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Supervisor appointed to oversee racism allegations at PDSB

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The Peel District School Board is once again coming under fire for its alleged inability to deal with racial discrimination within its schools.

The local school board was put under immediate review from the provincial government back in October 2019 after a collection of students, families, and even board trustees raised concerns about racism within the regional school community.

Lawyer and human rights advocate, Arleen Huggins was appointed to lead the investigation on April 27. Huggins' report was completed and submitted to Ontario's Education Minister Stephen Lecce on May 15, stating the board showed a lack of compliance with the 27 specific instructions that was given to them from the Province back in March.

?Her report finds that certain directions have not been complied with, and moreover, that the PDSB lacks the capacity to provide good governance in the interests of all students of the board and to effectively carry out its responsibilities to over-see and ensure proper compliance with my directions,? stated Mr. Lecce on June 8.

He added, ?My expectation is clear: the Board must change, or I will take further action. We cannot and will not sit idle, while families and students continue to feel isolated, victimized and targeted.?

The Board of Trustees passed a motion on June 17 asking Lecce to bring in a supervisor to oversee the board and bring in fundamental changes to ?ensure a discrimination-free and safe learning and work environment.?

?It is the Board's hope that ministry assistance will help ensure all students and staff face a new and better reality when schools reopen in the new school year,? says Brad MacDonald, Chair of the Board. ?Should the Minister accept the Board's request to appoint a supervisor, our Board of Trustees and the senior leadership team is committed to providing our full cooperation to ensure the fundamental changes are implemented, and I would expect the same from all staff.?

Dr. Avis Glaze, Ontario's former Education Commissioner, has been selected to serve in the role as special consultant to the PDSB as of June 15. Dr. Glaze has been instructed to provide extensive feedback on the school board's actions of anti-racism and to follow-up with clear, and effective solutions.

?Equity and excellence must go hand-in-hand. Variables such as race, gender, social class or postal code should not truncate the life chances of students, narrow their career choices, nor determine their destiny,? said Dr. Glaze. ?Graduates of our schools must become solution-finders?confident, productive and engaged citizens of character?who contribute to nation-building. There can be no throw-away-kids, and, to that end, Peel cannot be a throw-away-school-board; they must be supported.?

Members of PDSB are in unanimous agreement that work needs to be done to rid all discrimination that has brought negative impacts on students, families and the community in recent months.

?In the Minister's letter to the Board on June 8, 2020, he made it clear that we must take a substantive and purposeful approach to the directives, and not simply a technical one,? says PDSB Director of Education, Peter Joshua. ?We know that we need assistance to ensure that our approach meets Ministry requirements, particularly focused on the needs of Black students and other students who have been marginalized and underserved. We must create a more harmonious, productive and effective school district. We are fully aware that we need the expertise necessary to help guide our next steps.?

Minister of Education Stephen Lecce took to Twitter this week to reaffirm his commitment to creating a safe environment for PDSB students, one that embraces equality for all.

?To the families of Peel, your voices have been heard. A supervisor needs to be called in with one mission: stomp out anti-Black racism and all forms of discrimination that has set too many kids back. I will be taking immediate steps towards that end,? he said.

On Monday (June 22), Lecce officially appointed Bruce Rodrigues to the role of supervisor for the Peel District School Board. Mr. Rodrigues previously worked as a Superintendent and Associate Director for Waterloo Catholic District School Board, where he implemented programs for students who were impacted by discrimination, whether race, gender, or sexual orientation.

?With the assistance of Mr. Rodrigues' supervision, I know that the Peel District School Board will have the leadership and necessary management structure in place to ensure the learning and working environments are welcoming, inclusive and respectful for students and staff,? said Mr. Lecce. ?We know there is more to do ? provincewide- which is why we will continue to work to confront racism, including anti-Black racism, in all Ontario schools across our province.?

He added,? Ontario's children deserve nothing less.?

For more information, visit peelschools.org.