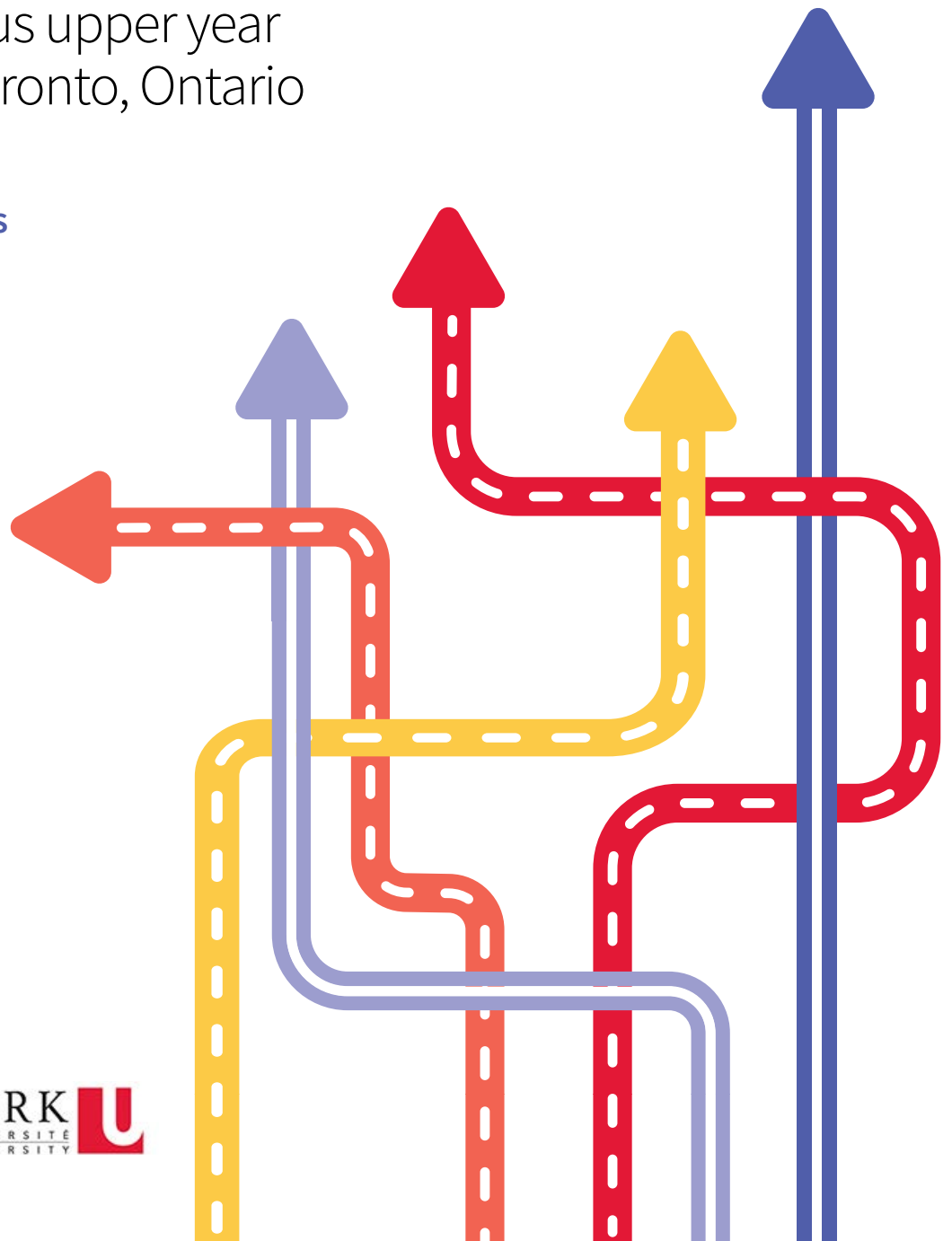


# I have all my credits... now what?

Disparities in postsecondary transitions,  
invisible gatekeeping and inequitable  
access to rigorous upper year  
curriculum in Toronto, Ontario

**Summary of Findings  
and Recommendations**

March 2023



# Summary of Findings and Recommendations

“If educational attainment opens the door to a better life, then opportunities for educational attainment must be equally available to all students.”<sup>1</sup>

High school graduates with disabilities, and from some racial groups, face substantial disparities relative to school board-wide averages in the rate to which they progress onto postsecondary -- far greater than disparities in graduation. This report highlights between-group differences in the rates at which Toronto high school graduates gain access to postsecondary education, and examines the potential role of course choices in last two years of high school which contribute to uneven levels of postsecondary preparedness.

## Disparities in postsecondary access after graduation

A far greater percentage of students graduate from high school than those who make direct transitions to postsecondary institutions.

Marginalized group members are less likely to make that transition (recent Statistics Canada reports also highlight between-group differences (Statistics Canada, 2023)). Despite ostensibly having the same qualifications as their fellow students upon graduation, more than 20% of Latin American, White, Black and Mixed-race students who graduate from high school do not make a direct transition to postsecondary education (see figures 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b, 3c in the main report). The attainment of these groups compares unfavorably to a school board-wide average of 16%. An even more dramatic contrast is to East Asian students, of whom all but 9% of high school graduates proceed to postsecondary. Among students with disabilities who graduate, again, 23% do not make a direct transition.

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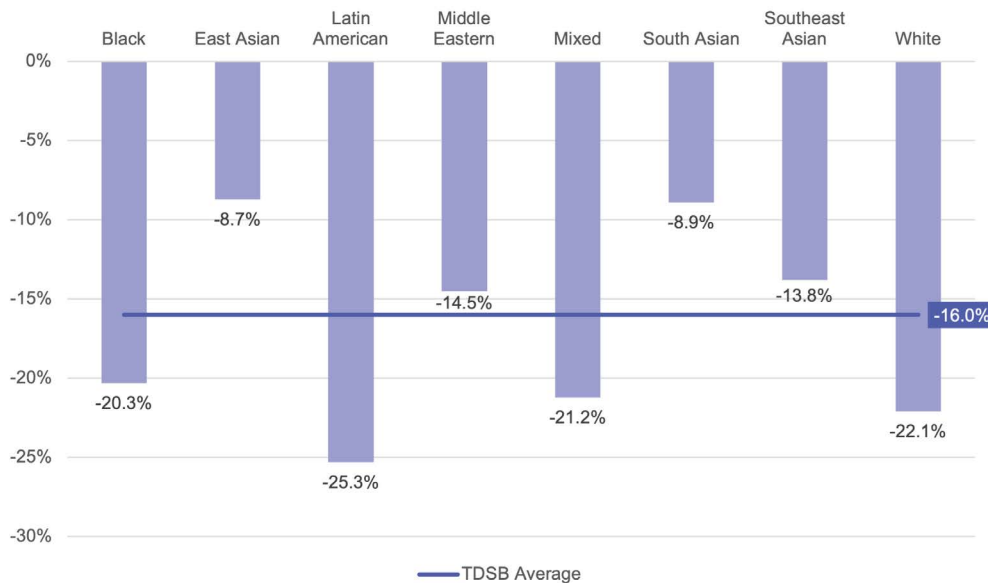
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1 National Academies of Science and Medicine (U.S.). (2019). *Monitoring Educational Equity*. National Academies Press.

2 [“I have all my credits, now what?”](#)

FIGURE 3A.

**Difference between 5-year graduation rate and PSE access by racial identity, 2006-15 cohorts, n=139,860**



Despite strong social and economic benefits associated with postsecondary education, in Ontario, government policy expresses no explicit preferences among ‘pathways’ for students to pursue at the end of high school: university, college, apprenticeship or workplace represent interchangeable versions of success. Students’ postsecondary goals are characterized as ‘personal’, their pathways are ‘individual’, and the goal of the career planning program is that students make ‘choices’ about education and career/life (Ministry of Education, 2013). In the upper years of high school, students choose between “University” (“U”) and “College” (“C”) courses in academically-focused subjects such as English, Math, or the sciences or social science courses.<sup>2</sup> Course credits of different types count equally towards high school graduation, but do not prepare students the same way for postsecondary education.

This report is based on longitudinal cohort data from the Toronto District School Board, disaggregated by race and special education needs, a proxy for disability. The data is taken from ten cohorts of TDSB students who started grade 9 between 2006-2015. Each cohort was followed for five years. There are 156,580 students in this dataset.

**Gatekeeping courses? Differential postsecondary preparation shapes postsecondary access**

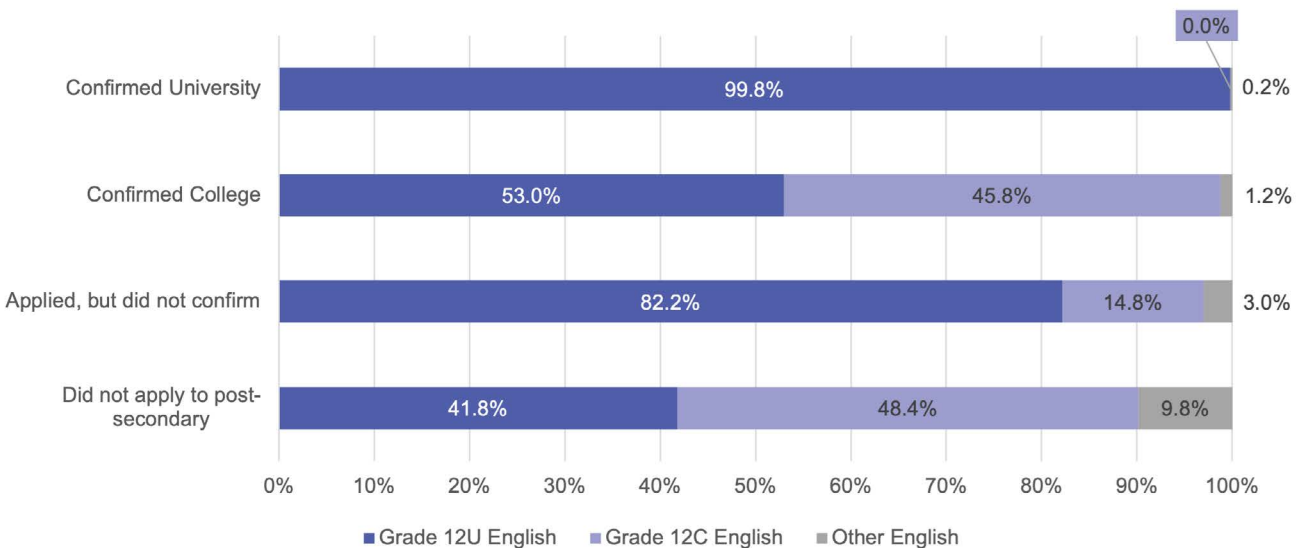
Broadened access to upper year curriculum that prepares students for postsecondary is an important ‘policy lever’ to improve more equitable postsecondary access. In our analysis, *all* university-bound students, and two-thirds (65.3%) of college-bound students, completed at least one Grade 12 ‘U’ course by the end of high school (see figure 4).<sup>3</sup> Of graduating students who did not complete *any* Grade 12 ‘U’ courses (24.5% of TDSB students), fewer than a quarter (23.1%) made the transition to college; and 70.9% did not apply to postsecondary at all. Most students with one or two U courses were able to pursue college. Students with 4 or more ‘U’ courses generally transitioned directly to university.

2 There are also Mixed, Open and Workplace courses but the focus of this paper is on University and College options in academic subjects.

3 When looking at the combined 2005-2012 cohorts, only 8% of postsecondary bound students- 7,188 of 84,899- had not completed at least one Grade 12 ‘U’ courses. These students comprised a third of the Ontario college-bound students.

Among the four- and five-year graduates who confirmed entry to university in Ontario within two years of finishing high school, 99.8% of them took 12U English. Furthermore, a *majority* of students who confirmed entry to *college* in Ontario (53.0%) *also* took 12U English (see figure 5a). 12U English clearly has a gatekeeping role for university, and, further, it is a meaningful asset for college admission. Only 70.8% of TDSB students took grade 12 Math. The vast majority (87.2%) of those took University Math (see figure 5b). Remarkably, 97.4% of students who took at least one 12U Math course applied to postsecondary.

FIGURE 5A.  
**Relationship between highest English course taken and postsecondary destination, 2006-2015 cohorts n=131,441**



### Significant differences by race and disability in postsecondary preparation

There are significant differences along the lines of race and disability in who takes the University courses that are so important for their preparation, access to and pursuit of postsecondary education.

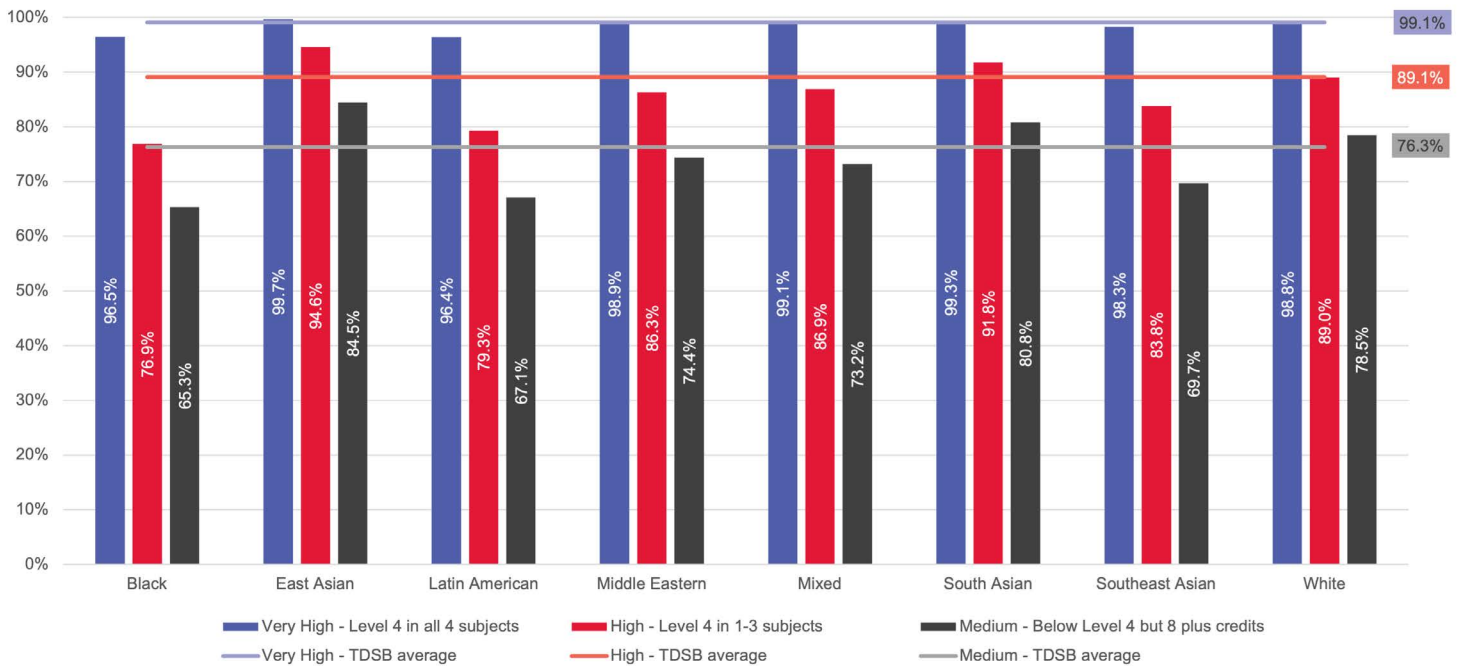
For example, looking at the mandatory grade 12 English courses, Black and Latin American students are about twice as likely to be taking College English relative to the school board average of 14.6% (30.6% and 27.5%, respectively). Conversely, Black and Latin American students are notably *underrepresented* in 12U Math courses: 37.9% of Black students and 35.8% of Latin American students are enrolled in at least one 12U Math, while the board-wide average is 62.6% (see figure 6).

Students with disabilities are about half as likely as the TDSB average to be enrolled in 12U English (see figure 7) – the course taken by almost every student who transitions to university, and the majority of those who go on to college.

When we control for prior achievement, patterns of underrepresentation for key historically marginalized groups are starkly visible, at every level of achievement.

Overall, students' academic achievement is a very strong predictor of both what types of courses they will take and whether they go on to postsecondary education. However, when we control for prior achievement, patterns of underrepresentation for key historically marginalized groups are starkly visible, at every level of achievement (See figures 8A and 8B). For example, even among students with 'very high' grade 9 achievement<sup>4</sup> – a group that, overall, is 99.1% likely to go on to postsecondary, Black and Latin American students are less likely to go on to PSE (96.5% and 96.4%, respectively).

**FIGURE 8A.**  
**Percentage of students enrolling in 'University' English courses,**  
**by race and prior achievement, 2006-2015 cohorts (n=102,082)**

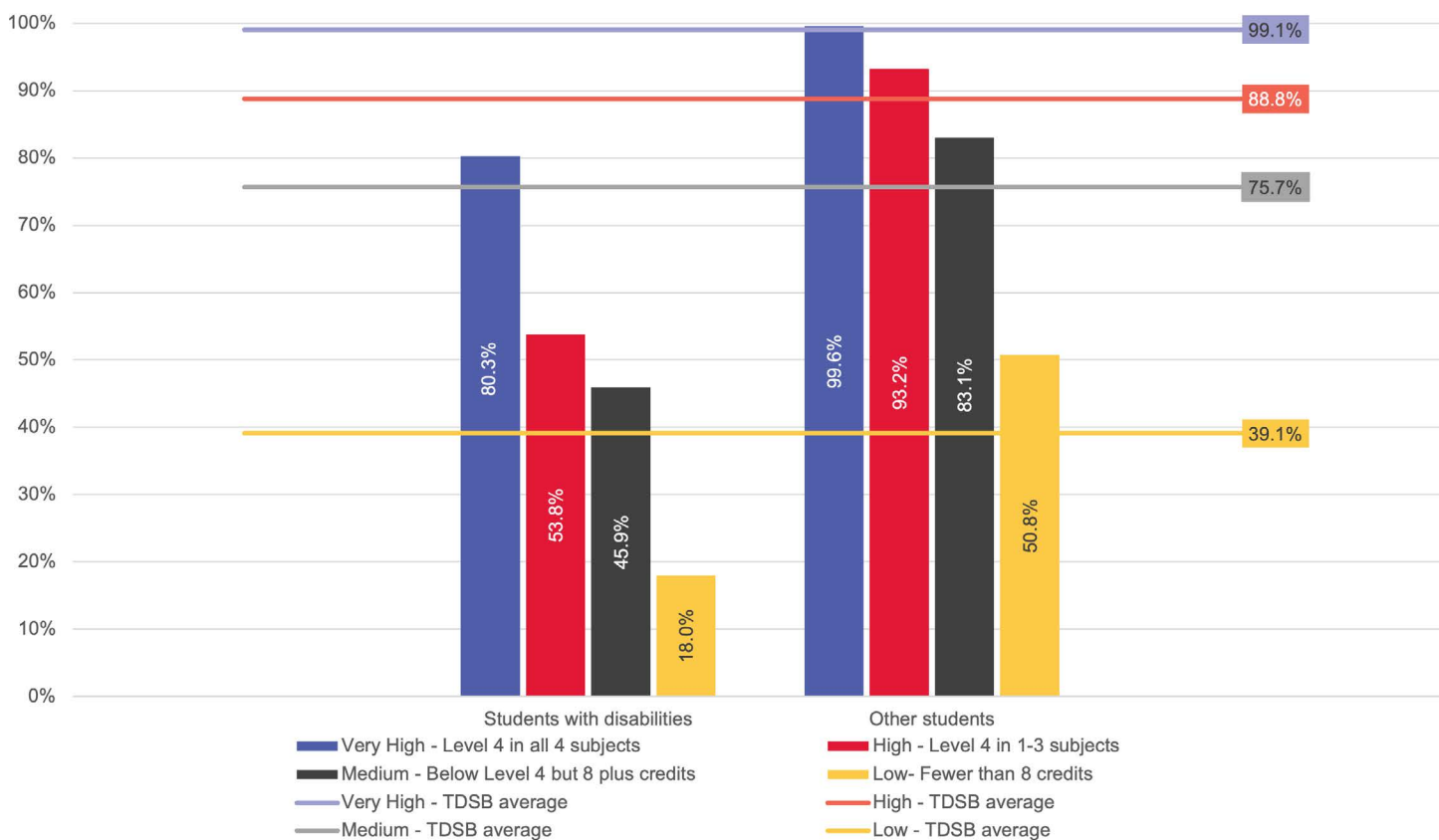


For students with disabilities, disproportionately reduced access to these key opportunities is even more apparent (see figure 8B). Only 80.3% of students with disabilities who have 'very high' grade 9 achievement enroll in 12U English - compared to 99.6% of other students with a similar achievement profile.

4 See full discussion in the main report on how we assess achievement. Students with "very high" grade 9 achievement have As in all four academic subjects and at least 8 credits.

FIGURE 8B.

Percentage of students enrolling in ‘University’ English courses, by disability and by prior achievement, 2006-2015 cohorts (n=131,442)



Disparities get larger as student achievement levels go lower.

Disparities get larger as student achievement levels go lower. For students with ‘medium’ achievement,<sup>5</sup> ‘social capital’ is likely to play a much larger role in the process of choosing, applying to and enrolling in postsecondary education (Ma, 1999; Nagaoka et al., 2009; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Schneider, 2007). That is, social factors beyond academic performance help shape students’ decisions about, in the words of the Careers Curriculum, what post-secondary ‘destination’ will “suit their aspirations, skills, interests, values, and personal circumstances” (Ministry of Education 2013, p.16). For example, Black students with medium achievement are almost fifteen percent less likely to take 12U English than the TDSB average; and East Asian students *with comparable achievement* are almost ten percent *more* likely than TDSB average to access the rigorous curriculum that increases the chances they will go on to postsecondary.

5 At least 8 credits, no As in the four academic subjects.

## Systemic Discrimination?

The patterns documented in this report are highly suggestive of systemic discrimination, which is prohibited under Canadian human rights law. In the words of the Supreme Court of Canada, systemic discrimination:

results from simple operation of established procedures ... none of which is necessarily designed to promote discrimination. The discrimination is then reinforced by the very exclusion of the disadvantaged group because the exclusion fosters the belief, both within and outside the group, that the exclusion is the result of “natural” forces (*C.N. v. Canada (Action Travail des Femmes)*, 1987)

The systematic underrepresentation of some racialized groups and students with disabilities in the courses which play a key role in postsecondary access, even when we control for prior achievement, requires concerted and timely action.

The patterns documented in this report are highly suggestive of systemic discrimination, which is prohibited under Canadian human rights law.

The data for this report comes from only one of Ontario’s 72 school boards, albeit the largest. Past findings from TDSB-specific on unequal outcomes research have been replicated in other boards; some boards have more limited research capacity. It is likely that the findings from this research have applicability beyond Toronto.

## Recommendations

Current efforts to de-stream grade 9 will likely contribute to greater equity by ensuring students have appropriate prerequisites, but it is likely that other targeted efforts to change these patterns will be required to overcome the current discriminatory status quo. Change is required both in K-12 and in postsecondary institutions. Some of this change is underway. Based on internal research, the TDSB incorporated enrollment in U courses as a key metric in its [Pandemic Recovery Strategy Update](#) (Oct 2022). The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement is leading urgent work on addressing racist and ableist structures, attitudes and practices across the system. At the same time, efforts to boost learning, engagement and achievement for all students remains a priority.

More specifically, we recommend:

- **The provincial government consider explicitly supporting a definition of student success that emphasizes postsecondary education, in light of evidence the current ‘many pathways to success’ approach has failed to set up historically marginalized students for equal chances of better lifetime outcomes.**
- **The provincial government ensures students, educators and families have clear and accurate information about short- and long-term outcomes associated with postsecondary pathways, including the postsecondary outcomes associated with course choices in the upper years of high school.**

- **The provincial government re-examine misleading names of ‘College’ and ‘University’ course types.**
- **The provincial government should routinely report publicly on rates of post-secondary access as well as graduation, with reports disaggregated by race, disability and other key identity characteristics.**
- **Given the considerable shortfalls with provincial government reporting on issues of equity even years after the *Anti-Racism Act* has been law in Ontario, we recommend serious consideration of moving responsibility for reporting on equity-related educational outcomes and opportunities outside of the Ministry in a model equivalent to the U.S. Office for Civil Rights.**

The report also includes a number of recommendations for future research and data collection, particularly in the area of pathways to apprenticeship.

References for this Executive Summary can be found in the Full Report, available at <https://www.yorku.ca/edu/securing-black-futures/pse-access-report/>