Anti-Black Racism In Education Roundtables

What We Heard Report
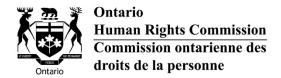
Ontario
Human Rights Commission
Commission ontarienne des
droits de la personne

Contents

« Il faut enseigner les choses [en se plaçant dans] une perspective positive. Il faut mettre d'autres idées dans la tête des élèves. [Cela leur permet d'aspirer à autre chose.] [J'ai mis du temps à] me rendre compte que je peux avoir [une] autre [vie] [...] que [celle de] l'esclavage et [d]es gangsters. »[1]

"We need to teach things from a positive perspective. You have to put other ideas in the students' heads. It's a way to improve dreams. It took me a long time to realize that I can have other and more out of life than slavery and gangsters."

- Student participant

Acknowledgement and Thanks

Black leadership and community engagement have been at the forefront of action to address systemic discrimination and advance racial equity in Ontario. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) recognizes that Black individuals, organizations, and grassroots movements have been working on issues of anti-Black racism in education for decades. The OHRC acknowledges and embraces the work of generations of grassroots and community-led organizing and academics and the significant strides toward protecting the safety and well-being of Black children in Ontario's publicly funded education system. The OHRC has tried to capture and preserve those works in its initiative to address anti-Black racism in Ontario's education system. We are grateful for those works and honour the people who have contributed to them.

Warning: This report deals with topics that may cause trauma to some readers. It includes references to the mistreatment of Black students, educators, and communities and includes references to racial violence. Please engage in self-care as you read this material. There are many resources available if you need additional support, including on the OHRC website under List of Supports.

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[1] To preserve the authenticity of the opinions expressed by the French participants, the OHRC has kept their quotes in the original language. The English translations can be found directly below the quotes.

Definitions

What is Anti-Black Racism?

"Prejudice, attitudes, beliefs, stereotyping, and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement and its legacy. Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies, and practices, to the extent that it is either functionally normalized or rendered invisible to the larger White society. Anti-Black racism is manifest in the current social, economic, and political marginalization of African Canadians, which includes unequal opportunities, lower socio-economic status, higher unemployment, significant poverty rates, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system" (Government of Ontario, 2022).

Black Joy

Black Joy speaks to how Black people – individually and collectively – have been able to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally despite the systemic barriers they face and continue to face. Black Joy is not a denial or dismissal of struggles faced by Black people but a refusal to be defined and limited by them. Black Joy flows from Black people's refusal to always focus on their struggles and negative experiences, and instead centres joy to change the narrative. Prioritizing the importance of joy, engagement, and belonging in schools as the foundation for achievement and student success, counters, and ideally decreases, the racism Black children begin to internalize and experience early in their lives. That is why access to Black Joy is vital for empowering Black students, because it helps to celebrate their identities, experiences, and abilities.

Duty-holders

All people have a responsibility for respecting human rights. Duty-holders are state or non-state actors that have the obligation to respect, protect, promote, and fulfill the human rights of rights-holders. Duty-holders have the obligation to set up mechanisms for effective remedies and meet legal and other obligations relating to human rights issues.

Introduction

All students have the right to an education free from discrimination, harassment, racism, and hate. Notwithstanding, Black students, administrators and educators are facing a crisis in Ontario's education system. Anti-Black racism remains deeply entrenched within Canadian institutions. Spanning several decades, many efforts have been made to address and combat anti-Black racism in education. In Ontario's publicly funded education system, this discrimination has not only persisted but has been further exposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd uprising. The impacts of those pandemics have laid bare the challenges for education professionals, students, their families, and Black communities.

Recognizing the urgent need for change, the OHRC took action. In April 2023, OHRC held a two-day roundtable (April 27 – April 28, 2023) with duty-holders and students to develop concrete solutions to tackle anti-Black racism in Ontario's education system.

This report summarizes key points and insights from the discussions. Attending the roundtable were education professionals, administrators, academics, researchers, the Human Rights Legal Support Centre, and representatives from the Ministry of Education. The discussions were structured to encourage open dialogue around eight topics. The OHRC consulted extensively with its Anti-Black Racism in Education Advisory Group created specifically to provide advice.[2]

The aim of the roundtable was to determine recommendations and actions needed to address anti-Black racism and its manifestations in schools. By fostering a spirit of partnership and dialogue, the OHRC sought to create an environment where all stakeholders can contribute to the collective goal of tackling anti-Black racism in Ontario's education system.

This report is an account of the roundtable and testifies to the ongoing struggles of anti-Black racism in Ontario's education system. It seeks to provide a foundation for meaningful and transformative dialogue for our work going forward. It is a call to action for all stakeholders to actively engage in the collective effort to create an

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[2] *Human Rights Code*, s 31.5

inclusive and equitable education system. The roundtables are the beginning of a much broader and ongoing project to develop a comprehensive Action Plan with recommendations targeted to key duty-holders.

The OHRC extends sincere appreciation to all participants, observers, and individuals who developed and supported the roundtable. OHRC thanks the facilitators for their meaningful, constructive, and inclusive dialogue, which kept the participants motivated and engaged throughout the discussions.

These roundtables were conducted under the Chatham House Rules[3]. Quotes have not been attributed to specific individuals. This report shares the views of participants and may not represent those of all Black communities.

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[3] The Chatham House Rule is "when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed."

Phases of the OHRC's Anti-Black Racism in Education Initiative

Phase 1: Project Scoping and Development (Completed)

In preparation for the roundtables, the OHRC conducted environmental scans and created the Anti-Black Racism in Education Advisory Group comprised of key educators, to assist in developing the framework and discussion questions. OHRC also met with members representing certain groups in the community.

Phase 2: Roundtables (Completed)

The OHRC held roundtables with students and duty-holders in the education sector and are publishing the *What We Heard* report.

Phase 3: Written Submissions and Community Engagement (Upcoming)

This summer, the OHRC will call on stakeholders, service providers, Black parent and community organizations and advocates to provide written submissions on **solutions** for addressing anti-Black racism.

Over the coming months, the OHRC will also begin to engage in public outreach and key informant discussions with people with lived experience, various stakeholders in the education sector, and community and parent groups.

The OHRC conducted a Compendium of Recommendations comprising of 83 community reports concerning anti-Black racism spanning 75 years with over 190 recommendations. The working-team organized those recommendations into the eight roundtable themes and analyzed which recommendations had been implemented, and the results. The Compendium of Recommendations and the victim impact statements show that although some recommendations were adopted, substantively, over the many decades, anti-Black racism in education and the attendant problems persist and have even worsened. This is what makes the work so critical. The Compendium of Recommendations has and will continue to inform the dialogue with education and community partners and act as a foundation for a solution-focused Action Plan.

Phase 4: Action Plan (Upcoming)

An Action Plan will follow the extensive community engagements, incorporating findings from the written submissions and roundtable discussions. The Action Plan will consist of proposed actions for implementation to key actors in the education sector.

Phase 5: Monitoring and Implementation (Upcoming)

Following the launch of the final Action Plan, the OHRC will work with education and community partners to monitor progress and empower and hold duty-holders accountable.

What We Heard

Student Experiences and Perspectives

During the roundtable discussions, the Ontario Human Rights Commission engaged with approximately 25 Black Anglophone students and 20 Black Francophone students in grades 7 – 12. The OHRC asked students to share their experiences, perspectives, and ideas to enhance the education experience for Black students. Including student voices in policy discussions allow decision-makers to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by Black students.

The discussion revolved around three key questions posed to the students:

1. What is happening in their schools that impact Black students' success and well-being?
2. What should educators in schools and classrooms do to support the experiences and knowledge of Black students and their families?
3. How can educators ensure that they treat all students fairly and respectfully and give them the same chances to succeed? Specifically, what skills and abilities do educators need to develop to provide equitable opportunities for Black students?

Themes:

Affinity and Safe Spaces for Black Students

Lack of affinity and safe spaces for Black students was a significant concern. Students expressed the need for dedicated spaces like Black Student Associations or Unions, where they can feel safe, supported, and included. They highlighted that existing spaces might be inadequate or ineffective in addressing the unique needs of Black students. Building inclusive and safe spaces for Black students is a priority.

One student mentioned,

> "There is a lack of affinity spaces and just safe spaces for Black students... they don't have spaces like that for Black students, and in the event that they do, a lot of times I hear is that they don't really do anything and they don't know what to do in it, and how to build this inclusive and safe space for our students."

Representation and Support

Representation and support were other issues raised by the students. Black students expressed feeling a lack of representation, especially those attending predominantly white schools. This contributes to a feeling or sense of not mattering and fighting for recognition and opportunities. Creating student-led initiatives, such as Black Student Alliances, responds to the lack of representation.

> « Dans mon école, [il y avait peu] de personnes noires. [Dans ces cas-là], [nous n'avons plus] le sentiment [d'être représentés]. [Il faudrait] des gens qui nous comprennent et qui [soient] capables [d'apporter] un soutien […] plus [personnalisé]. »

> "There was an under-representation of Black people in my school. When there isn't that [presence of Black people] it takes away from the feeling of representation. [We need] people who understand us and are able to provide support that's more personal."

Students also stressed the importance of having Black teachers in the education system and the need for their support and mentorship.

> "In my school I don't think we have Black teachers at our school, we only have staff, one staff member that's Black. If you don't have staff or teachers that you can look up to that look like you and you feel you can address them and they share the kind of struggles you've gone through, then you don't have that support and you feel like you don't have anyone to talk to about what you are struggling with."

Students voiced that teachers should take the initiative to establish affinity spaces like Black Student Associations and support Black students in their chosen ventures. Students further outlined the importance of this by saying,

> "Teachers should also take the initiative to establish [Black Student Associations] in schools because Black students may not feel encouraged to do so."

> "Educators need to find a way to engage students in this career path and show them the positives rather than reinforcing the negatives and traumatizing them."

Cultural Competency

Black students expressed frustration with the lack of education and awareness about Black history and cultural celebrations. Black students shared that they frequently take on the responsibility of organizing events and initiatives themselves, and the absence of school-led activities undermines the feeling of acceptance and value for Black students.

> "I do attend a predominantly white school and for Black History Month nothing would have been done if I didn't kind of like orchestrate the entire thing for my school."

> "It's the fact that we constantly have to go to them is a bit annoying... They just don't want to be uncomfortable... I think they can push that fear if they just are willing to learn."

They highlighted the need for teachers to develop cultural competency, treat Black students sensitively, learn about their cultural backgrounds, and integrate Black history and achievements into various subjects. Students also called for teachers to engage in uncomfortable conversations about racial issues and to be open to learning and continuous dialogue. Students expressed that teachers should receive adequate training to understand and address issues related to anti-Black racism and promote equity over equality.

Students also emphasized the need for educators to continuously educate themselves about Black culture, including understanding the significance of names, cultural practices, norms, and values. This also highlights the importance of connecting with Black communities and families to facilitate a deeper understanding of their lived experiences.

Students discussed the importance of incorporating Black history and achievements across different subjects and courses, not only limiting it to Black History Month. They called for educators to encourage learning about Black people in various contexts and subjects, promoting a more inclusive and equitable curriculum.

> "Teachers should connect with Black communities and families to learn about cultural practices and values."

Fear and Uncomfortable Conversations

Teachers' fear of uncomfortable conversations leads to a lack of discussion about Black history and experiences. Students expressed that teachers often avoid discussing topics related to Black history or experiences due to the fear of saying the wrong thing. Students feel the burden of constantly initiating conversations and advocating for themselves. Black students suggested that teachers can overcome this fear by being open to learning and engaging in dialogue.

Teachers who are open to having uncomfortable conversations about racial issues and creating spaces for dialogue can positively impact students' experiences. Avoiding uncomfortable discussions and failing to address racial incidents perpetuates the problem and hinders progress.

One student shared the apprehension that some teachers have towards saying the word "Black", and the importance or recognizing different cultures and races.

They stated,

> « Certains enseignants ont peur du mot "Noir", mais ils doivent comprendre [qu'il n'y a rien de répréhensible dans le fait de] différencier les différentes races. Notre conseillère en orientation nous a souvent donné des [renseignements] sur des bourses pour les élèves Noirs ou Autochtones et […] ces petits gestes sont très importants. »

> "Some teachers are afraid of the word "Black" but they need to understand that it's not wrong to differentiate between different races. Our guidance counselor has often given us information about scholarships for Black or Indigenous students, and just these little gestures are very important."

Another student shared that,

> « Parfois, je comprends les enseignants. Ils ne savent pas comment s'y prendre pour ne vexer [personne]. Du coup, [il ne faut pas rester] […] gêné dans son coin; il faut aller parler au prof. [Sinon,] le racisme devient le problème des élèves noirs [alors que c'est] un problème social beaucoup plus [général]. »

"Sometimes I understand teachers. They don't know how not to offend. So you can't be embarrassed in your corner, you have to talk to the teacher. [Otherwise] it makes racism the problem of Black students instead of being a much broader social problem."

Tokenism and Burden of Leadership

Black students often feel tokenized and burdened with the responsibility of advocating for themselves and their communities while lacking support from teachers and staff. Students expressed that tokenism limits the opportunities for other Black students and can lead to self-doubt and questioning of achievements.

Some students expressed the following sentiments:

"Black students are just being tokenized at schools... Sometimes I try to make the best of it... but sometimes it creeps up on you and you're like 'I wonder why they need me for this?"

"Teachers have to recognize that we can't be an expert on our own race and they expect us to be the expert of our race."

"They need to take their time out of their day to try to take the effort to do that for themselves."

"Teachers should approach topics related to Black people sensitively and avoid making students feel like spokespersons for their race."

Racial Aggressions and Stereotypes

Black students expressed that they continue to experience racial aggressions and stereotypes from teachers and peers. They mentioned the use of racially insensitive language, such as the N-word, perpetuates a hostile environment for Black students. The lack of consequences for using racial slurs reinforces the idea that Black students' concerns are not taken seriously. Instances of white students using racial slurs are downplayed or neglected by school administrations, creating conflicts and a lack of consequences for their actions.

"The white kids wouldn't really get in trouble for saying the N-word at all, it would be mostly them getting suspended because of a fight or other things like that."

Black students face disproportionate expectations and opportunities, leading to situations where they may be unprepared for specific opportunities. Stereotypes can fuel unequal treatment and can hinder the success and progression of Black students.

Another student from the Francophone session discussed how their teachers contributed to prejudice and stereotypes about Black people. They said,

> « Selon moi, l'une des raisons qui expliquent les obstacles que rencontrent les élèves noirs, ce sont les préjugés contre les Noirs en général. Une prof a fait une remarque à propos de la ville d'une élève. Elle a dit quelque chose comme : "Je sais comment on mate les gens qui viennent de là-bas". À cause de certains préjugés, les enseignants n'accordent pas aux élèves noirs le même respect qu'ils montrent envers les autres. »

> "In my opinion, one of the reasons there are obstacles for Black students is prejudice against Black people in general. One teacher made a comment about the town she was from. She said something like, 'I know how to deal with a student from your town.' There are prejudices that prevent them from seeing Black students with the same respect they give others."

In response, another student mentioned how biased judgments from their teachers can have a profound impact on their self-perception and academic achievement by stating,

> « Nos enseignants ont [des préjugés très marqués], [et] si inconsciemment on se dit que cette personne [va échouer], ça a un effet. Même les enseignants noirs nous disent qu'il [nous] faut [viser] 110 p.100 au lieu de [nous dire de] faire de notre mieux, comme [ils l'attendent] des autres. [Donc même quand nous donnons le meilleur de nous-même, cela semble passer inaperçu.] »

> "Our teachers have a very biased judgment, [and] if we subconsciously tell ourselves that this person won't make it, it has an effect. Even Black teachers tell us we need 110% instead of doing our best like everyone else. So even when you give your best it doesn't matter to anyone."

> « Ils doivent [prendre davantage conscience] de leurs préjugés. Les préjugés sont inévitables, et la majorité des enseignants sont blancs, mais [...] s'ils [s'investissent davantage], ça pourrait améliorer [le ressenti] des élèves [...]. Et c'est un travail personnel, et si [les responsables] [...] [pouvaient les

encourager à mener ce type de travail introspectif], ça pourrait beaucoup aider. »

"They need to be more aware of their prejudices. Prejudice is inevitable, and the majority of teachers are white, but at least if they did more work, it could improve the way students feel. And it's personal work, and if leadership could promote that kind of introspection it could help a lot."

Black Joy

Students mentioned the importance of celebrating Black identity, fostering Black Joy, and promoting unity. Students identified that teachers should encourage pride in Black heritage throughout the year, highlight positive aspects of Black culture, and create spaces where Black students can support and uplift each other.

"Black students should be proud of their heritage every day, not just during Black History Month."

"Teachers should embrace Black Joy and highlight positive aspects of being Black, including the accomplishments of Black figures."

"Creating a supportive environment and clubs for Black students can help foster unity and combat the criminalization of Black Joy."

Accountability and Transparency

To address these issues, students suggested accountability and transparency from educators and school administrations. They called for comprehensive sensitivity training and anti-Black racism training for teachers, ensuring that it is engaging and goes beyond online modules.

Students most often described the following:

"Teachers should connect with students on a human level and be held accountable for change."

"There should be more transparency from administration and staff regarding protocols and resources for addressing racially motivated situations."

"Educators should engage in genuine anti-racism teaching and enforce policies."

Training and Awareness

Students highlighted the need for comprehensive sensitivity training and anti-Black racism training for educators. They noted the importance of ensuring the training is engaging and not merely an online module that can be skipped through.

> "I would like others to see that there is a need for a continuous day-to-day education and enlightenment about Black culture. For example, some professional development training sessions to improve educator's capacity to create more equitable opportunities for Black students—and, in so doing, this would provide teachers an opportunity to interact with students and learn not only how to pronounce their names but also the significance and the meaning and their cultural practices, norms, and values."

Another student discussed their disappointment with the lack of celebration or acknowledgement of Black History Month. They shared that,

> « Dans mon école, [...] rien [n'a été] fait [pendant] le mois de février, alors que mon père [siège] au conseil scolaire. Les gens ne prennent pas le temps d'apprendre et ne font pas d'effort. [S'ils ne connaissent ni nos difficultés ni nos besoins], ils ne [pourront] pas nous aider. »

> "In my school they didn't do anything for the month of February, even though my father is on the school board. People don't take the time to learn and they don't make the effort. Without knowing what's bothering us, what we need help with, they can't help us."

Victim Impact Statements

The Ontario Human Rights Commission has reviewed several "victim impact statements" provided to us by parent organizations, such as Parents of Black Children and Parents Against Racism Simcoe County. The OHRC reviewed over 80 victim impact statements and cross analyzed them with the themes from the student roundtables. Below is a summary of key themes from the impact statements:

a) Trauma

Students reported the use of racial pejoratives by non-Black students and teachers, racial violence (i.e., threatening behaviour by non-Black students), Black children being described as "brown like poop," resulting in mental trauma; degree of victim blaming, Black students' well-being not a focus, students suffering from depression and other mental ailments from adverse treatment by faculty and students, and that parent/student concerns are dismissed when voiced.

b) Discrimination (e.g., hostility, "microaggressions," profiling):

The inability for students to succeed because of being in what is characterized as toxic settings; not being in an environment that supports their success which has a detrimental effect on achievement; punitive discipline for incidents without situations being thoroughly investigated and assessed, commenting on appearance (i.e., hair).

c) Communication and transparency

Placing in 'Actualisation linguistique du français' (ALF) or 'Programme d'appui aux nouveaux arrivants' (PANA) instead of regular curriculum without consulting parents; placed in remedial or other programs outside of the regular stream without parent awareness or consent; lack of engagement with parents - teacher not engaging on school success and instead focusing on the behaviour of the student.

d) Cultural sensitivity and awareness

Other students using Black face with no reprimand, not knowing the difference between students and names; Black children having their hair touched without consent; lack of representation among faculty, absence of demonstrably empathetic teachers, also teachers being too overwhelmed to offer additional support or remedial assistance to students.

e) Stigmatization

Lower expectations that are manifest in behaviour/actions toward Black students; may contribute to receiving less support. In the victim impact statements, a parent asserts that her child received a failing grade after objecting to a previous low grade in the same course, assumptions that the Black student is in the wrong or an active participant in disputes/conflicts, labelling for benign behaviour; being assigned to levels lower than their capability.

f) Student representation and voice

Students are not consulted on their own learning/progress and no guidance; being asked to lead anti-racism learning with little engagement from faculty; Black students not being listened to when incidents occur.

Education Roundtable

The OHRC organized the roundtable into the following eight key dialogue themes[4]:

1. Successful Pathways for Students and Parents
2. Student Achievement and Black Joy
3. Professional Development and Educator Support
4. Performance Indicators and Outcomes
5. Data Collection
6. Enforcement and Accountability Mechanisms
7. Operational Drivers
8. Relationships, Policy, and Advocacy Drivers

Over the course of the roundtable discussions, participants emphasized the need for greater acknowledgement and understanding of racism as a form of violence, regardless of its scale or subtlety. By recognizing racism as violence, a shift occurs in how we respond to it. Rather than solely focusing on intent and impact, we begin to acknowledge the actual harm inflicted and the necessity for accountability and corrective measures.

Participants acknowledged the unfortunate reality that, although discrimination faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students or those who have experienced sexual violence is recognized to some extent within institutions, a disparity continues to exist in institutional recognition when it comes to racial violence or acts of anti-Black racism. One participant emphasized the imperative for schools to confront and address this discrepancy, placing particular attention on manifestations of anti-Blackness and other forms of racism within educational settings.

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[4] Key dialogue theme descriptions are provided in the Appendix

Themes:

Networking between schools and boards, parents, and community supports

Participants highlighted networking and building networks among teachers, parents, students, and community members, as essential for creating a supportive and inclusive educational system. One participant said their sense is that "there are a bunch of teachers out there who are doing amazing things and supporting Black learners, but the trouble is they are often alone and isolated." They emphasized the need for these teachers to connect and share their best practices, stating "you really have to focus on what teachers are doing and get those teachers to start talking to other teachers about what they're doing."

Participants also indicated that parents' involvement and engagement in their children's education is essential. The concept of "Black parent joy" was mentioned, emphasizing the importance of parents witnessing their child's learning and feeling a part of it. The significance of understanding and connecting with the community in which students exist was also highlighted, along with the need for innovative approaches to involve parents and create a sense of belonging. A participant added to that sentiment by saying "a sense of belonging for students always involves their families. [Parents] cannot be left out. We have to find ways to bring them into the space, to bring them together and in numbers."

One participant highlighted the importance of supporting parents in their ongoing growth and development in addressing issues of equity and anti-Black racism. The participant emphasized that,

> "Because [parents] [are] dealing with the kids coming home frustrated, crying, sad, not understanding what's happening to them, but knowing that school is an uncomfortable place and they might not have the words to articulate that just yet. I love what I heard about the professional development for teachers not being a standalone, one-time thing and then you got it… I think that the way that we engage with parents currently in terms of building their skills to support their children is in that kind of one and done…[but] parents need that bite size, over time. An opportunity to learn and practice, learn and practice, learn and practice."

Both for-profit and not-for-profit community organizations were also recognized as valuable resources for enriching the learning experiences within school environments. Leveraging these organizations is seen as a way to enhance support and provide additional learning opportunities for students. As one participant explained, "being intentional about reaching out to the families of African, Caribbean, and Black identifying [ACBI] students...has also been something that we have found to be impactful in moving the conversation forward between the schools and the ACBI families."

During discussions about the role community organizations and advocacy groups could play in promoting equity and inclusion within education, one of the challenges mentioned was the adversarial relationship that often arises when communities raise issues. One participant noted that institutions often adopt a "very defensive" stance, which does not foster healthy relationships with community members.

In summary, the OHRC heard that networking and building networks among teachers, parents, students, and community members are central to sharing best practices, as well as promoting parent involvement, redefining success, and leveraging community resources to create an inclusive and supportive educational system.

Parent and student engagement

Participants confirmed that engaging families in more meaningful and intentional ways is central to fostering positive outcomes for Black students

Creating structured spaces where families can bring forth complaints, suggestions, recommendations, and narratives is essential. Participants mentioned that establishing Black parent associations within schools or school boards can support parents and help them navigate the system. Parent-teacher interviews, though scheduled, should not restrict parents from reaching out to teachers at any time. Dismissiveness towards Black parents, a lack of care, willingness to listen, and inequitable application of rules exacerbate parents' challenges. Participants noted that accountability for these dismissive practices could ensure that parents are engaged and informed when incidents occur. One participant mentioned that,

« Les écoles devraient créer un lien de confiance avec les parents noirs et [ne pas balayer] leurs inquiétudes. »

"Schools should establish a relationship of trust with Black parents and also validate their concerns."

Participants stressed that the assumption that Black parents are uninvolved is incorrect, and schools need to actively involve parents, even addressing structural poverty issues that may impede their participation.

Setting clear expectations for school leaders can help reverse the current dynamic and ensure that all families are actively supported. One participant asked, "how do we intentionally switch that and have very clear expectations for the leaders that we support in our schools?"

Participants discussed the complex relationship between schools and parents, particularly in the context of engaging Black parents. One key theme that emerged is the need for a paradigm shift from an adversarial relationship to a collaborative one. One participant said, "we shouldn't need schools working against parents or parents feel they have to combat the schools in the interest of their own children."

Transparency and effective communication were identified as essential to improving the relationship between schools and parents. Participants said that schools need to be more transparent with their processes, policies, and language. As one participant suggested, schools should be receptive to the communication parents and students are constantly engaged in, even if it is not explicitly expressed in traditional ways like parent-teacher meetings.

One participant noted that,

> "Engagement works both ways, right? So, it shouldn't only be schools thinking they need to go out and engage. What are the ways in which schools and school staff are being responsive to what parents are communicating to them? And it might not be very clearly under the banner of a parent-teacher meeting. It might not be very clearly under the banner of a question expressed to the schools and that the parents respond to. But I think parents and students certainly are communicating all the time. It's how open and receptive are we to what is being communicated, and even if we haven't asked, right? Schools need to meet parents where they're at, and I think that

is both literally and figuratively. It could mean actually having conversations outside of the school or outside of those traditional parameters."

Affinity spaces

As the students mentioned, educators also discussed the importance affinity groups, such as Black Student Associations or Black Student Unions, could have on students.

One participant shared,

"One of the things that the students have definitely said to me and that we've been doing is creating brave and safe spaces for them. We work with them on what they want it to look like, we basically amplify their voices... through that, we are able to provide a lot of systematic changes and give them a platform to know the pathways through the educational system, and to be able to also incorporate the history of the geographical region and its history as well... embedding that into everything that they do."

Another participant expressed,

"When the director and other adults in the room are telling [students] how great they are and the wonderful abilities, talents, and gifts they have and the great contributions they are making and are going to make, it lifts the spirit in ways that you can't even measure."

One participant questioned the ways

"Black kids resist even with the constrictions and limitations placed on them and the narratives placed on them."

They suggested that documenting the process in which Black students are creating affinity groups or counter-spaces can reveal whether it "comes down to the kindness of certain individuals within the education system or the advocacy of students and their caregivers or community members." A discussion unfolded about the systemic nature versus the individual nature of students finding and creating "spaces of humanity" for themselves within these institutions.

Representation

Students in the roundtable spoke about the importance of representation. To see themselves reflected in the curriculum, among their peers, and to have representation amongst the teachers, staff, and administration. Participants also stressed this by saying,

> "When students can see themselves at the front of a classroom or in an administrator's or vice principal's or principal's office, that makes a huge difference and increases successful outcomes."

Participants stressed that even having *one* teacher who supported them in their educational journey even when the whole system was letting them down was an indicator of success for some students. However, we also heard participants say,

> "Sometimes we hear it's a Black teacher, so we use that to fight for more representation but sometimes it's just a teacher that saw them and helped them."

Participants also stressed the need for representation at decision-making tables. One participant mentioned that a piece of accountability and sustainability is considering who is "at the table." They said,

> "When we look at who are making the decisions, they're not people who look like us, and therefore not who look like our Black students. And so, when the people making the decisions don't have our experiences, don't understand where we come from, don't understand the struggles that we face, they're speaking on behalf of a group that they're not a part of, and I think that becomes problematic. So, changing who's at the table in terms of leadership opportunities for educators, for guidance counselors, for whoever is part of that school system, that needs to be a consideration."

One participant discussed the importance of graduation coaches and said that,

> "the students need to see themselves. They need to see themselves represented, and they need someone to talk to that looks like them. And if that's not done, we're a disservice to them in a variety of different ways."

Another participant shared that,

> « [Pour] répondre aux besoins, il faut d'abord comprendre ceux des élèves et je pense que les conseils et les établissements scolaires doivent tirer parti de toutes les ressources disponibles et questionner ces enjeux de concert avec la communauté. »

> "In order to respond to needs, we must first understand the needs of students. And then, I think that school boards and schools must take advantage of all available resources and address these challenges together with community."

Increasing the number of Black teachers was highlighted as an essential operational driver. Participants referenced research demonstrating the positive influence of one Black teacher on Black students and how designing mentorship programs can be challenging due to the scarcity of Black teachers in Ontario. One participant highlighted that extending the qualifying teacher education programs in Ontario from one year to two years is a barrier to entry as it was indicated that many individuals cannot afford to dedicate two years of their lives solely to studying. Furthermore, how Black teachers are supported, especially in school boards with few Black educators or administrators, was identified as crucial to preventing burnout.

Data collection

Quantitative data is often valued over qualitative data. Many participants pointed out that institutions frequently classify the narratives of Black students and families experiencing discrimination as merely 'anecdotal.' Participants shared that often times data collection on Black students and communities "focuses on numbers" to delay action and discount lived experiences.

One participant, who is a qualitative researcher, argued that people commonly perceive narratives of Black experiences as "perception." Consequently, the "system doesn't have to be accountable to remedying it." Data through narrative is viewed as less scientific, which becomes inherently problematic for Indigenous and Black communities, whose traditions of knowledge are often rooted in oral storytelling. Such a stance can devalue narratives and shift accountability away from the system. A participant stated that, "the reality is, within the systems that we operate,

they are looking for that data in order to activate any recommendations, responses, fixes that we want to see. The uncomfortable reality is that no one is going to put money until there is data to support what is seen as 'acceptable data' to support the recommendations you are looking for."

Collecting data must drive action, including both the design and implementation of program delivery. The question "what are you collecting the data for?" was repeatedly asked. One participant began by saying you must, "look at data as a tool or as a means to an end. It's not an end in a sense, you can't just tick it off and say, 'research done, great.' Research is supposed to inform and persuade, and in most instances, you want it to lead to some kind of informed and inspired action."

Participants noted that this is particularly the case when they see that data confirms what they already know,

> "We already know what the data is going to tell you. Our lived experiences should be enough. Why do we have to go through the process to activate resources? Activate responses to recommendations made to the community?"

However, participants acknowledged the importance of data collection as a tool to advocate for systemic change. One administrator cited the OHRC'S *Right to Read* inquiry report recommendations as an example of using data to help influence program design.

One participant emphasized the need for greater cultural competency and representation among data collectors. They stressed the importance of understanding the Black communities and establishing a feedback loop with those affected by the data collection process, ensuring that actions follow suit.

Participants emphasized the need for data that affirms the experiences of racialized groups rather than perpetuating deficit narratives. They called for more effective storytelling with data, allowing external perspectives to challenge the narratives presented by the education system. Data collection and its public availability become essential in providing alternative stories and highlighting the need for Black individuals to experience joy, health, safety, and happiness within the education system.

Participants raised concerns about the processes of data collection, consistency across school boards, and the questions asked about the data. One participant asked, "is there some consistency in terms of these processes?" They also highlighted the need for diverse perspectives in data analysis, stating, "I have questions about whether there are any Black people in the room when that data is analyzed." The participants emphasized the potential biases and shaping of data, with one remarking, "data can tell people what it is they want to hear." They stressed the importance of involving diverse voices in analyzing the collected data.

Data collection can be used to uncover systemic inequities, highlight who is made visible or invisible, and shed light on the experiences of success or lack thereof. Participants stressed that data alone is insufficient; it must be utilized as a tool to inform and inspire action. Participants urged a shift from counting bodies to using data to expose systemic points of harm and to actively challenge the status quo. Legal avenues were suggested to address active racism and hold systems accountable.

Participants articulated the distinction between comprehending the data and discerning effective actions capable of effecting substantial change, recognizing the latter necessitates a comprehensive understanding of one's goals and motivation. The discussions on data collection involved conversations about posing of rhetorical, practical, and theoretical questions to determine which parts of data collection are most important. Participants encouraged their peers to challenge the notion of what data matters, bringing it back to the central idea that "if Black kids don't matter, counting what happens to them doesn't make any difference."

Accountability

Although conceptualized differently from person to person, accountability is understood to be critical in addressing educational inequities, particularly for Black communities. Participants highlighted the need for explicit expectations, transparency, and individual and collective responsibility in holding educational institutions accountable.

Participants emphasized the importance of accountability by breaking down demographic data and its public sharing. Concerning data, one participant stated,

"Accountability to me means that the ministry needs to have a stated expectation that the data is broken down demographically and shared publicly."

Similar to discussions at the students' roundtable, the educators' roundtable discussed the unfair burden placed on the Black communities in shouldering the responsibility of accountability. One participant stated,

"There continues to be this unfair burden that continues to be placed on the Black community to police this."

They stressed the importance of acknowledging and addressing systemic anti-Black racism within educational institutions and shifting the accountability focus from Black students and families to educators.

Participants recognized the need to address individual educators' practices and mindsets to foster change within the education system. As one participant remarked,

"The problem is not our Black students. The problem [is] the adults in the buildings."

Strategies to address these issues included promoting good instructional practices, setting high expectations for all students, and dismantling barriers.

Participants stressed the need for clear avenues for appeals and empowering parents to understand the recourse available. They also highlighted the importance of holding all staff members accountable for supporting students of all identities.

One participant said,

"We need a whole department, and we need that department to hold people accountable to certain standards and expectations."

Participants recommended expanding the capacity of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) departments to start with a foundation of understanding the Black experience but emphasized that the objective of Black Joy is everyone's responsibility, not just the responsibility of those who have "human rights," "equity," or "inclusion" in their title. One participant expanded on this point by questioning,

"The measure of accountability is actually how are we holding all staff accountable for the ways in which they support or facilitate that outcome?"

Participants emphasized that many communities lack "the power, privilege, or mobility" to initiate the necessary campaigns for accountability. Furthermore, they felt that the education sector falls short in enforcement. In contrast, participants noted that Black individuals often face extensive scrutiny and are consistently held accountable.

Lastly, participants discussed how unions play a significant role in the education system and highlighted concerns regarding their potential as barriers to dismantling anti-Black racism in schools. Specifically, participants expressed concerns about how unions may hinder efforts to address anti-Black racism and create representation in various positions within schools. One participant noted,

"Our unionized environments...prevent us from actually creating representation in our schools in a range of positions."

The discussion shed light on the challenges of holding boards and directors accountable for addressing anti-Black racism. Participants expressed frustration with the lack of attention given to the role of unions in this process. They emphasized the need for unions to ensure the profession's integrity by taking action against their members who violate human rights. One participant stated,

"No one is saying that unions should be protecting the integrity of the profession by ensuring that where their members are in violation of human rights. They should be the ones who are forwarding them for the learning, the sanction, or the consequences."

Sustainability

Sustainability and ongoing professional development are essential to fostering meaningful change within the education system. Participants highlighted the importance of follow-up actions, evaluation, and diverse perspectives to ensure that professional development translates into improved practices.

Participants emphasized that professional development should go beyond acquiring knowledge and focus on translating that knowledge into practice. One participant remarked,

"If we're not asking them to show what the learning was and how that moves your practice, then the professional development was about knowledge, but it wasn't about practice."

Participants raised concerns about the need for evaluation and research following professional development initiatives. One participant asked,

"Why is there no evaluation following up so that we know who's implementing it, how it's being implemented, what the results are?"

They emphasized the importance of research and evaluation to identify successful strategies and make necessary adjustments.

Participants emphasized the significance of ongoing support and accountability in professional development. They stressed the need for sustained engagement and continuous check-ins to monitor progress and provide guidance. One participant stated, "if you really want to seriously do professional development, it has to be on an ongoing basis."

Another participant offered a different perspective on professional development, advocating for a balance between qualified educators and other sources of expertise. They emphasized the importance of listening to parents, former Black students, and successful alternative programs. The participant suggested this inclusive approach can enrich professional development and provide a holistic understanding of effective strategies.

Legislative and regulatory changes

Participants expressed the need for legislative and regulatory changes in the education system to address systemic issues and ensure accountability. They emphasized the importance of transparent accountability measures and the empowerment of parents in the process. One participant said, "if the legislation doesn't think Black people matter, then they will not ask you to care about them."

Participants stressed the need for clear and transparent accountability measures when incidents occur within the education system. They highlighted that the current bureaucratic processes can be disempowering and lengthy, hindering effective resolution. One participant stressed, "there needs to be accountability, it

needs to be swift, and it needs to be transparent to the parents." Another participant confirmed previous sentiments and shared that, "the onus shouldn't be on the parent or the student."

Participants emphasized the importance of legislative changes to rebuild trust between schools and communities. They argued that existing legislation should clearly define and address issues such as racism in the education system. Without proper definitions and accountability, schools may dismiss incidents or acts as not constituting racism.

Participants also highlighted the need for accountability measures to have a real impact. They compared it to other sectors, such as policing and healthcare, where accountability is necessary for effective change. They believed that decisions resulting from human rights issues should have consequences that genuinely impact the system. According to one participant,

> "All of the training, all of the work [...] isn't effective unless there are accountability measures attached to it at the end."

Participants stated that the *Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2* (Education Act) must be changed to promote meaningful transformation. They challenged the current approach of holding schools and school boards accountable without addressing the Ministry of Education's role. One participant emphasized the need to shift the narrative and place accountability on the Ministry and the law. They stated, "the conversation about accountability [...] needs to be taken to where it belongs, which is the Ministry and the law."

Additional participants noted that,

> "Legislative changes are required to rebuild the trust between schools and community. When you have an Education Act that doesn't actually define racism, then how are you supposed to teach about that in teacher's college and address it at its root? We have the Anti-Racism Act in Ontario that says you have to address racism in education but we don't actually define what racism is, which leaves it up to every school to say, 'that isn't really racism,' and they make up an excuse."

> "When you have a system that is legislated but we pretend that its not and that this is just people that are choosing things, then you actually conceal the

ways in which inequities happen. So, in a legislated system like the school, when there's no discussion about racism, nobody has to believe it to be real. And so there is a discussion in the Education Act about building inclusive classrooms in schools, but there are no tools that are provided to schools to do that work, so that means it's left to the individuals, both elected and non-elected, to just make things up and to harm people as they make things up—sometimes inadvertently—but then there's no recourse for requirement for change, so that's a problem."

Another participant said we must ensure that the language in the legislation is reflective of what schools are meant to do and who we value, which should be all students, no matter their race, colour, or creed, as stated in the *Human Rights Code*.

Overall, the participants stressed the urgency of legislative and regulatory changes in the education system to address systemic issues, foster accountability, and rebuild trust between schools and communities. They believed defining accountability measures, redefining the home-school relationship, and enacting legislative changes would lead to a more inclusive and equitable education system.

Curriculum

Participants highlighted the importance of curriculum and curricular inclusion in the education system. They emphasized the need for students to see themselves represented in the curriculum and have diverse narratives that go beyond struggles and exceptionalism.

Participants recognized that a curriculum that reflects students' identities plays a significant role in increasing student engagement. They emphasized the importance of children seeing themselves in both the official curriculum and the curriculum implemented by teachers. One participant stated,

"It's really important that children see themselves in the curriculum. It's especially true for Black learners because there's so many places where they don't see themselves. And we've long known this is one of the key things that leads to disengagement from school because it's not about them."

Participants advocated for narratives of empowerment and Black Joy in the curriculum. They expressed the desire for students to be heard and seen without being limited to a "struggle perspective." One participant highlighted the need for a

range of resources that provide examples reflecting the diversity and greatness of Black students. They stated,

> "Our narrative is triumph and survival and thriving. Not the struggle narrative, but also Black flourishing and not exceptionalism."

One participant highlighted the importance of everyday inclusion, stating, "without making a big deal of it, just on an ongoing basis."

Participants underscored integrating students' experiences and perspectives into the curriculum. They highlighted how incorporating real-life examples, such as analyzing the impact of public policies on communities, fosters authenticity and creates opportunities for students to tell their stories and be inquisitive. This approach not only augments learning but also empowers students to thrive. One participant shared, "There's power in that room of not feeling the kind of loneliness, exclusion, silencing that happens so regularly in and out of schools."

Upon reflecting on the role that schools and teachers play in fostering students' sense of belonging, one participant shared that,

> « Je pense que les écoles [pourraient aider] à prendre acte de l'existence des sentiments de stress et de découragement passagers et à les relativiser [en faisant preuve d']un peu de compassion et de soutien, n'est-ce pas ? [Pour] les enfants noirs, cela veut dire tout simplement [...] [d'être] aimés et [de se sentir] aimés [...] par le personnel scolaire. »

> "I think schools would help validate and normalize the transient feeling of stress and discouragement with a little compassion and support, right? In Black kids, it just means Black kids need to be loved, and feel loved, too, by the educational staff."

One participant spoke about the challenges of covering all the expectations in the curriculum and the need to create space for students' voices and experiences. A participant acknowledged that educators often require assistance in the selection and prioritization of curriculum content, recognizing the limitations in covering all aspects. The participant placed significant emphasis on the need to prioritize student perspectives and voices from the outset rather than treating it as an afterthought. In this regard, the participant proposed that to,

"Really get to a place of centering Black Joy and that idea of their own success, you would start by asking them what some of the things they'd love to accomplish are in the school year."

Overall, participants stressed the need for a curriculum that reflects students' identities, promotes empowerment and joy, and allows for casual and authentic inclusion. Participants indicated that incorporating diverse narratives and experiences in the curriculum would enhance student engagement and foster a sense of belonging and empowerment.

Black Joy

In the face of ongoing racial discrimination and harmful experiences within educational institutions, the notion of Black Joy takes on a significant meaning. To truly embrace Black joy, participants noted that it requires more than just superficial expressions of love and support. One participant shared that, "for Black Joy to exist, there has to be radical change." As such, a collective effort to believe and validate the experiences of Black students, accompanied by tangible actions such as legislative changes, comprehensive training, and addressing the prevalent use of racial slurs are needed.

A participant mentioned,

"Before we can talk about Black joy and student success, I think we do need to have a way to capture that people that are in positions of power recognize that you cannot be successful in a space where you are experiencing violence."

Other participants stated,

"How can you walk into a space and be told you are supposed to learn and you hear the N-word every day. That's still happening in our schools right now."

"One of the things that works against Black children is all of the framing of Blackness and Black children through anti-Black racism. Systems need to be accountable for addressing anti-Black racism. Black children and their experiences from my perspective needs to be framed through Black success and Black Joy."

Finally, a participant shared their thoughts on how to measure Black achievement and Black Joy, stating,

> "We have to ask students what makes them feel that Black Joy and that is how we measure it."

Unlearning, Disrupting, and Re-imagining Learning Practices

Part of allowing students to bring in their own experiences and having their teachers allow student experiences to shape the curriculum and how they run their classrooms also requires new ways of teaching or learning.

Participants emphasized the importance of imagining new ways of teaching and learning, highlighting the need to move away from traditional, rigid educational structures. They argue that while there has been some progress in recognizing different learning styles, the structures and policies continue to hinder the development of young Black students, especially those with intersecting identities.

A participant shared that we need to look at,

> "Learning as a multiverse of ideas and solutions to real life situations that they can impact. Joy needs to be cultivated through inclusion, belonging, expectation, teaching self-love and esteem… Supporting students who have a need, rather than emphasizing compliance with the structures that were not designed for their success. Exploring how they can be successful in creative ways."

Participants also highlighted the significance of Black students' ability to dream, create, and imagine as an integral part of their experience of Black Joy. They emphasized the importance of allowing students to explore their ideas and venture beyond the limitations set by educators and societal expectations. Another participant underlines the need to create space within the education system for Black students to dream and be creative by saying,

> "A major part of Black Joy is the ability and freedom to dream and create, and is there room for that within the system?"

Building Francophone-specific networks, resources, and capacity

As seen above, participants in the Francophone session shared the concerns of participants in the Anglophone sessions; however, Francophone participants emphasized the need for a specific focus on building Black Francophone networks, resources, and capacity as they considered these to be lacking and certainly behind relative to what is in place or existing in the Black Anglophone context.

This was considered to apply to all the areas discussed above, including data collection, curriculum, student, educator and parent supports, and specifically the need to build robust networks with community organizations as a critical link to immigrant communities who interact with the public education systems at the intersection of race, immigration and newcomer status and language. A recurring theme was the need for an intentional three-party relationship between schools, families, and community organizations. Participants also noted the need for supported spaces for parents, educators, and administrators to safely and thoroughly exchange information and wise practices.

The need for Francophone-specific networks was felt to be particularly acute because of the significant cultural and linguistic barriers Black Francophone families must overcome to be present in their children's educational lives, even in the publicly funded French-language education systems.

Conclusion

This overview of the roundtables' discussions provides valuable insights to guide the OHRC's development of actionable recommendations on the key themes. Roundtable participants underscored that racism should be acknowledged as violence that demands appropriate responses and redress. They emphasized the importance of accountability measures beyond mere data collection, extending to transparent reporting and swift action in addressing violence and discrimination. They also emphasized the need for ongoing and embedded professional development that focuses on practical application and continuous evaluation. Participants viewed faculties of education and unions as barriers to dismantling anti-Black racism, and there was a call for dialogue and collaboration to ensure their role in upholding human rights and supporting accountability.

One participant shared that,

> "We need to have anti-Black racism recognized. The scourge, the stress, and the violence of anti-Black racism [must be] recognized. And while we are navigating that piece and fighting against that piece, that we still [must] have the expectation of Black students reaching their potential and yielding the gifts of their giftedness. It's a question of, in addition to Black students being seen, being seen by each other. Because there is a whole piece around who we want to see us and who is important and whose recognition is important. We need to advance a conversation that our recognition of each other, our recognition of our children, our children's recognition of each other, matters. That's where the mattering has priority and that's where the mattering has strength. We have to be **seen by each other** and this is how we rise each other up."

What we have heard from students, education professionals and administrators, combined with the Compendium of Recommendations and victim impact statements, form the basis of a multi-pronged Action Plan with actions for implementation. Over the next few months, the OHRC looks forward to engaging in conversations with partners, stakeholders, and community members and receiving written submissions on concrete solutions to address anti-Black racism in the education sector.

Appendix: Key Dialogue Theme Descriptions

1. Successful Pathways for Students and Parents

This session examined the pathways that currently exist which have been useful for Black students and parents in navigating the education system and increasing positive outcomes. The purpose was to identify areas which may not be presenting as barriers, areas which may be building or leveraging Black students and parents' strengths, and what and how this may be taking place.

2. Student Achievement and Black Joy

This session considered what changes are required to support the educational success of Black students and may simultaneously and symbiotically focus on Black success and Black Joy, in addition to addressing serious concerns of anti-Black racism.

3. Professional Development and Educator Support

This session examined the need for those within the education system (teachers, guidance counsellors, non-teaching staff, administrators, trustees) to have sufficient and ongoing professional development with a particular attention on equity, human rights, anti-bias, anti-racism, and anti-Black racism to deliver high quality instruction to all students. Discussion included the importance of prioritizing equitable and inclusive work cultures and deals with bias in hiring and promotion processes at all levels of the education sector and the importance of building Black and other racialized employee networks for support to navigate their own safety within the education system.

4. Performance Indicators and Outcomes

This session considered literacy, graduation, and numeracy rates as indicators of how schools were performing in educating Black students. It also examined how anti-Black racism impacted the mental health and well-being of Black students and discussed strategies to address and eliminate disproportionalities.

5. Data Collection

Data collection and indicators are instrumental in serving as a catalyst for changing the paradigm of how we engage with Black Joy and address anti-Black racism in education. This session discussed what data school boards should collect, the methods and scope of data collection, and the monitoring and evaluation standards pertaining to the data collection.

6. Enforcement and Accountability Mechanisms

This session focused on promoting confidence in existing or new accountability processes; and enforcement or accountability mechanisms that should be utilized in the education system.

7. Operational Drivers

This session identified operational solutions based on emerging themes from the discussions in previous sessions. The aim was to identify practical, concrete actions that can be taken by all parties.

8. Relationships, Policy, and Advocacy Drivers

This session identified the role and function of the various players in the education space, including parents, guardians, caregivers and families, educators, administrators, boards, and the Ministry of Education to advance emerging priorities to tackle anti-Black racism in education.