

**PROMOTING ONTARIO'S EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
STRATEGY and THE ACCEPTING SCHOOLS ACT
in NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO**

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Introduction:

The Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario (MANWO) and the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) are working with the Ministry of Education, The Lakehead District School Board, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board and Nishnawbe Aski Nation to enhance implementation of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13). This report covers activities MANWO and the RMYC organized to follow up on surveys and consultations to assess awareness of government guidelines and school board policies to create safer, inclusive and accepting schools.

MEETING WITH THE LAKEHEAD DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

To launch the project, the RMYC met with senior educators at the Lakehead District School Board (LDSB) offices. The meeting on October 29, 2012 provided an opportunity to share the highlights from Phase I, and discuss the workplan for Phase II. Seven members of the Youth Council executive and MANWO's executive director attended the meeting chaired by Mr. Charles Bishop, Education Officer with other Education Superintendents present. Ms. Catherine Siemieniuk, Director of Education made a courtesy visit to meet and greet the Youth Council delegation at the beginning of the meeting.

Below is a summary of what was discussed. The RMYC provided a preamble followed by a question 'Q'. 'R' is the response given by the school board.

1. The RMYC wants to work with the Lakehead District School Board (LDSB) to implement Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy so that all students, parents and other members of the community feel welcomed and respected, and every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.

Q. What role does LDSB want the RMYC to play in this regard, and how can we work together to accomplish this?

R. The LDSB welcomes all the help to promote the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. The school board appreciates the Youth Council's contribution, and supports students' effort to engage peers and involve the community in improving the learning environment in all schools. The LDSB will work with the RMYC to promote the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy.

2. The RMYC wants to meet with School Councils to share the findings of our Equity and Inclusive Strategy Project report as presented to the school board last May.

Q. How can the school board help us to host such a forum?

R. Every school has a School Council. Rather than try to bring all School Councils together for a presentation, it may be easier for the RMYC to contact each school principal for the dates of their School Council meetings and arrange to be included on the agenda.

3. The RMYC wants to hold a student leaders forum for YEDE delegates who signed up to join our Equity and Inclusive Education campaign. About thirty to fifty students will be invited. We will discuss ways to promote what the school board is doing to make our schools inclusive and safer, and the role students can play to share the information and engage peers in the process. We would like to organize the meeting before the end of the year.

Q. How can the school board help us? Is it possible to have the meeting in one of your schools, and which one would you recommend?

R. The LDSB supports the RMYC's plan to hold a follow-up forum for Youth Embracing Diversity in Education (YEDE) delegates who signed up to be part of the RMYC's Equity and Inclusive Education promotion team. The school board endorses the idea and will provide the references needed for approval by schools to send delegates to the forum.

For the project manageable given the timeline, it is better to involve just the local high schools, and leave elementary schools out during this phase. The board of education cannot offer space in schools to host events. It is up to the Youth Council to contact potential schools directly and request if their facilities are available to hold the forum.

4. The Lakehead District School Board initiated YEDE conferences. Most RMYC officers today are past YEDE delegates, and we see great potential in the forums creating peer leaders that engage other students to make a difference.

Q. Will the LDSB welcome the development of a plan of action developed by the RMYC and past YEDE delegates to enhance the effectiveness of YEDE in schools?

R. The LDSB will review any recommendations by students to enhance the learning environment in schools. Suggestions to improve the effectiveness of YEDE, and ideas to create inclusive and equitable schools are reviewed on an on-going basis, and input from the RMYC will be considered.

5. The LDSB has invited the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board to the last two YEDE conferences for the benefit of all Thunder Bay students. We are pleased that the school board has responded positively to our request to include students from the separate school board at YEDE so that they can also participate and benefit from this important forum.

Q. How do you see this collaboration progressing, and is there a role our Youth Council can play?

R. YEDE was initiated by the LDSB five years ago to engage public school students in social justice issues. At the urging of the RMYC, since 2011 the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board has been invited to send high school delegates to YEDE conferences. The invitations will continue in the foreseeable future, and it is up to the Catholic Board to send delegates.

PHASE I: CONSULTATIONS – NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Sixty eight students representing different schools participated in a workshop to review Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and focus groups on the local school boards' policies to implement the Ministry's directives for enhancing student wellness and achievement.

Students were asked to respond to eight questions below:

1. Are You Aware of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy?

YES: 20 NO: 48.

Only the RMYC and Working Group members were aware of the Strategy from being involved with the project. The other student leaders and student council members were not familiar with the policy at all. Leaflets of the strategy were handed out during the workshop.

On what should be done to make students more aware, the suggestions were as follows:

- Advertising: posters and announcements
- Handout information pamphlets/handouts
- Have a booth in job fairs
- Host conferences and hold meetings (i.e. RMYC Equity and inclusive Community Leadership conferences)
- Invite more people to events like the YEDE conference
- Give presentations and speeches (can use the auditorium)
- Give presentations in and out of schools
- More school presentations, workshops, and fun events
- Create school activities and booths
- Make the strategy more present in school education so that everyone can be aware, not just those who attend the conference; include in the curriculum
- Make the strategy more prominent within the schools by discussing it within groups and clubs (e.g., Natural Helpers)

2. Do you feel that all students are included in school activities? Why?

YES: 0 NO: 68

The reasons given why students feel excluded are:

- Due to race, culture, ethnicity
- Difference in grade/age
- Appearance (i.e. size)
- Difference in religion such as Moslems, Jews, Sikhs, etc.
- Exclusion caused by bullying
- Exclusion due to homophobia
- Favouritism by teachers, coaches and supervisor biased towards certain students
- Minorities not being acknowledged during activities i.e. sports, music, athletes, etc.
- Language barriers i.e. new immigrants, refugees, students from reserves
- Intelligence
- Some do not know what to get involved in
- Reluctance due to lack of self confidence and understanding of self-worth (10)

3. Are all students accepted by their teachers and/or peers at school? Why?

Students-Students NO: 68 YES: 0

Teachers-Students NO: 61 Yes: 7

1) Discrimination occurs between both teachers to students and students to students

- appearance and interests
- race/ethnicity
- age
- religion/beliefs
- sexual orientation

2) Bullying between students

- Verbal bullying
- Cyber bullying
- Exclusion

- 3) Students are unaware of how their actions affect others (i.e. excluding others)
- 4) Students tend to "group off" and this can be intimidating to others
- 5) Some are prejudice due to who one associates with
- 6) Teacher may base their opinions of students on academic performance
- 7) Students who excel in other areas than academic are not viewed in as a high standing
- 8) Students and staff assume authority/superiority over the "weak"
- 9) Many teachers treat students of different ethnicity's differently
- 10) Generally teachers try to accept all students

"Not everyone is accepted all the time and could be made fun of or not respected all the time, but that doesn't mean people don't try."

4. Do you feel students know where to go to report problems? Where can they go?

YES: 48

NO: 20

- 1) Adult of authority/trusted adult
- 2) Principal and vice principals
- 3) The Administration office
- 4) Office
- 5) Guidance office (student services)
- 6) Guidance/Aboriginal counsellor (3)
- 7) Teachers
- 8) Peers / Peer leaders / Natural Helper
- 9) Parents
- 10) Student Council

"The issue is students don't report incidents because they are afraid of retaliation, and feel that it will resort to something bad."

"It depends on the problem really. Sometimes students know exactly where to go (office, teachers, etc.), but sometimes they struggle for a location."

5. Do you feel that student's complaints are handled very well? How so?

YES: 29 NO: 39

- Staff neglect /avoid dealing with issues (often after assuring that issue will be dealt with)
- Staff members have difficulty finding a proportional solution to problems.
- Too much or too little is done to fix the issue
- Often complaints are not taken seriously
- The smaller problems are overlooked; only the bigger problems are dealt with
- Some teachers and other staff tend follow the statement: "if we didn't see anything we can't do anything"
- Some students are ignored; teachers put more effort in helping those with a higher academic standing
- Staff give reasons why not to feel emotional rather than solving the problem
- Complaints are considered thoroughly and actions are taken to address the complaint
- If an issue is brought to attention, actions occur to handle it immediately with authority
- Punishment are decided by the school, and parents are informed
- Generally every issue is taken seriously
- Complaints are dealt through talking instead of violence
- Some students feel reluctant to seek assistance from staff for fear of the consequences
- Some complaints are too difficult to handle well
- Depends on the person that is helping

6. Please list the common problems experienced by students at your school.

- (a) Drug and alcohol use and abuse / Too much partying
- (b) Bullying
- (c) Racism
- (d) Homophobia
- (e) Teen pregnancy
- (f) Theft / crime
- (g) Poverty and Financial difficulties
- (h) Fighting

- (i) Partnership issues (boyfriend, girlfriend, gossip, etc.
- (j) Dropping out of school/failing to attend class
- (k) Poor grades (not getting help for homework, feeling neglected, lack of confidence)
- (l) Talked down to by teachers and peers
- (m) Lack of/poor education
- (n) Stress with academic problems, homework, assignments, tests, exams
- (o) Peer pressure
- (p) Exclusion
- (q). Discrimination
 - sexual orientation
 - ethnicity/race
 - religion
 - physical appearance
 - belief/attitudes
 - elitism
 - mental health
- (r) Family issues such as divorce, neglect, job loss, poverty, etc.

"A majority of students say that the most common problems they see are associated with discrimination -- racism, homophobia, appearance, weight, etc. Too many students crack jokes, and don't realize the hurt and pain this brings."

"Bullying - it could be as simple as saying you're kidding about something, but there is always a hint of truth to a statement"

- 7. Any suggestion you have to improve the learning environment at your school so that all students feel safe, included, and accepted?**
- (a) Train and encourage teachers to reach out to students and become involved with what is happening in and out of school and to take a more active approach to stop bullying
 - (b) Have guidance counsellors meet with students every month, to assess their progress in school, and their relationships in and out of school
 - (c) Hire and train more counsellors

- (d) Support groups (e.g. for discussing issues to feel that you are welcome to talk about it to adults in the school or anywhere else)
- (e) Promote groups of acceptance (i.e. GSA, Group hugs)
- (f) More Natural Helper involvement
- (g) Work with NWOSSSA / Student Councils
- (h) More workshops on bullying
- (i) Make students aware of the inclusion program and promote inclusion throughout the school (to make everyone feel comfortable with their surroundings)
- (j) Provide more clubs and activities with a variety to have something for everyone
- (k) Use games, music, videos, etc. that influence students to promote equality
- (l) Work together to create an improved and healthier environment (Treat the environment with respect and improve it: no ripped walls, broken windows, vandalized stalls, etc.)
- (m) More security
- (n) Create safe spaces in the hallways and classrooms
- (o) Make more effective punishment for bullying
- (p) Include more/other cultural classes; Native and Korean languages etc.

8. Are you aware of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy? *

NO: 85% YES: 15%

* *A majority of students who knew about the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy said they learned about it at the YEDE Conference, from the RMYC Working Group, and through participating in the Youth Council's forums and meetings. Many students said that they are not aware of the two school boards' policies.*

After the surveys, the Youth Council met to review the results and analyze the findings. Even though all the delegates acknowledged that discrimination was a common problem in schools, that all students were not included in school activities, and that not everyone was accepted by their peers, an overwhelming majority were not aware of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and where to go to report problems. A significant number also said that student complaints were not handled fairly. Discrimination included several qualifiers such as -- appearance, body image, weight, sexual orientation, race, clothes, family wealth and class.

PHASE II: ENGAGING SCHOOL COUNCILS

While developing the project, the Ministry of Education suggested that MANWO and the RMYC identify and engage stakeholders to enhance equity, inclusion and safety in our schools. We have traditionally worked with students and focussed on student councils and school boards to create a healthy learning environment for all students to realize their academic potential.

School councils have not been a major part of our work to enhance learning. This project was a chance for the Youth Council to learn more about school councils. To connect with them, we decided to begin with Westgate Collegiate and Vocational Institute where the RMYC president, Meghan Payment went to school. This was a trial run to prepare the Youth Council for the meetings. We learned that each school council was comprised of parents, the school principal, teachers, staff and student representatives. This composition made them quite suited to deal with the issues to enhance student wellness and achievement.

Three school council meetings took place before the Holiday Season break, and the remaining high schools were covered in the new-year. The agenda included discussing Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, and the policies developed by school boards to implement the Ministry's mandate. We shared our findings from the surveys which revealed the students' priorities in their respective schools, and that a majority of the students were not aware of the government's directives and the school boards' policies to create safer, inclusive and accepting schools. We also presented the students' priorities, and their suggestions to improve the learning environment in their schools.

The school councils supported the project, and were impressed with the RMYC's efforts to engage students in the process. Our surveys mirrored results from the school boards' own studies. There was a willingness to work together in promoting Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, and finding effective ways to implement the school boards' policies. As each school council operated independently, the challenge was for the RMYC members in each respective school to develop a working relationship with their school council so that we can learn from each other, share success stories and best practices for the benefit of everyone.

Additional Meetings with School Council Members:

Over the summer, the RMYC met with school council members who were unable to attend earlier meetings. The Youth Council was very pleased to meet with Mrs. Amina Abu-Bakare, past chair of Sir Winston Churchill High School's School Council, and Ms. Beth Ponka who sits on the Hammarskjold High School's School Council.

Meetings with Mrs. Abu-Bakare of African heritage, and Ms. Ponka who is Aboriginal, were an opportunity to get their perspective on school councils and their influence to initiate change. We wanted to hear their comments on the challenges of addressing racism and inclusion which are common concerns among minority students, and how school councils could apply Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy to create a healthier learning environment for everyone.

Two separate meetings with Mrs. Abu-Bakare and Ms. Ponka began with the project's background and highlights from our surveys. We wanted their input as members of school councils, and parents of racialized students in the school system. We also wanted them to offer recommendations from their experiences and make suggestions that would make a difference.

The following is a summary of what transpired during the meetings and the suggestions presented for action:

1. Get parents more involved

Schools should come up with creative ways to engage parents. The Ministry of Education's Parents in Partnership ...A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools was cited as a valuable resource for reference. School Councils play a key role in engaging parents, their children and school boards to enhance student wellness and achievement. Parents can use their experience as parents/guardians, and their influence on their children to facilitate the implementation of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act. This is an effective strategy to involve the community in raising awareness of the new and progressive policies to improve student safety and success.

Some students will not be actively involved unless nudged or pushed by parents. Reaching out to parents through flyers, town hall meetings, billboard ads, *One City Many Voices* news articles, mass media, new technology, home visits and so forth are various alternatives to try and mobilize parents to get them involved. Feedback from the discussion revealed that parents seem to participate in school issues when their children are in elementary grades than when they are attending high school.

In addition, if parents do not see or hear about problems at school, they will often stay out of students' lives, especially if they are older. Therefore, more effort should be put to urge parents to stay involved as long as their children are still in school, and discuss with them what is going on, learn about any new policies being implemented such as Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act, and how this affects their learning environment. Parental involvement is key to student success.

2. Develop more peer leaders

While parents are role models for their children and their encouragement is critical for students to stay in school and succeed, unfortunately some parents are indifferent, unmotivated and uncooperative. Ms. Ponka highlighted the challenges faced by Aboriginal families due to the effects of residential schools. Many do know how to parent and the intergenerational impacts are evident among the children and many drop-out of school. Training peer leaders and working through them to connect with other students is a practical alternative. Initiatives such as Natural Helpers, Roots of Empathy, Youth Embracing Diversity in Education (YEDE) conferences and so forth enable schools to reach out to many students. Creating a diverse pool of peer leaders is an effective strategy to promote inclusion, equality and social justice in schools. The Lakehead District School Board's (LDSB) YEDE conferences launched in 2008 have been an effective way to recruit and train student leaders.

The example of how the RMYC has been invited by the LDSB to lead workshops on anti-racism, discrimination, Aboriginal relations at YEDE forums was brought up. This is a practical way to use a peer-to-peer approach to advance race relations and promote Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy among students.

Participating in YEDE has also enabled the RMYC to observe systemic problems that led to minority and racialized students being excluded. Consequently, the RMYC has recommended that schools select YEDE delegates that reflect the diversity in the school population. In addition, training and support is needed to enable student leaders and peer leaders to share what they learn with their peers.

Ms. Ponka and Mrs. Abu-Bakare suggested that the RMYC should work with student councils, school clubs and school boards to organize events to celebrate and raise awareness of our diversity during special days such as March 21, *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*, *Gay Straight Alliance/Pink Days*, *Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week*, and so forth.

Commemorating our special days and symbolic occasions in schools will raise awareness of national efforts to educate, sensitize and include everyone. A collaborative effort led by peers will lessen the stigma Aboriginal, racialized, and minority students often face in schools, and mobilize everyone to feel that it is "cool" to work together and be inclusive.

3. Create Diverse School Councils

School boards should make a conscious and deliberate effort to have School Councils that reflect the diversity of their student population. Mrs. Abu-Bakare and Ms. Ponka were the only School Council members from racialized backgrounds the RMYC is aware of and met with. They provided personal perspectives in regards to discrimination, and spoke from personal experiences which other School Council members did not have.

Their sensitivity to diversity, and understanding of the challenges faced by racialized children from first-hand knowledge provided a deeper insight on issues minority students feel in the mainstream education system. As our community becomes more multicultural, multi-religious and so forth, there is a need to ensure that educators mirror the population they are serving, and School Councils reflect the same diversity among students to better present the issues, interest and concerns of all children. Having diversity on School Council members will ensure that the needs of all students are addressed equitably.

4. School Uniforms

Mrs. Abu-Bakare agreed with the RMYC's recommendation that school uniforms can level the playing field among all students. After all, the RMYC prepared a position paper on school uniforms used by the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board to promote the idea. Having lived in Africa and the Middle East where school uniforms are the norm, Mrs. Abu-Bakare stated that they eliminate visible signs of poverty, status, class and wealth based on dress.

Feedback from the Catholic students confirms that school uniforms help to promote equality by eliminating conspicuous branding and showing off designer clothes that divide the have, and have-not students. This eliminates discrimination based on attire.

The RMYC should engage students in debate about school uniforms, and initiate dialogue with School Councils to promote the merits from the students' perspective. Chances of success will be greater if the school uniform campaign was driven by students and sold to parents. To make it easier to sell the idea, promoting simple attire such as plain shirts or school-colour T-shirts with casual jeans at affordable prices will still build team spirit.

With growing gaps between the have and have-nots in the community, school uniforms are an ideal way to avoid discrimination based on clothes and wealth. Parents will not be pressured to buy new wardrobes each school year, and those who cannot afford designer clothes have their children feel left out. This way, local public high schools will not be fashion showcases as seems to be the case now -- allowing students to focus on learning and concentrate on their studies than the clothes they wear to feel that they belong.

5. Enhance collaboration among service providers working with youth

There are many challenges confronting youths today. Family problems, addictions, mental health, poverty, racism, sexual orientation, discrimination, the legacy of residential schools and other social issues require various supports for students. There is a need to get rid of "silos" that are divisive, and encourage different groups to work together in complementary ways that will benefit students and enhance the well-being and achievement.

Mrs. Abu-Bakare urged the RMYC to initiate meetings for youth service groups such as the Student Councils, students clubs, Children's Aid societies, Boys and Girls Club, Big Brother Big Sister, Teen Challenge, Hope Youth Centre, Under Ground Gym, and so forth, to encourage children and youth to stay in school. We should review current priorities and gaps that exist, and offer the supports they need to realize their academic potential.

The RMYC should collaborate with Diversity Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay Anti-racism Committee, Thunder Pride Committee and other groups working against discrimination, and hold forums and workshops with School Councils, school boards and teachers to assess the supports and resources they need to implement Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act to enhance student wellness and achievement.

6. Liaising with School Councils and School Administration

More needs to be done to promote School Councils and the work they do. Through this project, we realized that many people not familiar with School Councils and what they do. Even arranging the meetings in the schools, school secretaries, teachers and student councils were not very familiar with their School Council, who sat on them, and when they met.

Given the important role they should play, and their potential to make a difference, there is an urgent need to raise the profile of School Councils and the work they do. New approaches are required to publicize their role, the meetings and how to approach them with pressing issues that need to be addressed. School assemblies with panels of School Councils can be the beginning to make them more visible and accountable to the school and community.

School boards and school councils should hold town hall meetings for the general public to provide feedback and input on their policies to implement Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting School Act (Bill 13), or other issues of mutual interest.

MANWO and the RMYC should develop a follow-up plan to monitor implementation of the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and Accepting Schools Act, and develop strategies to engage stakeholders and mobilize the community to achieve the intended results.

STUDENTS FORUM

A students' forum was run by the Youth Council with the support of the LDSB and MANWO. The event was held at the Airplane Hotel and Conference Centre on February 21, 2013. Forty eight delegates from six high schools attended the day-long workshops led by thirteen RMYC officers and members of the project Working Group. Most of the students were past YEDE delegates. Students from Ecole secondaire catholique de Le Verendrye and Dennis Franklin Cromarty First Nations High School were invited to build relations with the two special schools.

The Chair of the LDSB, Deborah Massaro, and Mr. Charles Bishop, Education Officer addressed the students and encouraged them to come up with ideas to make a difference. Staff from the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board also attended, and Colleen Peters from Thunder Bay John Howard Society who also volunteers with Thunder Bay Youth Centres addressed the students during lunch. She spoke about youth leadership and challenged the youth to realize their potential and make a difference for a better future.

The RMYC presented highlights from the surveys to assess awareness of the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, the school boards policies on the same, and equity, inclusion and safety issues in schools. The findings appear below. This was followed by concurrent workshops on: Anti-Racism; Discrimination based on appearance, dress, etc; Homophobia; and Suicide. The students shared opinions, expressed their feelings and offered suggestions to deal with the issues. The day ended with a repeat workshop on suicide. Most students who wanted to talk and know more about suicide prevention. They recommended counselling and more supports to deal with depression, suicidal feelings and mental health.

Comments on the evaluation forms confirmed the need to engage students to provide input and feedback on conditions at school. More needs to be done to promote policies, protocols and the resources available to help them enjoy learning and do well in school. In large schools, it was easy for some students to be lost in the crowd and feel that no-one cares. They wanted safe spaces to express their feelings, easier ways to report incidents and access the supports they need. Peer support groups were an option as teachers could not possibly be there for everyone.

SCHOOL SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

The RMYC ran surveys in all Thunder Bay High Schools on student concerns and get input on should be done to address the issues. All high school principals were supportive of the project and helped the Youth Council to select the best high-traffic site for the survey. More than one thousand (1,000) students participated in the study which focused on three pre-selected topics—Reasons students were excluded at their school, What schools can do to stop discrimination, and Common problems students face.

After tallying the results, the responses were ranked as follows:

Reasons students are excluded at school:

Appearance / Weight
Race / Culture
Homophobia
Clothes
Class / Grade / Age / Seniority
Manners
Behaviour
Beliefs
Disability
Athletic Ability
Family Wealth
Intelligence
Where you live / Neighbourhoods
Attitude
Religion
Gender
Addictions
Ignorance
Language

What can schools do to stop discrimination?

Pow wows
 Assemblies
 Awareness
 Conferences
 Consequences / Punishments
 Guest Speakers
 Multicultural Days / Cultural Activities
 Natural Helpers
 Presentations
 School Uniforms
 Suspensions
 Teacher Training
 Workshops
 Detention
 Team-building exercises
 Supervision
 Student cultural exchanges

Common problems students face at school:

Bullying / Intimidation / Threats
 Drugs / Alcohol / Substance Abuse
 Discrimination / Racism / Homophobia
 Depression / Suicide
 Violence / Assaults
 Threats / Rude students
 Gangs / Cliques
 Hazing / New students integrating into high school
 Biased teachers / Insensitive teachers / Prejudiced teachers
 Not being taken seriously / Students' complaints not being acted on
 Unfair treatment by teachers and peers / Being judged unfairly
 Ignorant people

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES TRAINING

The LDSB administrative staff at the Student Forum offered to provide Restorative Practices training to the RMYC to enhance the Youth Council's facilitation skills. During the workshops, Mr. Charles Bishop, Education Officer with LDSB observed that some of the students did not speak. The shy and laid back participants were easily over-shadowed by the more out-spoken ones and did not share their ideas and opinions. Mr. Bishop offered to run a training session to enable RMYC peer leaders to become more observant of the room dynamics during workshops and meetings to ensure that all participants are acknowledged, have a chance to be heard, feel included, and are part of the discussions.

The initial plan was to run Restorative Practices training before the Youth Embracing Diversity in Education (YEDE) conference (May 14, 2013). Unexpected developments made it impossible for Mr. Bishop to proceed with the two-part training until the end of May. The first session was held on Saturday, May 25, and the second phase will take place in due course.

Thirty RMYC and Project Working Group members attended the first session at the LDSB Victoria Park School Training Centre. Mr. Bishop and Mrs. Probizanski (Superior High School Principal) led the training. All participants received a training kit with resource materials and information on the restorative process. The content covered theoretical concepts on connecting with people and engaging them in a new approach to resolve conflict and modify behaviour. This is a positive and proactive strategy to improve the learning environment.

Restorative Practices can be applied to deal with bullying and other student risk behaviours. This is an alternative way of dealing with students who have made bad choices and helps them to learn from their mistakes. Teaching students to respect themselves, others, as well as the environment and property around them reduces disciplinary referrals and punishments. Creating Restorative Circles where participants take turns to express themselves while others listen respectfully enhances communication and understanding. This is an inclusive approach that is non-adversarial. It diffuses tension and potential conflict by encouraging people to hear each other out, and treat each other with empathy and respect. Teachers, staff, student councils and peer leaders should receive Restorative Practices training.

YEDE CONFERENCE

The RMYC facilitated concurrent workshops on “Anti-Racism and Aboriginal Relations” during the 2013 Lakehead District School Board Youth Embracing Diversity in Education Conference at the Airlane Hotel, May 14. About 150 student leaders from the LDSB schools and the two Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board high schools attended the event.

There was agreement that relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were poor, and continue to deteriorate. Differing lifestyles, mannerisms, behaviours, attitudes, dress and social expectations feed the general stereotypes that contribute to racial tensions. Racist graffiti targeting Aboriginal people is common across the city, and when the words “Kill Indians” were painted on a prominent bank sign by the major intersection of Harbour Expressway and Fort William Road at Intercity Mall, it showed how far some people are willing to go with hatred. This happened just a few years ago.

It was also revealed that First Nations students attending Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School being banned from Intercity Shopping Centre, and it took a delegation of concerned citizens to lobby Mall management to reverse this. Physical assaults, pizza slices, pop, coffee, etc. thrown at native students on the streets, or while waiting at bus stops reveal how wide-spread the problem is. It was observed that racist incidents spiked after the recent Idle-No-More protests. This made many First Nations boarding students leaving reserves to study in the city feel that they were not welcome in the community.

Many Aboriginal students did not report racial incidents to the police, teachers, or authority figures outside their circle of friends and guardians. They were scared, felt that no one will believe them, and thought that it is a waste of time because nothing will be done. To encourage students to file complaints about racism, the RMYC has been promoting a Racial Incident Reporting Form (sample included at the end of this report). It provides a record of what transpired, and seeks the victim’s input on how they would like to see the problem resolved. This process is intended to help schools monitor racial incidents when they occur, and involving students directly encourages them to helping create harmonious relations.

Students want more formal opportunities to learn about the local First Nations, creative ways to build an understanding of Aboriginal cultures, and practical strategies to foster respect. With many students not quite aware of where to go, or who to approach with their complaints, there is a need for schools to design a simpler and more accessible reporting process. They also want schools to create safe spaces for students to 'hang-out' and support each other.

Many teachers are struggling to deal with complains involving racism, bullying, homophobia and discrimination among students. They ignore the problem until it becomes physical so that it becomes easy to lay a charge of assault. Teachers and staff need to be trained, mentored or coached to handle problems fairly, with the consequences being applied accordingly. This will assure the victims that their complaints are taken seriously and that justice is being done.

An inventory on the nature of racism and discrimination, what is being done, and what more is needed to create accepting, inclusive and equitable schools produced the following:

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION IN SCHOOLS

1. What is the nature of Racism / Discrimination in schools?

- *Racial avoidance or shunning students who look or appear different*
- *Racial jokes and negative stereotypes*
- *Name-calling*
- *Cultural avoidance for those from other cultures*
- *Bullying / physical bullying towards targeted groups and minorities*
- *Religion i.e. Moslems, Jews, Aboriginal spirituality, etc*
- *Racist graffiti*
- *Prejudice against Aboriginal students*
- *Racism and Discrimination linked to poverty*
- *Verbal comments and Gossip*
- *Racial cyber bullying*

2. What is being done to deal with racism at school that is working?

- *Presentations*
- *Natural Helpers*
- *Detentions and suspensions*
- *Charges being laid after racial fights*
- *Assemblies*

- *Student groups/ clubs promoting equality*
- *Posters*
- *Events such as Multicultural Days*
- *Discipline*
- *Websites*
- *Students being punished*
- *Guest speakers*
- *People being punished*
- *Pow Wows*
- *More information about bullying / discrimination*

3. What is not working?

- *Doing nothing*
- *Ignorance or ignoring the problem*
- *Just yelling at the student*
- *Confronting students in class*
- *Ignoring bullies---they keep on bullying other students*
- *Old forms of punishment such as simple suspensions that do not work*
- *Getting a simple talking to*
- *Just talking about racism and discrimination, and no action.*
- *Detentions with no teachings or follow-up*
- *Punishing people with no explanation will just anger them to lash out*
- *Having no consequences does not work*
- *Not being serious about it, or thinking its OK.*
- *No follow-up to presentations, workshops or discussions*
- *Teachers yelling at students not to do it again*

4. What more can be done to stop discrimination in schools?

- *Presentations during orientation, and in-class discussions*
- *Teach Restorative Practices and organize Restorative Circles*
- *Share success stories and best practises to promote respect*
- *Teach younger students in elementary schools*
- *Policies with easy to use reporting and complaint processes*
- *Getting kids more involved to be part of the solution*
- *Involving parents/guardians to help*
- *More information on how racism and discrimination hurt*
- *Training teachers to deal with racism*
- *Encouraging students to share ideas to deal with problems*
- *Keep trying, and make improvements from experience*
- *More guest speakers familiar with the subject*
- *Teach respect and empathy*
- *Promote similarities, minimize differences*

5. What should students do to reduce Racism and Discrimination at school?

- No racial jokes, name-calling or bullying
- Spread awareness, attend workshops and conferences such as YEDE
- Peer mediation, encouraging students to talk things out
- Report incidents to teachers and staff
- Listen to how others feel / be helpful
- Stand up for victims / Reach out to victims and be there for them
- Join student groups promoting equality i.e. Natural Helpers
- Learn about multiculturalism and diversity as a Canadian reality
- Mix and interact to learn about other races and cultures
- Not hang out with those people who discriminate, tell them its wrong
- Let students know that racist or homophobic jokes are hurtful
- More awareness about cultural sensitivity training and sharing circles
- Stand up for people who are being discriminated against
- Interact with more students to reduce ignorance
- Students should report any discrimination they see
- Educate students to think critically and from the reverse-side
- Teach students to be open minded and respectful
- Start school campaigns to combat racism

6. What should teachers and staff do?

- Learn about diversity and effective strategies to deal with racism in class
- Teach multiculturalism to celebrate our rich heritage
- Have workshops, talk and teach about different races/cultures
- Realize what's going on in the classroom and among students
- Stop physical bullying when you see it and punish those who discriminate
- Encourage students to report incidents when they occur and take action
- Teachers and staff should learn and apply Restorative Practices
- Work with student groups to speak about it
- Keep eyes on racial bullies and tell the parents
- Assign essays and assignments to educate students
- Identify and discipline students who discriminate against others
- Support students to be part of the solution
- Get students to provide answers, and listen to what they have to say
- Keep an eye out for discrimination, and do something to stop it
- If they catch someone doing or saying something bad, send them to the office
- Look out more when it comes to racism and discrimination
- Promote diversity by encouraging students to mix
- Stop racist actions when they occur, and have consequences
- Apply detentions and punishments with discussions
- Address issues that cause racism such as ignorance, poverty, etc.
- Have more informed discussions about the impacts of racism

7. What should school boards do?

- *Set up fair policies that can be implemented effectively*
- *Promote Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy aggressively*
- *Hold workshops to educate teachers about equity, inclusion, diversity, anti-racism*
- *Train student leaders at conferences such as YEDE to work with their peers*
- *Help teachers to understand racism and how to deal with it in class*
- *Sponsor presentations to help students learn about racism*
- *Promote multiculturalism and diversity in schools*
- *Develop and provide resources for teachers to use in class*
- *Set guidelines to standardize procedures to deal with racism fairly*
- *Encourage students to be part of the solution and use their ideas*
- *Support schools to be proactive in promoting inclusion, Restorative Practices, etc.*
- *Hire professionals to help implement Anti-racism policies*
- *Create opportunities for more teacher and student talks about racism*
- *Hold multicultural days and presentations*
- *Have teacher professional development days about racism and diversity*
- *Help schools to host pow-wows to raise awareness of Aboriginal culture*
- *Engage students in mediation and sharing circles to resolve problems*
- *Create more programs to celebrate different cultures, races, religions, etc*
- *Set up more workshops that more people can go to*
- *Hire diverse teachers and staff to reflect the student population*
- *Work with all school councils to promote Anti-racism*
- *Include Anti-racism in the curriculum*
- *Engage the Aboriginal community to help improve race relations*
- *Develop strategies to monitor what is going on and how to respond*
- *Learn success stories from others and apply good ideas accordingly.*

The information above is similar to other surveys the RMYC has conducted. In spite of current efforts to improve race relations, many students felt that racism against Aboriginal people was getting worse. Others observed that there more racial incidents in high schools compared to elementary school. It is however, impressive that when students are aware of new interventions such as Restorative Practices, peer mediation and sharing circles, they are keen to try them.

While there was a cry for consequences to teach lessons and modify behaviours, students also showed empathy and wanted victims to seek and get the help they need. Some may be caught in cycles of negative experiences and needed guidance to change attitudes. School councils, and peer support groups were potential alternatives that could help to make a difference.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

1. As the project ends, work to monitor implementation of the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act will continue. MANWO will support the RMYC to engage students, solicit feedback on what is happening in schools, and gather input on what needs to be done to improve the situation.
2. MANWO and the RMYC will link with other stakeholders outside the school boards and involved in equity, inclusion and social justice issues such as Diversity Thunder Bay, City of Thunder Bay Anti-Racism Committee, Thunder Pride and so forth. We should all collaborate in promoting Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting Schools Act to create safer, inclusive and accepting schools that enhance student wellness and achievement.
3. The RMYC intends to complete the Restorative Practices training provided by LDSB. Youth Council members who participated in the first session took it as professional development to deal with issues happening in schools such as bullying, racism, harassment, discrimination and so forth, more effectively.
4. The MANWO and the RMYC will liaise with LDSB, (the lead group assigned the responsibility of promoting the Ministry's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy across Northwestern Ontario) and use the annual YEDE conferences to train student leaders who will in turn engage their peers to make a difference. However, more needs to be done to provide skills, support and opportunities to enable YEDE delegates to share the information learned at the forums with peers in their respective schools.
5. The RMYC will develop a plan of action to work with School Councils and seek ideas to promote their role in the community and strategies to create safer, inclusive and more accepting schools. There is a need to raise the profile of school councils so that all stakeholders – parents, students and educators work together to create a healthy and safe learning environment for all students.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

MANWO and the RMYC are pleased with the valuable information compiled from the project. The findings from the surveys and consultations will serve as reference to understand what is going on, and what the stakeholders should do to move forward.

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and the Accepting School Act provide the framework to create safer, inclusive and accepting schools. The challenge is for school boards to apply their policies and guidelines to fulfill the Ministry's wishes to enhance student wellness and achievement. We have school councils, student councils and various student clubs all working to make the school experience for students enjoyable, memorable and fulfilling. These groups are stakeholders committed to improving the school environment.

RMYC members who attended the first part of the Lakehead District School Board's Restorative Practices training gained valuable information and skills they are now using to engage other students in schools. Therefore, teachers, staff, student leaders and school councils should find a way to provide Restorative Practices training to equip them with professional skills and knowledge to improve the learning experience for all students. Creating a wide pool of educators, peers and other resource people capable of reaching out and involving more students to be part of the solution to problems they face will make a difference.

The complaint process should be well publicized, readily accessible and easy to use for reporting incidents, filing complaints and dealing with conflicts. Students should be encouraged to offer suggestions to improve the situation, so that they feel involved in a meaningful way.

The Ministry of Education should be applauded for developing Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and passing the Accepting Schools Act. We need to work with our school boards and school councils to mobilize parents, educators and students to play an active role in making schools safer, more inclusive and accepting. Acknowledging and respecting diversity in schools will enhance student wellness and achievement.

CREATING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS -- REPORTING RACIST INCIDENTS

This form is to help students report racist incidents at school. When completed, please give it to your school principal, class teacher, guidance counsellor, staff, or your parents/guardians. Keep a copy for follow-up. You can also send a copy to the Multicultural Youth Centre at the above address, or fax it to: (807) 622-7271.

Date of Report _____ School _____

Name of person Reporting the incident: _____

Name of person Recording information: _____

Briefly describe the incident -- What happened? (was it verbal, physical, etc?) _____

Where did it happen? (Place --in class, gym, hallway, grounds, etc.) _____

When did it happen? Morning _____ Afternoon _____ After-school _____

Do you know the Name(s) of the person(s) involved? YES _____ NO _____

If YES, Who? _____

Did anyone else see what was happening? YES _____ NO _____

If YES, List the witness(es): _____

Any other information you feel is important (i.e. whether this has happened before) _____

How would you like to see the problem resolved? _____



THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL/SANDI KRASOWSKI

Strategy shared with peers

Sir Winston Churchill high school Regional Multicultural Youth Council members, from left, Nathan Ogden, Celine Jalalifar, Jeevan Chahal, Simrun Chahal, Shane Wong, Samantha Smith and president Gurleen Chahal introduced the equity and inclusion education strate-

gy Wednesday by promoting safety, inclusion and anti-discrimination among their peers. The campaign, which continues this week, is expected to provide a better understanding of social issues that youth face.

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