

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy reviewed

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ontario government has taken significant steps to promote equity in the province's classrooms. In 2008 the Ministry of Education called for the development of *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, and began implementation in 2009. The Ministry stated that the strategy would contribute to the broader objectives of increasing student achievement, reducing achievement gaps between students and increasing confidence in publicly-funded education. The implementation of specific policies at the local level fell to school boards as did navigating the public controversies over the strategy's contested elements, such as student surveys and gay/straight alliance clubs. Other elements, such as the subjective evaluation of the board level policies and the continued reliance on outside community groups and activists to supplement the curriculum received far less attention.

Complimenting the equity strategy, the government more recently introduced Bill 13, An Act to amend the Education Act with respect to bullying and other matters, in December of 2011. The bill proposes wider measures of discipline and mandates extracurricular groups supporting minorities. It specifically mandates gay/straight alliances. While gay/straight alliances have attracted the most attention, it is actually the bill's definition of bullying that deserves greater scrutiny. The bill's definition relies on a stereotypical understanding of bullying and fails to acknowledge the complexities of the issue.

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada offers recommendations for parents, educators and the provincial government in creating safe learning environments through the equity strategy. Highlights include:

PARENTS

- As the primary educator, parents should be actively engaged in their child's school-based education
- Parents should hold school boards and trustees accountable for ensuring that equity strategies encourage diversity of thought and opinion

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - CONTINUED

EDUCATORS

- Ensure students are not coerced into activism
- As the key player in development and implementation of equity policies, school boards must work hard to engage parents and keep them informed of equity efforts in the classroom and encourage parents to continue the dialogue at home

GOVERNMENT

- In acknowledging the victims of bullying, the government should avoid creating a hierarchy of victimhood that could lead to an inequitable availability of resources
- Create standard tools of measurement to evaluate the impact of the equity strategy and anti-bullying programs

Diversity will only flourish in Ontario schools when students are encouraged to respectfully interact with different thoughts and opinions. *Ontario's Equity and Inclusion Strategy* document states that students must move “beyond tolerance to acceptance and respect.”¹ If tolerance is the respectful interaction of diverse viewpoints, then moving beyond it to acceptance will constrict both freedom and equality in Ontario schools.

1. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). Realizing the promise of diversity; Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy, p.2. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf>

INTRODUCTION

School can be a rough place, especially for students who are ill-treated by their peers. The age-old problem of bullying has become a high profile issue. Provincial ministries of education and school boards have responded, introducing policies and programs intended to address incidents of bullying and to create school climates where all students and staff feel connected and represented.

The Ministry of Education in Ontario released *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* document in 2009 to guide school boards and schools in implementing a policy that strives to create a welcoming atmosphere for a diverse community of students and staff. Despite this well-meaning goal, many parents felt uninformed and confused about the strategy leading to protracted public controversy. Some parents of students in the Ottawa Carleton District School board were caught off guard in 2010 by a survey requiring students under the board's equity policy to disclose their sexual orientation, religious beliefs and parental employment status. Concerns were raised about the nature of the questions and the privacy of information collected by the board.² In early 2011 debate arose over whether Catholic schools should be compelled to facilitate gay/straight alliances groups or provide alternative groups in line with Catholic teaching. Eventually the Premier's office could no longer avoid responding to the issue, but came just short of compelling Catholic boards of education to host the clubs.³

The Ontario government solidified its position in December 2011 with the introduction of Bill 13, "An act to amend the Education Act with respect to bullying

and other matters." Primarily an anti-bullying bill, the legislation compliments and codifies elements of *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, but the government also seized the opportunity to strong-arm Catholic boards by specifically mandating gay/straight alliance clubs in all schools where students request them.

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy holds both the potential of helping and hurting true diversity in Ontario's classrooms

Ontario parents and students can appreciate the desire to make schools a healthy place for learning, but they must hold local school boards accountable as the key player in shaping how equity policies are applied in the classroom. *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* holds both the potential of helping and hurting true diversity in Ontario's classrooms. Parents must ensure that policies are applied in a fair and reasonable manner for all students, respecting the diversity of identities and beliefs.

PURPOSE OF THE POLICY

The need for *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* was first raised in 2008 by then Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne as part of the Ministry's larger goal to increase student achievement, reduce achievement gaps between students and increase confidence in publicly funded education.⁴ The strategic document released by the

2. CBC News. (2010, November 4). Ottawa students asked about sexual orientation. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/health/story/2010/11/04/ottawa-carleton-school-survey-sexual-orientation.html>

3. Baluja, T. (2011, March 22). Schools must obey equity policy, McGuinty says. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A17.

4. Realizing the promise of diversity, (2009), pp. 5, 10.

Ministry of Education argues that “rejection, exclusion and estrangement are associated with behaviour problems in the classroom, lower interest in school, lower student achievement and higher dropout rates.”⁵ The policy is grounded in the assumption that systemic barriers exist in Ontario’s education system that prevent children from achieving their full potential. The Ministry “aims to close student achievement gaps by identifying and eliminating any biases, barriers and power dynamics that may limit students’ prospects for learning, growing and contributing fully to society.”⁶

POLICY DEVELOPMENT; WHO DECIDES WHAT IS EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE?

The development process of the policy began following a review by “educational leaders and specialists” who researched and consulted with parents, teachers, students and community organizations and interest groups.⁷ The Ministry developed a strategy with a four-year rollout plan beginning in the school year 2008/2009, resulting in local school boards adopting their own policy, based on Ministry guidelines. The strategy required individual schools to establish equity policies and practices based on the work of their local school board. The Ministry crafted its strategy to reflect human rights outlined under the Ontario Human Rights Code, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the provincial Code of Conduct.⁸

For its part, the Ministry agreed to provide school boards with guidelines for policy development as well as four million dollars in funding. The Ministry also stated that it would incorporate equity and inclusive education into curriculum revisions and would ensure that teachers receive training in equity and inclusive education.⁹ The

Ministry went on to say that in the subsequent years of the strategy it would monitor and support school boards in the implementation of the policy.

School boards are responsible for the bulk of the work in evaluating and revising current policies as well as facilitating the communication of the policy and the procedures that enable students and teachers to identify and report discrimination. The Ministry asked the boards to review student assessment practices to “identify and address systemic bias that may exist in the way students’ work is assessed and evaluated.”¹⁰ Individual schools are required by the Ministry’s strategy to incorporate the board’s policy and review classroom strategies for the integration of the policy.

The Ministry places greater focus on ensuring the values of equity and inclusion are imbedded in the day to day school experience than quantifying the results

POLICY EVALUATION

The Ministry’s long-term goals include increasing achievement, reducing achievement gaps and increasing confidence in public education. So how will progress be evaluated?

5. Realizing the promise of diversity, (2009), p.9.

6. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). Equity and inclusive education in Ontario school; Guidelines for policy development and implementation, p.11. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/inclusiveguide.pdf>

7. Realizing the promise of diversity, (2009), p.10.

8. Realizing the promise of diversity, (2009), p.13.

9. Realizing the promise of diversity, (2009), p.20.

10. Realizing the promise of diversity, (2009), p.21.

Whither tolerance?

Diversity will flourish in Ontario classrooms only if there is room for everyone. Diversity will inevitably include a plurality of views and opinions. A successful learning environment will teach young people to interact with civility and respect.

University of Kent (UK) sociologist Frank Furedi argues that in the past the value of tolerance was integral to learning environments that promoted interplay between beliefs in the pursuit of truth. Tolerance was a virtue and a public good. The term now conveys something much less constructive. More recently, tolerance has come to mean “non-judgmental indifference” and has created an atmosphere free of questioning and judgment.¹¹

In her introductory letter accompanying *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* document in 2009, then Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne wrote, “[e]mbracing diversity and moving beyond tolerance to acceptance and respect will help us reach our goal of making Ontario’s education system the most inclusive in the world.”¹² The

Ministry’s document does not define tolerance or acceptance and it is difficult to unpack what Wynne means. If the intent is to move beyond the interplay between beliefs in the pursuit of truth, then the policy will fail to create true equity and will restrict freedom. The Ministry of Education must promote respect without constraining a diversity of views and opinions.

The Ministry of Education states that it is ultimately up to the classroom teacher to “assume responsibility for examining and taking steps to modify personal beliefs and biases that are inconsistent with equity and inclusive education principles.”¹³ Teachers should address inappropriate comments and behaviours. But parents should be asking how beliefs are determined to be inconsistent with the policy, what steps teachers are sanctioned to take to modify beliefs, and what role do parents have in this teacher-directed action?

A significant challenge for educators in implementing equity policies in public schools is to ensure that all voices can participate and that freedom is not diminished or muted in the broad name of equity.

Quantifying the effectiveness of the policy could prove difficult, particularly as it relates to achievement. Aside from monitoring the implementation of the policy, there is no standard measurement of effectiveness that will be applied across the province. The Ministry places greater focus on ensuring the values of equity and inclusion are imbedded in the day to day school experience than quantifying the results.

The job of identifying and rooting out systemic barriers of discrimination falls on school boards and their schools. While the Ministry will track the implementation of board level equity policies, the onus is on the board and schools to evaluate their equity policy. The Ministry’s strategy document suggests that school boards employ surveys like the one in Ottawa to collect demographic data and perceptions about inequity to assist in evaluating the policy, and has since made such surveys mandatory

11. O’Neill, B. (2011, September 23). ‘It is time that we reclaimed liberalism.’ *The Spiked Review of Books*. Retrieved from http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/reviewofbooks_preview/11092

12. *Realizing the promise of diversity*, (2009), p.2.

13. *Equity and inclusive*, (2009), p. 58.

under Bill 13. The Ministry also encourages teachers to use formal and informal assessments to evaluate the progress of the strategy. School boards are required to communicate the results of their policy assessments.

COMMUNITY GROUPS AND SPECIAL INTERESTS

The Ministry's guideline document encourages schools to maintain partnerships with community groups "so that all community groups have access to and can participate in school – community partnerships."¹⁴

If tolerance is the respectful interaction of diverse viewpoints, then moving beyond it to acceptance will constrict both freedom and equality in Ontario schools

Community partnerships can be a valuable educational tool as these groups possess passion and expertise in specific areas. The provincial strategy document cites the example of Corsair Public School in Peel that invited a musician to work with children to compose a song about ableism –recognizing the contribution of people of all abilities.¹⁵

Community partnerships serve as an endorsement of the views the outside organization presents. This has been problematic. For example, controversy arose in Ontario in 2007 when the Tides Canada Foundation partnered with

the province of Ontario to distribute Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth* to 302 public high schools and 72 boards of education. The project received the endorsement of then Environment Minister and current Education Minister Laurel Broten.¹⁶ The documentary quickly became a classroom staple with one student telling the *National Post* they had viewed the film in four separate classes. The *National Post* also reported that ethanol producer SunOpta Inc sponsored a showing of the movie for 900 students from the Halton Region.¹⁷ Critics argued that in most cases, even when the film's bias was identified, no alternative point of view was presented. Whatever the intentions behind the province's partnership with Tides Canada Foundation, the agreement was received as an endorsement of the views of the film.

When special interest groups contribute to curriculum resources, their perspective is granted unquestioned legitimacy. While there can be many benefits to community partnerships, parents should inquire about the appropriateness of granting special interest groups and activists open access to schools.

MOVING BEYOND EDUCATION TO ACTIVISM

The equity and inclusive policy is not simply a code of conduct, but aims to remove systemic barriers by creating a school experience where students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. The Ministry charges school boards to create an environment where "students are encouraged and supported in efforts to promote social justice, equity, antiracism and antidiscrimination in schools and classrooms."¹⁸ For many years, students in Ontario have had opportunities to be involved in clubs and extracurricular activities focused on social causes.

14. Equity and inclusive, (2009), p. 19.

15. Equity and inclusive, (2009), pp. 23-24.

16. Press release. (2007, June 27). Ontario schools to receive Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth." Tides Canada Foundation. Retrieved from <http://tidescanada.org/news/climate-change-news/ontario-schools-to-receive-al-gores-an-inconvenient-truth/>

17. Libin, K. (2007, May 20). So how did An Inconvenient Truth become required classroom viewing? *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=f7806f79-bf1f-4bd1-8d33-c904feb71047>

18. Equity and inclusive, (2009), p. 52.

How can parents respond to equity policies

The Ministry's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* presents the possibility of positive and negative applications in classrooms across Ontario. Parents can engage their school community in various ways:

- Parents can ask their children about classroom activities and engage in their learning. Asking a child what they learned in school can elicit a grunt or despondent "nothing." Rather than asking what they learned, parents can ask their children what activities they did in class. This provides opportunities to learn about what topics were presented in the classroom and what values were emphasized through the activities. If parents are concerned about an activity, they should seek clarification from the classroom teacher.
- Parents can make an effort to volunteer or serve on a parent council. These opportunities allow parents to build relationships

with staff and stay informed about what is happening in the school community.

- Parents should familiarize themselves with their elected school board trustee or consider running for a trustee position. In many cases these positions are acclaimed. Boards are a key player in translating Ministry directives into policies and practices. Get to know your trustee and their vision for the school board.
- If parental concerns are not addressed satisfactorily by the classroom teacher, parents can contact the principal and superintendent. Contacting the classroom teacher for clarification is the best place to start.
- Parents who are concerned with Ministry mandates and legislation can contact their MPP to express their concerns and inquire about where their MPP stands on the issues.

It is important that students continue to have the opportunity to participate in civic engagement in areas of their passions, but no child should be coerced into activism.

Some concerns have been raised in the way school boards have applied the policy. The Toronto District School Board sanctioned a curriculum guide called *Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism* to assist teachers in integrating diversity education in the classroom. The curriculum guide was authored and shaped by activist educators and outside activists, and forbids students from opting out of activities. A suggested exercise for the JK

to third grade level was for the school to have their own Pride Parade and to invite the media and representatives from Pride Toronto or a similar organization.¹⁹ It is fair to ask whether this is an educational experience or activism and media event providing a platform for an outside special interest group. School boards will have to manage the appropriate participation of special interest groups in schools.

In their 2010 book *What's Wrong with Our Schools and How We can Fix Them*, authors Michael Zwaagstra, Rodney Clifton and John Long identify a long running debate over the fundamental purpose of education. They argue

19. Ast, D. (2011). Challenging homophobia and heterosexism: A K-12 curriculum resource guide. Toronto District School Board Equitable and Inclusive Schools, pp. 56-57. Retrieved from http://www.tdsb.on.ca/wwwdocuments/programs/Equity_in_Education/docs/Challenging%20Homophobia%20and%20Heterosexism%20Final%202011.pdf

20. Zwaagstra, M., Clifton, R. and Long, D. (2010). *What's wrong with our schools and how we can fix them*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing.

21. Laurel Broten as quoted on <http://www.premier.gov.on.ca/news/event.php?ItemID=19678&Lang=EN>

that a progressive romantic view of education positions the teacher as a social reformer who uses the classroom as the primary tool to bring about social change. They further argue that this focus supplants the acquisition of knowledge and skill.²⁰

The Ministry of Education has allocated substantial resources to social reform under the umbrella of diversity, equity and inclusion. Ontario Minister of Education Laurel Broten states, “[w]e taught our children three fundamental “Rs” in school – Reading, Writing and Arithmetic – but now we need to also focus on the fourth R – Relationships.”²¹ School boards should articulate standards for behaviour and teach respectful interaction, but the primary classroom to teach relationships is the home. How should schools support this form of education at home, and what does the increasing focus on the ‘fourth R’ reveal about the Ministry’s beliefs regarding the home lives of Ontario students?

In supporting the implementation of an equity and inclusion policy, parents should be asking what role activism plays in education and whose views are represented in the classroom. Special interest and community groups have a role in school, but students should not be coerced to participate in activism or activities that compromise their own beliefs and positions. *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* provides greater latitude for activist educators and special interest groups.

BILL 13: AN ACT TO AMEND THE EDUCATION ACT WITH RESPECT TO BULLYING AND OTHER MATTERS

Bullying is a persistent issue that has gained national attention in the wake of several tragic teen suicides.²³ The Ontario government has already committed 23 million dollars over three years to anti-bullying initiatives in 2005, and yet the issue remains as persistent as ever. Nonetheless, bullying is an attractive issue for political parties. The Liberals and the opposition Progressive Conservatives attempted to outdo one another in December 2011 by introducing competing anti-bullying legislation on the same day.

Religious accomodation

The Ministry guidelines direct school boards to have a religious accommodation policy and to communicate the policy to the schools. The Ministry cites the Ontario Human Rights Commission, which defines religion as “a professed system and confession of faith, including both beliefs and observances or worship.”²² The commission omits secular, moral or ethical beliefs or political convictions and religions that incite hatred towards other groups. The Ministry guidelines state that boards must facilitate the practice of religious observances while students and employees are at school.

22. Equity and inclusive, (2009), p. 25.

23. CTVNews.ca. (2011, Nov. 30) Bullying prompted Quebec teen’s suicide, mom says. Retrieved from <http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/TopStories/20111130/quebec-teen-bullying-suicide-111130/>

Doucette, C. (2011, Sept. 30) Bullied boy has suicidal thoughts. *London Free Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.lfpress.com/news/canada/2011/09/30/18762216.html>

Willing, J. (2011, Oct.18) Ottawa councillor’s bullied son commits suicide. *Toronto Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.torontosun.com/2011/10/18/ottawa-councillors-bullied-son-commits-suicide>

24. Bill 13 An Act to amend the Education Act with respect to bullying and other matters. Available from http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills_detail.do?locale=en&Intranet=&BillID=2549

Bill 13

Bill 13 An Act to amend the Education Act with respect to bullying and other matters

HIGHLIGHTS

The proposed bill would amend the Education Act to include a definition of bullying and a whole-school approach regarding the prevention and response to bullying. The bill addresses the following:

- Defines bullying
- Requires school boards to implement an equity and inclusive education policy
- Requires school boards to survey students regarding equity issues once every two years

- Mandates Bully Awareness and Prevention Week
- Requires third parties using school board facilities to follow standards consistent with the code of conduct
- Requires school boards to develop discipline policies for students who engage in bullying
- Requires school boards to support students who wish to organize and lead activities or groups concerning gender equity, anti-racism, the promotion of respect for people with disabilities and gay/straight alliances
- Allows for the expulsion of students who engage in bullying

The government's Bill 13, An Act to amend the Education Act with respect to bullying and other matters, defines bullying, requires boards to monitor and respond to bullying and grants more authority to expel pupils if necessary.

²⁴ The bill also legislates a number of strategies from the equity policy such as student surveys and establishes an Anti-Bullying Week currently observed by most boards. The legislation also requires school boards to submit their equity policies to the Minister of Education should they be requested to do so.

The most controversial aspect of the bill requires schools to support students who wish to start clubs based specifically on gender equity, anti-racism, disabilities and sexual orientation. In particular, the legislation mandates gay-straight alliances or the same intentioned activity by another name. This is in direct response to the conflict that arose in early 2011 over mandatory gay/straight alliances in which Premier Dalton McGuinty's office

appeared flat-footed and unsure how to respond to the issue concerning Catholic school boards.

A key element of the bill that deserves thoughtful inquiry is the proposed definition of bullying. The bill defines bullying as repeated and aggressive behaviour by a pupil that causes or ought to be known to cause harm, fear and/or distress, including harm to an individual's reputation. All this is to occur in the context of a real or perceived "power imbalance." The bill then lists factors such as size, strength, age and subjective qualities such as peer group power and social status. The definition assumes bullying is unilateral and from a stereotypical position of privilege directed to a minority or position of real or perceived limitation. This isn't always the case as there are also low-status bullies who are simultaneously victims of bullying themselves.²⁵ The proposed government definition does not recognize this bullying dynamic. The definition reveals and codifies an incomplete understanding of bullying. Motivations behind bullying can be complex and can include an array of emotional and mental health

issues, but the government's definition of bullying fails to recognize this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government, educators and parents have a role in creating safe schools. The following recommendations consider these roles in light of Ontario's equity and inclusion strategy and proposed Bill 13.

Government of Ontario

- In acknowledging the victims of bullying the government should avoid creating a hierarchy of victimhood that could lead to an inequitable availability of resources
- Simplify the definition of bullying in Bill 13, moving beyond an understanding of bullying that relies on stereotypes
- Reasonably accommodate diversity of thought and opinion in the classroom, teaching students to respectfully engage one another
- The introduction of Bill 13 is an admission that the Ministry's guidelines are inadequate. The Ministry should reevaluate school discipline standards and expectations of students. Empower teachers and school administration to hold students accountable for their behaviour
- Create standard tools of measurement to evaluate the impact of the equity strategy and resources directed to equity education and anti-bullying programs

Educators

- Foster learning environments that respect diversity of opinion and teach respectful interaction between

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diverse view points

- Ensure students are not coerced into activism
- Ensure that all students are respected in the classroom
- As the key player in the development and implementation of equity policies, school boards must work hard to engage parents and keep them informed of equity efforts in the classroom and encourage parents to continue the dialogue at home

Parents

- Strive to be knowledgeable and current on school events and policies that impact the learning environment
- Be proactive in addressing issues of bullying and discrimination with children by following up with the school when incidents occur
- Hold school boards and trustees accountable for ensuring that equity strategies encourage diversity of thought and opinions
- Clarify with school boards and school administration the role of the classroom educator in addressing

25. Lagacé Dowson, A. (2011, December 5). Intervention is needed to stop bullies. *The Montreal Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://www.montrealgazette.com/opinion/Intervention+needed+stop+bullies/5814444/story.html>

beliefs and opinions

- As the primary educator, parents should be actively engaged in their child's school-based education
- Parents must take responsibility for communicating expectations to their children and hold them accountable for their actions.

CONCLUSION

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy aims to create healthy social environments by identifying and eliminating barriers to inequality. The Ministry states that this policy will contribute to the larger goal of improving academic achievement, reducing achievement gaps and increasing confidence in public education, though it is unclear how the impact of the strategy on these goals will be measured.

School boards are the key player in determining how equity and inclusion principles are incorporated into the daily life of students and staff. According to Ministry documents, school boards are responsible for evaluating the success of the policy, though this process is subjective and will be inconsistent from board to board.

The Ministry of Education encourages the continued involvement of community groups in the classroom. Special interest and community groups bring expertise and knowledge to the classroom, but school boards must ensure that material is age appropriate and balanced. School boards must also ensure that students are not coerced into participating in activism facilitated by outside groups or activist educators.

The province introduced anti-bullying legislation to bolster the equity strategy. While anti-bullying has become a politically attractive issue, the government's definition of bullying rests heavily on stereotypes rather than acknowledging the complexities of bullying. In response to earlier conflicts with Catholic Bishops and school boards, the bill also mandates the creation of gay/straight alliances in schools where students request the groups. The government must be careful not to create a hierarchy of victimhood that will guide how anti-bullying resources are delivered.

An effective equity policy must make space for everyone as there is no hierarchy of human rights. Within diverse classrooms there will be a plurality of opinions and beliefs, but the policy should encourage civil and respectful dialogue. Ontario's classrooms cannot be diverse without respect for differences of thought and belief and the strategy fails to adequately account for this.

As school boards launch and monitor board-wide equity policies, they will need to be mindful of not only the benefits of the policies but also the potential abuses that can be levied under such policies. Parents should applaud the initiative to create safe schools and hold their school boards accountable in respecting all students.

