

THE VOLUME OF OUR VOICES

Volume Two: Negative Space

May 2021





ABOUT OSTA-AECO

The Ontario Student Trustees' Association—l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario (OSTA-AECO) is a registered non-profit, nonpartisan organization, and the largest student stakeholder group in Ontario, representing approximately 2 million students. The general assembly is comprised of student trustees from public and Catholic school boards across the province. Members of the organization work tirelessly throughout the year to advocate for student voice, and strive to work with provincial partners in the education sector. Ultimately, OSTA-AECO aims to improve Ontario's education system for its students.

More information about OSTA-AECO's work can be found at osta-aeco.org

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ABOUT

THE VOLUME OF OUR VOICES

The Volume of Our Voices is a three-part series by OSTA-AECO highlighting student stories. *Volume One* focuses on the impact that COVID-19 has had on public education; *Volume Two* centers on how students' race, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural identity have shaped their school experience; and *Volume Three* features how students' gender identity or sexual orientation have shaped their school experience.

Students in grades 7 to 12 across Ontario were invited to write and submit to *The Volume of Our Voices* between January and May 2021; the submissions in this publication were submitted at varying times in this months-long period. The online submission form was provided in English, and students could request to have their submission transcribed over a call or otherwise submitted through an alternate means to ensure accessibility in submission methods. Students were encouraged to freely share whatever they wished on the theme of each volume, and all submissions were anonymized to protect the students' safety and privacy.

We want to feature student voices discussing complex issues and their personal experiences within the Ontario public education system. Student voice will always be essential to decision-making and we hope these stories shift provincial and local discussions and decisions surrounding topics such as racism and homophobia in schools or learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The stories featured in each volume are followed by our policy recommendations for a variety of stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, school boards, schools, and teachers. Each volume also contains recommendations from previous OSTA-AECO publications, such as *Affording Our Students' Success: 2020-21 Pre-Budget/Grants for Student Needs Submission*, *The Students' Vision for Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document*, and *eLearning: the Students' Perspective*.

Above all, we owe a debt of gratitude to all the students who courageously submitted to *The Volume of Our Voices* and shared their experiences. These stories and their openness and vulnerability are truly at the heart of this project. We hope that the people and stakeholders reading these volumes do their stories justice by critically examining our public education system and continuously working to serve the students of Ontario.

The ethos of this project simply comes down to this: Our voices matter. Our stories matter.

Welcome to *The Volume of Our Voices*.

INTRODUCTION

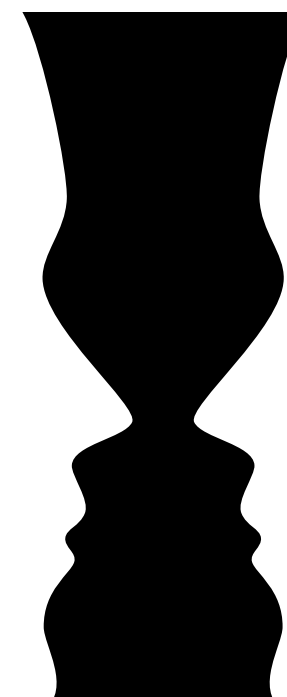
The title of *Volume Two: Negative Space* draws from the concept of negative space to respond to the idea that students of diverse cultural identities only exist as an "other version" in relation to a default pupil, and that these students must shape and contour their identities to succeed in an exclusive, rather than inclusive, school environment. These concepts highlight the principled difference between modifying an education system built for a certain default student to accommodate students of diverse cultural backgrounds, as opposed to building a system that is inclusive for all to begin with.

Volume Two: Negative Space invited to students to reflect on how their race, ethnicity, nationality, and/or cultural identity have shaped their school experience. Unlike *Volume One: Learning and Living during a Pandemic*, the stories have been placed together at the front of this publication. We encourage you to read them all together to note their interconnectedness as well as the common and contrasting themes present between different submissions. Students have written thoughtful and articulate reflections on their own experiences, the change they want to see, and what concepts like equity and representation personally mean to them.

Schools—such crucial paths for children's personal development and social mobility—should be spaces that do not replicate the racism and discrimination that exists in the world at-large. Rather, they should be spaces that actively work to dismantle systems such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, ableism, and colonialism. Where schools should be the incubators nurturing the growth

of children into empathetic, socially responsible adults, they are often instead environments that present additional social and structural barriers to students of colour and non-majority religious identities from accessing educational opportunity. As long as systemic inequality continues within our schools, more students will continue to be deprived of their right to a quality education and to participate fully in school. And as you will understand through the stories these students tell, the effects of their school experience continues to shape them for years on end.

Change cannot wait. The two million students in Ontario's public education system cannot wait for change. There are myriad solutions that can be implemented, but the first thing to do is listen. Listen to students, and listen to our stories.



STUDENT STORIES

Students wrote at length and in great detail about their personal experiences in school, and discussed their beliefs and opinions about the status of public education today and what it should be.

“I’m at a point where decolonizing myself and learning everything I can from my elders has become my biggest priority.

“My ethnicity and culture had always impacted my school life, even when I was in kindergarten to elementary school and now in high school. Sometimes, when I was younger, I would be teased for having darker skin. Sometimes people would mock my culture as well. I’m a Two-Spirited Indigenous kid. After being treated like I wasn’t typical for having naturally dark skin, I spent many years refusing to go outside for long periods. I didn’t want the sun to make my skin any darker. So, throughout a few years, my skin began to get paler. Now I’m pale enough that I get mistaken for being white. Some people have thought that I was lying about being native.

I can’t even describe how much I regret sheltering myself like that. Now that I’m older and understand my culture and its absolute beauty. I feel ashamed of what I’ve done. I feel like I’ve taken away so many chances to learn so many things from myself. I have been learning to accept what has happened, and I’m trying to move on.

In high school, sometimes I’ll get the occasional mockery, but nothing that hurts. I don’t necessarily feel unsafe, but things could be better. I can’t let those things bring me down anymore. My school has occasionally offered

activities in which I could participate and learn more about my culture. I took those opportunities without hesitation. I’m at a point where decolonizing myself and learning everything I can from my elders has become my biggest priority. With that, equity has become something that I aim for in every way, shape, and form. My high school has become more and more diverse through the years and encourages students to show their colors, their pride.

Any bullying is not tolerated, but it is a matter of a bully getting caught or the victim having enough courage to speak up. It’s challenging to get rid of completely. However, my school is mostly good with these problems; they only happen on rare occasions. Most of the time, any altercations rarely have anything to do with race, ethnicity, or nationality. Rarely. Most of the time, it’s about gender, identity, or sexual orientation, which is not better. However, I’m proud to say that most students stand up for anyone in the center of any such bullying. I’ve even had students stand up for me before. Whenever I feel as though I’m not accepted or cared about within my school, I remind myself of experiences with kind students and school staff. Not everyone is out to get you.”

—Grade 11 Student

“I still don’t know where to place my frustration and anger. Is it to the students and classmates that I called my friends? Or is it the teachers and staff who made no effort to change the behaviors despite my emotional breakdowns in class and at recess? Should it be the entire educational system?”

“As an elementary school student, I experienced countless racist behaviors for years but never knew how to process or deal with them. Starting as early as JK, students made fun of my eyes, chased me in a playground yelling ‘ling ling’ or ‘Ching Chong Chang,’ ridiculing my food and subjected me to Asian stereotypes like eating dogs or being naturally intelligent.

Throughout the years, microaggressions have been normalized, that I began to make similar jokes to fit in. At the expense of my cultural appreciation, I sacrificed all ‘Chinese’ aspects of myself to help in desperate attempts to escape the racism. It makes me incredibly sad that I had told my parents I hated the food I brought to lunch and wanted to have ‘whiter’ options like sandwiches or hotdogs.

Looking back now as a high school student, I can understand these struggles to be the product of racism, but I still don’t know where to place my frustration and anger. Is it to the students and classmates that I called my friends? Or is it the teachers and staff who made no effort to change the behaviors despite my emotional breakdowns in class and at recess? Should it be the entire educational system?

When I went into middle school and high school, the outright attacks diminished and instead gave rise to microaggressions. I was expected to complete the entirety of group projects, sometimes even being gaslighted into doing other students’ work since it was ‘easier for Chinese people’ anyways. Teachers would call me by the names of other Asian students even after two years of teaching me and after I expressed my discomfort with being called the wrong name repeatedly.

I’ve been asked where I’m from, which I answer the city I was born in Canada, but then I’m probed until I say I am Chinese or from China. None of my white friends are approached with the same questions or ever have their citizenship questioned. It makes me wonder how people manage to brainwash themselves into thinking they owned a country when the land they claim was mercilessly stolen from the Indigenous people whom the government continuously mistreats. My entire education has left me with unprocessed anger, frustration, and sadness that strips away my belief in humanity.”—Grade 11 Student

“To me, representation means to hear the voices of marginalized students and address any concerns they have.”

“I am a visible ethnic, racial, and religious minority at my school. I can count the number of people of my race and ethnicity on one hand (three or four as far as I know). As for my religion, there are seven out of 1100 students (that I know of).

I do not feel that we are represented at my school. I do, however, feel generally safe and welcome. Usually, people are kind, but sometimes students say rude and hurtful things about my race and other racial minority groups. I have both good and bad experiences related to my identities at school. One example was when I was discreetly praying in my school’s change room, and a student walked in and then immediately apologized for interrupting me. Another is when a group of students followed me around and called me a ‘fob.’

My school has accommodated me by allowing me to wear a religious head covering and taking days off on religious holidays. To me, representation means to hear the voices of marginalized students and address any concerns they have. An equity measure would be to educate students about the diverse experiences of Ontarians and Canadians in the curriculum itself.” —Grade 11 Student

“To me, representation is the conscious act in schools to ensure all people feel safe.”

“To me, representation is the conscious act in schools to ensure all people feel safe. I identify as a female Chinese-Canadian, and my school has not made me feel uncomfortable with my identity. My school community has always been relatively inclusive, and I am treated as any other student. Recently, I was selected to be part of a student voice forum, and I genuinely appreciate the admin and staff’s effort when it comes to equity and diversity.” — Grade 10 Student



“Because his mother sat on the school council, there was nothing I could do about it. Even when he physically attacked me, I was the one sent home for the rest of the day. I left the school at the end of that year, but that was just the beginning of the story.”

“When I was in elementary school, my parents sent me to a Catholic school under the impression that the learning atmosphere and the Montessori program they followed would allow me to develop a better academic standing. I was late to learn to speak, and I had trouble with even the most basic tasks, so they figured they should spend a little extra to help me get myself to reasonable standards of knowledge.

Looking back, the experience was one I greatly appreciate. Yet, I also feel that attending this school exposed me to the systemic issues surrounding race, religion, and cultural identity in our societies. Today, I maintain an inexplicable fear of those of Western European descent. I make sure to emphasize my ability to speak English without any accent and carry myself like a Western [person] to make sure I do not associate myself with many aspects of my Muslim heritage. Attending this school began a process of corrupting me, making me fear association with my own culture.

I always had trouble getting along with other kids. Even today, I am awkward and uncomfortable when I talk to my peers, even those I consider incredibly close to. I retract statements in fear I will offend them and stay quiet for the rest of the conversation if I make a joke that doesn’t receive a laugh. And yet, I consider myself an extrovert. So I keep trying to talk to people, no matter how bad I am at it. The same issue was the case for me when I attended this Catholic school, but dramatically worse.

One kid, in particular, knew this about me, and he exploited it. He consistently took jabs at every single one of my errors. He beat me, called me slurs, and he insulted me in any way I could. And when I asked him why he told me it was because I was a ‘dirty Arab.’ Through the rest of the year, he persisted in his attacks and made fun of my religion and background, knowing I wasn’t Catholic like most kids at the school. And because his mother sat on the school council, there was nothing I could do about it. Even when he physically attacked me, I was the one sent home for the rest of the day. I left the school at the end of that year, but that was just the beginning of the story.

My following incident of this sort of racism occurred with a teacher instead of a student. This time, I attended a public elementary school filled with a diverse population of students, including many Muslims who had set up a cultural society that met at lunch. For just a few days, while our typical teacher was recovering from illness, we were assigned a supply teacher who showed absolutely no remorse for [students] of color. On every single day when she came, she demanded that those with darker skin colors should stay longer than class time for detention, often forcing us to miss our busses home for no reason at all.

On one occasion, a Caucasian girl broke the class pencil sharpener, and this teacher picked on the colored students, asked them to stand at the front of the class, scolded them, and demanded they apologize. She wrote us all up numerous times until our complaints were finally taken to the vice principal, and she was reassigned from our class, not fired, reassigned. The incident left many students unnerved. Many didn’t return to school for a few weeks to deal with the trauma.

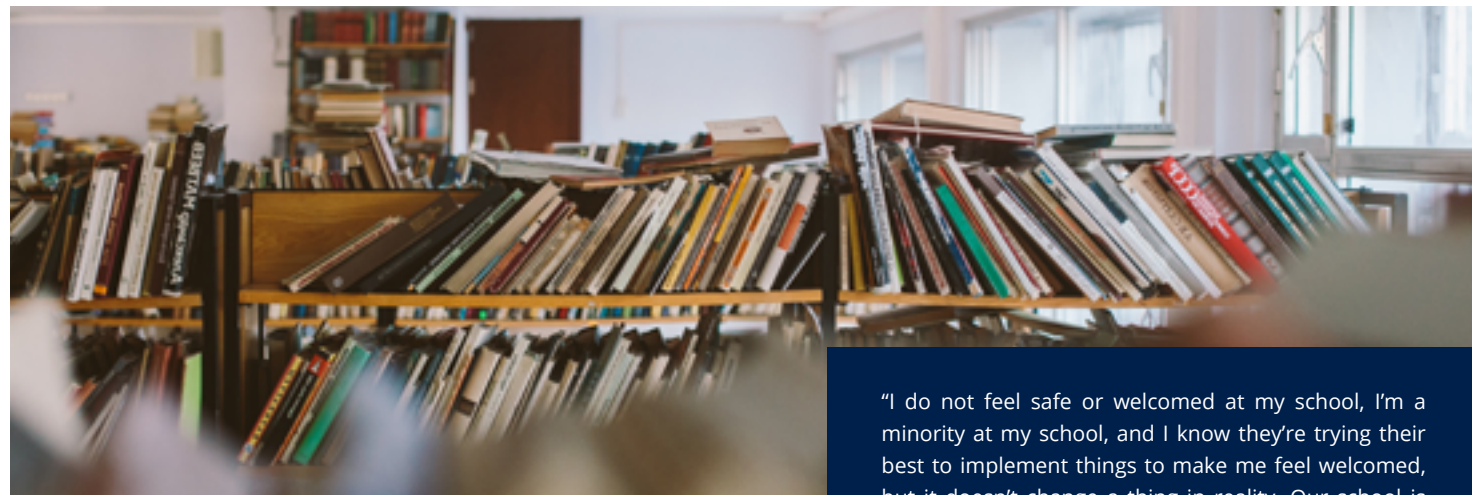
These stories are not single events. Though they are the significant recognizable instances of racism in my education, this sort of intolerance is a constant offense factor. I have seen teachers use racial slurs without any objection, as well as mock individuals of color with impersonations that depicted them as uncultured. And this happens to many students, daily, across the province, and even outside of schools. I have made my best effort recently to draw myself closer to my heritage, but even today, I face severe repercussions of those and many other cases of racism I had witnessed in my youth.” —Grade 12 Student

“When we were still going to school, there was a person who said the N-word in an assembly, and all that the school did about it was putting up papers with ‘heartfelt messages.’

Sure, that’s good, I guess, but that doesn’t do anything, it’s just a form of performative activism. Schools will say they’re going to do things only to disappoint and back out. When multiple students spoke about the fact that posters don’t work, they were just shushed and pushed aside (which is funny because it was a BLACK student talking to the WHITE teachers about what they were doing wrong in terms of racism). It seems like teachers will just let things slide when it doesn’t

immediately affect them.

Something I’ve noticed is that I’ve never once had or seen a black teacher hired at school (as more than just a supply teacher) until last year, which is an issue, isn’t it? If teachers want to do more, they should start listening when students say there is an issue and try and help fix it, not push the problem onto students to make us improve it ourselves or ignore the issue altogether. In addition to this, teachers should stop saying the N-word in class as ‘a part of the teaching.’ It’s a bullsh*t excuse, and there’s nothing ever done about it because teachers, again, never listen to students.” —Grade 12 Student



Representation is essential to me, as much as it is vital to all people of color. When we see diversity, we get a sense of security and belonging to an environment.

"I am South Asian-Canadian. Growing up in the education system, I have always felt alienated from my friend group(s) due to my ethnic background. I have always been called out for my physical features by my friends who have made fun of the fact that I have 'dirty' skin, poor hygiene, big eyes, thicker eyebrows, and a pointed nose.

Most of my peers growing up lacked [exposure to ethnic] diversity, as I was one of the only few brown kids at my school. I have always felt ashamed of who I was and how I was represented, that I was almost afraid to reciprocate with my culture. Most of the days when I'd bring cultural food to school, people would frequently create a scene and shame me for my food and endless questions arousing, which involved asking me where I'm 'really' from, isolating me from my nationality.

As of today in the education system, I feel welcome when I do not have to worry about someone violently attacking me for my race. This is probably one of the privileges I hold since I know incidents like this are familiar with many people of color, and I am fully aware of this issue. However, another part of me does not feel welcome. Students and staff would behave passive-aggressively towards my race or ethnicity and outcast the community by throwing microaggressions and making harmful stereotypes.

When I look at my school curriculum, such as teaching staff and school guests, there is very little representation of my ethnicity. This is also a factor that makes individuals with my ethnic background feel alienated in the learning environment.

As I forgot to mention earlier, I am also Islamic. By looking through my objective lens, school systems need to do a better job taking other religious holidays into account. For example, students get two-to-three full weeks off of school for Christmas celebrations; however, for Islam's holy month of Ramadan, schools do not reciprocate with this holiday which also causes alienation towards Muslims by making them take responsibility for their

"I do not feel safe or welcomed at my school, I'm a minority at my school, and I know they're trying their best to implement things to make me feel welcomed, but it doesn't change a thing in reality. Our school is majority white, and many students have the same mentality about Arabs, which creates problems. For instance, I was walking down the hallway, and my friend and I were making jokes in Arabic. This somehow gave a student the idea that it would be funny to yell Allahu Akbar at us; I felt so lonely and uncomfortable at that moment. We had never even met this person. They already had an opinion on who we were as humans."
—Grade 9 Student

accountability. For instance, teachers do not necessarily provide support or understanding towards those students who are fasting by forcing them to exercise in gym class so they won't lose marks and not giving them an extension on assignments. As for the school system as a whole, they do not provide a break for this holiday, which I find if this is taken into recognition, could also combat the issue of alienation and discrimination.

Representation is essential to me, as much as it is vital to all people of color. When we see diversity, we get a sense of security and belonging to an environment. We are no longer afraid or outcasted. When people tend to see similar archetypes of an individual, that group and phenotype are automatically seen as 'normal' or 'attractive,' which also applies to society.

Factors that need to be changed in the Ontario education system include involving more diversity by hiring staff members of different backgrounds, taking recognition into cultural/religious holidays, and last but not least, including more variety in history lessons. When we learn most about historical white men, you are damaging the system by throwing your students off in society to exclude taking diversity into account and gaining the opportunity to learn about cultural significance and oppression.

Last but not least, when I think of the term "equity," I picture fairness, balance, and objectivity. By combating the current issues in our schooling systems, we begin thinking about various progression for our future generations to be taught. Normalize different ethnic, racial, or cultural backgrounds by representing more issues focusing on that specific area. By the acts of normalizing, we seek progression in our environment." —Anonymous Student

“Equity means that these acts of racism are not tolerated and are acknowledged and dealt with, in a way that does not criminalize or dehumanize the victim.

"In my school community, I have always been in the racial minority. I am Southeast Asian, and I have grown up in a suburban school community that is predominately white. In my school community, I faced microaggressions, comments, or general racist comments towards my racial identity. In elementary school, I would get negative comments or insults about the food I would eat which would make me feel insecure about my cultural background; I would get called names and/or racial slurs in which students would make faces to mimic my eyes; I would be asked insensitive or ignorant questions about my culture in which people would ask me if I eat dogs; if I came from a poor family; if I always spoke English very well; or, if I knew a friend of theirs from another city who happened to be the same race as me.

Having teachers who were all white throughout all of my elementary school years, did not help my self-esteem either, as I never came forward to them about my experiences with other students because I felt like they would never understand my experiences as a racialized person.

In addition to my own story, I have had a friend who reached out about their story. They are a racialized immigrant who has is not fluent in English. Because of this, their Caucasian classmates did not work with them because they felt that they would not contribute due to their language skills, additionally, they were also made fun of for their background and their lack of fluency in English. Their ethnic background was also targeted, as they were told that they look identical to the rest of the international student body and that they were 'funny' because they did not act in a culturally Western way.

These experiences made them feel unsafe in their school, and several times they did not feel safe enough to go to school for a couple of days. As a result, they felt that the only way that they would feel safe in their school community was to act 'white' or 'Western.' Although not directed to them, they have also heard other students use racial slurs hatefully.

International students such as this one, are already undergoing a difficult time; in which they are leaving their homes to a faraway and foreign country, with a different and unfamiliar language, and a very different culture from their own. Racism only worsens the situation for foreign students, in an environment that should be welcoming.

My experiences and the experiences of my peers really make us feel dehumanized; it makes us feel that people look at our appearances and our backgrounds, and only see us as such. We are not seen as individuals but rather as another punching bag to make fun of and make us feel bad in our own skin. We feel unsafe and uncomfortable in a school environment that is supposed to help us grow and learn.

To have a truly equitable community would be to have representation among staff, educators, educational executives, and leaders in our school community. Equity means that these acts of racism are not tolerated and are acknowledged and dealt with, in a way that does not criminalize or dehumanize the victim." —Grade 11 Student

"I feel that my religion causes many individuals to form an opinion about me before actually conversing with me and getting to know me. This may be because I am from Finland by birth and have only resided in Canada for a small amount of time compared to my birth country. It may sound cliché, but I am Norse Pagan by birth and belief, and I'm sure you will understand where the friction comes from when I state that I attend a Catholic school.

Some students have many reservations when discussing paganism and are very critical of it, thinking it is not very reasonable to believe in Gods featured in Marvel films and comics. I do not blame these people for their ignorance, as the Catholic education on religions glosses over all religions. Even in a world religions course, they only cover paganism as an old dead religion and as a religion of devil worship.

This might be the most extensive generalization of paganism I had ever heard. Paganism is not one but many different faiths, all related in aspects that don't have to do with similarities within beliefs. Like mosaic religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, paganism is similarly a group of religions with similarities within them. I believe that all religions should be given equal importance as it will create an overall more accepting and educated student body." —Grade 12 Student



“COVID-19 has amplified the racist microaggressive behaviours in my school.”

“COVID-19 has amplified the racist microaggressive behaviours in my school. While personal attacks have been uncommon, some students have taken to social media to share attacks on the Asian population or blame towards Chinese people. I’ve noticed subtle comments towards Asian students like myself, notably one instance where two students coughed and joked they had coronavirus after I walked into a bathroom. I’ve become more frustrated with the education system as a result of the pandemic, but not because the changes have caused these problems, rather because they pulled back the curtain hiding these issues.” — Grade 11 Student

“To me, equity at school means that if there is a student in need, struggling, whether it may be because of mental health, bullying, skin color, gender identity, etc. they are given the resources they need to succeed.”

“Growing up in elementary school, I have felt the pressure of constantly having to ‘fit in,’ and well, it’s hard to do that when you are a different skin color from everyone else in your grade. I have had experiences where I’d be the odd one out in groups or not be invited to something, not asked to be a part of things, and that impacted me a lot as a kid, especially when there was no one else to relate to in that school environment.

I remember once, I brought food from my culture to school, and some kids in my class kept talking about how disgusting it looked, which fueled me to be more ashamed of my culture because they were saying it was awful. I would go to my parents and beg them to make lunches that seemed more ‘normal’ for school. And it wasn’t just me. Others of different cultures would get questioned for their food as well, and when you stood up for them, you would become the next target. Now, I realize my culture is beautiful and so rich, and it’s not my fault for bringing the food to school. Food from different cultures should be normalized and not made fun of.

In elementary, I’ve never really seen my culture being represented in school as we never really talked about different holidays or traditions much. Still, during the rare times, we did try to incorporate other practices. It was very cool to experience.

However, in the high school that I am currently at, we have multiple traditions and events that incorporate many cultures, celebrating different holidays and events. The community here is very multicultural, and for me, that makes a considerable amount of difference because now I have people to relate to. I don’t feel that pressure to ‘fit in’ with the norms anymore. In this school, I think that my voice is heard and that we have equity in the chances we are given.

To me, equity at school means that if there is a student in need, struggling, whether it may be because of mental health, bullying, skin color, gender identity, etc. they are given the resources they need to succeed. For me, it means that someone cares and they are willing to help you to grow. In the short experience that I’ve had so far, I noticed that my school and the school board do an excellent job responding to incidents and others. I’m pretty happy to be at this high school and be a part of this very uplifting diverse community.” —Grade 9 Student

“A lot of this racism was taught behavior. It was behavior taught to young kids by their parents, and the teachers only perpetuated this racism by ignoring it.”

“For context, I am half European and half Chinese, but my peers only viewed me as someone who is Chinese for most of my life. Although this isn’t necessarily an experience from the school I currently attend, I would still like to share this experience from my elementary school years because it is relevant and needs to be discussed.

I went to a rural, majority-white school for my Kindergarten to Grade 8 years. I was exposed to much racism at school since I was six years old (e.g., fellow young kids singing racist songs to me, treating me as weird for my culture and looks, kids asking me questions with extremely racist undertones, etc.). A lot of this racism was taught behavior. It was behavior taught to young kids by their parents, and the teachers only perpetuated this racism by ignoring it.

As a result, racism was extremely normalized to me as a child, and I never thought it was strange that I was often treated differently by the kids around me. This systematic issue impacted me a lot. I felt genuinely lonely, I had low self-esteem, and I did not know how to stand up for myself. I could not tell bad friends from good friends because the derogatory and toxic behavior was so normalized and engrained in my mindset. As I grew older, I slowly realized these

things, and I tried changing myself and finding new friends (this was around Grade 6). This was when things started getting better, and I could start recovering, but I still witnessed a lot of sexism and racism as I grew. If the teachers had acted and told the kids that their actions were not OK, I think it would have prevented this. Even just having an Asian teacher there would have helped.

“Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I’ve dealt with racism at my school simply because I am Asian, which has caused me to feel less comfortable at school. People have told me that ‘it makes sense to stay away from as many Asians as possible’ during this pandemic without thinking that those words are incredibly harmful.” —Grade 9 Student

No child should ever have to go through this experience in the first place, especially not alone. As for high school, the situation is not much better. Although the system and students are much more mature here, there is still an element of systematic racism. Many minority students are not treated equally. There are still frequent acts of bigotry toward the BIPOC, Muslim, and LGBTQ+ communities here in school that are not adequately addressed at all. Like in elementary school, they are often ignored. Due to threats from other students, many of my peers feared for their safety because of their race, religion, or sexuality. They felt like they could not tell the school because they would not do anything helpful. When the school does act, it isn’t always fair—in fact, I would go as far as to say the school sometimes acted in an ignorant manner.

I can see that the school has recently started taking new steps to start diversifying representation in education. I see BIPOC teachers more often, I see more representation in our education system, and there was a GSA club at school to accommodate the

LGBTQ+ students. These are steps in the right direction, but this does not change the fact that our school system is still innately discriminatory. I think the thing that needs to be introduced to schools is better education about discrimination and other cultures in general. Teachers should be trained on how to detect and address racism and bigotry. Students should also be taught these things. It would help them learn about different religions, cultures, and types of people around the world. This way, it would help break the systematic discrimination prevalent in many communities.

To me, equity means being seen as a regular person rather than being seen just as a ‘Chinese person.’ Equity means making sure everyone has access to what they need regardless of race, identity, religion, or culture —or sometimes, it also means having certain things accessible to you to specifically accommodate for your race, identity, religion, or culture. It means being able to express yourself without being considered ‘weird.’” —Grade 12 Student

SCHOOL TREATMENT

Many of the students wrote about being harassed, intimidated, threatened, and assaulted at the hands of their peers and teachers on the basis of their race, ethnicity, or cultural identity. This is unacceptable. When students' safety and well-being are threatened, they are discouraged from—rather than empowered to—fully participating and accessing academic and extracurricular opportunities. In other words, they cannot access their right to a quality education. School, an environment meant to foster growth and learning, becomes an environment of fear, shame and intimidation, one where students are compelled to shun their own identity instead of embracing it. As expressed within the very submissions to this volume, the emotional and physical ramifications of this dehumanization and violence follow students for years on end.

Stakeholders in public education—including but not limited to the Ministry of Education, school boards, schools—are responsible

for protecting its children instead of remaining complicit in a system that instead currently situates children of colour within sites of violence and harm. The interactions these students have described do not exist within a vacuum; it is the school environment and education system that allow for these interactions and abuse to occur.

In the education sector, systemic change is often seen as a slow, gradual process of incremental progress. This is not enough. Students in Ontario attend school every day. A year spent waiting for change to occur represents at least ten months that a student spends attending school and risking their well-being to try and access their education. Students and families should never have to make the coercive choice between receiving their schooling and protecting their physical and mental health against racist mistreatment and cruelty. These rights are not meant to be traded and negotiated with each other.

All stakeholders within public education must act in their full capacity with overwhelming urgency to eliminate all forms of racism from schools. Inaction does not allow stakeholders to refrain from doing harm; inaction is a policy choice that permits a system of inequality and inequity to continue to operate. OSTA-AECO recommends:

1.1

School boards develop a system-wide action plan to address the disparities experienced by students of marginalized cultural identities, and where disparities exist within individual schools, require action plans at the school level. These action plans should be developed with the input of these marginalized communities, from conception to implementation to evaluation, and made publicly available;¹

1.2

School boards develop strategies that create racism-free school environments, which all schools are expected to implement, and include ways to assess the effectiveness of these strategies by collecting information from students and parents;²

1.3

School boards develop human rights policies and procedures (including a complaints process) to reflect expectations for addressing racism and the harassment and bullying of students based on their race, ethnicity, nationality, and/or cultural identity;³

1.4

School boards inform all parents and students about the complaints, advocacy, and appeal mechanisms available to them should there be issues with school policies and practices;⁴

1.5

School boards establish regular mandatory professional learning for school and district staff on anti-racism, anti-oppression, and human rights;⁵

1.6

School boards establish additional training and capacity building professional learning opportunities for staff to learn more about anti-racism, anti-oppression, and human rights (required as a prerequisite for promotion);⁶

1.7

The Ministry of Education continues to commit funding for human rights and equity advisors in Ontario, and extend such funding into every school board and school authority, with select amounts of funding particularly addressed towards high priority areas;⁷

1.8

The Ministry fully implement proposed plans in the *Education Equity Action Plan*;⁸

1.9

The Ministry of Education require school boards to routinely collect disaggregated identity-based data (through a Student Census that allows for the examination of the experiences and outcomes of students of diverse cultural identities) and subsidizes this practice; and,

1.10

School boards supplement the disaggregated identity-based data with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with students, parents, educators, and advocates of diverse cultural identities to identify the underlying issues resulting in the opportunity and achievement gaps identified through the data.⁹

DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Many students wrote about not feeling represented in school—not seeing their racial, ethnic, or cultural identity represented in curriculum, in staff, or in school activities. Representation matters: it matters because the examples students see around themselves shape what they imagine to be possible for people who look like them or who have lived what they have lived. Nuanced representation also changes the perception of various cultural identities by non-identifying people, helping work against biases long ingrained in Canadian and global society for decades. Furthermore, the inclusion of diverse perspectives and lived experiences inherently enriches learning and improves decision-making at all levels. OSTA-AECO recommends:



2.1: The Ministry of Education engage with educators and stakeholders to integrate diverse cultures, histories, and perspectives across the K-12 education curriculum;¹⁰



2.4: The Ministry require education in anti-colonial and critical race theory, as part of all teacher education programs in Ontario, including elementary and secondary school teacher training programs and early childhood education programs;¹¹



2.2: The Ministry and school boards support the creation of communal spaces and networks for students of colour or non-majority cultural identities, e.g. Black Student Forum;



2.5: School boards establish a community consultation framework (e.g. including consultation with the board's Advisory Committee on Equity) for the development of their equitable recruitment, hiring, and promotion policy in light of the Ministry's revocation of Regulation 247; and



2.3: The Ministry work with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to work with teacher education programs to make concerted efforts to recruit students to their programs from a variety of backgrounds and lived experiences;



2.6: School boards actively seek out guests of different cultural identities for district events and encourage schools to do the same for school events.

STRUCTURAL INCLUSIVITY AND EQUITY

The students of Ontario enter the education with different lived experiences and lifestyles. An equitable education system must be inclusive and responsive to these diverse student needs to ensure that all students can fully access a quality education regardless of their race, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural identity. OSTA-AECO recommends:

3.1

School boards, schools, and staff accommodate students' cultural or religious holidays and practices, including but not limited to: the provision of extensions on schoolwork, the modification of classroom activities, and the provision of on-site physical spaces for cultural practices such as prayer;

3.2

School boards, schools, and staff deliberately seek out the voices of students from diverse cultural identities to guide decision-making, e.g. forming student advisory committees, conducting roundtable discussions, conducting outreach to student clubs and organizations;

3.3

School boards ensure documents and communications sent home are in the appropriate language for parents and that interpreters are available when needed for any school-parent interactions; and¹²

3.4

The Ministry of Education undertake an extensive review of streaming in the education system, while directly consulting students who have been most disproportionately impacted by the current streaming system.¹³

CLOSING

The stories that these students have courageously shared are truly at the heart of *Volume Two: Negative Space*. Some of these students took over two hours to write about experiences deeply personal to them, and now we must honor them by using student voice to guide decision-making and policy change at all levels of public education.

REFERENCES

It is clear in reading these stories that Ontario public education continues to underserve students of colour and of minority cultural identities, though these students' stories do describe what progress is being made in the status quo. Still, instead of embracing the richness of the diversity present within classrooms to enrich learning for —which would enhance all students' education, including those who are non-identifying—schools and systems often marginalize and diminish the humanity and lived experiences of students from communities that already experience this injustice in society at-large. Schools should not be replicating the inequalities, inequities, discrimination, biases, and oppression present within the world; this is antithetical to the mission of education as a lever of social change, mobility, and equality.

All stakeholders have a role to play in rectifying the historic, systemic, and endemic flaws of public education so that schools empower all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural identity. We must build an inclusive system

together—one that does not marginalize students or allow them to exist as negative space. The diversity of lived experiences and identities within Ontario's student body is rich, and it is beautiful.

Rather than flattening and relegating this diversity to the fringes and negative space of our public education system, we must center and bring forward these voices in the remaking of schools as cultural mosaics. Let us build schools and classrooms that appreciate, celebrate, and empower students as we are, no longer moulding and chiseling our identities to fit a disingenuous default.

Let us begin by listening and acting, starting not tomorrow, but today. Ontario must do better for the sake of its students—not because we will become the adults of tomorrow, but because we are the youth of today.

- 1 Carl E. James, Tana Turner, Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area. (Toronto: York University, 2017), 75.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap. (Ottawa: Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2020), 14.
- 4 Carl E. James, Tana Turner, Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area. (Toronto: York University, 2017), 76.
- 5 Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap. (Ottawa: Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2020), 19.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, Affording Our Students' Success: 2020-21 Pre-Budget/Grants for Student Needs Submission. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2020).
- 8 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, Affording Our Students' Success: 2020-21 Pre-Budget/Grants for Student Needs Submission. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2020).
- 9 Carl E. James, Tana Turner, Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area. (Toronto: York University, 2017), 75.
- 10 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, The Students' Vision For Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2019).
- 11 Carl E. James, Tana Turner, Towards Race Equity In Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area. (Toronto: York University, 2017), 73.
- 12 Ibid, 76.
- 13 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, The Students' Vision For Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2019).

Images by Charlotte May, Dids, Mary Taylor, Tima Miroshnichenko, Polina Zimmerman, and Emily.



CALLS TO ACTION

FOR THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION:

- 1.7** The Ministry continues to commit funding for human rights and equity advisors in Ontario, and extend such funding into every school board and school authority, with select amounts of funding particularly addressed towards high priority areas;
- 1.8** The Ministry of Education fully implement proposed plans in the Education Equity Action Plan;
- 1.9** The Ministry of Education require school boards to routinely collect disaggregated identity-based data (through a Student Census that allows for the examination of the experiences and outcomes of students of diverse cultural identities) and subsidizes this practice; and,
- 2.1** The Ministry of Education engage with educators and stakeholders to integrate diverse cultures, histories, and perspectives across the K-12 education curriculum;
- 2.2** The Ministry and school boards support the creation of communal spaces and networks for students of colour or non-majority cultural identities e.g. Black Student Forum;
- 2.3** The Ministry work with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to work with teacher education programs to make concerted efforts to recruit students to their programs from a variety of backgrounds and lived experiences;
- 2.4** The Ministry require education in anti-colonial and critical race theory, as part of all teacher education programs in Ontario, including elementary and secondary school teacher training programs and early childhood education programs; and
- 3.4** The Ministry of Education undertake an extensive review of streaming in the education system, while directly consulting students who have been most disproportionately impacted by the current streaming system.

FOR SCHOOL BOARDS, SCHOOLS, AND/OR TEACHING STAFF:

- 1.1** School boards develop a system-wide action plan to address the disparities experienced by students of marginalized cultural identities, and where disparities exist within individual schools, require action plans at the school level. These action plans should be developed with the input of these marginalized communities, from conception to implementation to evaluation, and made publicly available;
- 1.2** School boards develop strategies that create racism-free school environments, which all schools are expected to implement, and include ways to assess the effectiveness of these strategies by collecting information from students and parents;
- 1.3** School boards develop human rights policies and procedures (including a complaints process) to reflect expectations for addressing racism and the harassment and bullying of students based on their race, ethnicity, nationality, and/or cultural identity;
- 1.4** School boards inform all parents and students about the complaints, advocacy, and appeal mechanisms available to them should there be issues with school policies and practices;
- 1.5** School boards establish regular mandatory professional learning for school and district staff on anti-racism, anti-oppression, and human rights;
- 1.6** School boards establish additional training and capacity building professional learning opportunities for staff to learn more about anti-racism, anti-oppression, and human rights (required as a prerequisite for promotion);
- 1.10** School boards supplement the disaggregated identity-based data with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with students, parents, educators, and advocates of diverse cultural backgrounds to identify the underlying issues resulting in the opportunity and achievement gaps identified through the data.
- 2.5** School boards establish a community consultation framework (e.g. including consultation with the board's Advisory Committee on Equity) for the development of their equitable recruitment, hiring, and promotion policy in light of the Ministry's revocation of Regulation 247;
- 2.6** School boards actively seek out guests of different cultural for district events and encourage schools to do the same for school events;
- 3.1** School boards, schools, and staff accommodate students' cultural or religious holidays and practices, including but not limited to: the provision of extensions on schoolwork, the modification of classroom activities, and the provision of on-site physical spaces for cultural practices such as prayer;
- 3.2** School boards, schools, and staff deliberately seek out the voices of students from diverse cultural identities to guide decision-making, e.g. forming student advisory committees, conducting roundtable discussions, conducting outreach to student clubs and organizations; and
- 3.3** School boards ensure documents and communications sent home are in the appropriate language for parents and that interpreters are available when needed for any school- parent interactions.

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