

Ministry of Education ends supervision of Peel District School Board]

Change comes ahead of 'We Rise Together 2.0' Black Student Success Strategy Implementation

By Zachary Roman

The Ministry of Education has deemed the Peel District School Board can go back to managing its own affairs.

The Ministry's January 19 move ends an over two-year period in which a supervisor, Bruce Rodrigues, was appointed to watch over the board after an investigation into serious concerns about the Board's capacity to address systemic discrimination – specifically anti-Black racism. During the two and a half-year period, Rodrigues had the final say for any decision.

Rodrigues completed a report on December 23, 2022, in which he said, "I am confident that the changes I have made to the senior administration team will help to ensure that the necessary leadership, policies, and practices are in place to allow the board to better serve students and families."

However, not everyone in the community is happy the Board is once again able to operate independently.

Advocacy Peel, an independent multi-racial coalition of individuals and groups in the Peel region that advocates for a school system free of anti-Black and other forms of racism and discrimination, issued a statement in response to the Ministry's move, calling it unacceptable.

"Without a commitment to extend PDSB Director Rashmi Swarup's contract, Black community activists are not convinced the Trustees have the ability, capacity and will to comply with the Ministry Directives. Advocacy Peel knows that white supremacy never goes away on its own. Without strong anti-racist leadership at the Board, change will not happen?" reads the statement. "Many Peel residents are disappointed and feel betrayed because the Ministry never consulted with Black community representatives until after the decision was made."

There were 27 Ministry directives laid out for the PDSB to work on, and Rodrigues indicated in his report that work has been done or is being done on all 27. Examples of the directives include hiring an integrity commissioner, implementing an annual equity report card, establishing an equity office and superintendent of equity, establishing a student advisory committee that's representative of student body demographics, and developing an anti-racism policy.

Rodrigues' full report, which includes the directives and the work that's been done towards them, is available online on peelschools.org.

While work has been done on the directives, Advocacy Peel is not confident that work will continue now that supervision is complete.

"We see no evidence that the Trustees, left on their own, will continue to dismantle white supremacy and create equal opportunities for African, Black and Caribbean students," reads their statement.

Rodrigues said he invested "significant time and resources" to build the capacity of the PDSB Board of Trustees so they'd be able to "govern the PDSB in a manner that is accountable, transparent, respectful, and responsive to the issues and concerns of the communities it serves."

The Ministry's move comes at a time when the PDSB is set to launch "We Rise Together 2.0: Black Student Success Strategy." The Board is launching the strategy at a January 31 event in Mississauga at the HJA Brown Education Centre.

From 6 to 8:30 p.m. that evening, there will be dance and spoken word performances from students, student reflections, student art

displays, and a panel discussion with graduation coaches.

At the event, there will be Steel Pan and Djembe drumming, and a catered meal. The event will be live-streamed and according to the board it's being held to "celebrate Black culture and highlight the Black Student Success Strategy with PDSB."

"We Rise Together 2.0: Black Student Success Strategy Implementation" (the strategy) is a five-year plan from 2022 to 2027 and was presented as a 49-page document at a December 8, 2022 PDSB Curriculum, Equity and Student Well-Being Committee Meeting.

The strategy's goal is to lead systemic change to improve outcomes for African, Black, and Afro-Caribbean students.

There are six main focus areas in the strategy: Develop the knowledge and skills of Trustees and senior leaders to lead the implementation of this strategy; integrate the experiences of Black Canadians into the curriculum; foster anti-racist learning and working environments; continue engagement with the Black community; inspire and support Black student success; and hire and support more Black staff.

Along with the six focus areas are eight guiding principles, which the Board said guided the development of the strategy and will also guide its implementation. They are the following: Anti-Black Racism exists; the Education system is NOT neutral; dismantling Anti-Black racism is a collective responsibility; and an ongoing journey; there is an urgency to act now; the Board will hold itself accountable; complying with the Human Rights code is a priority; and system transformation requires community voice.

According to the PDSB, the success of the strategy's implementation will be measured continuously through the Equity Accountability Report Card, which was directive number nine from the Ministry of Education.

More information on the PDSB's plan to support Black students can be found at werisetgether.ca.