



Focussed Conversations with African, Afro-Caribbean and Black Students, Families and Community

The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement

Introduction

Over a five-month period in 2021, the University of Toronto's Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement engaged with African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black (ACB) students, families, and community members in focus group conversations. The consultations are part of a broader effort to develop family-school-community partnerships, which focus on a shared responsibility to support Black students and families. This engagement includes multi-



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Executive Summary

This executive report provides an overview of the key themes and recommendations from consultations conducted by the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement with the African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black (ACB) community. Three stakeholder groups – students, families and/or caregivers, and community members – participated in these consultations. Stakeholders were invited over five months (May-July; October-November 2021) to have focussed conversations. Throughout the focus group sessions, the Centre of Excellence research



pain, exhaustion, and struggle to describe what it means to be Black. Some described being Black as having a superpower or sense of purpose. Many described themselves as knowledgeable about the history of Black struggle and passing that history on to the next generation as a fact of life.

The importance of centring the voices of the ACB stakeholders

Historically speaking, the Ontario system of public education has been challenged by ACB families, students, community, and educators for not being responsive towards the needs of Black students. It is undeniable that anti-Black racism and Eurocentrism negatively impact the academic experiences of Black youths. In many instances, the aspirations of their families are not met. (M, Pizarro, and Nevárez) Black students are challenged by the dominance of racist stereotypes, manifested by the constant and inescapable, racist, hegemonic fog in the air of the Ontario education system. Black racism in Black student schooling experiences. Therefore, understanding how the Black identity has been constructed historically and in contemporary education remains a starting point for discussions rooted in actualizing change.

In education, ACB students and families may not be viewed as commanding authorities to bring about change which is necessary to challenge traditional narratives that are based on the normalization of whiteness and Eurocentrism. However, centring ACB diverse cultures and identities can increase their sense of belonging in the school environment. To disrupt the status quo, board-wide interventions and mechanisms must be established within the classroom to help educators teach and empower Black students effectively. The need for education leaders to partner with Black communities is also a focal point to reimagine school environments that: (1) centre Black voices; (2) recognize the community and students as assets and (3) nurture those strengths to improve their wellbeing and overall educational success. This understanding also extends to supporting self-identifying Black educators who teach students and who also experience difficulties and barriers in their daily work environment.

Indeed, a collaborative school-family-community-wide approach is critical for systems change. Our public education system has not done a good job of serving all students equitably, especially, Black students who enter schools with their various intersectionalities (i.e., class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers). To ensure that schools genuinely serve all students, our schools and communities must be in dialogue with each other about what

⁴ Kohli, R., Pizarro, U. & Nevárez, M. (2019). M12 schools: Centering critical research on racism.



inclusion means, which barriers prevent inclusion, and how we can remove those barriers. For Black families and their children, their community and always has been a protective factor in their lives. Community provides comfort and familiarity and supports their determination as they navigate an anti-Black world.

As the Board recognizes the ongoing duty to advocate for the needs of everyone in its school communities, it remains the responsibility of school leaders and staff to address racism, equity and cultural responsiveness in their leadership practice and the classrooms. This is substantiated fully in the annotated bibliography created for educators to develop their critical consciousness practitioner inquiries.



Summary of Key Theme and Findings



The Centre group was discussed.

- Recommendations were given on the role of the Centre of Excellence in strengthening school/family partnerships.
- Stakeholders discussed the Centre of Excellence as being a hub for the community and support to bridge the gap between families and schools.
- Families talked about the need to have coordinated resources and services to support Black students and their families.
- Suggestions were given about improving engagement with community organizations to strengthen resources and provide a mechanism to respond to student and family needs directly.
- Parents/caregivers reinforced the need for the Centre of Excellence to take leadership in promoting Black academic excellence and to be a strong advocate and mediator for students and their families.

Recommendations

Students, families, and community members shared recommendations to improve classroom conditions, negotiate school communities and improve partnerships. Many of the suggestions visualized a much broader concept of education that move towards student success, parent empowerment and increased partnerships. This coincides with the Centre of Excellence mandates and the initiatives outlined in the 5-year strategic plan that underscore the need to build strong relationships with students, staff and families so they may engage in discussions and learning opportunities on critical issues that impact their schooling experiences. More importantly, developing and supporting a research-based family engagement framework is essential to determine when programs are working and how to improve them. Therefore,

methodologies Utilizing Afrocentric methodologies was intended to be used to investigate pertinent research questions legitimately and effectively (i.e., truthfully and inclusively), especially those methodologies that possess embedded assumptions about race and culture. Notably, Afrocentric orientations to data, or Afrocentric research methodologies, will push the inquiry into a higher realm where the methodology and the process of knowledge construction cease to take precedence over the well-being of the people being researched.

Conceptualization

Initial planning meetings were held with Centrally Assigned Principal, Karen Murray, System Superintendent, Jacqueline Spence, Manager of Research and Development, David Cameron, and the Centre of Excellence research coordinator, Tanitiã Munroe. Once the purpose and the population for the research had been defined the list of focus group interview questions was developed to be shared with participants in their invitation letters. These questions were also to be made available and shared by facilitators on a slide deck in the breakout rooms during the online focus group sessions.

Part of the planning was to ensure that the questions being asked during the focus groups served a dual purpose. The first was to have conversations on the various ways to implement the mandates identified by the Centre of Excellence. The second was the following:

- To create opportunities for students to engage in discussions and learning opportunities related to issues that impact their wellbeing and support improve their learning needs and amplify their voices.
- To create an opportunity for the families of ACB students to discuss issues that impact their leadership and engagement in the school community and to give us insight on the ways that the Centre of Excellence can serve them.
- To engage in discussions on how to promote meaningful and collaborative school community engagement with community stakeholders.

Therefore, the final stage of the planning was to have information sessions about the consultations with ACB staff (e.g., Community Support Workers) and advisory groups (e.g., Black Student Achievement Community Advisory Committee BSACAC) that support Black students and families and engage with community organizations. This approach informed us of any changes needed in the overall consultation and outreach strategy.

⁹ Reviere, R. (2001). Toward an Afrocentric research methodology. *Journal of Black Studies*, 31(6), 709-728.



Logistics

The research coordinator and research associates sent email reminders and followed up with text messages and phone calls on each day of the group sessions. Students, families, and community stakeholders appreciated this approach. Many parents and caregivers commented on feeling inundated with emails and expressed difficulties keeping track of important updates or information, so our communications were especially helpful.

Self-identifying Black Staff Representation

It was important that



Black Studies Approach to the Analysis

It was our intention to ensure that narratives, and counter narratives were represented in the interpretations and findings. This approach to the findings allowed us to understand how the collective and individual experiences related to the broader systemic issues. What matters is the team have been able to understand the lived experiences of the communities we are engaging with.

From a critical race theory methodological perspective (e.g, Black Crit¹, QuantCrit², Community Cultural Wealth³) it is important, especially when they are attempting to investigate culturally specific phenomena (Carroll, 2008)⁴. It was important to acknowledge and reconcile our own worldview orientation during the knowledge mobilization process. As researchers, we had a particular understanding of Black communities or people in research and

can create a mutually respectful and supportive relationship not only academic support, but emotional support as well. In every case, participants felt that it would make them feel empowered if their teachers took an interest in them. Several students asked teachers not to give up on students so easily and to focus on finding out the barriers or reasons why Black students

By the same token, parents and caregivers suggested that teachers offer resources, patience, and time, rather than giving up on them. Participants agreed that a sense of belonging at school can support students through a particularly vulnerable time when they are forming their identity, developing psychosocial skills, and trying to navigate the world.

2.1 Centring Joy in the Classroom and Practice

To resist the negativity and racism that students face, participants suggested that teachers reimagine classrooms by centring joy in their pedagogy and practice. For parents and caregivers, classrooms are a safe space where students encounter trauma, feel anxious/and are unable to connect with Black students to the degree that they need, and replace those things with books, music, laughter, vulnerability, humility, conversation, and growth.

was this person pivotal? Why are we learning this person? You look at their accomplishment and then work backwards. We always find Black History Month starts at



it is just passion. Like they just need to understand the cultural wants, the things that just make us tick without trying to plug it to children and suppress it. Just these are things that will help the children be better understood and not seen as unruly, undisciplined, just

Centring Black joy, for the participants, meant that teachers recognize how important it is for "te moments that tap into activities and

2.2 Affinity Spaces for Black Students

Motivated by the renewed call to discuss anti-Black racism, police violence and deaths of Black people, students felt that a need to go deeper in their understanding of these issues has led them to seek out peers and community for support. Participants said that they have formed study

now more aware and are drawn together because of anti-racism. h recommended that all schools should have a safe space where Black students could come together to learn about anti-Black racism, anti-racism, racial equity, and social justice. As one @ " @

my shoulder and be among other B

Students and families suggested establishing Equity Councils in schools as another avenue to promote affirming spaces. Participants reported that the Equity Councils have had a positive impact on the schooling experience of ACB students. For example, Equity Councils provided a platform for ACB students to share their challenges in school with ACB students.

2.3 Teaching Black History During and Beyond the Month of February



begins with them as individuals. Others discussed the many practical ways that teachers could apply an anti-racist analysis into the course content, pedagogy, and activities.

2.5 Representation: An Essential Component in the Affirmation Process

Representation in schools and classrooms was discussed as an essential component of affirmation. Participants referred to the importance of many elements of representation including positive images of Black people on school walls and in classrooms, and representation in curricula and educational materials, such as books, films, and podcasts. Representation was particularly important for students in the lower grades. Additionally, participants believed that teaching materials need to normalize Blackness.

both to bring in materials, no matter how much they understand that our education



Grade one, my son has had the Black male French teacher directly, which I think was pivotal in his success and self-worth. And half of those teachers were in the formative years (which) I think was



Parents, caregivers, and students underscored the need to have access to quality education to achieve the goal of improving their outcomes in the school environment. According to participants, schools should put greater effort into reducing or eliminating the achievement gap for Black students. Participants felt that schools needed to help Black students build their skills and academic achievement. Most of the participants believed that in order for the Board to make substantive changes in closing the achievement gap, schools must create more opportunities for Black students' voices to be amplified and decrease the





@ nk that a major part is the lack of healing of past trauma from parents and their experiences within the school board. So, lack of trust. The fact that every time there more, not all the time, but quite often schools are contacting parents, always with a

u s a bit of a fear, I think, around that new parent the coming in and that involvement. I think we feel more empowered to come forward and say, I want to do this. This is my school to rather than taking a back seat. We noticed that and I'm hearing that a lot and its causing a lot of friction. So, when negotiating and navigating the conversation when those frictions come up between parents and the school. And then the

" @ there is a need to come up with strategies in education for the educator Whether it be to combat their biases or to bridge that gap to make parents, Black parents, [Indigenous]parents. Because again, we know of all the trauma that been put on the Black and [Indigenous]community through educati



While Black parents and caregivers problematized their parent involvement as gendered, class based, race based and Eurocentric, it is equally important that educators be aware of the problems that Black LGBTQ2SIA+ families encounter when interacting in schools. Their family composition, gender identity and sexual orientation are other factors or . LGBTQ2SIA+ families described their experiences which include (1) homophobia and transphobia among school staff, (2) religious beliefs of school professionals, (3) experience with intersectional discrimination and anti-Black racism, (4) inability of school staff to address the discrimination LGBTQ2SIA+ students encounter as a human rights issue, (5) anxiety about traditional male and female gender roles, (6) unwillingness of school staff to view gender as non-binary, (7) unfamiliarity with the vernacular used to discuss LGBTQ2SIA+ issues, (8) lack of representation in the curriculum with respect to Black LGBTQ2SIA+ people and communities, and (9) fear of conflict with the dominant heterosexual parent on school councils.

Parent Council

A common theme expressed by participants was the lack of opportunities available for Black parents/caregivers to be involved in the school parent council. The gatekeeping and power exerted by some members revealed experiences with micro

One participant further noted that the only positions which appeared to be available were assisting with fundraising and bake sales. Several mothers suggested that what was regarded as white mothers and teachers regarded



Participants felt that having administrators who demonstrated cultural competence allowed them to be more aware of how to interact with Black families.

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understand the racial and cultural makeup of the students and families they serve are more understanding. They know how to speak to us and not let us feel like we do not

As Black trans dad that has encountered so many transphobia, misgendering and anti Black racism from different teachers, it was good encountering one vice principal who took





woman would come with in Black History Month. For my second child, I was told off. Her

and I was like who are you relating to? Certainly not the one Black student in your class.

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@ [redacted] hers] act that way when we ask that they treat our kids the same way. Why do Black parents face so much microaggression? Why are some of these teachers so downright racist against us when we ask for them to see our kids as belonging in their classrooms?

I remember having to escalate an issue when my daughter was, I believe Grade 9 or Grade 10. I had to go to the principal after I was getting nowhere with this rude teacher.

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[redacted] willing to hop over to demand changes or demand that an incident is addressed Teachers reacting to your child. They know their power; they know nothing will happen to them.

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Parents and Caregivers of Black Students in French Immersion Programs

h [redacted] 7 [redacted] 0 [redacted] 0 [redacted] programs. Several of them shared their experience with schools that continue to find ways to keep Black families out of French Immersion schools. Anecdotal examples were given of school administrators and teachers demonstrating anti-Blackness or creating conditions that led to families removing their children from schools.

Parents and caregivers also reflected on how deeply problematic the French Immersion school Participants suggested that the attitudes and ideology in the French programs created a division along the lines of race, gender and class.

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@ [redacted] other because they are a few of

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7 [redacted] @ [redacted], I discovered that there were programs like this 0 G [(,)]1>-4<0192.3pas emou 0 G [(,)]1G [(s)2()-65-17(ac)6(r)-4(ed th)



wife. They even tried to tell us they had no space for my children, and we should enroll them in the English programs. My wife wanted to not fight with them but insisted that my kids be

† There are a lot of Black students that entered. By the time Grade 1 hit, they're practically all gone because they couldn't deal with the teacher saying, "Oh, we can't do this. They're not talking. They're not understanding. They're not catching on."

Participants also had difficulties getting the support they needed, especially when there were so few Black families at their schools. For parents and caregivers that decided to remove their children from French Immersion programs, they discussed being that support their children) that this practice was committed under a false pretence and belief that French immersion is too difficult for students with special education needs.

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and caregivers go help with resources and having a community member being present at meetings with administrators or teachers. Participants discussed the need for all Black families or parents of Black children to educate themselves on board policies and learn how to make the most of their rights as Black parents and using them as tools for accountability. For one parent who described their approach to advocating for my children or myself to be treated fairly, the parent suggested that their concerns were only taken seriously after teaching staff recognized that the parent was serious. The parent stated that the parent

Others asserted that teachers who do not feel their job and livelihood is threatened. They felt that teachers must learn that equity and fairness means that teachers need to ask themselves why they entered the teaching profession and do ongoing reflection on their own bias against Black students and families. Participants suggested that educators challenge themselves to unlearn racism and seek ways to improve themselves. Even if there are feelings of discomfort in this process, they should



Parents and community members suggested that re-building community relationships can be supported through an annual summit hosted by the Centre of Excellence. The summit would include a discussion on what the Centre of Excellence has accomplished throughout the school year, what was done with the research and consultations, and what will be done going forward to ensure that they are driving policy changes within TDSB. More importantly, the ACB community asserted that the policies should be driven by the data produced from conversations with ACB families to provide families with a sense of ownership of the data.

It has been a large concern for our community. When we have consultations, do something about it! We want to see action, measurables and implementation. We need to

Families and community participants understood that data collection necessary part of the responsibilities to influence and inform practice and policies. However, they suggested the database made available for use by school staff, department leaders, and to have their stories heard and implemented. The recommendations given in all schools as a move to... For several participants, this demonstrates the



Participants also suggested creating a database of Black agencies and professionals to give Black students opportunities for placements that, depending on their professional interest, could count towards their volunteer service hours requirement. It was suggested that support for Black students must be envisioned as a long-term, continuous goal over the entire year. Community participants also recommended that a coordinated peer mentorship program be developed in schools to provide unique mentorship and educational opportunities for Black students. These would include personal, academic, and professional development opportunities that create a fulfilling student experience and can enhance community members' engagement and awareness. Participants added that these are tangible ways that schools can build bridges with the Black community and show an interest in issues affecting Black students.

Suggestions were also made that the Centre of Excellence build connections between students and create opportunities for parents and families to connect and network while also providing support. Participants also discussed the significance of having the Centre of Excellence located in an actual building where families could visit with the intention of finding safety, connection, support, and inspiration.

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you live in the east, the west, whatever, so that we can come together because we have a tie that binds. We all have children within this umbrella, and we need to be able to connect them with strength. With numbers, there's strength

Participants asked that the Centre of Excellence facilitate the creation of spaces for healing for the Black community and provide counselling to deal with issues, such as internalized racism and generational trauma.

They also proposed the implementation of an Ombudsman at the Board to understand parents' experiences with anti-Black racism.

In addition to the recommendations and thoughts shared, participants asked that no one be left out of the conversation within the umbrella term of ACB. Participants stated that while there is a recognition that the term ACB is comprehensive, it also omits identifying Black members (e.g., Afro-Latinx, Afro-Indigenous). Therefore, schools must see the need to continuously be intentional in connecting with Black community members, families and organizations that are often not present.



Parents/caregivers also requested that the Centre of Excellence provide information about Board policies and procedures, changes taking place in the school system, and research that has been conducted with Black students.

Participants emphasized the need for timely and accessible communications to ensure that community members receive information in a clear, direct, and easy to understand manner.

In fulfilling its communication role, it was suggested that the Centre of Excellence coordinate, organize and share information on a variety of topics relevant to Black students and their families, including community activities and programs, mentorship and work opportunities, scholarships and grants for Black students, a list of easily accessible tutors, Black focused resources and organizations, community supports, and TDSB resources.

Hub for Resources

Participants expressed the need for the Centre of Excellence could receive services and assistance that they need, such as mental health resources, food security, support with settlement/immigration, employment services, child welfare, and/or coordinate care services for students whose parents are working multiple jobs to support their families.

@ ... so they can access what they need. In general, we're very private people who don't have to tell you that I need help with this or whatever. But if there was just a general information that they could go and go to this website, and they could find it or call this the number or something set up somehow, that they could talk to somebody directly

@ ... think the Centre has a unique ability to kind of be a hub ...the Centre will be able to synthesize the resources and the services that the community organizations are able to give out

Coordination of resources was seen as a very important strategy for aiding parents/caregivers to better advocate for and support their children.

Community members discussed the essential need for the Centre of Excellence to provide information to families on navigating the education system. It was also suggested that the Centre of Excellence provide guidance to parents/caregivers on the types of questions they could ask during parent/teacher interviews.

Curating Resources and Partnerships

Community members shared the importance of conducting a needs assessment of services and resources available internally and externally to TDSB. Such an assessment would be helpful in



identifying the gaps in accessing resources. Community members also suggested that an inventory of resources be developed to direct families in need of support. It was suggested that the Centre of Excellence connect with schools to gather that information. One suggested strategy for the needs assessment is community mapping (identifying the location of organizations) to find out what is available within the community and sharing that information with ACB community members. It was recommended that the Centre of Excellence partner with existing organizations doing impactful work in community mapping. Community participants

unaware that there are services available to them, such as laptops for students and services for students with special needs.

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Participants emphasized that increased collaboration with ACB communities must be centred on building partnerships in order to support community development.

Additionally, participants asserted that the Centre of Excellence must collaborate with educators

Staff in the Centre of Excellence were also encouraged to explore the many opportunities to partner with ACB service organizations.

It was also recommended that the Centre of Excellence partner with Afrocentric organizations to ensure a more comprehensive teaching of African history. Another suggestion was that the Centre of Excellence collaborate with universities on pathway planning.

Participants proposed that the Centre of Excellence establish partnerships with community groups that already have experience with Black organizations.

... between us, the community and particularly the Black community and the TDSB, we are going to have challenges, but if the philosophy is to be open, then you know, it works both ways

Building Relationships Between ACB Communities and Schools

Parents/caregivers reinforced the need for the Centre of Excellence to take leadership in promoting Black academic excellence and to be a strong advocate and mediator for students and their families.

Community members and organizations identified advocacy as a very central success factor for achieving effective school-community engagement. They highlighted advocacy as critical in ... and improving the quality of relationship between the TDSB and ACB communities.

Participants asserted that the Centre of Excellence cannot be neutral and must engage in action oriented advocacy to counter institutionalized anti-Black racism and gatekeeping that Black students, families, and ... encounter. Proposed proactive actions were highlighted to actively confront the unequal power dynamics and structures between schools and ACB communities. These include assessing policies, programs, curricula and hiring practices to ensure that they are equitable.

Voice and Advocacy

Participants expressed the need for the Centre of Excellence to be a voice for Black families. ... can speak on behalf of us and our children, and you can get into places as ACB staff that we





Appendix A

| Mandates | Community Recommendation |
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| <p>Student</p> <p>1. Providesupport to Black students in TDSB schools to combat racism, navigate complaint processes, identify barriers to success and access appropriate resources (e.g., scholarships, networking, mentoring).</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> x The Centre of Excellence should take leadership in promoting Black academic excellence and be a strong advocate and mediator for students and their families. x As part of its strong advocacy role, the Centre of Excellence staff must act as a mediator between schools and families facing discrimination and anti-Black racism in schools. Staff also need to address socio-emotional needs of students and support families. x The Centre of Excellence must coordinate, organize, and share information on a variety of topics relevant to Black students and their families, including community activities and programs mentorship and work opportunities, scholarships and grants for Black students, a list of easily accessible tutors, Black focused resources and organizations, community supports, and TDSB resources. x The Centre of Excellence must coordinate resources enabling parents/caregivers to better advocate and support their children. x The Centre of Excellence must support the identity and development of Black students. Specific suggestions include celebrating their achievements, creating grants specific for Black students, supporting the transition of students to high school, post secondary education and apprenticeships, offering tutoring and mentorship programs, lunch and after school programs, an Elders School program, extracurricular activities that engage students outside of school, and hosting cultural events, activities, and programming throughout the year. x The Centre of Excellence must build connections between Black students. x The Centre of Excellence must develop and enhance Black students' networking and mentorship starting a young age. It must provide Black students with opportunities to network with Black professionals who can serve as role models and provide them with |



approved annual budget for this purpose.

transparency were suggested as key factors for regaining trust and strengthening partnerships.

- x The Centre of Excellence must develop and foster collaborations with ACB communities that are centred on building partnerships to improve classroom
- x The Centre of Excellence must collaborate with educators through professional learning to develop their awareness about community resources available understanding and valuing how community members are involved in supporting families in and outside of schools.
- x The Centre of Excellence must support schools in understanding and valuing the cultural capital that exists in the Black community. A key success factor of a collaborative school community engagement is recognizing, seeking, and valuing the varied knowledge of ACB community members that teachers of Black students can draw from.
- x The Centre of Excellence needs to create a database of Black agencies and professionals, providing Black students with opportunities for placements which could count towards

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> x The Centre of Excellence must partner with organizations doing impactful work in community mapping. x The Centre of Excellence needs to work with universities on pathway planning. x The Centre of Excellence must establish partnerships with community groups that already have experience with Black organizations. |
| <p>Staff/System</p> <p>7. Use evidence to highlight promising practices and engage in meaningful research on topics relevant to Black students that are then integrated across schools and at the system level within the TDSB;</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> x The Centre of Excellence is called upon to support school staff with evidence-based plans to support promising practice that will improve the learning conditions of Black students. x The Centre of Excellence must engage in the work of providing support to educators and administrators to build their critical consciousness practitioner inquiries. Also implement guidelines for schools to conduct thorough equity audits, family and community engagement plans, teacher diversity initiatives, and professional development on transformative practices and social and emotional learning. |
| <p>8. Create professional learning in anti-Black racism and collaborate with other staff in facilitating learning in decolonization, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and human rights, while recognizing the similarities and intersections of various forms of oppression.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> x The Centre of Excellence should provide teacher training in cultural responsiveness and implicit bias and training on how teachers can relate to Black students. x The Centre of Excellence should also provide training for school staff to address the barriers and discrimination that newcomer families encounter in TDSB schools. |
| <p>9. Provide annual accountability reports and recommendations to the Board of Trustees and staff.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> x To fulfill its measure of accountability, schools must report back yearly to the Centre of Excellence on the progress they have made to achieve ACB representation and inclusion. x More focus group research should be undertaken with young children to gain insight into their schooling experiences and to hear the experiences and stories of families. |

