ONTARIO'S EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT Launched in 2009, Ontario's award winning Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) Strategy aims to help the education community identify and address discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to support the achievement and well-being of all students. Parent engagement and character development are key components. When parents are involved in their children's education, children do better in school. Ontarians share a belief in the need to develop students' character and to prepare students for their role in society as engaged, productive, and responsible citizens. In an equitable system, factors such as race, gender and socio-economic status should not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes. The Strategy helps to foster an inclusive education system in which all students, parents and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected, and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning. To improve outcomes for all students and in particular those at risk, all partners must work to identify and remove barriers and must actively seek to create the conditions needed for student success.

Canadians embrace multiculturalism, human rights, and diversity as fundamental values. However, there are ongoing incidents of discrimination in our society that require our continuing attention. Racism, religious intolerance, homophobia, and gender-based violence are still evident in our communities and – unfortunately – in our schools.

The strategy sets the vision and the course of action for a system-wide approach to diversity, inclusiveness and human rights in the education sector. Power dynamics are acknowledged, and the elimination of racism continues to be a major focus; however, the strategy provides a framework to assist publicly funded schools in their efforts to respond to the full range of needs within the education community. A key focus of the Strategy is to support boards and schools to embed the principles of equity and inclusive education in all operations and learning environments, for example, from school and board planning, policies and practices, curriculum and assessment, to extra-curricular activities, student discipline practices, parent and community engagement, to professional learning, hiring and succession planning practices. The EIE principles are also being embedded across Ontario Ministry of Education initiatives through interdivisional collaboration. For instance, all revised curriculum policy documents include a section on EIE and how this relates to the particular subject or discipline.

Realizing that boards, schools and our education partners are at different levels of engagement, the ministry has supported a phased-in implementation approach, building upon successful policy and practices including diverse partnerships with our stakeholders to help develop evidence informed tools, resources and training. A number of measures have been undertaken to assist boards, including comprehensive guidelines with templates and reflective

tools, and the funding of seven (EIE) Implementation Networks to support effective implementation at the local level. Every school board is a member of one of the networks. The networks share effective practices, develop new resources, build capacity and engage in collaborative learning opportunities. This article outlines some of the challenges and the opportunities that have characterized Ontario's approach.

RESUME Lancée en 2009, la Stratégie ontarienne en matière d'équité et d'inclusion scolaire (EIS) a comme objectif d'aider le milieu de l'enseignement à identifier et aborder les préjugés et les barrières systémiques afin de promouvoir la réussite et le bien-être de tous les élèves. L'engagement des parents et le développement du caractère des élèves en sont des composantes importantes. Lorsque les parents s'impliquent dans l'éducation de leurs enfants, les enfants réussissent mieux à l'école. Les Ontariens estiment nécessaire que l'éducation développe la personnalité de chaque élève et prépare les élèves à devenir des citoyens engagés, productifs et responsables. Dans un système équitable, des facteurs tels que la race, le sexe et le statut socio-économique ne devraient pas empêcher les élèves d'atteindre leurs pleins potentiels. La stratégie ontarienne vise à promouvoir le développement d'un système éducatif inclusif où tous les étudiants, parents et autres membres du milieu scolaire se sentent accueillis et respectés, et où tous les étudiants sont soutenus et encouragés à faire de leur mieux dans un environnement où les attentes envers l'apprentissage sont élevées. Afin d'améliorer les résultats de tous les élèves, et surtout des élèves à risque, tous les partenaires doivent diriger leurs efforts afin de cerner et d'éliminer les barrières et s'impliquer activement dans l'établissement de conditions propices au succès des élèves.

Les Canadiens considèrent le multiculturalisme, les droits de la personne et la diversité comme étant leurs valeurs fondamentales. Cependant, les incidents discriminatoires continuent de se produire dans notre société et il est nécessaire de leur accorder une attention soutenue. Le racisme, l'intolérance religieuse, l'homophobie et la violence fondée sur le sexe sont très présents dans nos communautés et – malheureusement – dans nos écoles.

Cette stratégie définit la vision et le cadre d'action par lesquels aborder le secteur de l'enseignement au moyen d'une approche intégrée en matière de diversité, d'inclusion et de droits de la personne. Cette approche reconnait l'existence des dynamiques du pouvoir et l'élimination du racisme demeure une de ces préoccupations principales ; cependant, cette stratégie nous offre un cadre par lequel soutenir les écoles publiques dans leurs efforts de répondre à l'éventail complet des besoins du milieu de l'enseignement. Un des objectifs centraux de cette stratégie est de soutenir les commissions scolaires et les écoles afin qu'elles intègrent les principes de l'équité et de l'inclusion en matière d'éducation à travers toutes leurs interventions et les divers environnements d'apprentissage (p. ex. de la planification dans les écoles et les commissions, les politiques et les pratiques, les curriculums et les évaluations jusqu'aux activités parascolaires, aux pratiques disciplinaires des étudiants, à l'engagement parental et communautaire, aux pratiques concernant le perfectionnement professionnel, l'embauche et la succession). Les principes de l'EIS sont en processus d'intégration, a sein de collaborations intersectorielles, à travers les initiatives du ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario . Par exemple, tous les documents révisés concernant les politiques sur les curriculums incluent une section sur l'EIS, qui décrit la façon dont celle-ci s'applique à un sujet ou à une discipline donnée.

Reconnaissant que les conseils scolaires, les écoles et leurs partenaires sont engagés à différents degrés dans la mise en œuvre de cette stratégie, le ministère a décidé d'adopter une approche graduelle, qui s'appuie sur les politiques et les pratiques efficaces, incluant les divers partenariats établis qui ont permis de développer des outils d'apprentissages, des ressources et des formations. Différentes mesures ont été prises afin d'assister les conseils scolaires, dont des guides et des outils réflexifs, ainsi que le financement de sept réseaux de mise en œuvre de l'EIS, visant à soutenir l'implantation de la stratégie au niveau local. Chaque conseil scolaire est membre de l'un de ces réseaux. Ces réseaux partagent les « bonnes pratiques », développent de nouvelles ressources, renforcent les capacités des acteurs et participent à des initiatives d'apprentissage collaboratif. Cet article décrit certains des enjeux et opportunités que comporte la stratégie ontarienne.

INTRODUCTION

Our children and youth are our most precious resource – they are the driving force behind everything that we do. Internationally, an equitable and inclusive education system is seen to be essential to supporting student success in a knowledge-based global economy.

Launched in 2009, Ontario's award winning[1] Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) Strategy aims to help the education community identify and address discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to support the achievement and well-being of all students.

The Strategy helps to foster an inclusive education system in which:

- all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected; and,
- every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.

Research shows that students who feel welcome and connected to school stay engaged and are more likely to succeed (EIE Strategy, 2009). In an increasingly diverse Ontario, this means fostering positive learning environments that support all students to feel engaged, included, and respected, and in which students see themselves reflected. Recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys, and students with special education needs, however, are some of the groups that may be at risk of lower achievement (EIE Strategy, 2009).

In an equitable system, factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status should not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes. To help close achievement gaps and improve outcomes for all students, and in particular students who are at risk, all partners must work to identify and remove barriers and must actively seek to create the conditions needed for student success. Equity and excellence go hand in hand.

Bullying, cyberbullying, racism, religious intolerance, homophobia, hate propaganda and gender-based violence – these are some of the issues that are still evident in our communities and, unfortunately, in our schools. Through the development of the EIE Strategy, it was recognized that our provincial policies must evolve to meet the challenges of a complex and ever evolving society. After extensive consultations with diverse stakeholders, it was clear that a system wide approach was needed.

EIE STRATEGY LAUNCH

Ontario's education system needed a provincial framework with combined commitment, energy and strategies to identify and remove the barriers to student success. Charged with this challenging mandate, the Inclusive Education Branch was established to develop and support effective implementation of the Strategy. Prior to the introduction of the Strategy in 2009, only 43 school boards reported having some form of equity policy and only 12 boards had some form of guideline on religious accommodation. Now all school boards have an EIE policy and a religious accommodation guideline in place.

The Strategy sets the vision and the course of action for a system-wide approach to diversity, inclusiveness and human rights in the education sector. Power dynamics are acknowledged, and the elimination of racism continues to be a major focus; however, publicly funded schools must also continue to increase their efforts to respond to the full range of needs within the education community.

The Strategy recognizes that several factors may intersect to create additional barriers for some students: these barriers, whether overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional need to be identified and addressed. What sets the Strategy apart is the concrete action items (many are ongoing) that were identified for the ministry, boards and schools at the outset, together with requirements outlined in Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 119, "*Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools*" (updated April 2013). PPM 119 provides direction to boards in eight key areas designed to foster equitable and inclusive learning environments.

EIE STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

To put the Strategy into practice and assist boards in developing their EIE policies and religious accommodation guidelines, the ministry partnered with the Ontario Education Services Corporation (OESC). The OESC developed policy templates, customized for public, Catholic and French Language school boards, cooperatively working with all four education sectors, their legal firms, the Institute for Catholic Education, and the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC). The templates, distributed to all boards free of charge, were adopted by many boards for their EIE policies and religious accommodation guidelines[2]. This unprecedented cooperation set the stage for further collaborative initiatives. In addition to providing training and workshops at both the regional and provincial level, the OESC is currently developing an online compilation of board developed EIE tools and resources (in English and French). The OESC is also developing a framework for training, resources and professional learning that will help address

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues in schools and boards.

The vision of the Strategy must be understood as a journey, not a destination. The Strategy and board EIE policies, therefore, were only the beginning of the implementation process. The Strategy is not one that, once developed, sits on a shelf; it identifies an ongoing process that must be embedded in a culture of continuous improvement. In keeping with their EIE policy, boards are to embed EIE principles - in other words applying an equity lens - to all operations and aspects of their learning environments, from their multi-year strategic plan, to employment, curriculum implementation and classroom instructional practices. Building upon existing mechanisms and successful practices utilized by boards, an EIE focus is to be applied to board and school improvement plans, SMART goals – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely goals – and their cyclical review of policies, with this work highlighted in the Director's Annual Report to their local communities (PPM 119, 2013).

In 2012, the Education Act was revised (through the Accepting Schools Act) to provide clear legislative authority; every board is required by legislation to have an EIE policy.

PPM 119 and the guidelines have been revised to reflect these changes and remain current.

Shared and committed leadership at all levels is a key success factor. The commitment to equity in Ontario is cited as a "game changer" for school and system leaders in their efforts to improve the learning of all children and closing gaps in achievement between those groups of students who have always done well and those groups who have not.[3]" EIE principles are actively being embedded in ministry initiatives, policies, programs, and practices; for example, the revised School Effectiveness Framework (SEF)[4] identifies indicators for equity and inclusiveness at the school and board levels. *Aménagement linguistique*[5] is in place to support our French-language school boards: it fosters the development of French-language and culture to support high levels of achievement for all French-language students. In addition, the policy statement and guidelines on the Admissions, Welcoming and Support of French-language students in Ontario focuses on the inclusion and support of all students with particular attention to newcomers and students from families in which French is not the language spoken at home.

The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) and the Board Leadership Development Strategy (BLDS), essential components of Ontario's Leadership Strategy[6], support school and system leaders to foster positive, safe, respectful school climates and cultures. Throughout the curriculum development and review process, EIE is an important lens that is considered: all curriculum documents are reviewed from a bias and equity and inclusive education lens, by academic and equity experts, before being released. The front of every revised curriculum policy document includes a section on EIE, highlighting the importance of EIE principles and showing the connections to that program area in order to help implement the curriculum in a way that students can see themselves reflected in what they are learning. For the first time in Ontario, the newly revised Social Sciences and Humanities Curriculum (Grades 9-12, 2013)[7] includes courses in equity studies and gender studies that are being offered for the first time.

Realizing that boards, schools and our partners are at different levels of engagement, the ministry has supported a phased-in implementation approach, building upon successful policy and practices. A number of measures have been undertaken to assist boards from the release of comprehensive guidelines, containing templates and reflective tools, to the funding of seven (EIE) Implementation Networks to support effective implementation at the local level. Every school board is a member of one of the Networks. The Networks share effective practices, develop new resources, build capacity and engage in collaborative learning opportunities. Lauded by the members of the Minister's Partnership Table[8], the EIE Networks are valued and seen to be a model of how to influence positive change across sectors. Diverse, cross-sector partnerships, whether they are new, enhanced or expanded, are essential; to forge valuable links, draw upon expertise (embracing an interdisciplinary approach) and experience to collaboratively seek solutions. This multi-pronged, results-oriented approach – where everyone has a role to play – was adopted from the onset, and continues.

This era of school and community relationships fostering partnerships is demonstrated by the ministry's collaborative work with the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) to jointly develop a new resource. *Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools: A Resource Guide for School and System Leaders* (August 2013)[9] will help foster a bias-free approach to progressive discipline, prevention, and early intervention practices to support positive behaviour among all students. To support implementation, Adobe Connect sessions were held in the fall of 2013 for boards as well as key stakeholders. Additional implementation supports are also being developed; for example, an "In-Conversation" paper is being developed to provide key leadership perspectives on how to effectively use this practical, user-friendly resource.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While there have been many challenges (e.g. racism, intersectionality) there have also been many opportunities. It is this attitude that has characterized Ontario's approach. The ministry recognizes that the scope and the dimensions of diversity are vast. For example, in terms of diversity, 27% of Ontario students are born outside of Canada and 20% are visible

minorities. Toronto, the largest city in Ontario, is one of the most diverse cities in the world[10]. In addition to English and French, the 2011 National Household Survey estimated more than 200 languages as mother tongue[11].

The issues themselves (e.g. racism, homophobia) and the intersectionality of these issues are by their nature sensitive — many are contentious and complex — as evidenced by the emergence of competing rights. These issues could not be ignored and served as an impetus for the release of the Strategy. The ministry understood the ramifications if we did not seek to deal with these challenges facing the education sector and the potential impact on our society.

While a system-wide approach was needed, it was clear that "cookie cutter" solutions would not work. Instead, local solutions needed to be found in the context of a comprehensive provincial framework, arrived at collectively with diverse stakeholders at all levels. For those who did not know where to begin, the ministry provided leadership using the excellent work that resulted in the issuing of the original PPM 119 in 1993 as a basis. We have expanded upon this work, while maintaining an anti-racism focus, to reflect the emerging issues and the complex needs of our rapidly changing, dynamic society. We were able to draw on the valuable advice from an ad hoc Equity Roundtable convened by the Minister of Education, comprised of experts and practitioners in the field to support the development of the Strategy and its accompanying documents. As we have moved forward, we are now benefitting from the ongoing collaborative relationships that have been established and the advice of the multi-disciplinary Accepting Schools Expert Panel which includes academics and respected practitioners[12]. The Strategy is embedded in Ontario's comprehensive action plan which focuses on a whole school approach that involves all partners to foster safe, inclusive and accepting learning environments.

In the beginning, there were some who viewed the Strategy as "Toronto-centric". They did not feel that it applied to their local situation. We also heard concerns that the Strategy would only recognize multiculturalism and that it would not go far enough to deal with difficult issues such as racism. We have seen a shift in these perceptions as a result of the excellent work that has been done and is continuing in schools, boards and at the ministry. While multiculturalism is recognized and celebrated, the challenging, "hard" issues (e.g. racism, homophobia) together with stereotypes, discriminatory biases and systemic barriers, are being identified and addressed. There is a realization that these issues are incredibly complex and that several factors may intersect to create additional barriers for students[13]. There is also a realization that these issues are not going to go away – they must be dealt with in order to support our students to reach their full potential.

Applying an equity lens to the work that we do is seen to be not only relevant but essential. Research shows that inclusive settings provide optimal learning environments for all students[14]. There is a renewed emphasis on prevention and early intervention. Boards are benefitting from anti-racism and human rights training; many are proactively approaching the Ontario Human Rights Commission seeking their input to help ensure that their processes are fair, equitable and transparent. Boards that showed initial resistance now acknowledge the need and value of the Strategy and are actively supporting it, for example by forming their own equity committees to further advance implementation.

The Strategy has provided a safe and open platform to bring challenging issues forward; collaboratively working with our partners utilizing a cross disciplinary approach to discuss and share strategies, evidence-informed practices and most importantly, collectively implement solutions. The EIE Networks have been highly effective in this regard; helping to build capacity within the sector by mobilizing and transferring knowledge including evidence informed strategies to identify and address discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to support student achievement and well- being.

The release of the Strategy has led to a growing network of partnerships that are forging valuable links between the government and the communities it serves. New partnerships have been formed with organizations such as the Antiracist Multicultural Educators Network of Ontario, Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, the Harmony Movement, the Canadian Centre for Diversity and the Ontario Multi-faith Council. The portfolio of evidence informed tools and resources that have been developed by the ministry, boards and our partners is unprecedented and continues to grow. International delegations, many from high performing jurisdictions, are coming to Ontario to learn about our work. Extensive outreach has been undertaken to extend our sphere of influence beyond the traditional educational realm to affect transformative change. For example, to date workshops have been provided to over 4,000 cadets at the Ontario Police College.

To realize long term, sustainable improvements across Ontario's education system, the focus is to support deeper implementation of the Strategy. For example, the ministry has partnered with the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) to work with boards to develop a performance assessment rubric, including benchmarks and indicators that reflect the goals of the EIE Strategy. The rubric will enable schools/boards to assess the implementation of their EIE policies and identify strengths/gaps to inform ongoing implementation.

The Enhanced Teacher Education Program will expand teacher pre-service to four semesters and include mandatory core content on teaching diverse populations and tailoring teaching methods to each student. The mandate of the Inclusive Education Branch itself has been expanded to include parent and community engagement and character education,

which are essential elements of the Strategy. A range of new and innovative initiatives continue to support deeper implementation of the Strategy: for example, The Centre for Urban Schooling (University of Toronto) is engaged in a pilot project with participating schools to develop culturally relevant and responsive teaching e-learning modules to help teachers incorporate these principles into their instructional practice.

GOING FORWARD

While much has been accomplished, there is more that needs to be done. We are continuing our journey, entering the next phase of the Strategy, renewing the ministry's commitment and identifying next steps in implementation.

Since Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy was first published in 2009, a renewed vision for education has been established, which builds on the system's three priorities of: increasing student achievement, closing gaps in student achievement and increasing public confidence in publicly funded education. It encompasses these goals and reaches deeper and broader, raising expectations both for the system and for the potential of children and students.

The renewed goals for education are:

- Achieving Excellence: Children and students of all ages will achieve high levels of academic performance, acquire valuable skills and demonstrate good citizenship. Educators will be supported in learning continuously and will be recognized as among the best in the world;

- Ensuring Equity: All children and students will be inspired to reach their full potential, with access to rich learning experiences that begin at birth and continue into adulthood;

- Promoting Well-Being: All children and students will develop enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills to make positive choices;

- Enhancing Public Confidence: Ontarians will continue to have confidence in a publicly funded education system that helps develop new generations of confident, capable and caring citizens[15].

The Strategy recognizes that an equitable, inclusive education system is one in which all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected, and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning[16].

> *"The increasingly rich diversity of our student population is not a problem, but rather an opportunity that benefits all learners in a classroom community[20]."*

Embracing diversity and moving beyond tolerance and celebration to inclusivity and respect will help us reach our goal of making Ontario's education system the most equitable in the world.

Everyone in our publicly funded education system — regardless of background or personal circumstances — must feel engaged and included. Realizing the promise of our diversity is a continuous process grounded in actively respecting and valuing the full range of our differences. As Ontario strives to achieve excellence, we will continue to strengthen our focus to provide our students with every opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential.

NOTES

[1] "Excellence in Diversity Education Award", January 2011, Canadian Intercultural Dialogue Centre, Intercultural Dialogue Institute, Canadian Race Relations Foundation's National Award of Excellence 2010, Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, Parents Reaching Out (PRO) Grants recognized as an effective practice among 20 top performing school systems (November 2010, McKinsey & Company report).

[2] OESC templates - www.oesc-cseo.org/English/equityInclusivity.html

[3] Leithwood, Ken, Langan, L., & Hoshizaki, W. (2010). Leading the Future: A Project of the Directors of Education in Southwest Ontario, Final Report (Final Report). Institute for Education Leadership, p.5.

[4] www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/framework.html

[5] www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/linguistique/guide/

[6] www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/index.html

[7] www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/sstudies.html

[8] www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/partnership/

[9] www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/SupportResGuide.pdf

[10] OECD, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States, 2011

[11] www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm#a5

[12] Accepting Schools Expert Panel- www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/safeschools.html

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[16] Hattie, J (2008) Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement, p.70, 238.

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