

# 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.*

Your child is now beginning high school. The child that you have nurtured and protected all their life is entering a stage that fuels their independence—making decisions about their life, career, and relationships at school and outside of school. You are not letting go, but you are recognizing that they have grown up. They may not think they need you anymore, but they still require the love, guidance, and support of a parent/guardian.

Grade 9 is an important year. It is the first year of high school and sets the stage for success in high school and post-secondary education.

In Grade 9 all students across Ontario get tested for the math skills they are expected to have at this grade. 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 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.



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.<sup>1</sup>

### THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

- Expect to receive an information package from the new school once you have registered your child or at the time of registration. 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.
- 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 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/grade9.html>.

This document outlines 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 ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

- The first day of high school can be hectic. The information package you will have received will probably list your child's homeroom (the first classroom they go to in the mornings

for attendance and announcements). There, the homeroom teacher will introduce themselves and any procedures your child is expected to follow. It's possible you may not get to meet the homeroom teacher at this time.

- There will be information meetings early in the year that you and your child will be expected to attend. These are important meetings, as they give you an opportunity to meet the teachers and ask them questions. Even if you don't have questions, it is important for your child's teachers to meet you and know that, as the parent/guardian of a Black child, you are involved and care a great deal about their success in school and beyond.
- In high school, students will have different teachers for each subject, and each teacher's approach to teaching could be different. Their standards for grading might also differ. Some will give more homework than others. Some will appear not to care that your child has a lot of homework for their other subjects. Early in the school year, get to know each teacher and their expectations of your child.

## WHAT TO DO DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- You likely won't meet your child's teachers right away, as the school and the teachers might want to take the time to get to know each student and how well they are adapting to high school. In the meantime, you can continue to follow the progress of your child by having conversations, asking them about their marks for homework or tests, and paying attention to any notes in their school agenda.
- 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.
- Volunteer when possible for class outings,

preparation for special events, and parent committees. Again, these are good opportunities to understand what is happening at school and in the school environment.

- 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.
- Continue to monitor how your child is adapting to high school. How is your child finding the pace of teaching? Are they finding it hard to keep up with the content and homework? Have they handed in assignments on time? How have their test scores been?
- Talk to your child about their extracurricular activities—what clubs have they joined, what teams have they tried out for? How often do the clubs or teams meet? You need to ensure that they are able to get their school work done while participating in extracurricular activities.
- If you spot a weakness in one or more of your child's subjects, talk to your child about issues they may be having. Get the supports they may need. Rather than waiting for the parent-teacher meeting, you can also call or speak to the child's teacher at any time throughout the year. Your child might want to attend the meeting with you to raise their concerns. Try to get a good picture of how they are doing and what the problem might be from the teacher's point of view—Are they not attentive in class? Can they handle the course material or is the subject out of their reach? It is important to find a tutor or other source of help so that your child doesn't fall behind.
- Remember, some of the selections of subjects are based on the career the child hopes to get into. Use that as a basis for encouraging your child to pay more attention to the subject and offering to help as much as possible.

- 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 homework 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.

## 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 what the issue is. 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? Find out what supports you can get them.
- 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 the teacher to try to gain an understanding, 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 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.
- 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

- 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/>