11

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| **CC** | **Reflections and Advice on the****Continued Implementation****of Safe and Accepting Schools** |
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As the mandate of the expert panel comes to an end, members would like to put forth some advice to assist the Ministry of Education as it continues to support safe and accepting school environments for all Ontario students. The information below is a summary of their reflections and advice.

***Supporting a Positive School Climate***

In order for children and youth to succeed and to realize their full potential, it is first necessary for them to have their basic needs met, including the need to feel safe and included. Reflecting upon having basic needs met, there are equity challenges that pose barriers to the educational and well-being needs of Indigenous students, including the sufficiency of funding in provincially-funded and federally-funded schools. In light of recent commitments from the federal and provincial governments to address the Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report, there is an opportunity to further support improved achievement and well­being for all Indigenous students. This means, the ministry should consider enhancing supports for students transitioning from on reserve schools to provincial schools, as well as for students transitioning between the different levels of the provincially-funded schooling system. This could include providing schools with readiness tools to assess whether they are in a position to receive and support Indigenous students; building partnerships with community partners to support Indigenous students to be successful throughout their years of schooling; helping parents, caregivers and families navigate the school system; and increasing knowledge and awareness of Indigenous histories, cultures, perspectives and contributions for all students, school staff, teacher candidates, staff at Faculties of Education, school board staff, and school trustees.

At the school level, it is important for staff members to have the tools and the time to adequately and effectively respond to the strengths and needs of all members of the school community. These tools could take the form of assessment instruments, evidence-based programs or curricular and extracurricular supports. As well, ongoing dialogue between teacher and principals and the decision-makers at the board and provincial levels is vital to ensure that essential information is communicated in a way that facilitates prompt and effective responses to the identified strengths and needs of students.

Supporting a positive school climate has been an important part of the ministry’s work. Attention should also be paid to the importance of school cultures, classroom climates, listening to all voices, and responsive and respectful relationships. Cultivating healthy relationships is crucial both at the school level and at the individual classroom level, and plays an important part in the successful implementation of safe and accepting schools policies and programs. All children need to be supported to learn. The demo­graphics of Ontario are changing, and the ministry and schools must do their part to support students who need assistance e.g., newcomers.

12

All of our children and youth need to feel like they matter. They need to know that someone cares about them and knows who they are. One expert panel member asked that the ministry consider a quote from Dr. Seuss to sum this thought up, “To the world you may be one person but to one person you may be the world”. The goal should be that each child is known to at least one adult in their school, so they have a “go-to person”, and that no child “slips through the cracks”.

It is essential for school boards to clearly identify the needs of their students and community in order to implement specific programs and targeted activities that will foster a sense of belonging, and well-being in the school environment. It is vitally important that all key players in the education sector be involved in the development of safe and healthy environments. Consequently, an approach that establishes shared priorities and specifies each person’s duties and responsibilities will help to achieve our primary objective of academic success for all students.

***Making Alignment across Policy/Program Areas***

At the beginning of the mandate of the expert panel, there was a sense that the work of safe and accepting schools was not as connected as it could be to other relevant policy areas. Over the course of the mandate of the expert panel, increasing efforts have been made to bring areas together, make linkages, and align work. These conversations are happening more often within the ministry, and the panel would like to see this continue. The work of safe and accepting schools needs to be integrated with other relevant strategies for school boards to be able to have success. Making it a practice to connect across policy and program areas is essential. There is also a need to have an interdisciplinary approach that reflects the diversity of our populations. Although this work requires time and sustained effort, it is important to make sure it happens. The importance of partnerships and connecting with community organizations was raised. Administrators and educators should be encouraged to work with community partners including school resource officers, youth probation officers, as well as leads for mental health in boards.