

EDUCATION

# The new guy isn't all that new to the Peel board

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Growing up in Mississauga in the 1970s, Peter Joshua admits diversity wasn't exactly prevalent back when he was a student in the Peel District School Board.

Illustrating his point with a past class photo during his keynote speech at the board's Starting Point event, the new education director said: "Although I looked different, I didn't feel different."

And it was his former Peel teachers and schoolmates that gave Joshua a "true sense of belonging", he told staff members and trustees at the board's annual launch event for the school year on Wednesday, Aug. 30.

Joshua, who succeeded Tony Pontes in July, is the second racialized individual to hold his position in the board, behind Harold Brathwaite.

Joshua's family came to Canada from India in the 1960s. He stressed to the Pearson Convention Centre audience the importance of building on equity and inclusion in schools.

He cited the board's action plan to improve the learning experience of black male students as a course from which educators mustn't shy away. We Rise Together was released last fall, alongside findings from a study that noted negative experiences reported by black male students in Peel board high schools.

"We have taken the time to listen to the voices of our black male students, yet this only matters if we act on what we are being taught by their voices," he said, applauding the board's subsequent accountability report to monitor its progress so far.

Weaving multimedia, live student performances and humour - in one video, Joshua does a brief Yoda impression - into his lengthy keynote, the animated administrator also touched on his commitment to address student mental health.

Noting that Peel teachers have cited mental health as a concern, he said the board has a mental health strategy that



Bryon Johnson/Metroland

**Peter Joshua, education director for the Peel District School Board, delivers his keynote at the annual Starting Point event at Pearson Convention Centre in Brampton.**

aims to help teachers address mental health, addictions, and anxiety issues with students.

"Long waits for service in the community and the stigma that surrounds mental illness continue to act as barriers to getting the help our students need and deserve," he said.

Joshua also intends to continue to focus on bringing LGBTQ students into the fold through its gender expression and identity guidelines, as well as gay-straight alliances in secondary and middle schools.

He pointed out a pilot project where select schools are learning the more uncomfortable side of Canadian history when it comes to Aboriginal people by way of treaties and residential schools.

As well, Joshua added, the board will work with local stakeholders such as the United Way to address poverty.

Throughout his talk, Joshua, who previously worked in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, kept circling back to how he has returned home.

"This is my opportunity to truly thank and give back to the school district that raised me to believe in myself and to strive for the best for all," said the Erindale Secondary School graduate.