Promising Practices for the Economic Empowerment of Black Youth: Institutional Actions Against Anti-Black Racism

This Evidence Brief summarizes 11 evidence-based practices to support institutional actions against anti-Black racism by dismantling exclusionary norms and practices and enforcing equitable policies and laws that advance Black youth economic empowerment.

The content for this Evidence Brief is informed by the report *Outcomes Framework: Economic Empowerment of Black Youth in Ontario*[1] developed by YouthREX to support community stakeholders as well as relevant government institutions to build a shared understanding of possible interventions and outcomes under the Economic Empowerment Stream of the Black Youth Action Plan.

The Outcomes Framework is informed by the *SIDE Theory of Change for the Economic Empowerment of Black Youth* that includes four quadrants of change grounded in an understanding that an economic empowerment stream for Black youth must provide opportunities for them to develop skills and capacities but must also include institutional change strategies that address systemic barriers that they face.

01. CELEBRATE BLACK EXCELLENCE.

The achievements, successes, contributions, hopes, and dreams of Black communities continue to go unrecognized. Highlighting this erasure and emphasizing Black excellence can **rewrite deficits-based narratives** that undervalue the assets of Black youth and magnify their perceived shortcomings.[2] The successes of Black entrepreneurs, for example, must be acknowledged, highlighted, and celebrated to counter a prevailing narrative of pervasive discrimination and failure.[3] In fact, many Black entrepreneurs view their businesses as a way to empower others, to demonstrate what is possible, and to challenge stereotypes.[3] Black excellence needs to be acknowledged, highlighted, and celebrated

in programs, through events, and across media. Celebrating examples of Black excellence across fields and sectors, particularly those in which Black people have been historically underrepresented, can support Black youth in identifying role models and mentors and expanding their sense of possibility.

02. HIRE AND SUPPORT BLACK EDUCATORS.

Evidence shows that a diverse teaching workforce can reduce achievement gaps. The underrepresentation of Black Ontarians among educators denies many Black youth the informal guidance, role-modelling, relatability, and self-esteem that comes from being visually represented by – and having shared experiences with – one's mentors and leaders.[4] Black students are three times as likely to be identified as gifted by a Black teacher than a white teacher.[5] Assigning a Black teacher to a Black student for just one school year, particularly as early as elementary school, can **significantly increase high school graduation rates and the overall educational attainment** of Black students.[6,7,8] Black teachers within Ontario's education system must be supported, as many share experiences of anti-Black racism. For example, half of Black teachers surveyed in the province believe their race has affected their promotability.[4] These targeted supports for Black educators could both **increase the number of Black teachers hired** and **ensure their longevity, wellbeing, and success in the field**.

03. TRAIN EDUCATORS IN ANTI-BLACK RACISM.

Empowerment is a relational process,[9] in which shifts in critical consciousness – among those in power and

those who should be empowered – play a crucial role. Teacher education programs should **equip** *all* **educators** to be culturally responsive to Ontario's growing Black student population. Supporting educators in developing a critical anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice will **cultivate critical consciousness-raising** and contribute to **dismantling exclusionary norms and biases** that result in the unjust treatment of Black students. Black youth could then be supported to learn in an inclusive and supportive educational environment, improving their sense of belonging and, ultimately, their educational outcomes.

04. ENFORCE EQUITABLE POLICIES ACROSS THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

Working against anti-Black racism in the education system and improving outcomes for Black youth must also include **dismantling exclusionary practices and policies** that disproportionately target Black youth.[2,8] For example, disciplinary policies, which often focus on punitive justice, could be revised to emphasize preventative strategies and restorative justice practices.

05. ADDRESS EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION.

a) In hiring and promotion practices
Discrimination in hiring and promotion practices needs to be addressed within and across institutions, companies, organizations, and agencies. Diversity in hiring must be encouraged, but diversity, education, and inclusion processes **must go beyond tokenism**. Efforts to work against unconscious bias should be prioritized, but unconscious bias trainings should not be used as a "quick-fix rather than the start of an ongoing and possibly lengthy process of reflection, discussion, and awareness-raising, in keeping with cooperative learning approaches".[10] Companies with the most inclusive workforces are those that require managers to show specific diversity gains in areas of race and gender,[11] an approach that could be encouraged in a variety of underrepresented fields and/or sectors. Employers must also commit to **fair pay and benefits** (including compensation for training, internships,

and apprenticeships) and **professional development opportunities**.

b) In workplace cultures
Organizations can work against anti-Black racism by **promoting cultural identity** and **engaging in consciousness-raising and activism**.[12] Cultural change should also include dismantling exclusionary norms, such as shared understandings of professionalism through a white-centered lens. For Black Canadians, empowering workplaces are those that encourage empowering relationships between colleagues, as well as meaningful roles, opportunities, and incentives.[12]

c) In policies and laws
Equitable labour policies and laws need to be enforced, centering **racial equity** and reflecting **stricter regulations against discrimination** in hiring and promotion practices, workplace racism, and financial lending practices.

06. PROVIDE TARGETED FINANCIAL SUPPORTS AND ACCOMMODATIONS.

Students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to attend post-secondary educational institutions,[13] and, given the relationship between race and class,[14] this disproportionately impacts Black youth. In order to support Black youth in pursuing post-secondary education and training, schools and youth-serving organizations should ensure that young people are aware of available financial assistance. Policies that **increase the availability of student loans** (i.e., lower barriers for qualifications, more lenient and forgiving repayment timelines, and amounts that more accurately represent the cost of living) are critical, as are **targeted scholarships and grants**. Young people should be presented with the variety of options available for funding their education, including employment. Post-secondary institutions should accommodate students who need to work to support themselves or their families by providing **greater flexibility in course scheduling**.[15] Work-based **learning programs** can also allow young people to earn

an income and attend post-secondary studies while developing work skills and gaining valuable employment experience.

Supporting young Black entrepreneurs requires institutions to make **strong financial commitments in the form of grants, subsidies, loans, and in-kind contributions**.[16,17,18] Enforcing **equitable loan approval processes and policies** is essential. Since Black entrepreneurs may experience challenges securing financial assistance,[16,17,18] often as the result of racial discrimination, access to grant programs is particularly important in the early stages of a business venture. Black entrepreneurship is often presented as a way to increase wealth for both individuals and communities[16,18,19] – a "path out of poverty"[18] that can create more employment opportunities, as Black business owners are more likely to hire Black employees.[16] These **businesses could be financially supported to mentor, train, and employ Black youth** – through paid internships or co-op placements, for example – to generate new pathways and opportunities. Studies suggest that Black individuals have a greater proclivity towards entrepreneurship, with stronger motivation, interest, and intentions to want to become their own business owners.[18] Evidence indicates that "a marginal increase in the Black entrepreneurship rate would result in thousands of new firms and employment opportunities, give hope to historically distressed communities, and put the nation on a path to economic and social justice".[18]

07. ENGAGE EMPLOYERS.

Employers must be encouraged and supported to **recruit, hire, train, retain, and promote Black youth**. This should occur at multiple levels, with involvement from policymakers, workforce development boards, and community organizations.[20] Employers can engage directly with youth organizations to support the development of soft skills (such as communications, teamwork, and time management) and work-ready skills, and offer learning and earning opportunities for young people. Community-led service opportunities can be supported to enable youth to gain skills that can connect to educational and employment

opportunities.[21] Some best practices to improve employer engagement include **setting clear, skill-based selection criteria, creating flexible education supports, providing on-the-job learning, setting high expectations, and ensuring wraparound support services** are available.[21] Partnerships between social enterprises and service providers can support youth to receive training and experience linked to local business needs.[22] Employers (and employees) must **engage in training on anti-Black racism** in order to address the racism that occurs within organizations. This training should facilitate critical consciousness-raising, challenge internalized biases that result in unjust interpersonal and policy-level discrimination, and develop an awareness of power dynamics and how they play out across – and beyond – workplaces.

08. HIRE AND ADDRESS DISCRIMINATION IN UNDERREPRESENTED FIELDS AND/OR SECTORS.

Black youth need to feel they belong in the spaces where they are learning and working,[23] so **promoting hiring in underrepresented fields and/or sectors** can facilitate greater representation and create pathways to opportunity. Black workers in Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) fields, for example, report feeling a lack of belonging in these spaces, which can be linked to both underrepresentation and to discrimination as a result of workplace culture. One study[24] found that STEM workers who experience microaggressions feel like outsiders in the STEM community. Addressing anti-Black racism in STEM education and employment, and in other underrepresented spaces, can ensure that young people **feel a greater sense of belonging**, and that they experience these spaces as **inclusive and welcoming**.[25]

09. SUPPORT THE TRANSITION TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION.

Supporting more Black youth to enter and complete post-secondary education requires taking a more

holistic approach to post-secondary readiness and attainment metrics. Readiness discourses have largely focused on raising test scores, with the premise that this will translate into an increase in post-secondary enrollment and graduation rates.[15] However, it is important to ensure that young people also have the knowledge, skills, and supports they need to succeed in school and in post-secondary education. Educational institutions should pay more attention to the way students learn, the classes students take, and their performance in higher-level coursework, rather than focusing strictly on standardized test scores,[15] which historically disadvantage non-white students.[26] Young people need to be supported in understanding the importance of post-secondary education, and in knowing all available post-secondary pathways. Secondary schools and youth-serving organizations should ensure that youth have access to information about different post-secondary programs and potential employment outcomes, including earnings potential. Youth should also have access to information about program pre-requisites, application processes, life on campus, and potential challenges and available supports.[15]

Research suggests that bridging programs can support Black youth by catering to their unique needs, and providing services that connect institutions, families, and communities. Institutions can develop effective bridging programs by conducting needs assessments and collecting data to understand the barriers that students face in their local communities.[27]

10. COLLECT DISAGGREGATED RACE-BASED DATA.

Many have argued that the collection of disaggregated race-based data across systems is critical in addressing systemic racism.[2,8,28,29] When data is dichotomous (e.g., 'white' and 'non-white'), it automatically creates a 'white benchmark' that is especially unhelpful in cities like Toronto, where over half of the population is racialized.[28] School boards, for example, have been called to "routinely collect disaggregated race-based data that allows for the examination of the experiences and outcomes of Black students, including but not limited to suspensions (by reason and days), expulsions, program of study, graduation rates, drop-out rates, special education identification, and confirmation in post-secondary education".[8] Understanding the unique experiences of Black youth across various institutions and systems will enable the co-creation of effective interventions that target their needs and support greater economic empowerment.

11. TAKE A COLLECTIVE IMPACT APPROACH.

The Ontario Black Youth Action Plan recognizes the importance of a collective impact approach – one that reflects the commitment of a group of stakeholders, from different sectors, to a set of principles for solving complex social challenges. Given the interconnected barriers that limit the economic empowerment of Black youth, lasting change will be difficult to achieve through single-issue interventions. While these interventions "are critically important, [they] cannot in isolation transform life outcomes across a population".[30] Collective impact approaches may be more successful in addressing persistent barriers because they are able to support a young person at every stage of their journey toward meaningful employment. Where it may be difficult to provide services and supports across a young person's life transitions, cross-sector collaboration between stakeholders can be beneficial. Working with intermediaries at various levels and engaging different stakeholders can increase the impact of individual programs. Stakeholders must include parents or caregivers, youth workers, community programs, educators, employers, organizations, policymakers, and, critically, Black youth. This approach can also facilitate the development of shared accountability processes, including measures for collecting and sharing data and for charting success.[21,22]

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