

# RACISM PROBE FINDS 'MARGINALIZATION, DISCRIMINATION, HARASSMENT' IN PEEL SCHOOL BOARD

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Just weeks into their probe of racism and dysfunction in the Peel public school board, three provincial reviewers say they have already "consistently heard painful accounts of traumatic experiences in schools and school communities."

The "narratives shared with us signal a profound lack of respect in relationships, demonstrated by stories of marginalization, discrimination, differential behaviour, and harassment," says their interim report, obtained by the Star.

Ena Chadha, Suzanne Herbert and newly appointed reviewer Shawn Richard are looking into complaints of racism - in particular anti-Black racism - as well as issues overall with equity, hiring and leadership.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce ordered the investigation in early November after the Peel board reached out for help as it grappled with allegations of anti-Black racism, a trustee who referred to a diverse McCrimmon middle school as "McCriminal," and after a senior administrator in charge of anti-discrimination launched a human rights complaint.

So far, the review team has received more than 350 interview requests as well as email/mail and phone submissions, which they characterize as a "strong" public response.

The review began December, and that month alone they spoke to 50 people, both individually and in groups.

Richard, a lawyer, was appointed later last month after concerns that no one from the Black community was on the front lines.

At the time, Lecce noted that the entire review was being overseen by assistant deputy education minister and human rights lawyer Patrick Case, a prominent member of the Black community who was part of a review team in 2017 - with Herbert - that issued a scathing report on racism and a lack of leadership in the York Region District School Board.

The trio filed their interim report on Peel to Lecce on Dec. 30, and their final report is due by spring.

In a statement, Lecce said he has met with the reviewers "to better understand their immediate observations of systemic anti-Black racism, and lack of adherence to governance, leadership, trustee conduct" and hiring and promotions practices.

"I believe students and families deserve better," Lecce said. "It is my hope that the final report will build momentum for the transformational change racialized families are seeking, after a period of inaction."

Their interim report says "we have received written and oral submissions from many individuals and groups representing di-



Shree Paradkar/Toronto Star

An investigation into racism and dysfunction in the Peel public school board has found "a profound lack of respect in relationships, demonstrated by stories of marginalization, discrimination, differential behavior, and harassment." The findings were part of an interim report obtained by the Star.

verse perspectives on the issues within the scope of the review."

The reviewers have also been examining "various documentation, minutes of board meetings, board policies and data. We have consistently heard painful accounts of traumatic experiences in schools and school communities that speak to systemic and historical disparities between and across racial, ethnic and cultural groups with respect to access to programming, services, academic achievement, transitions to post-secondary education and the workforce, hiring, and promotion, as well as discipline measures both in education and employment.

"They go on to say that a "profound lack of respect (is) demonstrated by stories of marginalization, discrimination, differential behaviour, and harassment. To date, these sentiments relate to leadership, governance, human resources, anti-Black racism, Islamophobia and other forms of inequities put forward by students, parents, educators, staff, senior administrators, elected offi-

cials and community members who we have met with thus far."

The Peel District School Board is the second-largest in the province, with more than 155,000 students in Brampton, Mississauga and Caledon schools, and about 17,000 staffers. Its student body is highly diverse, with the three largest groups identifying as South Asian (45 per cent), white (17 per cent) and Black (10 per cent).

So far, the reviewers say that "all stakeholders, from students and parents to educators, staff, senior administrators, trustees and community members, have expressed consensus that the review is a much needed intervention to better understand the challenging and compounding dynamics operating within the (Peel board) and broader community."

However, there has been some criticism that given the tight timeline, the review will not be as comprehensive as needed. The reviewers say they will identify the problems and make recommendations, but more work will need to be done.

The board, they say, will need a "process that will allow community members to directly 'speak their truth' to trustees and senior staff" in order to "regain public confidence that will be necessarily longer-term and that will be monitored by the ministry," they wrote.

Those they've interviewed "have told us that they expect that this review will assist the (Peel board) to become more transparent and responsive in its commitment to provide inclusive learning and working environments where all students and staff feel respected."

Last month, Lecce himself met with some Peel community members who told him part of the problem is a lack of diversity among teachers.

Lecce said that Regulation 274, which was brought in under the former Liberal government, impedes boards in hiring because it forces schools to hire the most experience supply teachers for full-time jobs, rather than their top choice or who will be the best fit.

The regulation is a part of the current negotiating

round between teacher unions and the province.

The Peel review team had at least 13 days of interviews in January - in Brampton, Mississauga, Malton, Etobicoke and Toronto - and notes that "considering the urgency to complete this review and the volume of requests to participate in the review process, we will not be able meet with everyone who has expressed interest" but promises that all written submissions will be looked at.

Lecce said he wants families to know the government "is listening and is fully committed to combatting racism and improving equity and opportunity for their children."

He pledged to "continue to empower students - notably from racialized communities - to be a part of the solution, to have a voice, and to work collaboratively to eliminate obstacles to academic success and well-being."

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