Canada and its regions, 2011 to 2036*. Statistics Canada. Ministry of Industry. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>

45 The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition. (2018). *Data request on the number of refugees to Canada in 2017 and 2018, by age group and gender*. <http://cyrrc.org/data-aggregation/demographic-socioeconomic-characteristics/>

2.5 2SLGBTQ+ students

While the 2SLGBTQ+ population has not necessarily been growing, changed attitudes and legal protections has resulted in people being much more open about their gender and sexual identities from a younger age. The 2021 Census asked Canadians about their sexual orientation, and 4% of the population identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or another sexual orientation.⁴⁶ In addition, Canadians were able to identify a gender other than male and female on the Census; 0.3% identified as gender diverse or non-binary.⁴⁷

Notably, the representation of 2SLGBTQ+ adults captured by Statistics Canada is far below what students have reported on Student Census surveys conducted by school boards across the province. The Student Census surveys conducted by various school boards over the past few years show that approximately 20% of students identify as 2SLGBTQ+.⁴⁸

2SLGBTQ+ students are oftentimes targets of bullying, harassment, and discrimination from other students as well as adults, both inside and outside of school. One study found that in Ontario one in five people who are trans were targets of physical or sexual assault and one in three to verbal threats or harassment because of their identity.⁴⁹ These students are at higher risks of poor mental and physical health outcomes due to experiences of homophobia and transphobia. In schools, 2SLGBTQ+ students can experience high rates of peer harassment and mental health challenges, including suicidal thoughts and substance abuse.^{50, 51} In addition, 2SLGBTQ+ youth are more likely to not complete school and face a greater risk of social isolation compared to their peers.⁵²

46 Statistics Canada. (2022, December 1). *Canada at a glance, 2022: LGBTQ2+ people*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/12-581-x/2022001/sec6-eng.htm>

47 Statistics Canada. (2022, April 27). *Canada is the first country to provide census data on transgender and non-binary people*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220427/dq220427b-eng.htm>

48 See, for example, the results from [Simcoe County DSB](#); [York Region DSB](#); [Trillium Lakelands DSB](#).

49 Bauer et al. (2013). Suicidality among trans people in Ontario: Implications for social work and social justice. *Service Social*, 59 (1): 35-62.

50 Blais, M., Bergeron, F. A., Duford, J., Boislard, M. A., & Hébert, M. (2015). Health outcomes of sexual-minority youth in Canada: An overview. *Adolescencia & saude*, 12(3), 53–73.

51 Ybarra, M. L., Mitchell, K. J., Kosciw, J. G., & Korchmaros, J. D. (2015). Understanding linkages between bullying and suicidal ideation in a national sample of LGB and heterosexual youth in the United States. *Prevention science*, 16(3), 451–462. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-014-0510-2>

52 Blais, M., Bergeron, F. A., Duford, J., Boislard, M. A., & Hébert, M. (2015). Health outcomes of sexual-minority youth in Canada: An overview. *Adolescencia & saude*, 12(3), 53–73.

2.6 Students with disabilities

While not all students with disabilities require special education supports, the focus of data collection and research has been on students with special education needs.

In 2018, approximately 17% of students in elementary school and 27% of students in secondary school received special education support.⁵³ These supports were extremely diverse and ranged from additional help in a regular class to the provision of specialized medical equipment with at least one dedicated staff. Despite this need, more than half of Ontario schools report difficulty assessing students who may be in need of special education supports, resulting in many students not receiving the assistance they need.

Schools report that even when students receive a formal assessment with specific and individualized recommendations, approximately 22% of elementary and 19% of secondary students are not receiving all their educational recommendations.⁵⁴ With the appropriate supports and resources, schools in Ontario can ensure all students have access to the support they need and can remain in school.

2.7 Students from diverse faith communities

According to the Statistics Canada report *Religiosity in Canada and its evolution from 1985 to 2019*,⁵⁵ 68% of Canadians aged 15 and older identified with a religious affiliation, and 54% felt their religious/spiritual beliefs to be somewhat or very important to the way they live their lives. Those born outside of Canada (77%) had a higher likelihood of having a religious affiliation than those born in Canada (72%).

Immigration plays a significant role in the growth of non-Christian religions. In Ontario, 16% of the population reported being affiliated with a non-Christian religion, with the largest and fastest growing being Muslim (7%) and Hindu (4%).⁵⁶ Non-Christian affiliations were seven times higher in large urban centres versus rural areas.

Those born outside of Canada identified more with being Muslim (12% versus 1% of those Canadian-born), Hindu (6% versus 0.3%), Sikh (4% versus 0.6%), or Buddhist (4% versus 0.6%). These groups were also more likely to participate in group religious activities once per month (36% versus 19%) and individual religious/spiritual activities once per week (42% versus 28%).

53 People for Education. (2018). The new basics for public education: People for education annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools.
https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/AnnualReport18_Web.pdf

54 Ibid.

55 Statistics Canada. (2021, October 28). *Religiosity in Canada and its evolution from 1985 to 2019*.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm>

56 Statistics Canada. (2022, October 26). *The Canadian census: A rich portrait of the country's religious and ethnocultural diversity*.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>

The amount of Canadians that reported being Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh has more than doubled in 20 years. From 2001 to 2021, Muslims increased from 2% to 4.9%, Hindus increased from 1% to 2.3%, and Sikhs increased from 0.9% to 2.1%.⁵⁷ Those who identified as Jewish decreased from 1.1% to 0.9%. Approximately 0.2% of the total population in Canada identified with traditional Indigenous spirituality in the 2021 Census.

With the complex religious and spiritual diversity within the Ontario public school system, acknowledgement of these identities and associated human rights accommodations are routinely addressed in school boards. Other themes also arise, such as how students that do and do not have a religious affiliation can co-exist respectfully and how public schools refrain from providing religious indoctrination (which is different from providing education of any religious views such as World Religions courses, etc.).

Unfortunately, as world events and global conflicts show, students from diverse faith communities can often face the brunt of misconceptions, stereotypes, discrimination, harassment, violence, and threats of violence for adhering to their faith and using their right to assembly and express themselves peacefully, especially in times of crisis. The disproportionate use of discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions towards students from particular faith communities (i.e., Muslim and Jewish communities, etc.), is also another stark reality that must be addressed.

Ontario school systems are also tasked with ensuring a discrimination and harassment free learning and work environment. In 2021, there was a 67% increase of police-reported hate crimes based on religion.⁵⁸ The rate of police-reported hate crimes targeting the Jewish population (145 incidents per 100,000 population) was highest, followed by the Muslim population (8 incidents per 100,000 population).⁵⁹ With the alarming rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia the Ontario Ministry of Education made a commitment to combat both forms of hate in schools.

Many of the most common topics around religious accommodations within schools relate to religious/spiritual practices related to observance of holy days and rituals, prayer, fasting, wearing articles of religious apparel, dress code adjustments, dietary restrictions (i.e., Halal, Kosher, etc.), exemptions from certain school activities, and the ability to congregate in safe spaces, among others. Failure to accommodate these religious requirements is not only insensitive but also threatens the creation of a safe and inclusive learning and work environment.

Furthermore, the intersection of religion/spirituality with race, ethnicity, citizenship, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression requires school boards to approach religious discrimination in a nuanced way (i.e., gendered Islamophobia, anti-Black Islamophobia, etc.).

57 Ibid.

58 Statistics Canada. (2023, March 22). Police-reported hate crime, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230322/dq230322a-eng.htm>

59 Ibid.