



EVIDENCE BRIEF

Economic Empowerment of Black Youth: Programmatic Interventions for Diversifying Economic Opportunities

Black youth are underrepresented in high-growth sectors and in business ownership; as such, programs are needed to support Black youth in succeeding in entrepreneurship and in STEM fields to diversify their economic opportunities.

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.

positions and these are projected to grow,⁵ but there are not enough individuals with the required skill set to fulfill these positions. Since STEM skills are highly employable and STEM occupations come with higher earning potential, they can lead to sustainable employment and long-term careers. Supporting Black youth to enter STEM fields through STEM-related education and skills can provide opportunities for Black youth to diversify economically and achieve greater economic security. As Perry wrote:

“If we don’t scout, recruit, invest in and cheer for Black engineers, biologists and computer scientists as we do for quarterbacks, linebackers and wide receivers, our youth won’t be able to participate in the game of life when they grow up.”⁶

Programs aimed at contributing to economic diversification for Black youth through entrepreneurship and STEM should be focused on one or more of these interventions (see Logic Model on page 5):

EIGHT PROMISING PROGRAMMING INTERVENTIONS

Entrepreneurship can be a means to diversify economically for Black youth and is often viewed as a “path out of poverty”.² It can also create more employment opportunities, as Black entrepreneurs are more likely to hire Black employees.³ Unfortunately, Black business owners are still underrepresented in entrepreneurship, despite a stronger tendency and desire to pursue this path.²

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)-related jobs are the fastest growing sector in Canada.⁴ Currently, there are a great deal of STEM

01. FINANCIAL INVESTMENT.

Black-owned businesses require financial investment, such as grants, subsidies, loans, and in-kind contributions.^{2,3,7} The challenges noted with respect to gaining approval for loans from financial institutions, in addition to the creation of greater debt, suggest that grant programs might be more helpful to nascent businesses while they are trying to build into more viable ventures. Programs aimed at providing financial investment could include new business start-up grants and business support grants, while programs responsible for distributing financial support could include grants to pursue and further STEM education. Investing financially would result in **greater access to**

financial assistance for those wanting to embark upon entrepreneurship or pursue STEM fields of study.

02. ANTI-BLACK RACISM TRAINING.

To combat anti-Black racism (ABR), trainings should be provided to those within organizations and institutions that Black entrepreneurs would encounter in their journey to becoming business owners, and to those who come in contact with Black youth within STEM spaces (both in education and employment). Such trainings could be offered to lenders from financial institutions, post-secondary staff and instructors within STEM fields of study, and employers and employees at STEM-related workplaces. These trainings will assist workplaces to implement intentional diversity and inclusion strategies, and provide opportunities to build cultural competence and education on how to become allies to Black youth.⁸ Anti-Black racism trainings need to be widespread to help combat the experience of microaggressions. This would hopefully increase opportunities for Black youth to enter STEM education streams and workplaces, and would ideally result in more **encouraging and supportive educational and workplace environments** without the presence of microaggressions. If ABR trainings were successful in reducing bias in the consideration of business loan applications, this would further lead to **greater access to financial assistance** for Black youth.

03. STEM PROGRAMMING.

Black children and youth need to feel as though they belong in STEM spaces.⁹ From an early age, and continuing through to the completion of one's secondary education, children and youth need to be exposed to STEM concepts and ideas through the provision of out-of-school community STEM programs.¹⁰ Additionally, STEM programming should include the development of power skills, which tech employers have identified as most desirable for potential employees, and include collaboration, adaptability, enthusiasm to learn, work ethic, and coach-ability.^{11,12} STEM programs should improve the knowledge and skill levels of STEM concepts and power skills, and could also contribute to the feeling

that STEM is an area where Black children and youth belong and can thrive, thereby contributing to the development of a STEM identity. **Improved aspirations** and an **improved sense of belonging** are outcomes that would result from providing STEM programming to Black children and youth.

04. BUSINESS OWNERSHIP TRAINING.

Black entrepreneurs need opportunities to learn about business ownership and operation. The capabilities and knowledge of Black entrepreneurs must be enhanced, not only in relation to starting and operating a business but also about resources available, and Black entrepreneurs need to learn how to access and use this knowledge and information.³ Programs funded to **improve the knowledge, skills, and capacity** for business ownership could focus on a variety of topics delivered in different ways. Free programs to upskill or reskill through online courses and workshops could allow for a larger number of entrepreneurs to have access. In addition to courses related to business ownership, financial capability trainings or workshops could incorporate the importance of home ownership in building personal wealth and provide concrete and practical strategies. With increased training, Black-owned businesses would have the knowledge, skills, and resources needed for increased success, thereby **increasing the longevity of Black-owned businesses**.

05. MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS.

Mentorship programs would address an overwhelming need in both entrepreneurship and STEM. Mentors can provide Black youth looking to embark on entrepreneurship with valuable insights and supports as they move through the many stages and challenges of business ownership.³ Mentors can help Black entrepreneurs in navigating the process of obtaining loans and grants, making the necessary connections to support the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey and navigating the challenges encountered along the way. Increased mentorship for entrepreneurs would result in **improvements in knowledge and skills**, but would also increase access to **a greater number of role models**,

and ultimately **increases in one's social capital**. Within STEM, a lack of mentorship is related to feelings of isolation, and to avoiding STEM post-secondary fields of study or switching out of STEM fields.^{13,14} The lack of representation of Black individuals and the lack of support have been cited as challenges in STEM post-secondary educational programs.¹⁴ These challenges seem to be exacerbated for Black women, given their even fewer numbers in such fields. To improve outcomes within STEM post-secondary educational programs, mentorship and role models are vital, as they can provide the support needed to help Black youth navigate these challenging fields of study. Research found that Black students in STEM who made connections with older students in similar fields increased their social capital, ensuring the support they needed to continue their studies.¹⁵ STEM mentors can also help Black youth learn how to communicate the skills they have as career-narratives,¹² a valuable tool in securing employment. Therefore, mentorship programs for STEM students and employees would result in an **improvement in the environments** and an **increased sense of belonging**, and would provide access to a **greater number of role models**, ultimately **increasing social capital**.

06. NETWORKS AND RESOURCES.

Black nascent entrepreneurs would benefit from programs that are targeted toward building networks and resources to support the formation of – and linkages to – individuals and businesses that can assist Black youth in starting a business.³ Business networks can also support potential and new business owners in navigating the entrepreneurial undertaking. Such networks must be made known and easily accessible to Black entrepreneurs. A network of professional services could provide advice on various aspects of business ownership, and can assist in connecting prospective or new business owners with comparable existing businesses, thereby providing further opportunities for role models. The development of a service exchange network, in which businesses provide free or discounted services to a business in exchange for services from that business, could help to address the difficulty in obtaining such services due to financial

constraints. The development of resource inventories on various topics, including available grants and trainings, would also be helpful. In addition to providing valuable resources and connections, networks can offer opportunities to advocate for new business owners and new businesses. These networks and resources would lead to **improvements in knowledge**, **increased access to role models**, and **increases in one's social capital**.

07. CELEBRATING AND AMPLIFYING STORIES OF BLACK EXCELLENCE.

Celebrating Black excellence is another way to advocate for Black business owners and Black-owned businesses. Unfortunately, the story that is told with respect to Black entrepreneurship is one of pervasive discrimination, and ultimately failure.¹⁶ However, there are success stories, and there is a need for these successes to be acknowledged, highlighted, and celebrated. Some Black entrepreneurs view their businesses as a way to empower others, to show others what is possible, and to help challenge stereotypes.¹⁶ If Black excellence is celebrated and prominently displayed, both within entrepreneurship and in STEM fields, further role models are created and there is greater exposure to possibility. In other words, celebrating Black excellence through events and the media will result in an **improved awareness of Black success**, would help to **improve the aspirations** of Black youth, and would lead to an **increased number of role models**.

08. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS.

Mental health has been identified as one of the top issues affecting Black youth and their families in Ontario.¹⁷ Black youth affected by mental illness are stigmatized and marginalized. The compounding effects of individual trauma and systemic oppression, coupled with limited access to positive supports and a lack of acknowledgment of mental illness by the Black community, have a significant impact on Black youth.

These impacts are further exacerbated by the discrimination and isolation that Black youth experience in underrepresented fields and sectors,

including entrepreneurship and STEM. Due to burnout and loneliness, entrepreneurs are disproportionately affected by mental health challenges compared to non-entrepreneurs.¹⁸ The mental health of Black entrepreneurs and Black pioneers in STEM can be further impacted by a myriad of other challenges, including discriminatory norms and practices, microaggressions and stereotyping, and a lack of mentors and representation in leadership that can compromise wellbeing.^{19,20} Imposter syndrome may also be experienced by Black youth who feel a lack of belonging and the anxiety and pressure that can come from being the only Black person, or one of a few people of colour, in their workplace.²¹

In order to support Black youth mitigate these additional challenges, targeted mental health supports must be developed and made available. For example, in recognition of the unique challenges faced by Black

entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic, Innovate Inclusion (a Canadian not-for-profit that advocates for the success of underrepresented communities in technology and entrepreneurship) partnered with the Canadian Red Cross to launch the *Black Entrepreneur Mental Health Initiative (BEMHI)*, which connected 100 Black entrepreneurs with free mental health therapy. Such an intervention would lead to **improved access to mental health supports** as well as **improved mental health knowledge and skills**, such as coping skills, and would ultimately contribute to the **improved wellbeing** of Black youth.

SUMMARY

These programming interventions should, in combination and over time, ultimately contribute to **the increased longevity of Black-owned businesses, increased social capital, and improved wellbeing**.

Logic Model for Pillar #3: Diversifying Economic Opportunities¹

Situation: Black youth are underrepresented in high-growth sectors and in business ownership; as such, programs are needed to support Black youth in succeeding in entrepreneurship and in STEM fields to diversify their economic opportunities so they can contribute to Ontario's economic prosperity.



ENDNOTES

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