

INFORMATION SHEET

THE ENGAGED PARENT

NAVIGATING THE SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR BLACK STUDENT SUCCESS

JK-K

1-2

3

4-5

6-8

9

10-11

12

This is one in a series of information sheets designed to support your involvement as a parent/guardian in the education of your Black child in Ontario — from junior kindergarten all the way to graduation from Grade 12. Many other resources are available from community organizations, your child's school, the school board, and the Ontario Ministry of Education. We encourage you to use these information sheets as a starting point for becoming involved in your child's education and to seek out all the resources available to you.

By Grades 4 and 5, your child is no longer a baby (or so they think; they will always be your baby). They are beginning to incorporate what they have learned at school into how they think. If they haven't already, your child will begin expressing their own ideas which might question you and their teacher. While it may be challenging, this is a good thing and should be encouraged.

Your child is about to begin a very serious part of their education. There will be a faster pace of teaching and a higher demand for reading, writing, and math skills, with an expansion into social studies and science. A good grounding in Grade 3, supported by at-home practice, will help them meet the increasing demands and expectations at school.

Your attention to their progress and ability to provide homework support is important. You should not only be making sure homework gets done, and done well, but should also help your child to work through problems. If you are unable to help with homework,

find someone who can such as a neighbour, friend, or tutor.

At this stage, homework requires more research, improved writing skills, and the ability to organize thoughts in a coherent or logical way. The same can be said about math, where your child will be required to work on a problem using practiced steps to arrive at an answer.

As the parent/guardian of a Black child, you're the most important person in your child's life: you're their strongest advocate and can ensure they have access to all the opportunities open to them. In this role, you also need to know what is happening with your child so that issues can be addressed as early as possible. That means ensuring that things like mental health issues, learning disabilities, or even stereotypes and prejudice do not derail your child's education.



All parents need to be involved in their children's education until they graduate from high school. You are your child's first teacher and will continue to be for the rest of their lives. Your interest and engagement in your child's schooling directly impacts the education they receive and their success.

Because anti-Black racism is prevalent in Canadian society, including within Ontario's education system, it is even more crucial that parents and guardians of Black children be involved in their children's education. Parents and guardians of Black children in Canada need to understand that their children will face challenges that have nothing to do with their abilities. Many studies show that Black students experience racism and unequal treatment throughout their schooling, which affects their success in school and their well-being.¹

You may also receive a Student Census from your school to complete. This survey asks questions about each student's background, including race and ethnicity. It is important to complete the Student Census as it allows the school board to know how Black students as a group are doing in relation to other students, and implement strategies to address any gaps. You can also ask for the results of the Student Census and participate in any strategies to address the identified issues.

THINGS TO DO AT HOME

While many of these activities might seem straightforward, they may not always be easy depending on your circumstances. If you need help, community agencies or social services in your neighbourhood could give you support. Seek out these services so that you can do your best at the most important role you have: that of being a parent.

- **Talk to your child.** Talk to them about school, their friends, and their interests. This helps you support and encourage their interests and curiosity at home. You can also help your child practice their communication skills by talking to them about what is happening in their school, the community, and in society.
- **Maintain good study habits.** At this stage, it is important that your child has the space at home to complete homework. If possible, create a dedicated space at home for studying. If you don't have the space, help your child find somewhere quiet at the local library for studying and completing homework.
- **Support a love for reading.** Make sure your child continues reading. It's the best way to develop their vocabulary and deepen their understanding of the world. Studies show that it is better for children to read physical books than read the same material on a tablet or computer. Take your child to the library and help them find books with stories that capture their interest and feature characters that look like them. This will help foster a love of reading while also developing important reading skills. Encourage your child to read or keep in touch with the news (though you will want to monitor where they get their information and how much news they consume). It helps them to think critically about how government works, the role of elected officials, world affairs, and other issues.
- **Keep a routine.** A regular bedtime and at least 8 hours of sleep will help your child feel well rested and ready to learn when they get to school in the morning.
- **Ensure your child is ready for school each day.** Ensure that your child is in school every day and on time. Regular attendance in these early years sends the message to your child that education is important. It also helps support their ongoing learning by ensuring they don't miss a lot of time in class.
- **Engage your child in cultural events and Black history.** Because schools often don't teach Black history, you need to supplement your child's education with books about Black history and events that promote Black history, culture, and achievements. Knowledge of their cultural and racial heritage helps your child to develop a positive self-image, which will benefit them for life.

- **Set high expectations and celebrate successes.** Your child will learn a lot in these early years. Set high expectations for your child so that they in turn have high expectations of themselves. You can also encourage their love of school and love of learning by celebrating their accomplishments.
- **Monitor screen time.** Parents need to monitor the amount of time their children spend on cell phones, iPads, computers, and in front of the TV. You can do this by setting specific times when your child can play on their iPad or watch TV. Talk to your child about balance, and monitor what they are watching and who they are talking to when online. You should also monitor how much time you spend on your cell phone while you're with your child.
- **Encourage their interests.** Encourage your child's interests and create opportunities that will stimulate these interests. You can find books at the library and buy gifts for them that are related to these interests.
- **Develop the habit of talking to your child about their daily activities and experiences.** During these conversations, you will discover what they are learning and how well they are doing in school. You will also hear about any unpleasant experiences or difficulties they may be having, which you might then need to discuss with the teacher. These conversations are also an opportunity to find out whether the teacher is including content with Black characters or that covers Black history.

Ask:

- o *Who are the characters in these stories and what are the stories about?*
- o *Do the characters include persons of African descent (Black people)?*
- o *How are they portrayed—as good guys or bad guys?*
- o *How about other people of colour?*
- o *When they talk about places in the world, how are Africans or people from the Caribbean portrayed?*
- No doubt as your child ages it might be more difficult to get details about how their school day went, but keep trying. These conversations are important to understand how your child is feeling about school and whether they are having any challenges with other students or with the teacher. This will alert you to issues while they are small. Early action can prevent problems from getting worse.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR

- Many schools now have their own websites. Check it for bulletins and additional information throughout the school year.
- Read through any documents provided by the school or school board. This information will explain what is expected of your child at this level, as well as important procedures, rules, and practices. Review this information with your child so that they understand what is expected of them.
- It may be useful to get to know a neighbour whose child attends the same school and is possibly in the same class. You could share duties such as pick-ups or drop-offs and visits to special events.
- Get to know the teachers, the principal, the office secretary, and the other key personnel at the school. This helps them know that your child has an engaged and caring parent behind them. If school staff know you, they are more likely to call you when an issue arises.
- Watch for signs that suggest a lack of attention to your child in class. How does the teacher engage with your child in class? How often does the teacher complain about your child's

behaviour? What does your child have to say about what is happening in the classroom?

- If your child is disruptive at school because of a learning disability or behavioural issue, it can act as a reason for teachers to begin sidelining your child. Ask the teacher about the resources they have used to help your child. Speak with the principal, superintendent, or trustee if you don't think your child is getting the supports needed. There may be resources within the school board or services within the community that you can access. Monitor the relationship between your child and the teacher as closely as you can.
- You might need to supplement what your child is learning about Black people by taking them to cultural or Black history events or exploring African history through visits to museums or the library. You may also need to raise this issue with the teacher. Be sure to bring it up in a non-confrontational way. Instead, ask questions about what your child is learning, and talk to the teacher about the importance for your child's education of including Black Canadian and African history and content.
- Check in with the teacher throughout the school year. Don't wait for a problem to arise. Instead, develop a relationship with the teacher so that they come to you first if there is a problem. Regular check-ins with the teacher can also help to identify behavioural or other issues early on.
- Your child may begin to have a group of friends that they spend a lot of time with. Be sure to get to know these friends. You can also support their interest in particular subjects or help them develop good study habits by taking your child and their friends on trips or gathering them at your house to work on homework or projects together.
- Volunteer whenever you can for extracurricular activities—field trips, helping with school outings, or fundraising efforts. You want your child's teacher to see that you are an involved parent.

- Most importantly, attend parent–teacher meetings. These are specific appointments provided for you as a parent to discuss any concerns and receive updates about how your child is doing in school.
- School performances that your child is involved in (e.g., concerts, basketball or other competitive games) are all important activities that you should be aware of and try to attend. Participating in these activities are important to your child's development, but don't let them get in the way of their academic studies. Many students have hopes of playing in the NBA and may replace studying with basketball practice. But keep in mind that your child has a better chance of becoming a doctor than playing basketball professionally.
- If your child is exceptionally bright, ask that they be tested for giftedness. If your child is gifted, it is important for this to be identified so that their unique needs and talents can be nurtured.

WHAT TO DO AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

- The Ontario education system requires that a record—Ontario Student Record (OSR)—of your child's educational progress is maintained. The parents of any child under 18 have access to the OSR and all the information in it. You should review it at the end of each year and ask that any unnecessary or negative comments about your child be removed.

THINGS TO WATCH FOR IN YOUR CHILD

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

- This is a critical time in your child's education. Speak with the teacher to ensure your child is progressing well. If your child is not reading or writing at grade level, now is the time to get them extra support. If you have the funds, hire a private tutor. Community agencies also offer tutoring programs to help Black students. High school and university students also serve as tutors and mentors.

- You should also watch for anxiety when your child has a major test coming up. If they are experiencing test anxiety, seek out support for your child.

BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES

- Keep an eye out for any unusual behaviour in your child. Incomplete homework, lateness for school or classes, and distractions in class could be symptoms of more serious issues that demand attention before they seriously affects your child's education and well-being.
- If there are serious behavioural issues, the teacher will likely alert you. Because you have developed a relationship with the teacher, they might notify you early of any emerging issues affecting your child, before they become more serious.
- In some cases, behavioural problems could arise from underlying issues that may need to be addressed, such as poor vision, hearing issues, lack of sleep, etc.
- Watch for boredom or signs that your child is becoming disengaged from school. Boredom could be a sign that your child is not being challenged enough. A discussion with your child could help identify the problem. Conversations with the teacher could give you more information about your child's lack of interest. Work with your child and their teacher to develop strategies to improve your child's interest in school.
- Keep in mind that there could be differences in what you see as a parent and what their teacher sees. In some cases, your child may behave differently at school. But the teacher might be seeing your child through a biased lens and interpreting their behaviours differently because of racial or cultural differences.² Stay continuously engaged with your child's education to make sure you can recognize whether and when this is happening.

SUSPENSIONS/EXPLUSIONS

- Research shows that Black children tend to be suspended for behaviours for which other children are not.³ In addition, schools continue to suspend young children even though the evidence indicates that suspending young children is not an effective way to change behaviours.
- A suspension could also damage your child's self-esteem and reduces their chances of graduating from high school.⁴ Schools use suspensions when children struggle with managing their emotions, have developmental delays, or have mental health issues. If the principal wants to suspend your child, ask them to find an alternative way to deal with the problem. You can also challenge the suspension by discussing it with the superintendent or a trustee.
- You may want to hire a lawyer to fight a suspension or expulsion.

THINGS TO WATCH FOR FROM THE TEACHER

- Watch for any suggestion that the teacher doesn't have high expectations of your child, and any suggestion that the teacher is afraid of your child. This might indicate that the teacher is seeing your child through a biased lens rather than as an individual. Comments about how your child dresses and their mannerisms are some areas that could reveal the teacher's biases. If the teacher expresses surprise that your child can do what other children are capable of, it might be a sign that they have low expectations of your child.
- Teachers may sometimes provide information that they believe you want to hear—not incorrect information, just all the positives. Other teachers may be overly negative and not share the positives about your child. Building a relationship with the teacher and talking to them often will allow you to find out what your teacher thinks about your child and question any information that appears to be too one-sided.

¹ James, C.E. & Turner, T. (2017). Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: York University.

² Young, Y. (2016, October 4). Teacher's implicit bias against black students starts in preschool, study finds. The Guardian.

³ See James, C.E. & Turner, T. (2017). Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: York University.

⁴ Armstrong, D. (2018, April 4). Why suspending or expelling students often does more harm than good. The Conversation. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/why-suspending-or-expelling-students-often-does-more-harm-than-good-93279>; Wong, A. (2016, February 8). How School Suspensions Push Black Students Behind. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/how-school-suspensions-push-black-students-behind/460305/>