SAFE & INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT Safe and Inclusive Schools Integrated Model Implementation of Equity in public institutions has always been a very political endeavor. The Halton community of Trustees, staff, students and stakeholders have debated the best strategies to promote a whole school approach to equitable, safe and inclusive schools. There have always been two schools of thought as to the most prudent strategy to permeate equity. Some advocated for an explicit person or group to be solely responsible for the implementation of equity and inclusion practices. Others advocated for all departmental responsibility with each group to govern how equity was embedded. After several years of conversation and experimenting, we all agreed that the work could not happen in isolation. The silo approach to implementation is not effective and does not integrate the concepts of equity in a seamless manner. We are all responsible but at the same time there needs to be a group to monitor, support and encourage the integration of equity and inclusion.

In order to move forward with this initiative we needed to develop a model that could gradually integrate the work of our academic departments in the Halton District School Board (HDSB). The Board of Trustees and the senior team expressed an interest in more collaboration and alignment in addressing issues of inclusion that have an impact on student success. By bringing together the Equity department and Safe Schools department under one Superintendent of Education, this allowed for the beginning of an integrated structure. The next step was to bring together key superintendents and individuals from departments that would have an immediate impact on our schools. This initial group involved EQUITY Department, which has the responsibility of developing inclusive curriculum; promoting our Equity Lenses; building teacher capacity in equity concepts and *responding to school and community issues relating to equity – SAFE SCHOOLS Department: which has the responsibility of supporting progressive discipline strategies; monitoring the application of suspensions and expulsions; providing alternate programing and interventions for students in jeopardy – PROGRAM Department: coaching teachers on the delivery and implementation of the provincial curriculum - STUDENT SERVICES Department: Supports students who are identified with a special education need – SCHOOL SUPPORTS: Guidance, Social Workers, Child and Youth Workers addressing mental wellbeing and social emotional state of students and – LEADERSHIP: Development of programs that build leadership competencies in our system leaders.

Once the framework was established at the Superintendent level, and all parties began to define their roles in the Safe and Inclusive Schools Integrated Model, an Integrated Working Group was developed including system principals from all areas. Although the initial dialogue revolved around Equity, Safe Schools, Well-being

and Inclusive Curriculum, it quickly moved to how these foci are connected to the other work in the various departments. This is where the "Build In" approach worked as opposed to the "Buy In" approach. Usually we bring people to the table and attempt to have them buy into a plan but in order to find systemic success, we had to ask individuals to come and assist in building something that can benefit students, and at the same time, fulfil some of their priorities. This has resulted in: strategies that have reduced our suspensions by 100s per year; Board Improvement Plan - Student Achievement that identifies engagement actions in Literacy and Numeracy, not just Safe & Inclusive Schools; alignment to support Mental Health Strategy through curriculum, Public Health and school communities and the feeling that our work is connected and aligned.

RÉSUMÉ L'introduction dans les établissements scolaires du Modèle intégré d'implantation de l'équité pour des écoles sécuritaires et inclusives (*Safe and Inclusive Schools Integrated Model Implementation of Equity*) est un processus très sensible. Les membres du conseil d'administration de la Halton District School Board (HDSB), ainsi que le personnel, les étudiants et les intervenants ont travaillé ensemble afin de réfléchir aux meilleures stratégies pour promouvoir une approche globale visant à rendre les écoles plus équitables, sécuritaires et inclusives. Deux écoles de pensée se sont dégagées quant à la stratégie la plus efficace pour établir l'équité. D'une part, ceux qui soutiennent qu'une personne ou un groupe doit être désigné explicitement en tant que seul responsable de l'application des pratiques d'équité et d'inclusion. D'autre part, ceux qui estiment que cette responsabilité revient à tous les services ou directions et que chaque groupe est responsable de l'intégration de l'équité dans leurs pratiques. Après plusieurs années d'expérience et de dialogue, nous avons constaté que ce travail ne peut pas être réalisé de manière isolée. Une mise en œuvre « en silo » n'est pas efficace et n'intègre pas les concepts d'équité d'une manière consensuelle. Cependant, même si nous sommes « tous responsables », il demeure nécessaire de constituer un groupe chargé d'administrer, de promouvoir et de faciliter l'intégration de l'équité et de l'inclusion.

Pour aller de l'avant avec cette initiative, nous avons développé un modèle qui intègre progressivement le travail de nos diverses directions universitaires au sein du Halton District School Board (HDSB). Le conseil d'administration et l'équipe senior a communiqué son désir d'établir une plus grande collaboration et une meilleure coordination entre les directions lors du traitement des questions d'inclusion, qui ont un impact direct sur la réussite des élèves. L'intégration de deux départements (traitant respectivement de l'équité et de la sécurité scolaire) sous une seule direction nous a permis de construire une structure plus intégrée. Pour sa part, l'équipe « équité » est responsable du développement d'un curriculum inclusif, de la promotion des orientations en matière d'équité, du renforcement des capacités des enseignants et de la prise en charge des enjeux scolaires et communautaires liés à l'équité. Ensuite, l'équipe « Écoles sécuritaires », est responsable de soutenir le développement progressif de stratégies disciplinaires, du suivi de l'application des suspensions et des expulsions, et de la création de programmes alternatifs et d'interventions novatrices auprès des jeunes en difficultés. L'équipe « Programmation » est en charge de la prestation et de la mise en œuvre du curriculum provincial, alors que l'équipe « Services aux étudiants » fournit de l'aide aux étudiants ayant des besoins éducatifs particuliers. Enfin, l'équipe « Soutien scolaire » est composée de travailleurs sociaux et d'intervenants jeunesse qui s'occupent des enjeux liés à la santé mentale et émotionnelle des étudiants, et l'équipe « Leadership » est responsable du développement de compétences de gestion des dirigeants scolaires.

Une fois que ce cadre a été établi au niveau de la direction, et que toutes les parties ont commencé à définir leurs rôles dans le modèle intégré des écoles sécuritaires et inclusives (*Safe and Inclusive Schools Integrated Model*), un groupe de travail a été créé qui rassemble les directeurs de toutes les équipes. Bien que le dialogue initial portait sur l'équité, la sécurité dans les écoles, le bien-être et la nature inclusive du curriculum, il s'est rapidement réorienté vers la façon dont ces problématiques sont liées au travail des autres départements. C'est à ce niveau que l'approche « build in » (basé sur la coopération) s'est avérée beaucoup plus efficace qu'une approche « Buy in » (basé sur l'imposition par le haut). Habituellement, nous discutons avec les gens et tentons de les convaincre d'adhérer à un plan, mais si nous voulons réussir à implanter le changement à travers tout le système, nous devons demander aux individus de s'impliquer et de collaborer ensemble afin de bâtir quelque chose qui peut profiter aux élèves et, en même temps, répondre à leurs priorités. Les résultats sont assez probants : la réduction des suspensions d'élèves par centaines ; l'implantation d'un Plan du conseil axé sur l'accroissement de la réussite des élèves et l'identification d'actions pour favoriser leur engagement en littératie et numératie ; l'introduction de la Stratégie pour la santé mentale dans le curriculum, la santé publique et les communautés scolaires de même que le développement le sentiment que tous travaillent ensemble et dans le même sens.

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education's Inclusive Education and Equity Strategy adopted the phrase, *"Realizing the Promise of Diversity"*. The promise started in the 1970's and probably well before that with many equity seeking initiatives. In 1993 the Ontario Ministry of Education issued Policy Program Memorandum 119 – Anti Racism and Ethno Cultural Equity Policy to be implemented in all school boards.

This promise was not realized and many district school boards continue to struggle to implement safe, equitable and inclusive practices. Structurally in institutions, the philosophical debate on implementation of equity principles has been a central obstacle. One side of the debate states, let us be explicit about equity and have implementation done through; a single strategy, single individual, or department in addition to the things we are doing. The criticism to this approach is that it can be seen as additive; creating additional work and distracting from the "real priorities." The opposing argument states, let us have everyone implement and integrate equity into their work. The criticism to this approach is that when everyone is responsible then no one is responsible and it becomes lost in departments core work. You can see the dilemma. Well, I believe for continuous systemic change you need a balance of both *"We need to be explicit about our integration"*.

The Halton District School Board (HDSB) has assigned a lead superintendent to integrate the work of Safe Schools, Equity, Inclusive Curriculum and other programs. This allows HDSB to be explicit about the integration of equity of access, opportunity and outcome for students. As illustrated in figure 1, the approach we are calling "Safe and Inclusive Schools" requires all to play a role in building it together but lead by a few.

The HDSB is a school district located west of the Greater Toronto Area. It serves over 60,000 students and has close to 6,000 employees in a demographically diverse suburban – rural region. I will share the journey we have begun to establish equitable and inclusive practices within our system and although we are proud of the start, we know that there is still much to do.

SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS INTEGRATED MODEL

Having support from the Director of Education, our initiative started with developing a model for integration as illustrated in figure 2. This meant bringing together key superintendents and individuals from departments that would have immediate impact on our schools. The first circle of departments included: Equity, Safe Schools, Program, Student Services, School Supports and Leadership.

FIGURE 1: SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS – COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP

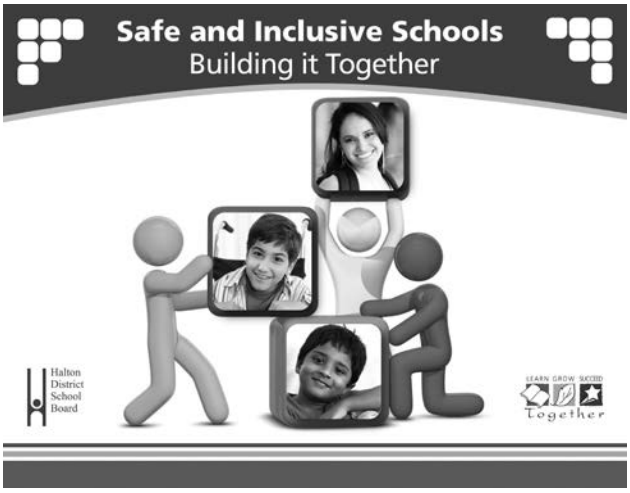
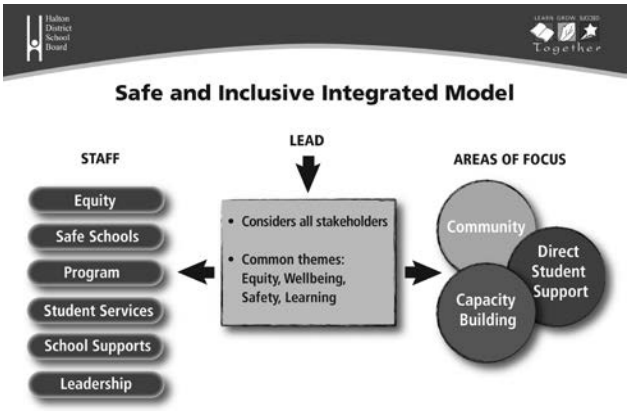


FIGURE 2: SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS – INTEGRATED MODEL



These departments were identified as having direct impact on schools that would lead the cascade of change based on their influence within the system. The corporate departments such as Human Resources and Business Services would follow as the integration progressed. The initial meetings with this group proved to be critical in establishing what the model would and could look like. Naturally all stakeholders questioned what is in it for them. The moral imperative reasoning alone was not enough to have immediate action towards this model. Doing the right thing is often not enough to make change to a structure individuals are comfortable with. Individuals want to see data and outcomes that can be driven by their work. Therefore, it was essential to bring forward the data, resources and the moral reasoning to tell the story of how the strategy could benefit each individual, department and system as a whole. A "Build In" approach was used as opposed to the traditional "Buy In" approach. We usually ask people to come to the table and convince them to "Buy In" to our plan. When we use the "Build In" approach we build it together and stakeholders get

an opportunity to align strategies that meet their own goals while supporting students. In the end, these stakeholders had to define the benefits. A great example was when designing a Board Improvement Plan template the idea of identifying equity principles and supports for vulnerable cohorts; this concept resonated with the Special Education department. The usual practice was to develop a plan and then ask Special Ed. Dept. what can you add without changing our structure or targets. Having the opportunity at the front end to create the structure and strategies gave great support to moving forward and the perspective for other stakeholders to contribute.

To facilitate the dialogue and stay focused on the goals without being deterred by side issues, terms of references were established that centred around the themes of Equity, Safety & Wellbeing and Learning. We discovered like many organizations, there was an overlap in departmental priorities, resources and staff assignments. In order to be strategic regarding our resource allocation and our system goals, we establish three areas of focus: Community, Direct Student Support, Capacity Building. Community refers to identifying the school board community partners that support the learning and wellbeing of our students which allows us then to create greater partnerships to fill in the gaps; direct student support refers to the individuals we currently have and would need to hire to give direct support to students; and capacity building; or the learning and training of our staff to enable them to deliver their duties within a safe and equitable context. In terms of our school staff this meant expanding their understanding of the term *Knowing the Learner*. Adapting Douglas Wilms (Wilms J.D., Friesen S. & Milton P., 2009) work on student engagement we have expanded on the term *knowing the learner* as illustrated in figure 3 to consider: Inclusive Quality Instruction; School Context; Classroom Context and the Family Context; all through our Equity Lens. (D.Wilms 2011 Halton Leadership Conference - Student Engagement: Leadership Priority)

FIGURE 3: SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS - KNOWING THE LEARNER



How do we explicitly address school level challenges was the most concerning area to our trustees who have given the financial and directional support through approvals in board budget and operational plans . The response was to apply a *pyramid of intervention* for student support (see figure 4). As a district we needed to interject our staff into three levels of intervention. Universal, which are strategies that will be given by staff to all students. Targeted, which are strategies of intervention to some students identified whether academically or socially; and finally, personalized, which would be the few students who need prescribed intervention to meet their specific needs. We believed this intervention strategy would facilitate student success and achievement considering whichever equity demographic a student came with.

FIGURE 4: SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS APPROACH - PYRAMID OF INTERVENTIONS AND INTEGRATED MODEL



ACCOUNTABILITY AND MONITORING

Organizations are routinely challenged with the monitoring of their policies, priorities and goals. In order to monitor what *"we say we wanted to do,"* a matrix of organization was developed as illustrated in figure 5 and described below. This organizational matrix covers the school system from direct student support to senior staff and trustees. Our Safe and Inclusive Teams are individuals that have direct contact with staff that give direct support to students; examples are teachers, educational assistants, social workers, special education resource personnel, settlement workers, etc. The Integrated Working Group are our managers and system principals that supervise our teams and implement our Operational Plan. They modify and monitor our metrics and goals over the course of 1-2 years, adjusting to the needs of our teams. This is a critically important group, simply because they bridge the vision of the Board and senior staff with what is actually happening in our schools and departments. The Equity and Inclusive Education Advisory Committee holds membership of Trustees,

staff and community organizations and community members seeking equitable practices for students. This group provides the balance of pressure and support in implementing our Equity Plan. In some cases, recommendations can go directly to the board table paving the way for a more expedient implementation. Finally, the coordinating committee involving the Director of Education and superintendents monitor the long-term direction and deliver key messages to the organization emphasizing our values and expectations of achievement for all students.

FIGURE 5: SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS - ORGANIZATIONAL MATRIX



Our Safe and Inclusive Schools structure has given us a common language and structure to address the challenges HDSB faces in supporting vulnerable students. Our common nomenclature around Ability, Faith, First Nations, Metis, Inuit; Gender; Race/Culture; Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity and Socio-Economic Status is allowing us to have critical conversations. When we say equity in HDSB it is an inclusive word that strives to meet the needs of all.

REFERENCES

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