

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.

Grade 3 is a critical period in your child's education. Studies show that your child's ability to read well in Grade 3 is connected to the likelihood that they will graduate from high school. The more exposed your child is to the habit of reading, writing, or doing math, the more developed their skills will be. You can help them by setting aside just a half-hour each day for reading. If the books at school don't interest your child, visit your local library to find books that do engage them. Keep in mind that reading physical books is better than reading on a tablet or computer. Encouraging your child to read stories about Black history and achievements helps them see that people who look like them can be successful, further developing positive racial identity and also their reading skills and their vocabulary.

In Grade 3 all students across Ontario get tested for reading, writing, and math. Get support for your child if they show signs of test anxiety. In the fall of the next school year, each student will receive an Individual Student Report with test results. If the results show

that your child does not meet the provincial standard, seek out supports that are available at the school or through community agencies.

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. At this stage, you can shift from reading them a bedtime story, to having them read to you. Studies show that it is better for children to read physical books than read the same material on a tablet or computer. Your local library is a great — and free — source 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 keep track of the cost of what you're buying to ensure you don't go over your budget.
- **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 THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

- If your child will be attending a new school, try to make an arrangement with the principal to visit the school with your child over the summer.
- Read through any information you received from the school, and discuss the school's expectations with your child. The school's website may also have additional information.
- You may also want to find out what kinds of extracurricular activities are available. Find out how your child can access these.
- Attend the school's information sessions. You will have an opportunity to meet the teacher and hear what to expect regarding homework, teacher–parent communication, assessment and evaluation.

WHAT TO DO ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

- If you can, take your child to school on the first day. It can give you an early chance to meet the teacher and other parents. This will also give you the opportunity to briefly observe the dynamics between your child, the teacher, and fellow students.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- Develop the habit of talking to your child about their daily activities and experiences. During these conversations, you will discover what they are learning and how well they are doing in school. You will also hear about any unpleasant experiences or difficulties they may be having, which you might then need to discuss with the teacher. These conversations are also an opportunity to find out whether the teacher is including content with Black characters or that covers Black history.

Ask:

- *Who are the characters in these stories and what are the stories about?*
- *Do the characters include persons of African descent (Black people)?*
- *How are they portrayed—as good guys or bad guys?*
- *How about other people of colour?*
- *When they talk about places in the world, how are Africans or people from the Caribbean portrayed?*
- You might need to supplement what your child is learning about Black people by taking them to cultural or Black history events or exploring African history through visits to museums or the library. You may also need to raise this issue with the teacher. Be sure to bring it up in a non-confrontational way. Instead, ask questions about what your child is learning, and talk to the teacher about the importance for your child's education of including Black Canadian and African history and content.
- If your child has raised issues, invite them to discuss these issues with you and the teacher. Your child may want you to discuss the issue with the teacher on your own, or may want to be part of the conversation.

- 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 also make it a habit to check in with the teacher throughout the school year. Don't wait for a problem to arise. Instead, develop a relationship with the teacher so that they come to you first if there is a problem. Regular check-ins with the teacher can also help to identify behavioural or other issues early on.
- 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.
- 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.
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- In some school boards, this is the year children are tested for gifted education programs. If your child is exceptionally bright, ask that they be tested for giftedness. If your child is gifted, it is important for this to be identified so that their unique needs and talents can be nurtured.

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 3 is a critical time in your child's education. Speak with the teacher to ensure your child is progressing well. If your child is not reading or writing at grade level, now is the time to get them extra support. If you have the funds, hire a private tutor. Community agencies also offer tutoring programs to help Black students. High school and university students also serve as tutors and mentors.

BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES

- Your child 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 to find out whether there are issues at school you need to be aware of.
- Regardless of how well behaved your child is when they're with you, in school they might behave in ways you are not accustomed to. You should 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 to any behavioural issues.
- 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. Comments about how your child dresses and their mannerisms are some areas that could reveal the teacher's bias.
- If your child is disruptive at school because of a learning disability or behavioural issue, it can act as a reason for teachers to begin sidelining your child. Ask the teacher about the resources they have used to help your child. Speak with the principal, superintendent, or trustee if you don't think your child is getting the supports needed. There may be resources within the school board or services within the community that you can access. Monitor the relationship between your child and the teacher as closely as you can.

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/>