

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.

These middle school years are critical in shaping your child's future, as they will set the stage for success in high school, post-secondary studies, and the labour market. The work and the workload will get tougher, and your child must develop the study skills needed to do their best.

In Grade 6 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 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.

If you have been engaged in your child's education, you probably have an idea of the subjects your child is good in, what they are interested in, their study habits, and the potential career paths in which they are showing an interest. This is a time to be thinking about your child's career options, keeping in mind that these **may change** as your child explores the many possibilities.

Your child may have already decided on a career path—carpenter, mechanic, lawyer, doctor, teacher, engineer. But even if they haven't, try to be open and begin exploring careers that may be of interest. If they have their sights set on a specific career, expose them to information about the profession and people who work in that field. For example, if they're interested in becoming a lawyer, take them to a court to observe a proceeding or find a lawyer in the community who is willing to speak with them. This is also a good time to do some research about the educational requirements of these careers to understand what courses they will need to take in high school. Regardless of their interest, be sure to expose them to a number of related and unrelated possibilities.

Keep in mind that university isn't always the right option for all children. In the current economy, a university degree does not guarantee a well-paying job. In fact, many students are choosing college after graduating from high school because college offers programs with more hands-on experience and



instruction from experts who work in the field. Explore all options that are of interest to your child.

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 throughout 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.

- **Ask about what your child is learning in school.** Knowing what they are learning at school helps you support and encourage your child's interests and curiosity at home.
- **Maintain good study habits.** At this stage, it is important that your child has the space at home to complete homework. If possible, create a dedicated space at home for studying. If you don't have the space, help your child find somewhere quiet at the local library for studying and completing homework.
- **Support a love for reading.** Make sure your child continues reading. It's the best way to develop their vocabulary and deepen their understanding of the world. Studies show that it is better for children to read physical books than read the same material on a tablet or computer. Take your child to the library and help them find books with stories that capture their interest and feature characters that look like them. This will help foster a love of reading while also developing important reading skills. Encourage your child to read or keep in touch with the news (though you will want to monitor where they get their information and how much news they consume). It helps them to think critically about how government works, the role of elected officials, world affairs, and other issues.
- **Keep a routine.** A regular bedtime and at least 8 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.** Because schools often don't teach Black history, you need to supplement your child's education with books about Black history and events that promote Black history, culture, and achievements. Knowledge of their cultural and racial heritage helps your child to develop a positive self-image, which will benefit them for life.
- **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.** Parents need to monitor the amount of time their children spend 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 when online. You should also monitor how much time you spend on your cell phone while you're with your child.
- **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 middle school at a different location, you should receive a package of material from the school your child will be attending. This package will likely contain registration dates, information meetings, possible school or classroom tours, rules, and bussing information. Read through this information with your child so that they know what to expect. Make a note of Professional Development days and parent-teacher interviews.
- Many schools now have their own websites. Check it fairly often for bulletins that might not have been included in the information package.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- Show support for your child's academic success by making sure you know when tests are scheduled and assignments are due. Ensure your child is well rested and eats a healthy breakfast on those days.
- 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.
- Regularly check the school's website for news and information. Although schools or individual teachers might send home information notes, they may not always make it home.
- 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. It may be useful to get to know a neighbour whose child attends the same school and is possibly in the same class. You could share duties such as pick-ups or drop-offs and visits to special events.

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- When possible, volunteer at events, during school field trips, and on committees. These are not only opportunities to support the school, but also a great opportunity to keep in touch with what goes on at school. As the parent of a Black student, this degree of involvement is critical if you are to help your child navigate a school system that is not always supportive of the success of Black students.
- School performances that your child is involved in (e.g., concerts, basketball or other competitive games) are all important activities that you should be aware of and try to attend. Participating in these activities are important to your child's development, but don't let them get in the way of their academic studies. Many students have hopes of playing in the NBA and may replace studying with basketball practice. But keep in mind that your child has a better chance of becoming a doctor or engineer than a professional basketball player.
- Attending parent-teacher meetings continues to be important. But remember that you can speak with teachers at any time of the year. Your child might want to attend the meeting with you to address their concerns.
- If your child is having difficulty with a subject, seek support. It is critical that they have the foundational knowledge, skills, and study habits at this stage to be successful in high school. By finding a tutor, you are helping your child bridge a gap and prepare them for success. Even children doing well in school could benefit from the help of a tutor to challenge them when their school work doesn't.
- 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 HIGH SCHOOL

- 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.

- You and your child should also talk about which high school they wish to attend, if there is a choice in the neighbourhood. It may be possible to enroll in a school outside your area if the

program is better suited to your child's aspirations. If that is the case, visit the websites of prospective schools and, once your decision is made, apply to register your child.

- Talk with the teacher, guidance counsellor, or principal about the choices open to your child. Some schools are considered “feeder” schools for the high school in the area, and registration could be automatic.
- 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.

THINGS TO WATCH FOR IN YOUR CHILD

- Do your best to always check in with your child about their assignments. You want to ensure they are beginning their assignments early and leaving enough time to complete them. Check to ensure they understand the instructions and what is expected of them. Check on the quality of work to ensure what they hand in represents their best effort. And always check on the grade they receive. If you don't think the grade reflects the quality of the assignment, meet with the teacher to discuss the grade. This will also be a learning opportunity for your child to understand expectations for future assignments.
- If your child is getting high marks, you still need to remain engaged. You should congratulate them for their marks and encourage them to keep up the good work. Point out that their organizational skills, practice, and hard work led to the high marks. These efforts are critical for their future success and need to continue.
- Watch how your child deals with disappointments such as a low mark, not making a team, or being unable to participate in an event. You should

ensure that your child doesn't get overwhelmed by the disappointment, but instead feels encouraged by you to not give up. Consider the many possibilities: Do they need to try harder the next time? Could it be that they're better off focusing on something they're better at? Or perhaps they need to spend more time practicing? Explore these and other options with your child.

- This is also a time that self-doubt can set in. Instead of seeing failures as isolated events, your child may begin to doubt their abilities.
- Keep your child focused on the hard work needed to be successful and ensure that they get any help or tutoring they need. You should also look for any evidence that self-doubt or bouts of sadness are turning into something more serious. Seek professional help if your child appears to be developing mental health issues.
- 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.
- You should also watch for anxiety when your child has a major test coming up. If they are experiencing test anxiety, seek out support for your child.

THINGS TO WATCH FOR COMING FROM 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.

- 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.³ A suspension could also damage your child's self-esteem and reduce 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. You may need to hire a lawyer to fight a suspension or expulsion.

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/>