

INFORMATION SHEET

THE ENGAGED PARENT

NAVIGATING THE SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR BLACK STUDENT SUCCESS

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This is one in a series of information sheets designed to support your involvement as a parent/guardian in the education of your Black child in Ontario — from junior kindergarten all the way to graduation from Grade 12. Many other resources are available from community organizations, your child's school, the school board, and the Ontario Ministry of Education. We encourage you to use these information sheets as a starting point for becoming involved in your child's education and to seek out all the resources available to you.

In Grades 1 and 2, children continue to develop important literacy and numeracy skills through reading, writing, and arithmetic. In a way, playtime is over, and the serious business of learning begins. In these grades, children are moving from play-based learning to a more structured learning environment, which demands more of their focus and attention.

As the parent/guardian of a Black child, you're the most important person in your child's life: you're their strongest advocate and can ensure they have access to all the opportunities open to them. In this role, you also need to know what is happening with your child so that issues can be addressed as early as possible. That means ensuring that things like mental health issues, learning disabilities, or even stereotypes and prejudice do not derail your child's education.

All parents need to be involved in their children's education until they graduate from high school. You are your child's first teacher and will continue to be for the rest of their lives. Your interest and engagement in your child's schooling directly impacts the education they receive and their success.

Because anti-Black racism is prevalent in Canadian society, including within Ontario's education system, it is even more crucial that parents and guardians of Black children be involved in their children's education. Parents and guardians of Black children in Canada need to understand that their children will face challenges that have nothing to do with their abilities. Many studies show that Black students experience racism and unequal treatment even early in their schooling, which affects their success in school and their well-being.¹

You may also receive a Student Census from your school to complete. This survey asks questions about each student's background, including race and ethnicity. It is important to complete the Student Census as it allows the school board to know how Black students as a group are doing in relation to other students, and implement strategies to address any gaps. You can also ask for the results of the Student Census and participate in any strategies to address the identified issues.



THINGS TO DO AT HOME

While many of these activities might seem straightforward, they may not always be easy depending on your circumstances. If you need help, community agencies or social services in your neighbourhood could give you support. Seek out these services so that you can do your best at the most important role you have: that of being a parent.

- **Talk to your child.** Talk to them about school, their friends, and their interests. This helps you support and encourage their interests and curiosity at home. You can also help your child practice their communication skills by talking to them about what is happening in their school, the community, and in society.
- **Read to your child.** Reading to your child is one of the most important things you can do to develop their literacy skills. Physical books are much better than reading on a tablet or computer. Your local library will give you free access to a range of books.
- **Practice math and writing.** Use the many opportunities throughout the day to practice math and writing with your child. For example, at the grocery store, children can count the number of fruit or vegetables you are buying.
- **Develop a routine.** Developing a routine at home helps children adapt to the structure and routine of school. A regular time for bed, a bedtime ritual, and at least 9 hours of sleep will help your child feel well rested and ready to learn when they get to school in the morning.
- **Ensure your child is ready for school each day.** Ensure that your child is in school every day and on time. Regular attendance in these early years sends the message to your child that education is important. It also helps support their ongoing learning by ensuring they don't miss a lot of time in class.
- **Engage your child in cultural events and Black history.** During these early years, you can start to

develop a strong racial and cultural identity in your child by taking them to cultural and Black history events in your community.

- **Set high expectations and celebrate successes.** Your child will learn a lot in these early years. Set high expectations for your child so that they in turn have high expectations of themselves. You can also encourage their love of school and love of learning by celebrating their accomplishments.
- **Monitor screen time.** Monitor the amount of time your child spends on cell phones, iPads, computers, and in front of the TV. You can do this by setting specific times when your child can play on their iPad or watch TV. Talk to your child about balance, and monitor what they are watching and who they are talking to if they go on the internet. You should also monitor how much time you spend on your cell phone while you're with your child. They benefit most from talking, playing, and interacting with you and need your attention.
- **Encourage their interests.** Encourage your child's interests and create opportunities that will stimulate these interests. You can find books at the library and buy gifts for them that are related to these interests.

WHAT TO DO BEFORE/ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

- If the school offers information meetings, attend the meeting and bring your child. This gives you and your child the opportunity to meet the teacher, visit the classroom, and meet other children in the class.
- Many schools now have their own websites. This can give you important information before the first day of school and throughout the school year.
- Get to know the other children in the class as well as their parents.
- If possible, take your child to school on the first day. You will get to meet the teacher and comfort any nerves your child might have.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- As the parent of a Black child, your engagement in your child's education is critical. If you have already developed a routine of recounting the school day beginning in kindergarten, it becomes even more important to maintain this ritual. (Ask your child: How was school today? What did you learn? Did you do anything special? Which activities were your most/least favourite?) Try to make it a conversation as opposed to a cross-examination. You are more likely to uncover any issues at school with this approach.
- Get to know the teachers, the principal, the office secretary, and the other key personnel at the school. This helps them know that your child has an engaged and caring parent behind them. If school staff know you, they are more likely to call you when an issue arises.
- You should make the habit of talking to the teacher regularly. It doesn't necessarily have to be about your child. For instance, you can ask the teacher: How are things going? How long have you been teaching? Do you love it? This lets the teacher know that you are involved in your child's education and will help them see your child as an individual. Ask the teacher how your child is doing in class. You can ask: Do they speak up? Do they get along with the other children? What can I do at home to continue their learning?
- School performances that your child is involved in are all important activities that you should be aware of and try to attend. If you are unable to attend, try to see if another family member or friend can go in your place.
- Attend all parent-teacher meetings. If you aren't able to attend on the day or time scheduled, you can ask the teacher to arrange for another time. These meetings are a strong indication to the teacher of your interest in your child's education. It also gives the teacher the opportunity to discuss any issues or concerns they might have.

- When you visit the classroom, look around to ensure that your child's identity is reflected in the classroom. Ask the teacher about the books, toys, and other materials that feature Black people.
- Volunteer whenever possible by accompanying the class on a school trip, helping the class prepare for special celebrations, or lending a hand when needed.

WHAT TO DO AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

- The Ontario education system requires that a record—Ontario Student Record (OSR)—of your child's educational progress is maintained. The parents of any child under 18 have access to the OSR and all the information in it. You should review it at the end of each year and ask that any unnecessary or negative comments about your child be removed.

THINGS TO WATCH FOR IN YOUR CHILD

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

- Grade 1 and 2 represents an important stage in the development of your child's thinking and learning skills. At this stage, children learn a great deal, including important vocabulary and social skills, math, reading, and writing. Take the opportunity to speak with the teacher to ensure your child is progressing well.

BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES

- At this stage, children should enjoy going to school and should have developed friendships. If your child does not like going to school, have a discussion with your child and their teacher about the reasons why.
- As much as we all want to believe that our child is an angel, in school they might behave in ways we are not accustomed to. Pay close attention to how your child behaves in different environments or how they interact with other children to help identify any issues. You will then be able to work with the teacher to come up with a solution.

- In some cases, behavioural problems could arise from underlying issues that may need to be addressed, such as poor vision, hearing issues, lack of sleep, etc.
- Keep in mind that there could be differences in what you see as a parent and what their teacher sees. In some cases, your child may behave differently at school. But the teacher might be seeing your child through a biased lens and interpreting their behaviours differently because of racial or cultural differences.² Stay continuously engaged with your child's education to make sure you can recognize whether and when this is happening.

SUSPENSIONS

- Research shows that Black children tend to be suspended for behaviours for which other children are not.³ In addition, schools continue to suspend young children even though the evidence indicates that suspending young children is not an effective way to change behaviours.
- A suspension could also damage your child's self-esteem and reduces their chances of graduating from high school.⁴ Schools use suspensions when children struggle with managing

their emotions, have developmental delays, or have mental health issues. If the principal wants to suspend your child, ask them to find an alternative way to deal with the problem. You can also challenge the suspension by discussing it with the superintendent or a trustee.

THINGS TO WATCH FOR COMING FROM THE TEACHER

As the parent of a Black child, you will need to consider whether your child is being treated differently than other children. Watch for:

- Any suggestion that the teacher doesn't have high expectations of your child.
- Any suggestion that the teacher is afraid of your child. This might indicate that the teacher is seeing your child through a biased lens rather than as an individual.

¹ James, C.E. & Turner, T. (2017). *Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: York University.

² Young, Y. (2016, October 4). Teacher's implicit bias against black students starts in preschool, study finds. *The Guardian*.

³ See James, C.E. & Turner, T. (2017). *Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: York University.

⁴ Armstrong, D. (2018, April 4). Why suspending or expelling students often does more harm than good. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/why-suspending-or-expelling-students-often-does-more-harm-than-good-93279>; Wong, A. (2016, February 8). How School Suspensions Push Black Students Behind. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/how-school-suspensions-push-black-students-behind/460305/>