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**Subject:** DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS

**Application:** Directors of Education  
Secretary-Treasurers of School Authorities  
Superintendents  
Principals of Elementary Schools  
Principals of Secondary Schools  
Principals of Provincial and Demonstration Schools

**Reference:** This memorandum replaces Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, “Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity”, July 13, 1993.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ontario’s publicly funded education system supports and reflects the democratic values of fairness, equity, and respect for all. Recognizing the importance of education, the Ontario government has established three core priorities:

- high levels of student achievement
- reduced gaps in student achievement
- increased public confidence in publicly funded education

An equitable, inclusive education system is fundamental to achieving these core priorities, and is recognized internationally as critical to delivering a high-quality education for all learners. “Equity and excellence go hand in hand. ... In a truly equitable system, factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status do not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes. Our experience shows that barriers can be removed when all education partners create the conditions needed for success.”<sup>1</sup>

Providing a high-quality education for all is a key means of fostering social cohesion based on an inclusive society where diversity is affirmed within a framework of common values that promote the well-being of all citizens. Ontarians share a belief in the need to develop students as learners and prepare them for their role in society as engaged, productive, and responsible citizens. Active and engaged citizens are aware of their rights, but more importantly, they accept responsibility for protecting their rights and the rights of others.

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1. Ministry of Education, Ontario, *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2008), p. 8.

On April 6, 2009, the Minister of Education released *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (hereafter referred to as “the strategy”). This document sets out a vision for an equitable and inclusive education system. The action plan contained in the document focuses on respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education, and identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ learning, growth, and contribution to society. These barriers and biases, whether overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional, need to be identified and addressed.

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide direction to school boards<sup>2</sup> on the review, development, implementation, and monitoring of equity and inclusive education policies to support student achievement. Our schools need to help students develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, and caring citizens who can contribute to both a strong economy and a cohesive society.

## BACKGROUND

The ministry has issued several policy/program memoranda to support equity, student achievement, and positive school climates, including Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, “Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity”, July 13, 1993.<sup>3</sup> When No. 119 (1993) was issued, many boards focused on creating learning environments that respected the cultures of all students. The antiracism and ethnocultural policies contained in No. 119 (1993) went “beyond a broad focus on multiculturalism and race relations”<sup>4</sup> to focus on identifying and changing institutional policies and procedures, as well as individual behaviours and practices that may be racist in their impact. No. 119 (1993) sought to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to live in an increasingly diverse world, appreciate diversity, and reject discriminatory behaviours and attitudes. Several boards have expanded these antiracism and ethnocultural policies into more inclusive equity policies that address a broader range of discriminatory factors.

In addition, it is now recognized that such factors as race, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, gender, and class can intersect to create additional barriers for some students. Many organizations, including the United Nations, are recognizing the compounding impact of such intersections on discrimination. Ministry and board policies, therefore, should also take intersecting factors into account.

Although much has been done – and continues to be done – to build the publicly funded education system’s capacity to foster equity and inclusiveness in boards and schools, evidence indicates that some groups of students continue to encounter discriminatory barriers to learning. Recent research shows that

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2. In this memorandum, *school board(s)* and *board(s)* refer to both district school boards and school authorities.

3. Others include Policy/Program Memoranda No. 108, “Opening or Closing Exercises in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools”, January 12, 1989; No. 112, “Education About Religion in the Public Elementary and Secondary Schools”, December 6, 1990; No. 127, “The Secondary School Literacy Graduation Requirement”, October 13, 2004; No. 128, “The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct”, October 4, 2007; No. 144, “Bullying Prevention and Intervention”, October 4, 2007; and No. 145, “Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour”, October 4, 2007.

4. Ministry of Education, Ontario, *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, Ontario, 1993), p. 7.

students who feel connected to teachers, to other students, and to the school itself do better academically.<sup>5</sup> This memorandum therefore broadens the scope of the previous Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119 (1993) to take into account a broad range of equity factors, as well as all of the prohibited grounds of discrimination under the Ontario Human Rights Code and other similar considerations. This memorandum fully supports and expands on the principles of antiracism and ethnocultural equity that were outlined in No. 119 (1993), and does not reflect a weakened or reduced commitment to antiracism or ethnocultural equity. This memorandum also promotes a system-wide approach to identifying and removing discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to help ensure that all students feel welcomed and accepted in school life.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR BOARDS

All publicly funded school boards will review and/or develop, implement, and monitor an equity and inclusive education policy in accordance with the requirements set out in this memorandum and in the strategy. The strategy is designed to promote fundamental human rights as described in the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, with which school boards are already required to comply. Boards will develop and implement their equity and inclusive education policy within the context of the denominational rights of Roman Catholic<sup>6</sup> schools as set out in section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867 and the Education Act, and the language rights of French-language rights holders as set out in section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms<sup>7</sup> and the Education Act. Boards must comply with all other aspects of the Education Act and regulations made under the act, including Ontario Regulation 181/98, which pertains to students with special education needs.<sup>8</sup> Boards must also comply with the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, the Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2001), and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005), as applicable. Other relevant legislation, such as the Youth Criminal Justice Act, must be referenced where appropriate. In addition, boards should refer to *English Language Learners / ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12, 2007*; *Ontario's Aménagement linguistique Policy for French-Language Education, 2005*;<sup>9</sup> and *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework, 2007*. They should also consult with their legal counsel and Freedom of Information coordinators to ensure that they are fulfilling all their legal responsibilities.

By the beginning of the 2010–11 school year (September 2010), boards will have in place an equity and inclusive education policy that addresses the eight areas of focus outlined in this memorandum, a guideline on religious accommodation, and an implementation plan. Boards may need to revise or

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5. D. Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2006).

6. Section 93 of the *Constitution Act, 1867* gives the provinces the exclusive right to govern education, subject to the preservation of denominational education rights.

7. Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* enshrines minority language education rights, subject to certain limitations.

8. Ontario Regulation 181/98, "Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils", requires school boards to consider placement of students with special education needs into regular classrooms before considering alternative placements.

9. Boards should also refer to Policy/Program Memorandum No. 148, "Policies Governing Admission to French-Language Schools in Ontario", April 22, 2009; and *L'admission, l'accueil et l'accompagnement des élèves dans les écoles de langue française de l'Ontario – Énoncé de politique et directives, 2009*.

expand upon their existing equity and/or antiracism/ethnocultural policy or develop a new policy on equity and inclusive education. As well, during the cyclical process of reviewing and revising their policies, boards will take steps to align all their other policies and procedures (e.g., on safe schools, student discipline, staff hiring and development) with their equity and inclusive education policy. This process will help to ensure that the principles of equity and inclusive education are embedded in all aspects of board and school operations.

School board policies must be comprehensive and must cover the prohibited grounds of discrimination set out in the Ontario Human Rights Code. The code prohibits discrimination on any of the following grounds: race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, citizenship, ethnic origin, disability, creed (includes religion), sex, sexual orientation, age, family status, and marital status. Boards may also address related issues resulting from the intersection of the dimensions of diversity that can also act as a systemic barrier to student learning.

## **POLICY DEVELOPMENT**

Equity and inclusive education policies and implementation plans will be consistent with the guiding principles and goals set out in the strategy, with the requirements in this memorandum, and with the ministry document entitled *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation, 2009* (hereafter referred to as “the guidelines”). These three documents should be used together when boards are reviewing and/or developing and implementing their equity and inclusive education policy, and when conducting their cyclical reviews of all their other policies.

When reviewing or developing their equity and inclusive education policy, boards are expected to consult widely with students, parents,<sup>10</sup> principals, teachers and other staff, school councils, their Special Education Advisory Committee, their Parent Involvement Committee and other committees (e.g., Diversity Committee; First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Advisory Committee), federations and unions, service organizations, and community partners in order to reflect the diversity of the community.

Boards have flexibility to adapt their equity and inclusive education policy to take into account local needs and circumstances.

### **Areas of Focus**

The three goals of the equity and inclusive education strategy are as follows:

- *shared and committed leadership* by the ministry, boards, and schools to eliminate discrimination through the identification and removal of biases and barriers
- *equity and inclusive education policies and practices* to support positive learning environments that are respectful and welcoming to all
- *accountability and transparency* with ongoing progress demonstrated and communicated to the ministry and the community

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10. In this memorandum, *parent(s)* refers to parent(s) and guardian(s).

In order to achieve these goals, each school board policy on equity and inclusive education will cover the following eight areas of focus.

### ***1. Board policies, programs, guidelines, and practices***

Through cyclical policy reviews, boards will embed the principles of equity and inclusive education in all their other policies, programs, guidelines, and practices, so that an equity and inclusive education focus is an integral part of every board's operations and permeates everything that happens in its schools.

Boards should make every effort to identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers that may limit the opportunities of individuals from diverse communities for employment, mentoring, retention, promotion, and succession planning in all board and school positions. The board's workforce should reflect the diversity within the community so that students, parents, and community members are able to see themselves represented. The board's workforce should also be capable of understanding and responding to the experiences of the diverse communities within the board's jurisdiction.

### ***2. Shared and committed leadership***

Board and school leaders must be responsive to the diverse nature of Ontario's communities. Leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes. School boards and schools are expected to provide leadership that is committed to identifying and removing discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to learning. Specifically, boards will identify a contact person to liaise with the ministry and other boards to share challenges, promising practices, and resources.

In accordance with the principles of the ministry's Ontario Leadership Strategy, effective board and school leaders promote the development of collaborative environments in which participants share a commitment to equity and inclusive education principles and practices. This collaborative approach includes and supports the active engagement of students, parents, federations and unions, colleges and universities, service organizations, and other community partners.

### ***3. School–community relationships***

Schools and boards will continue building their capacity – with the active engagement of parents and community partners – to create and sustain a positive school climate that supports student achievement. Each board and its schools should review the structures of existing committees and partnerships to help ensure that they reflect the principles of equity and inclusive education. Boards should expand upon their outreach efforts in order to foster new partnerships that engage a cross-section of diverse students, parents, staff, community members, and various organizations, including business groups (e.g., business education councils). Boards are encouraged to draw upon the expertise of their partners to explore innovative ways of sharing resources that can help them meet the diverse needs of their students and provide new and relevant learning opportunities. Strong relationships are necessary to effect real change so that all students can reach their potential regardless of personal circumstances.

#### ***4. Inclusive curriculum and assessment practices***

Students need to feel engaged in and empowered by what they are learning, supported by teachers and staff, and welcome in their learning environment. To this end, boards and their schools will use inclusive curriculum and assessment practices and effective instructional strategies that reflect the diverse needs of all students and the learning pathways that they are taking. Schools must provide students and staff with authentic and relevant opportunities to learn about diverse histories, cultures, and perspectives. Students should be able to see themselves represented in the curriculum, programs, and culture of the school. Also, since schools have a pivotal role in developing the work force of tomorrow, students should be able to see themselves represented in the teaching, administrative, and support staff employed at the school.

Boards are expected to draw upon strategies that have been shown by the evidence to support student success and reduce achievement gaps. These include reviewing resources, instruction, and assessment and evaluation practices to identify and eliminate stereotypes, discriminatory biases, and systemic barriers. For example, schools could make use of differentiated instruction, which takes into account the backgrounds and experiences of students in order to respond to their individual interests, aptitudes, and learning needs.

In order to help ensure that assessment and evaluation are valid and reliable and lead to improvement of student learning, teachers must use assessment and evaluation strategies outlined in the assessment and evaluation section of the curriculum policy documents. Assessment tasks should be designed to ensure consistency of standards, and any discriminatory biases in the way students' work is assessed and evaluated should be identified and addressed.

#### ***5. Religious accommodation***

School board policies on religious accommodation must be in accordance with the Ontario Human Rights Code and the requirements stated in Policy/Program Memoranda No. 108, "Opening or Closing Exercises in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools", and No. 112, "Education About Religion in the Public Elementary and Secondary Schools". As part of their new or revised equity and inclusive education policy and implementation plan, boards will include a religious accommodation guideline in keeping with the Ontario Human Rights Code, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of creed (includes religion) and imposes a duty to accommodate.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, boards are expected to take appropriate steps to provide religious accommodation for students and staff.

#### ***6. School climate and the prevention of discrimination and harassment***

Board policies on equity and inclusive education will be designed to foster a positive school climate that is free from discriminatory or harassing behaviour. A positive and inclusive school climate is one where all members of the school community feel safe, welcomed, and accepted. The principles of equity and inclusive education support positive student behaviour. These principles must also be applied in progressive discipline, particularly when it is necessary to take into account mitigating and other

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11. See *Policy on Creed and the Accommodation of Religious Observances*, available at [www.ohrc.on.ca](http://www.ohrc.on.ca).



factors.<sup>12</sup> When relationships are founded on mutual respect, a culture of respect becomes the norm. Boards will also put procedures in place that will enable students and staff to report incidents of discrimination and harassment safely, and that will enable boards to respond in a timely manner.

Regular school and board monitoring of school climate is essential. Monitoring through school climate surveys, as outlined in Policy/Program Memorandum No. 144, “Bullying Prevention and Intervention”, can help identify inappropriate behaviours, barriers, or issues that should be addressed. Boards are therefore expected to incorporate questions on equity and inclusive education in their school climate surveys.

### ***7. Professional learning***

Professional learning activities must be ongoing and based on evidence of positive results. Boards will therefore provide opportunities for teachers (including guidance counsellors), support staff, administrators, and trustees to participate in training on topics such as antiracism, antidiscrimination, and gender-based violence, and will provide information for students and parents to increase their knowledge and understanding of equity and inclusive education. Boards are also encouraged to draw upon existing expertise within their own organization, other boards, and their own community partners and agencies. Changing individual and collective behaviour, as well as organizational and institutional practices, will help to ensure that the education system is free from discrimination.

### ***8. Accountability and transparency***

Ongoing and open communication to keep all stakeholders informed of a board’s goals and progress will increase transparency and public confidence in the board and its schools. It is expected that boards will post their equity and inclusive education policy on their website.

Board and school improvement plans, within the context of a board’s multi-year plan, will take into consideration the board’s equity and inclusive education policy. The plans should focus on identifying and removing any barriers to student learning in order to reduce gaps in achievement and provide a respectful and responsive school climate.

The Director of Education’s annual report will inform the ministry about the board’s progress in implementing its equity and inclusive education policy. The report should also provide information on the status of embedding the principles of equity and inclusive education in all board policies and practices during the cyclical review process, and should describe the steps taken, progress made, and the impact on student achievement. In addition, progress will also be reported to the local community.

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12. Ontario Regulation 472/07, “Suspension and Expulsion of Pupils”, identifies mitigating factors and other factors that must be taken into account in individual cases.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The ministry recognizes that school boards are at different stages in their development of an equity and inclusive education policy. The strategy is therefore being phased in over four years, beginning in 2008–09. The ministry expects boards to demonstrate continuous improvement, such that wherever a board starts, progress is evident on an annual basis towards the goal of embedding the equity and inclusive education policy into the operations of the board. Boards are expected, at a minimum, to meet the timelines as stated in the strategy and guidelines documents. However, the timelines for any action item may be accelerated for a board whose implementation process is ahead of the ministry's implementation timelines.

Implementation plans will:

- be three-year plans beginning in 2009–10, monitored annually by the board;
- contain clearly stated annual objectives and measurable outcomes at both the board and school levels;
- reflect consultation with community partners, and show evidence of active and ongoing partnerships with students, parents, and diverse communities;
- contain indicators for measuring and evaluating progress;
- contain timelines that are consistent with the strategy and the guidelines.

## RESOURCES

To support boards in developing, implementing, and monitoring their policy on equity and inclusive education, the ministry is providing practical strategies, advice, and templates in the guidelines. The ministry will also review and conduct research on promising practices in equity and inclusive education, and will disseminate this information to boards.



**APPENDIX: DEFINITIONS**

The following definitions are included for the purposes of this policy/program memorandum only.

**Diversity:** The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

**Equity:** A condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences.

**Inclusive Education:** Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected.