

# INFORMATION SHEET

## THE ENGAGED PARENT

### NAVIGATING THE SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR BLACK STUDENT SUCCESS

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1-2

3

4-5

6-8

9

10-11

12

*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.*

These are critical years in your child's education. What happens in these years will determine whether your child will graduate on time and whether they can go on to post-secondary education.

In Grade 10 all students across Ontario receive a literacy test to measure whether they are meeting the minimum standard for literacy. Successful completion of the literacy test is one of the requirements to graduate from high school. Get support for your child if they show signs of test anxiety. In the fall of the next school year, each student will receive their 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 your child settles into the high school experience, it's a great time to explore career options and set plans for post-secondary education. If you haven't already done so, begin to have conversations with your child about their career aspirations. Meet with a teacher, the principal, or the guidance counsellor to

find out what high school courses are needed to get into these programs. It's also not too early to begin to visit college and university campuses or to attend the Ontario Universities' Fair.

It is critical that you are speaking with your child each day and checking in regularly with their teachers to make sure they're staying on top of homework and understand what is required of them. Find out early whether your child is not on track to graduate. Speak with the guidance counsellor about credit recovery options if necessary.

If possible, find a mentor for your teenager. A mentor who is working can offer career advice, set up an internship, help your child get a summer job, provide different perspective on issues, and help teenagers build self-confidence. A college or university mentor can also help your child improve their study habits to prepare for post-secondary education. A mentor can't replace a parent's guidance, but a mentor can serve as another advocate for teens during these important high school years.



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.

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 throughout their schooling, which affects their success in school and their well-being.<sup>1</sup>

## THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

- You may receive an information package from the school. Read through the materials carefully with your child. Check to ensure that your child is enrolled in the courses they selected. If not, call the school to have this changed immediately.
- Visit the school's website regularly. You may find additional information about upcoming events and special dates.
- Your child's graduation from high school is based on their meeting the credit requirements of an Ontario Secondary School Diploma—a minimum of 30 credits, of which 18 are compulsory. Check your child's report card to find out how many they have accumulated and whether they are falling behind.
- Attending summer school is an option to gain additional credits or to repeat a course to improve their grade.
- At this stage, you and your child should discuss

their career goals and whether college or university is part of their plan. This will help you determine what high school your child should attend, their program of study (academic, applied, or essentials), and which courses to take. University-bound students would follow the academic stream, while college-bound students would follow the applied stream. Students in the essentials program of study will not be accepted to college or university.

The academic program of study provides more options to your child and a strong foundation for future studies. Even if they don't want to go to university, academic courses will allow them to attend college. However, they will not be accepted to university if they take applied courses.

- The curriculum, although not easy reading, is available online for all to see:

Grade 10: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/grade10.html>;

Grade 11: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/grade11.html>).

These documents outline what is expected of your child throughout the school year. If your child is interested in attending college or university, you should know which credit requirements are compulsory versus optional for their chosen educational path.

- To receive their high school diploma, all students are required to complete 40 hours of community service. Help your child find a local community organization so that they can achieve their volunteer hours early in high school. You don't want to wait until grade 12 to be thinking about this requirement.
- If you haven't already, visit a university or college campus with your child. You may also be able to sit in on some classes. You can use the excursion to not only show your child how great the environment is, but also emphasize why it's so important for them to put in the hard work now.

- Encourage your child to read newspapers, books, practice math problems over the summer holidays to keep their skills sharp. This way, they won't be losing their skills and knowledge over the summer.

## WHAT TO DO DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- Get to know the teachers, the principal, the office secretary and the other key personnel at the school. Your child is likely to have new teachers this year. You must engage in the process of getting to know these teachers and making sure they know that your child has an engaged and caring parent behind them.
- Continue to help your child get and stay organized so they remain on top of their homework assignments and upcoming tests while also balancing their extracurricular activities.
- Do your best to attend all parent–teacher meetings, after carefully reviewing your child's report card. Make notes when you ask questions for clarification or when you want to find out where your child is not doing well so you can seek assistance if necessary.
- If your child's marks are low or slipping, talk to your child about issues that they may be having. Get the supports that they may need. You also don't need to wait for the parent–teacher meeting to talk to teachers. Make an appointment to see them in person to discuss your child's performance. Your child might want to attend the meeting with you to raise their concerns.
- Check to make sure that your child is still on track to earn the credits needed for graduation and admission to the university or college of their choice.
- You also need to check in about the school climate and any issues in the school. Be aware of any incidents of racism at the school. What was it about? Who did it involve? How was it resolved? Was your child affected by it? There may be issues happening in the school, and your child may need

you to be a strong advocate to help them cope with or address it.

- Continue to monitor the amount of time your child spends on cell phones, iPads, computers, and in front of the TV. Be sure that they get home work and studying done before they get screen time. Also make sure they don't stay up late chatting on their cell phone, and therefore disrupting their ability to sleep, by placing the phone to charge in the kitchen or living room before they go to bed. A good night's sleep is still important at this age, and many students lose a lot of sleep because they are on their cell phones.

## 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.

## PREPARING FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

- By now, you should have had a discussion with your child about career goals and whether they want to pursue college or university. If you haven't had this conversation, now is the time.
- While guidance counsellors at school can provide support, you need to take the lead on guiding your child through this process. The guidance counsellor is there to support your child and offer information, but you and your child are responsible for making decisions about post-secondary education. There may be other resources in the community that can support your decision-making. If you find that a teacher or guidance counsellor is making decisions for your child, you may need to step in.

- Do some research to find out what post-secondary institutions offer diplomas or degrees in the field your child is interested in. You and your child can do the research on these colleges and universities to rank them in order of preference. Spend some time going through the admission requirements for each of the preferred universities and/or colleges, noting dates for submission and what is needed (in addition to transcripts—e.g., an essay, a portfolio, application fees, etc.)
- Ensure that your child's course selections are appropriate to obtain the required credits for graduation from high school and admission to post-secondary institutions.
- Remember that your child has to complete at least 40 hours of community service as part of their graduation requirements. The counsellor may be able to assist in a placement or help to make the formal arrangements so that your child's hours are documented.
- Your child's application to university and college will be submitted early in Grade 12. As a result, the admissions decision will be based on their marks in Grade 11 and the first term of Grade 12. Remind your child that Grade 11 is a critical year for them. The better the marks on their final transcript, the more likely your child will be accepted by their first choice of school. These final marks also have a bearing on scholarships—some of which your child will be automatically eligible for after submitting their application to university.
- One of the best things parents can do is to talk with other parents and teens. Many of them may have friends or older siblings in college or university right now and can be a great resource.
- Take advantage of opportunities to visit college and university campuses. Most offer campus tours for high school students, summer programs, or financial aid workshops for students and parents.
- Most major cities in Ontario have an Ontario Universities' Fair once a year. Find out when they are held and plan to visit with your child.

## THINGS TO WATCH FOR IN YOUR CHILD

- If your child's marks are starting to drop in some subjects, find out why. Talk to your child about the issues they may be having. Is your child having difficulty with the subject or are there other reasons, such as lack of homework preparation, distraction by other activities, not grasping the subject, or falling behind?
- You need to determine when it is time to intervene. Are your child's extracurricular activities hampering their learning? Or is there something else going on? If you are not getting a plausible answer, it's time to approach the teacher for an update. Is your child truly having difficulty with the subject or are there other reasons for the poor showing?
- Once you've talked to your child, talk to the teacher to try to gain an understanding of the issue. Compare notes between what the teacher said and what your child said. Did something happen that triggered the change but has nothing to do with your child's skills or knowledge?
- Always be on the lookout for any change in your child's demeanor. If your child's mood changes without warning and the shift is prolonged, try to find out what's going on. Responses may not be readily available about what is troubling them. Make sure you let your child know that you are willing to listen. If the issue is serious, seek professional help.
- Be sure to set boundaries and have conversations if there are issues. If they are late coming home, find out why. They are at an age where even minor issues can get them into serious trouble, so it is appropriate to set boundaries. At the same time, it is okay to allow a bit of leeway to demonstrate that you trust their judgment.

- 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.<sup>2</sup> Stay continuously engaged with your child's education to make sure you can recognize whether and when this is happening.
- Get to know who your child's friends are. These might be friends who are not on the same trajectory as your child and could get in the way of your child doing well in school.
- Your child may experience periods of self-doubt. Your encouragement will go a long way in boosting their confidence.

### THINGS TO WATCH FOR COMING FROM THE TEACHER

- We live in a world where anti-Black racism exists. Don't think that there won't be issues in school. You should always be on guard in the event that there are issues with a teacher or with other students that are not appropriately addressed by the teacher.
- Your child is working towards a future career goal that they have probably selected with your support. While the role of teachers and guidance counsellors is to support your child to achieve their goals, they might directly or indirectly try to change that goal. If this occurs, you may need to step in. Black students often report that they are discouraged from setting high goals and expectations for themselves. This discouragement could come about through course selection as your child prepares to enter Grade 9. The teacher and guidance counsellor may attempt to steer your child away from an academic stream and

toward an applied stream, regardless of their marks in grade 8. You need to be engaged in your child's course selection as they enter high school. Do your research to find out about the courses and the streams and what it means for your child's future studies.

- Checking in with the teachers once in a while will help. Find out whether your child is attending classes, handing in homework on time, and coming in prepared for tests and exams. If there are problems in any of these areas, you need to know. Some teachers may call to alert you in advance, especially if you have developed a good relationship with them. Other teachers may not call you and expect you to call them for information.
- In conversations with teachers, listen to how they talk about your child. Is the teacher happy with your child's performance? Does the teacher have high expectations of your child or are they satisfied with the low marks your child is getting? Carefully read all teachers' comments on your child's behaviour and performance in class. If you know that your child is not doing well in a class, yet the teacher's comments are glowing, meet with the teacher to discuss your expectations.
- Research shows that Black children tend to be suspended for behaviours for which other children are not.<sup>3</sup> A suspension could also damage your child's self-esteem and reduce their chances of graduating from high school.<sup>4</sup> 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. You may need to hire a lawyer to fight a suspension or expulsion.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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/>