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Every year, principals in schools across Ontario take the time to complete our survey and share their stories with us. This work would not be possible without them.

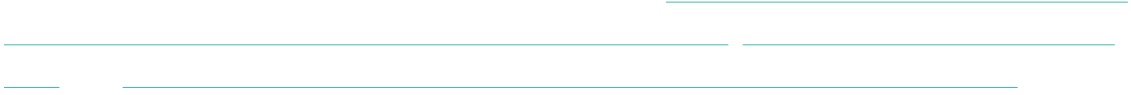
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Introduction

Anti-racism policies are gradually becoming more widespread in Canada. In 2019, the Government of Canada launched a 3-year plan for long-term action towards increasing equitable access to and participation in the economic, cultural, social, and political spheres.¹ At the jurisdictional level, Ontario was the first province to pass an anti-racism



In April 2022, **Nova Scotia**



While some provincial governments have taken legislative action to address anti-racism, the outcomes are yet to be seen. In the coming years, it will be crucial to monitor how community consultation, implementation, and accountability measures play a role in how these legislative policies come to fruition, and furthermore, their implications at the school board level.

Anti-racism policies in Ontario school boards

In fall 2021, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the Board Improvement and Equity Plan (BIEP), which is a planning tool to support boards in advancing equity. By September 2022, all Ontario school boards were expected to be in the process of collecting voluntary student demographic data.²⁵ A scan of school boards' websites, and responses to PFE's 2021-22 AOSS, show there is significant variability in how Ontario schools and school boards are approaching anti-racism and equity.

This scan involved a search of all 72 school board websites for information on whether they conducted a student census (e.g., student demographic data, identity-based data collection), school climate survey (e.g., well-being survey), staff census (e.g., workforce census), and parent survey. If a school board website provided information on a past and/or upcoming survey, they were included in the tally of participating school boards. The scan also included a search for an anti-racism strategy and/or the inclusion of anti-racism in equity policies on school board websites. The number of school boards that conducted each of these activities were tallied at the end of the scan for a final count. Limitations to this scan include missing information due to broken or missing links as well as outdated website content.

Overall, 74% of school board websites mentioned racism in their equity and inclusion policies, 40% of publicly funded schools had an anti-racism statement on their website, and 28% had an anti-racism strategy or approach available online.

Table 2: School board approaches to equity and anti-racism policy

School board approach to equity and anti-racism policy	Number of school boards

school climate), they were included in the total number of participants in each separate activity (i.e., School Board A is part of the total number of boards that conducted a student census in addition to a school climate survey).

Table 3: Overview of school board equity and anti-racism activities in Ontario

Types of school board activities used to advance equity and anti-racism	Number of school boards participating in this work as of summer 2022
<p>Student census</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A recurring, voluntary, and confidential student survey that collects identity-based data to identify and address systemic barriers Example topics: student's language(s), Indigenous identity, ethnicity, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, (dis)abilities, place of birth, and citizenship/immigration status 	67%
<p>Staff census</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A recurring, voluntary survey for school staff to help school boards better understand the makeup of their workforce and further inform the development of strategies to address gaps in employment equity Example topics: demographic data, employment opportunities, sense of belonging, safety, and well-being 	28%
<p>Parent survey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A recurring and voluntary survey for parents, guardians, and/or caregivers to support school boards to plan, address concerns, and improve their connection with families Example topics: perceptions of interactions that children and families have in classrooms, schools, and school boards, as well as feedback for improvement 	25%
<p>School climate survey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voluntary survey for students and/or staff to provide feedback to their school about the extent to which their school supports learning and promotes a safe and inclusive environment Some school boards may conduct this survey in conjunction with their student and/or staff census Example topics: student engagement, sense of belonging, safety, discipline measures, and well-being 	54%

Source: People for Education's scan of websites of publicly funded school boards in Ontario, summer 2022

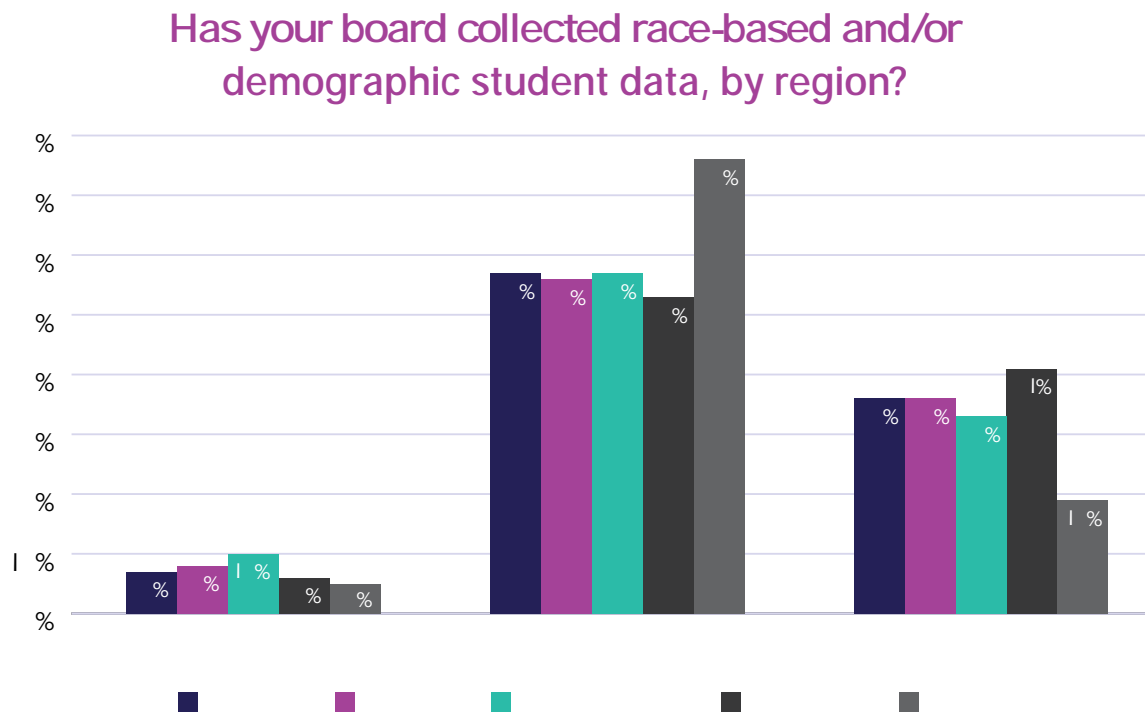
These activities are an integral step in advancing equity and anti-racism because collecting data on individual experiences in the school community that can be sorted by demographic variables such as race yields valuable insights about how different groups experience systems as well as their various outcomes.

With different school boards taking these different approaches, how are individual schools implementing anti-racism and equity strategies set by their school boards? The PFE 2021-22 AOSS provides some insight into school-level implementation of policies and practices set by boards as well as the provincial government.

Race-based data collection: who has started?

In the 2021-22 AOSS, 64% of Ontario school principals reported that their school boards collected race-based and/or demographic student data, 29% were unsure, and 7% did not collect race-based data. The GTA had the highest proportion of schools that reported collecting race-based data (76%) in 2021-2022, but in all other regions, this proportion was less than 60% (i.e., Northern: 53%, Southwestern: 57%, Central: 56%, Eastern: 57%).

Figure 1: Ontario schools collecting race-based and/or demographic student data, 2021-2022



Source: People for Education's 2021-22 Annual Ontario School Survey

The significant proportion of principals who reported being unsure raises questions about how effectively the Ontario government and school boards are communicating with local school staff. When asked about the purpose of this demographic data collection, one secondary school principal from Southwestern Ontario wrote,

Understanding

the rationale behind new initiatives requires clear communication, time, and resources. However, these are some of the things that were often cited by principals as being in shortage.

expressed one elementary school principal from Central Ontario. Furthermore, another elementary school principal from the same region expressed that,

These experiences highlight the administrative reality of implementing change; while fostering an understanding of the issue is necessary, it isn't possible without the logistics.

In an effort to support identity-based data collection and reporting, the 2021-22 AOSS was the first time that principals were asked to self-identify their racial background as an optional question. The vast majority of Ontario principals identified as white (86.7%), followed by Black (5.2%), South Asian (3.0%), East Asian (2.7%), Indigenous (2.3%), Middle Eastern (1.9%), other (1.7%), Latino/Latina/Latinx (0.9%), and Southeast Asian (0.6%).

Figure 2: Self-reported racial background of Ontario principals,

This homogenous racial profile of school principals is a contrast to Ontario's population, which is comprised of more than half of Canadian's "visible minority" population.²⁶ Race-based data collection, such as the above, provides foundational evidence to raise questions about disproportionate outcomes, examine the circumstances that may have contributed to these results, reflect what potential changes may be desired, and plan for improvement.

School strategies to engage in anti-racism and equity

Principals were also asked to indicate all the strategies that their schools had undertaken to engage in anti-racism and equity work. Almost all Ontario schools (94%) reported providing professional development specific to anti-racism and equity, and most of them (79%) reported updating and reviewing teaching resources and practices to ensure inclusive and equitable content and representation.

Partnering with community-based organizations in their anti-racism and equity work, however, was the least commonly undertaken strategy (37%). This finding is concerning given that research has shown that students benefit when there are strong partnerships between schools, communities, and families.²⁷ Furthermore, some principals reported a lack of support when pursuing this approach. One elementary school principal from Central Ontario explained,

These community-based relationships affirm student identities, increase sense of belonging, allow groups to learn from one another, encourage safe school environments, encourage community service, and improve student academic achievement.²⁸

Figure 3: Types of

Another elementary school principal in Central Ontario elaborated, *“Becoming anti-racist*
Facilitating this
type of reflection requires trust building and safe environments that allow teachers to be
vulnerable. After all, embracing vulnerability

³⁰ The creation of this safe environment is
challenging and complex, but necessary even in schools where the student population
is predominantly white, which was another theme that was apparent among Ontario
schools. One secondary school principal from Eastern Ontario explained,

Racial diversity,
however, is not a prerequisite to anti-racism work. Anti-racism is the ability to recognize
systems, policies, and power, as the root of racial inequality.³¹

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic was frequently mentioned by Ontario schools as a key
challenge. One elementary school principal from Central Ontario explained, *“School*

As we move forward and emerge from the initial shock of this pandemic, it
is critical that we have a clear and consistent plan in place to advance equity and anti-

including race-based data, is a fundamental step in institutional accountability because it provides evidence on where gaps exist and where further attention is needed.

Statistics Canada is an agency of the Government of Canada that is responsible for producing and running analysis on data about all 13 provinces and territories. In 1996, Statistics Canada began to ask Canadians whether they identify as a “visible minority” in the Census of Population, yet there remains no mention of “race” in this data collection.³⁶ Consequently, these data cannot be disaggregated into specific racial groupings, preventing systems from knowing what disparities exist among different populations of people, which is a prerequisite for working to combat the inequities.

Instead, Statistics Canada is attempting to respond to demand for race-based data through crowdsourced surveys and increasing the representation of marginalized groups in their samples.³⁷ Given that the census dataset underpins and enables further analysis across data collections in every sector, its lack of disaggregated race-based data is slowing Canada’s progress towards more equitable institutional decision-making.³⁸ As provinces and territories work towards advancing anti-racism, it is important to ask how federal leadership could play a role in supporting these efforts, as well as what critical understandings are necessary in guiding this work, and how to cultivate them.

Conclusion: where do we go from here?

While anti-racism policymaking—regional, provincial, and federal—has begun in Canada, this work is currently piecemeal and lacking consistency, possibly due to varying understandings about its rationale or purpose. In reviewing legislation and non-legislation progress across the country, in addition to a closer look at publicly funded schools in Ontario, PFE has three recommendations on how to move forward with regards to equity and anti-racism policy.

1. Name the problem

Currently, only 40% of Ontario school boards have published anti-racism statements on their websites, and 26% have an equity policy that does not include any mention of race or racism. Naming the problem is a crucial step towards removing societal taboos around race and creating an environment where students and staff feel safe to critically engage in conversations around race and racism. Public policies and strategies that name the problem signal an understanding of anti-racism and how power, privilege, and systemic discrimination have contributed to current societal inequities.

2. Data collection is a good start, but it's only the start

We know that inequity exists, but often we lack the data to address it. Collecting disaggregated identity-based data is a critical starting point that allows for the identification of inequities present in our systems, but it is only one piece of a puzzle that also includes data development (e.g., identifying indicators, creating collection tools, etc.), public reporting, and accountability mechanisms. Beyond collecting the data, this information should be regularly and publicly reported to promote institutional transparency and accountability. Furthermore, it is critical that individuals, groups, and communities who have been historically impacted by discrimination are consulted throughout this process. For example, British Columbia's Anti-Racism Data Act was co-developed with Indigenous leadership and establishes a process for government to request permission from Indigenous communities to use their data.³⁹

3. This is a process that needs to involve everyone, but especially individuals and groups historically impacted by discrimination

Less than one-third of Ontario school boards report using a parent survey or a school climate survey, and only 37% of Ontario schools reported partnering with community-based organizations in their anti-racism and equity work. Consistent efforts to understand school climate and address negative impacts on students, staff, and families can help create safer and more equitable learning environments that support all students to thrive. However, efforts should go beyond simply providing opportunities through periodic surveys, and instead dedicate time and resources to seeking out and building partnerships with individuals, groups, and community organizations who have been historically impacted by discrimination. Instead of being viewed as one step in the decision-making process, listening to these voices, perspectives, and lived experiences needs to be centred throughout the process. One way to facilitate this approach is by evaluating systems to ensure that equity-seeking groups have a mechanism to voice their concerns in addition to developing accountability measures that ensure that the appropriate follow-up actions are undertaken. School boards need government support in doing this work, both logistically with regards to time and resources, but also with respect to direction and leadership, which is where those community partnerships and marginalized voices could be an impactful guide.

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