

# 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.*

This is it! Your dedication to your child throughout their school years has helped them reach an important milestone—Grade 12. Crossing this bridge means the next step is university, college, or the workforce.

While this milestone is significant, all your hard work and guidance doesn't stop here. There is still plenty of work to be done. You have to ensure that your child feels able to meet the challenges of this year to graduate. Can they improve on their Grade 11 marks? The better the marks in grade 12, the higher the possibility of getting a scholarship and a place at your child's post-secondary program of their choice.

You also need to support your child to select a college or university and a program of study.

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 they arise. 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>



## 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.
- You may also want to review OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) about financial aid, noting dates for application deadlines. You can also consult the online calculator to see how much your child could get in grant and loans ([www.ontario.ca/page/osap-ontario-student-assistance-program](http://www.ontario.ca/page/osap-ontario-student-assistance-program)). Tuition is only one cost of attending post-secondary school. But there are other costs such as books and supplies, and if your child goes away to school they'll need to pay for the cost of housing, food, and travel. Start researching scholarships for which you may be qualified and identify requirements (e.g., writing an essay, dates for application).
- Remember that your child has to complete at least 40 hours of community service as part of their graduation requirements. The guidance 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/or college will be submitted before their final exam. Based on their marks in Grade 11 and the first term of Grade 12, your child may be offered a conditional acceptance to several universities or colleges, an offer to be confirmed or withdrawn after the final marks for Grade 12 are received.
- The better the marks on the 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.
- This is not a coasting year for your child. The work load will be heavier, so good study habits will be crucial. The better their final marks, the more certain your child can be that they'll be accepted by their preferred college or university.
- 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.
- 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 DO DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- Remain involved in your child's education. Staying engaged helps you to know what is happening at school and allows you to build a support system.
- 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.
- Guidance counsellors may set appointments to meet with students individually to discuss their plans after high school. You and your child should meet with the counsellor, armed with your university and college selections as well as faculty information. At this meeting, the guidance counsellor should review your child's current transcripts, discuss goals for post-secondary education, and advise you of additional credits needed to fulfill the requirements for admission to your child's desired program. Remember that the guidance counsellor is there to provide information and advice. You and your child should make the final decision.
- Stay in touch with teachers, keep volunteering at events, and continue attending information meetings and special activities. It is important that the school knows that your child has an engaged and caring parent behind them.

### 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 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.
- Make sure that your child isn't "cruising" through Grade 12. Keep reminding them that the better their marks, the more likely they are to get final acceptance at the school of their choice.
- 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.
- 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.

### **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.

- 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 reduces 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/>