

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.

Junior kindergarten is the beginning of your child's formal education. It sets the foundation for their future success by opening doors to various post-secondary options and career opportunities.

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 help 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. When reading to them, help them identify letters and simple words. Your child can also practice colouring and writing their name.
- **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 the iPad or watch TV. 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

- Schools often provide information and resources for families with children entering kindergarten. Schools might also hold information sessions and provide information on their website. Take the time to review this important information.

- If the school has an open house or information night, take your child with you so that they can become familiar with the school.
- Provide your child with as much positive information as possible about school. Tell them what to expect at school, what the classroom might look like, what the role of the teacher is, and what the other children will be like. This will help ease their anxiety about going to school.
- Prepare your child for school by getting them used to playing and cooperating with children their age. If they don't have siblings or other family members their age, there may be an Early Years Centre or library in your community with programs that let them meet and interact with children their age.

WHAT TO DO ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

- If possible, take your child to school on the first day. This is an exciting day for you to share with them.
- If you haven't already done so, meet the teacher. You might not have much of an opportunity to talk with the teacher on the first day, but it's important for the teacher to meet you and know that you are involved in your child's education.

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 might be having, which you might then need to discuss with the teacher.
- If your child reports any unpleasant incidents, find out how your child responded and what the teacher did to address it. If the teacher did not address the issue or if the situation continues, ask

for a meeting with the teacher. Be sure to make it a conversation, not a confrontation, so that you can work with the teacher to address the problem. If the teacher does not address the situation, you can speak to the principal or the superintendent. If they don't address it, you can also contact your school board trustee.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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

- Kindergarten 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, learning to count, and beginning to learn to read. 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 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.

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/>