

# Exploring Equity in Ontario: A Provincial Scan of Equity Policies Across School Boards

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## Abstract

Canada—and Ontario, in particular—is proud to be characterized as one of the most equitable education systems in the world. However, diversity poses unique challenges for Canadian education systems. This study presents findings from an environmental scan of equity policies across the 72 school boards in Ontario, which yielded 785 equity policies for analysis. Data extraction focused on five dimensions of knowledge mobilization: structures, brokering, co-production, dissemination, and exchange. Findings show that many topics remain under-represented in school board policy coverage, including religious accommodation, antiracism and ethno-cultural discrimination, anti-discrimination procedures for LGBTQ2+ students, gender identity, and socio-economic status.

*Keywords:* K–12 education, equity, policy, knowledge mobilization, LGBTQ2+

## Résumé

Le Canada—et particulièrement l’Ontario—est fier d’être décrit comme l’un des systèmes d’éducation les plus équitables du monde. Néanmoins, la diversité présente des défis particuliers pour les systèmes d’éducation canadiens. Cette étude présente des constats découlant d’une analyse des politiques en matière d’équité de 72 conseils scolaires d’Ontario, ce qui a mené à l’examen de 785 politiques concernant l’équité. Pour l’extraction des données, nous nous sommes concentrés sur cinq dimensions de la mobilisation du savoir : les structures, la transmission, la coproduction, la dissémination, et l’échange. Les observations démontrent que de nombreux sujets demeurent sous-représentés dans ce qui est couvert par les politiques des conseils scolaires, notamment en ce qui concerne les accommodations religieuses, l’antiracisme et la discrimination ethno-culturelle, les procédures antidiscriminatoires pour les étudiants GLBTTQ2, l’identité de genre et le statut socioéconomique.

*Mots-clés* : éducation primaire et secondaire, équité, politiques, mobilisation du savoir, GLBTTQ2

## Introduction

Ontario is one of the first jurisdictions in Canada (and elsewhere) to enact a large-scale initiative to improve equity across 5,000 provincial schools through an Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) strategy that “aims to promote inclusive education, as well as to understand, identify, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit our students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 11). The EIE strategy mandates that all 72 school boards create and implement EIE policies and administrative procedures. Policies are to serve as guiding principles and set direction within the school board while administrative procedures include a series of steps to be followed by schools to achieve the desired result of the EIE policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b). Due to the large-scale initiative of the EIE strategy, and limited empirical evidence exploring the implementation of the strategy across school boards, the following study consisted of an environmental scan of school board policies that focus on equity to help identify the knowledge mobilization processes (structures, brokering, co-production, dissemination, and transfer) district school boards are employing, as stated in their policy documents, to increase equity policy engagement. The aim of the scan is to serve as a planning tool for modifying existing policies and future policy work.

The remainder of this article is organized into five sections. First, a review of the literature is presented in regards to key equity issues faced by the education system, Ontario’s action plan for addressing equity, and the increased interest in using knowledge mobilization processes to influence policy issues. The literature review is concluded by presenting the conceptual framework used for the study. Next, the article details the specific research questions explored during the environmental scan, the method for conducting the scan, and presents the findings in relation to the conceptual framework. Finally, the study includes a discussion which highlights opportunities for continued improvement that includes a framework school boards can use for monitoring the implementation of equity efforts.

## Literature Review

This article sits at the intersection of two emerging trends: (a) a growing focus on addressing the key equity issues faced by the Ontario education system, and (b) the emerging view that the best available data and research evidence (efforts we refer to as knowledge mobilization, or KMb) should inform educational decision making, policy, and practice.

### Key Equity Issues Faced by the Ontario Education System

The highest-performing education systems in the world are also the most equitable (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Over the past decade, Canada has consistently been recognized as one of the top education performers and has been shown to be more equitable than many other countries in relation to educational outcomes for diverse students (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010, 2012). Adamson's (2010) *The Children Left Behind* report looked at inequality in child well-being in three areas: material (including family income and housing), educational achievement, and health. Out of 24 countries, Canada ranked seventeenth in material well-being, ninth in health, and third in education. This reveals that Canadian schools do better than many others in the world in mitigating the effects of socio-economic status, health, and housing inequality, as well as child and family poverty rates, on school success. However, in a Canadian study on equity, Carr (2008) notes "there remains a plethora of problems and issues related to equity, diversity, and human rights" (p. 4). Students with disabilities face significant barriers getting to, into, and around schools (Stephens et al., 2015). Students with prevalent medical conditions (e.g., anaphylaxis) report feeling stigmatized in school settings when they disclosed their condition (Dean, Fenton, Shannon, Elliot, & Clarke, 2016). Approximately half of First Nations peoples living on reserves graduate high school (compared to 85% of their peers in the general population) (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017). English Language Learners (ELLs) comprise 25% of Ontario students (Jang, Dunlop, Wagner, Kim, & Gu, 2013), yet ELL students have low success and high deferral rates for provincial literacy tests (Han & Cheng, 2011). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and two-spirited (LGBTQ2+) youth face greater prejudice and victimization in schools, which results in a lower level of

school connectedness than their non-LGBTQ2+ peers (Taylor et al., 2011). This prejudice may be experienced through the use of discriminatory language or failure to use personal pronouns as specified by the student (Airton, 2018).

Approximately one in five Ontario children live in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2017), and 50% of students who drop out of high school live in families earning less than \$30,000 a year (Ferguson, 2007). Reitz and Banerjee (2007), in their study of racial inequality in Canada, highlight that visible minorities report experiencing discrimination at three to four times the rate of white Canadians. This discrimination can be experienced through unequal treatment of people based on the fact they belong to a certain racial or ethnic group (Carr, 2008; Dei, 1995), disparities in school discipline (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011), and a lack of religious accommodation (Berger, 2014) for those students who do not follow the majoritarian religion of the nation. A large survey of 80,000 public school students across six states in the United States has revealed that when students had teachers of the same race as them, they reported feeling more cared for and more interested in their school work (Egalite & Kisida, 2018). However, the demographic divide between teachers and students in Ontario is large. Racial minorities represent 26% of the population, yet make up only 10% of secondary school teachers and 9% of elementary school teachers (Turner Consulting Group, 2014). Finally, international research has found that exposure to workplace violence and harassment negatively affects teachers, which in turn effects the education of students (Gluschkoff et al., 2017). However, the extent to which teachers experience organizational justice (i.e., the extent to which employees are treated with fairness) can mitigate potential negative consequences. Consequently, educational outcome data reveals stark inequalities in the education system, and as such, equity in education remains an area of critical importance to address within the Ontario landscape.

***Ontario's action plan to address key equity issues.*** The priorities of Ontario's education system is to increase student achievement, close gaps in student achievement, and increase public confidence in the education system. The EIE strategy, first released in 2009, seeks to address these priorities by "promoting an inclusive education system in which: all students, parents, and other members of the school community feel safe, comfortable, and accepted; every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning, and; staff and students value diversity and demonstrate

respect for others and are committed to establishing a just and caring society” (Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 10). The Ministry of Ontario (2009a) states that three goals must be pursued to create equitable and inclusive schools. First, schools, boards, and the Ministry of Education have a shared goal of committed leadership. The Ontario Ministry of Education charged itself with providing direction, support, and guidance to the education sector. Second, each school board must develop and implement an EIE policy and corresponding administrative procedures and practices to support positive learning environments for all students. Specifically, the ministry required all school boards to create religious accommodation procedures, anti-discrimination and harassment procedures, inclusive curriculum and assessment practices, and capacity-building for education professionals to accompany EIE policies. Individual schools are responsible for creating and supporting a climate that promotes the tenets of the EIE strategy, including building relationships with their surrounding communities. Schools and boards must monitor the progress of EIE implementation and report on its progress to stakeholders in order to enable accountability and transparency (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a).

Ontario’s EIE strategy was first published in 2009; renewed visions for education were released in 2014 and 2017, which built upon the system’s priorities. Due to the scope of this research study, this article did not include discussions on the development of the provincial strategy. For more information about its development, please see Naimi and Cepin (2015) and Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012). It is noteworthy to mention that both articles presented an argument that inclusive processes were not used in the creation of the provincial strategy in order to ensure “identities, values, beliefs, and experiences of the broader community” (Segeren & Kutsyuruba, 2012). Further, Segeren and Kutsyuruba (2012) call for future research to examine how the strategy is implemented throughout Ontario. Segeren’s (2016) subsequent doctoral work consisted of a content analysis of the provincial policy documents and a case study of three school boards to examine how school leaders enacted the EIE strategy within their schools. In her dissertation, Segeren (2016) reported that a multiple-site case study revealed “the policy approach to equity at the Board was largely symbolic not resulting in substantive change since individual Board staff and school leaders are not equipped with the political clout and resources to address educational inequity” (p. 191). Segeren (2016) calls for future research studies to examine the equity-related activities undertaken by other school boards located across Ontario.

## Knowledge Mobilization Processes to Influence Equity Policy Issues

The concept of knowledge mobilization (KMb) was introduced by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada as a method of turning research into outcomes (e.g., policies developed) and impacts (e.g., movement toward equitable schooling). However, there are a number of steps between knowledge and practical change that require attention in the process of mobilizing knowledge. KMb is a dynamic and iterative process that includes institutionalized structures, knowledge brokering, knowledge co-production, knowledge dissemination, and knowledge transfer in order to increase the use of evidence within policy and practice decision-making contexts (Cherney & Head, 2011; Morton & Nutley, 2011; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007).

***Institutionalized structures.*** Effective systems apply a variety of institutional mechanisms to define shared goals, manage and enable professionals to achieve KMb (Holmes et al., 2017). This may “include formal and informal policies” (Briscoe, Pollock, Campbell, & Carr-Harris, 2015). A few months after the release of the EIE strategy, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the Policy and Program Memorandum (PPM) 119 (2009c), which mandated school boards develop or update EIE policies and administrative procedures.

***Knowledge brokering.*** Effective systems also include “practices such as formalized groups or roles” (Briscoe et al., 2015) to identify people and bring interested parties together in order to help each other develop evidence-informed solutions to the problems in the current environment. These individuals are often referred to as knowledge brokers (Cooper & Shewchuk, 2015). PPM 119 required school boards to create the role of “EIE liaison” to work with the ministry and other boards to share resources, challenges, and effective practices.

***Knowledge co-production.*** Gathering key evidence and knowledge can help promote more proactive policy agendas and can provide decision makers with the information they need to plan policy and implementation (Honig, 2006; Werts & Brewer, 2015). The education sector has adopted a “co-production” orientation in recent years—meaning policy and funding decisions are being influenced by research evidence, in addition to other forms of evidence such as local knowledge of community needs and

values (Schuller & Burns, 2007; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Jacobsen & Young, 2013). School-community partnerships are “a two-way street where the school, families, and the community actively work together, creating networks of shared responsibility for student success. It is a tool that promotes civic well-being and that strengthens the capacity of schools, families, and communities to support young peoples’ full development” (Berg, Melaville, & Blank, 2006, p. 1). Patterson and Manning’s 2007 publication *Engaging Parents in Education: Lessons from Five Parental Information and Resource Centers* presents a conceptual model for school-community partnerships based on “current parent involvement research” and “input from parent involvement practitioners” (p. 10). The model shows schools can facilitate meaningful involvement by including stakeholders (e.g., parents) and educators in creating educational policies; providing capacity-building to help stakeholders and educators bridge the divide and create equitable, productive relationships, and informing stakeholders (about rights, responsibilities, and opportunities) and educators (policies and procedures) so they can support students. PPM 119 required school boards to create or revise policies, procedures, and plans in consultation with key stakeholders (i.e., parents, staff, and students). PPM 119 mandated school boards to continually review and revise EIE policies and include implementation plans with clear goals, performance measures, indicators, and anticipated outcomes.

**Knowledge dissemination.** Dissemination is making knowledge accessible and useable for other members of the system (policymakers, parents, community members, educators, students, etc.) (Atherton, 2006; Ordoñez & Serrat, 2010). PPM 199 required school boards to communicate their EIE policies and procedures to the school community. Progress made in the implementation of the board’s policy was to be reported to the Ministry of Education and school community members on a regular basis.

**Knowledge exchange.** Knowledge exchange combines educational outreach with capacity-building mechanisms to broaden participation with practitioners, students, families, and the community in planning for equity (Mendoza et al., 2007). This may occur through workshops, conferences, mentoring, or other methods of professional development. Enabling and supporting the development of institutional leaders, practitioners, and community partners through intentional capacity-building will help ensure the faithful implementation of the initiative through evidence-informed practices (Schuller & Burns, 2007; Cooper,

Klinger, & McAdie, 2017). The EIE strategy includes a commitment to training teachers, educational leaders, and other stakeholders (parents, community members, students). Ontario-based research has shown that school leaders often do not receive adequate training to deal with equity issues, and they also face covert and overt resistance as they try to navigate micro-politics of managing equity policies, initiatives, and practices on the frontlines of schools (Armstrong, Tuters, & Carrier, 2013; Ryan, 2006, 2010; Tuters & Portelli, 2017; Tuters & Ryan, 2013). For example, Heineke, Ryan, and Tocci (2015) found that while educators reported receiving basic training about EIE policies and procedures, there was no plan to hold training for in-service teachers. Although training can be important to changing practitioner behaviour, many studies have highlighted that professional development on its own is insufficient to changing day-to-day behaviour without additional supports embedded in organizational structures (Levin, Cooper, Arjomand, & Thompson, 2011).

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study explores school board efforts in using KMb as a tool for equity policy engagement using five dimensions: structures, brokering, co-production, dissemination, and exchange (Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework to analyze KMB efforts in relation to EIE policies and procedures

The conceptual framework guided the development of research questions, data collection, and analyses.

## Research Questions

Each dimension of the conceptual framework is linked to more specific research questions (Table 1) that we wanted to explore in relation to the policies collected from the 72 Ontario district school boards.

**Table 1.** Research questions as linked to conceptual framework (adapted from Shewchuk, 2014)

Major Area of CF	Research Question
Structures	1. What is the prominence of EIE policies and procedures across the 72 district school boards in Ontario <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What other policies and procedures exist in relation to key equity issues?</li> </ul>
Brokering	2. What brokering roles are provided to improve KMB efforts around equity?
Co-production	3. How is data use incorporated into EIE policies to address equity issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What data are collected to monitor progress and support decision making?</li> </ul>
	4. With whom are district school boards partnering in relation to equity policies and initiatives?
Dissemination	5. How is information on EIE initiatives shared with educational stakeholders?
Exchange	6. What commitment exists to provide educational outreach and capacity building for education stakeholders (i.e., teachers, leaders, students, parents, community members) in regards to equity?

## Method

Jorge Costa (1995), in a systematic review of environmental scanning, maintains that a majority of authors “agree that the main functions of environmental scanning are to: learn about events and trends in external environments; establish relationships between them; make sense of the data; [and] extract the main implications for decision making and strategy development” (p. 5). In addition, data from environmental scans can help the

ministry and the province: “capitalize early on opportunities;...provides an early signal of impending problems;... sensitizes an organization to changing needs;...provides objective information about the environment;...provides intellectual stimulation to strategists in their decision making;...[and] improves the image of the organization with its public by showing that it is sensitive to its environment and responsive to it” (p. 5). This policy scan consisted of two iterative steps: a Web search and a content analysis. First, school district websites were scanned for EIE policies and procedures. During the scan, we realized boards had a multitude of other documents related to key equity issues (such as those discussed in the literature review). In order to reflect a more holistic view of the environment, research assistants extracted information concerning policies and administrative procedures if they were related to the EIE strategy or were applicable to an equity topic discussed in the literature review. A francophone research assistant conducted scanning and analysis of French-language school boards, and an anglophone research assistant conducted scanning and analysis of English-language school boards. Figure 2 shows the flow scheme for the environmental scan.

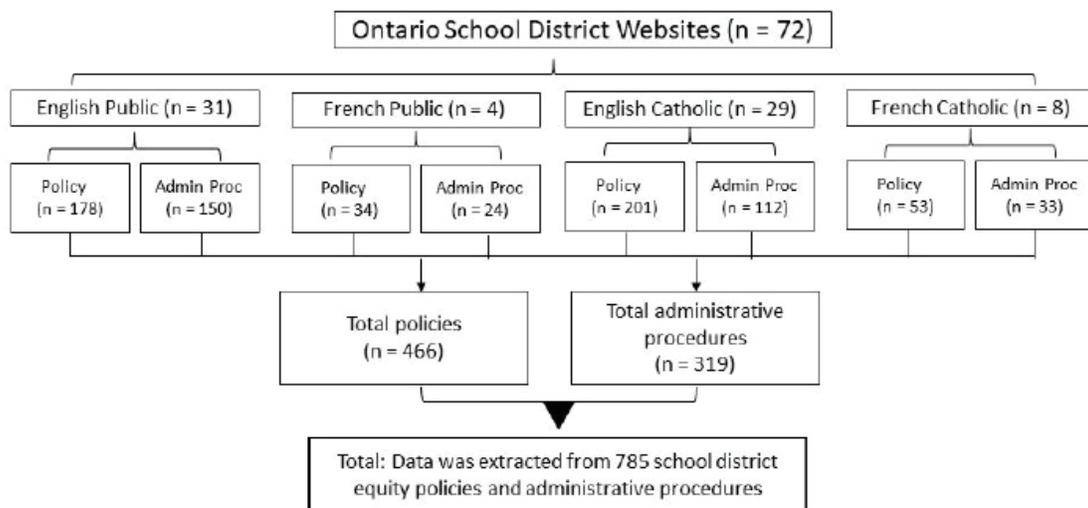


Figure 2. Flow scheme of the environmental scan of Ontario district school boards

A data tool (Excel spreadsheet) was developed and used to create an inventory of school board policies that focus on equity. The tool included two levels of analysis. First, all policies and administrative procedures were organized by equity topic to determine the

prominence of documents across school boards. Each policy as described in the following format: title, year, type, and reference. Second, EIE policies and procedures were further disaggregated by research questions to conduct further descriptive analyses. The final step of the policy scan was to upload EIE policies and administrative procedures into NVivo to conduct a content analysis of the documents in relation to codes, themes, and overarching patterns (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The research team coded the documents according to the five categories of the conceptual framework (i.e., structures, brokering, co-production, dissemination, and exchange). We did not conduct an analysis of the quality of the EIE policies and administrative procedures, as we know of no validated tool for this purpose.

### **Limitations**

This scan presents a “snapshot” of existing policies and procedures as listed on school board websites. Therefore, it may fail to represent the entirety of policies and procedures available across school boards if these documents were not available online during the period of data collection for this study. In addition, we recognize that policies, if not implemented, do not necessarily represent practice on the front lines in school boards (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987) and that policies and practices are often loosely coupled (Weick, 1976). We recognize and suggest that further in-depth qualitative methods (such as case studies of exemplary policies, school boards, and initiatives) are necessary to further explore the range and influence of these many policies on teachers, principals, students, and communities across Ontario district school boards.

## **Findings**

This section provides descriptive statistics in relation to the conceptual framework and highlights a variety of regional school board EIE policies and initiatives to show how school boards are operating under changing social and political conditions.

## Structures

Ontario has a large number ( $N = 785$ ) policies and administrative procedures in place related to the key equity areas as highlighted in the literature review. Figure 3<sup>1</sup> shows the frequency of school boards with each type of policy or administrative procedure.

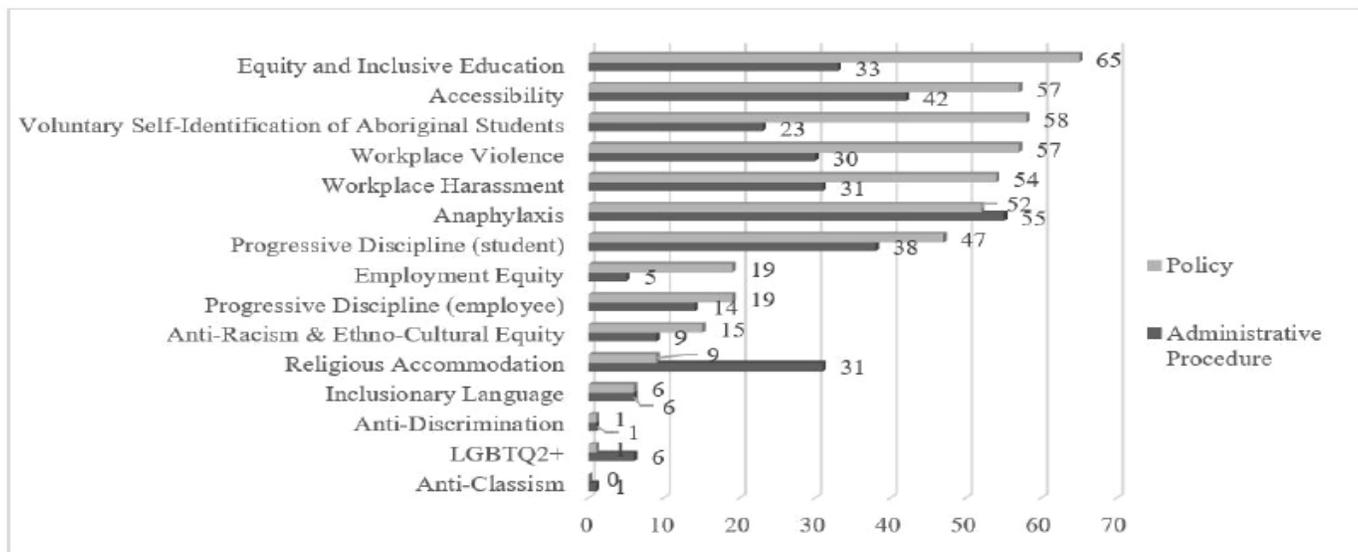


Figure 3. School board policies and administrative procedures related to different equity issues

The Ontario Ministry of Education has reported that all school boards have EIE policies and religious accommodation procedures in place (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). Our findings agree with the Ministry of Education's report that all 72<sup>2</sup> school boards (100%) had some combination of publicly available policies and administrative procedures relating to equity and inclusive education. However, we only found 38 school boards with a policy or administrative procedure relating to religious accommodation on

1 School boards may have had both policies and procedures, a policy and no accompanying procedure, or vice versa. Therefore, the counts for policies and procedures listed in Figure 3 may not match the counts of school boards discussed within the findings section.

2 Halton District School Board had its Equity and Inclusive Education policy under review, so the analysis utilized the draft policy posted to the board's website. The Bruce-Grey Catholic School Board website indicated that an equity policy exists; however, a password is required to access the document, so we were unable to analyze the contents of the policy. For a full list of the school boards and their websites, see the Appendix.

their websites. Many issues remain largely under-represented across school districts. Out of 785 policies and procedures, anti-racism and ethno-cultural equity ( $N = 24$ ) represented 3.05% of documents, inclusionary language ( $N = 12$ ) represented 1.52% of documents, and documents detailing anti-discrimination protections for LGBTQ2+ people ( $N = 7$ ) represented under 1% (0.89%), and only one administrative procedure directly addressed classism and socio-economic equity procedure. School boards had an average of 10.7 equity policies and administrative procedures ( $SD = 3.16$ ). Figure 4 shows a histogram of the number of equity policies and procedures per board.

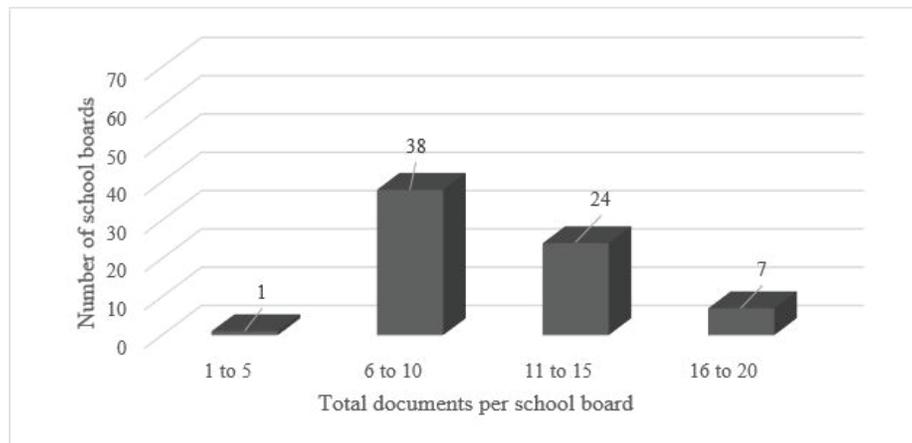


Figure 4. Combined totals of equity policies and procedures per school board

Thirty-eight school boards (54%) have between 6 and 10 equity policies and procedures in place, and a third ( $N = 24$ ) have between 11 and 15 policies and procedures in place. Ten percent of districts ( $N = 7$ ) have between 16 and 20 policies in place.

## Brokering

The EIE strategy reports that *all* school boards have indicated a contact person (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a, p. 21). However, only 51% ( $N = 37$ ) of school boards included information about the EIE liaison within their policies or administrative procedures. School board websites often did not provide names and contact information for these roles. Nineteen (25%) school boards made this information available, including contact information.

## Co-production

Community engagement requires regular partnership with educational stakeholders. Seventy-four percent ( $N = 53$ ) of boards reported that they would collaborate with diverse community partners to create and sustain a positive school environment and to enrich the total educational and career experiences of staff, students, and volunteers. The most common community partners listed in school boards were Catholic community partners within Catholic school boards (40%), business groups (36%), students (29%), and marginalized/under-represented groups (28%). Data use was mostly absent from school district equity policies, but it was mentioned in relation to three areas: school climate surveys, databases to collect identity categories of communities through self-identification, and reports to the Ministry of Education (Figure 5).

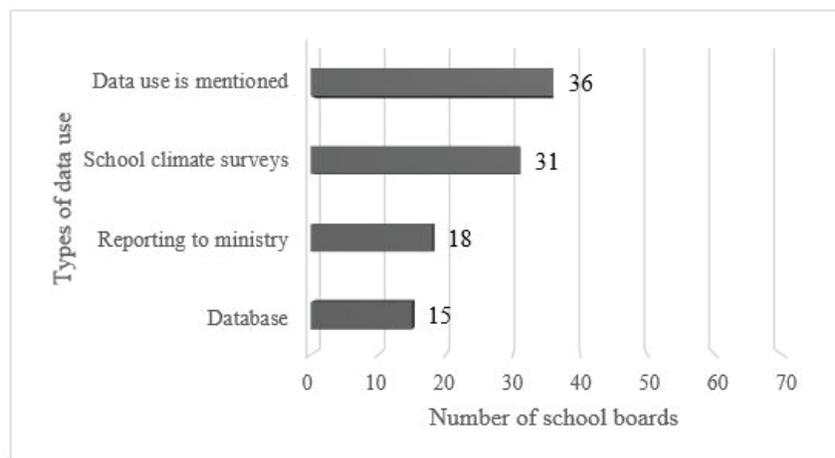


Figure 5. Types of data use mentioned in EIE policies and administrative procedures

Fifty percent ( $N = 36$ ) of boards mentioned data use in some way throughout EIE policies and administrative procedures. Forty-three percent ( $N = 31$ ) of school boards stated they would utilize climate surveys to assess matters of equity and inclusion. All Ontario school boards are required to conduct school climate surveys of students, school staff, and parents at least once every two years. These surveys aim to assess perceptions of safety from students, parents, and school staff, which in turn allows schools to make informed planning decisions about the effectiveness of their programs to help prevent bullying and promote safe, inclusive schools on an ongoing basis. Twenty-five percent

( $N = 18$ ) of boards stated that the director was responsible for writing an annual report of progress of implementing the equity policies. These reports were sent to the board of trustees and the Ministry of Education. Twenty-one percent ( $N = 15$ ) of boards stated that they would develop a “database of information that establishes the diversity of communities based on self-identification” (Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario, 2011, p. 5). No information was provided on how the boards would utilize the database to inform their decision making.

## Dissemination

Policies and information on equity were publicly available in accessible formats for diverse stakeholders; 94% ( $N = 68$ ) of board policies stated that information would be shared with key stakeholders (parents, students, employees, and other community members). School boards reported they would passively share information via the board’s website, reports, school newsletters, student agendas, student handbooks, and press releases. Figure 6 shows the online dissemination mechanisms of school boards in relation to their equity efforts.

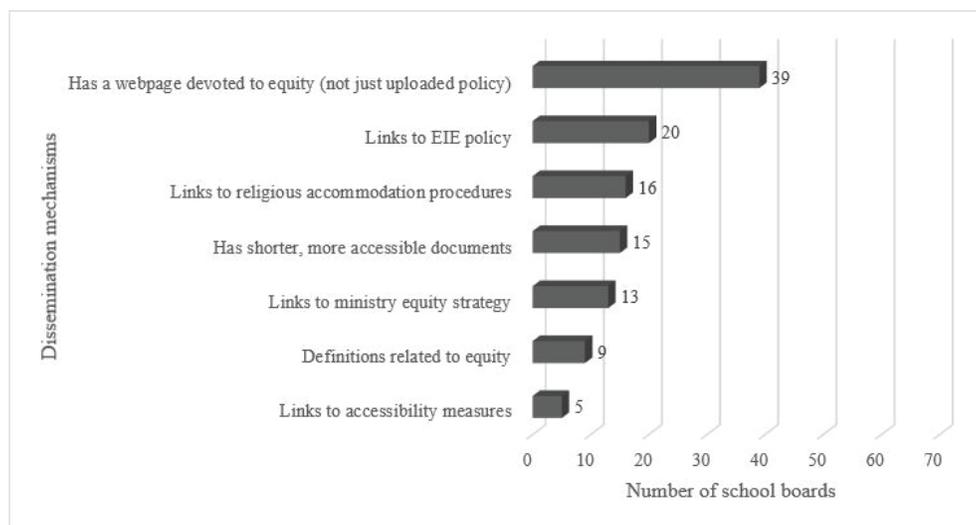


Figure 6. Online dissemination mechanisms of district school boards in relation to equity efforts

Fifty-four percent ( $N = 39$ ) of school districts had full webpages devoted to equity. Though not prevalent, 20% ( $N = 15$ ) of districts did have shorter equity documents available for communities and parents.

## **Exchange**

Capacity-building includes a commitment to training teachers, educational leaders, and other educational stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, and community members) through events and initiatives. Ninety-seven percent ( $N = 70$ ) of board policies report that school employees (i.e., administrators and teachers) do receive training on equity issues. School boards reported that employee training should do the following:

- Provide opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour needed to identify and eliminate discriminatory biases and systemic barriers under the Ontario Human Rights Code (Avon Maitland District School Board, 2015, p. 2).
- Include information on cross-cultural differences and promote a deeper understanding of exceptionalities and of ways to mitigate discipline in light of its effect on students with disabilities (Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board, 2010, p. 2).
- Involve community groups in the development and implementation of an in-service program and other staff development programs (York Region District School Board, 2013, p. 13).

Some school boards even had specific programs for staff in relation to equity. The Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board's Focusing Our Equity Lens Certificate Program addresses the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion for everyone in school and workplace environments:

The Program is designed for all staff, particularly for educators, administrators and support staff, who share the goal of fostering more equitable schools and classrooms. Sessions lead participants through experiential learning activities and guided self-reflection and analysis on the path to creating equitable and inclusive learning and working environments. Participants will be actively encouraged to question their own beliefs and practices, through activities that can be used in

the classroom with students or with staff. (Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, 2016, p. 16)

In addition to training outlined for school employees, 31% of school boards reported that school administrators and hiring managers would receive special training to “facilitate equitable recruitment and hiring practices to reflect Ontario’s diverse society” (Bluewater District School Board, 2010, p. 3). Eighty-nine percent ( $N = 64$ ) of policies also included students as persons who will receive training on equity issues. While the policies provided little information on what the training for students would include, 20% ( $N = 15$ ) of school boards listed educational outreach initiatives on their websites (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Equity educational outreach initiatives in Ontario district school boards

Type of Event	School Board	Example
Student workshops and conferences	Hastings and Prince Edward County	Poverty Challenge
	Thames Valley	Equity and Inclusive Education Parent and Community Workshop
	Avon Maitland	Learning for All Parent Workshop—Celebrating Diversity
Student workshops and conferences	Greater Essex	Aboriginal Youth Leadership Program
	Durham Region and Hamilton Wentworth Catholic	Change your Future Program for Minority Youth
	Hastings and Prince Edward County	Best Buddies Support Program Ambassadors for Inclusion
Community workshops and consultations	Thames Valley	Equity and Inclusive Education Parent and Community Workshop
	Avon Maitland	Learning for All Parent Workshop—Celebrating Diversity
Educational support programs	Greater Essex	Aboriginal Youth Leadership Program
	Durham Region and Hamilton Wentworth Catholic	Change your Future Program for Minority Youth
	Hastings and Prince Edward County	Best Buddies Support Program Ambassadors for Inclusion

Type of Event	School Board	Example
Student leadership training	Toronto and l'Est de l'Ontario and Catholique de l'Est Ontarien	Student Leadership Training
School-based equity events	Halton Catholic	Black History Awareness Day
	Simcoe County	Roots of Empathy Baby Celebration International Day of Pink
	Simcoe County and Hastings and Prince Edward County	
	Catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est	Proud and Mixed: A celebration of Aboriginal and Metis history and culture
Student clubs	Simcoe County	Gay-Straight Alliances Social Justice Clubs Rainbows/Spectrum Support Groups Equity Teams
	Durham Region	Students Ally for Equity (S.A.F.E.)

The most popular events and initiatives were student workshops and conferences, community workshops and consultations, educational support programs, student leadership training, school-based equity events, and student clubs. We recognize that far more activities are occurring in schools than are represented on school websites; however, these data do provide initial examples of the types of equity activities available in some districts. There was no mention of parents or community members in relation to training, to their involvement in training, or to their being a target audience of equity programs or training.

## Discussion

This study makes an important contribution because it is the first to provide an analysis of the coverage of equity issues across Ontario district school boards. Policies show what equity issues school boards are addressing through at least a rhetorical commitment to particular issues (at the minimum) but are often accompanied with resources and training to address those issues. Data from our study show many policies and activities targeting

a wide range of equity topics, a positive finding that puts equity firmly on the agenda in school districts across Ontario. Moreover, although we cannot assume that everything a policy states is occurring on the front lines, Ontario should be proud of this achievement, especially because the development of equity policies across the province includes stakeholder consultation and, to some extent, represents co-produced products from teachers, parents, community members, trustees, and school leaders in each district. We offer three suggestions for continued improvement.

**1. In order for school boards to mobilize knowledge effectively, it is imperative that institutional structures address how policies are housed, communicated, disseminated, and utilized by educational leaders and teachers.**

Our scan revealed an overwhelming number ( $N = 785$ ) of equity policies within each district school board, which, while positive in many respects, also poses tangible challenges for educational leaders' and practitioners' ability to be familiar with the policy lexicon of their district. Researchers have shown that often front-line practitioners are disconnected from policies in various ways (Heineke, Ryan, & Tocci, 2015). We argue that a system to streamline these documents into more accessible formats might be necessary if educational leaders and practitioners are to be versed in the various equity policies that exist within their school board.

**2. Active knowledge brokering is needed across district school boards to inform development of equity initiatives for under-represented groups.**

There can be no doubt that equity has been prioritized in the province's policy landscape. Though we do not wish to diminish this accomplishment at the policy level, there is a mismatch between equity topics identified in the literature as areas where Ontario and schools are most inequitable—race (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007), ethnicity (Carr, 2008), religious affiliation (Berger, 2014), socio-economic status (Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007), sexual orientation (Taylor et al., 2011), and gender identity (Airton, 2018)—and policy coverage of those areas. It also might mean that teachers and educational leaders are not receiving the guidance they need (in the form of concrete policies and administrative procedure in conjunction with training) to address some of the most challenging issues arising from diversity in their classrooms and schools. Existing policies on these under-represented issues can be shared by EIE liaisons across school

districts so that each district can create policies and school improvement plans in these key equity areas.

**3. Co-production of knowledge is critical to improvement planning (which includes dissemination and knowledge exchange).**

While policies remain an important foundation to build on, equity efforts across the school system in Ontario must go far beyond the policy level and include capacity-building in conjunction with data collection and reporting mechanisms that can inform decision making at school district and provincial levels. Only 50% of district school boards mentioned monitoring EIE initiatives for improvement planning within their policies—most often in relation to school climate surveys and reports to the ministry. Data use needs to be envisioned as a powerful tool for teachers and leaders to use in order to address equity issues in their unique contexts, and we also need to recognize that policies, leadership, community involvement, and action plans will differ based upon the topic. It can be easy to essentialize social justice issues and talk about them in aggregate: a social justice leader or a social justice school. However, as McKenzie et al. (2008) note:

The perfect social justice leader or the perfect social justice school does not exist. A leader may be strong in some aspects of social justice, such as including students with disabilities, but weak in addressing the needs of students who are English-language learners inclusively. Nevertheless, our goal in preparing leaders for social justice is that they become equally “expert” across student differences, that is, while striving toward this goal, a leader’s area of expertise may be uneven. What we are aiming for is that the leaders realize their unevenness in the application of social justice and strive to close the gap between the ideal and the application. (p. 114)

We argue the same point for schools—we need to develop instruments and monitoring systems that will allow us to have more fine-grain information about different equity issues in various schools, and how they might best be addressed. Therefore, we draw on the work of Carr (2008), Corburn and Cohen (2012), Datnow and Park (2015), and Greenhalgh, Robert, Bate, Macfarlane, and Kyriakidou (2004) to develop a framework (Figure 7) to assess equity initiatives to develop policy and drive practice.

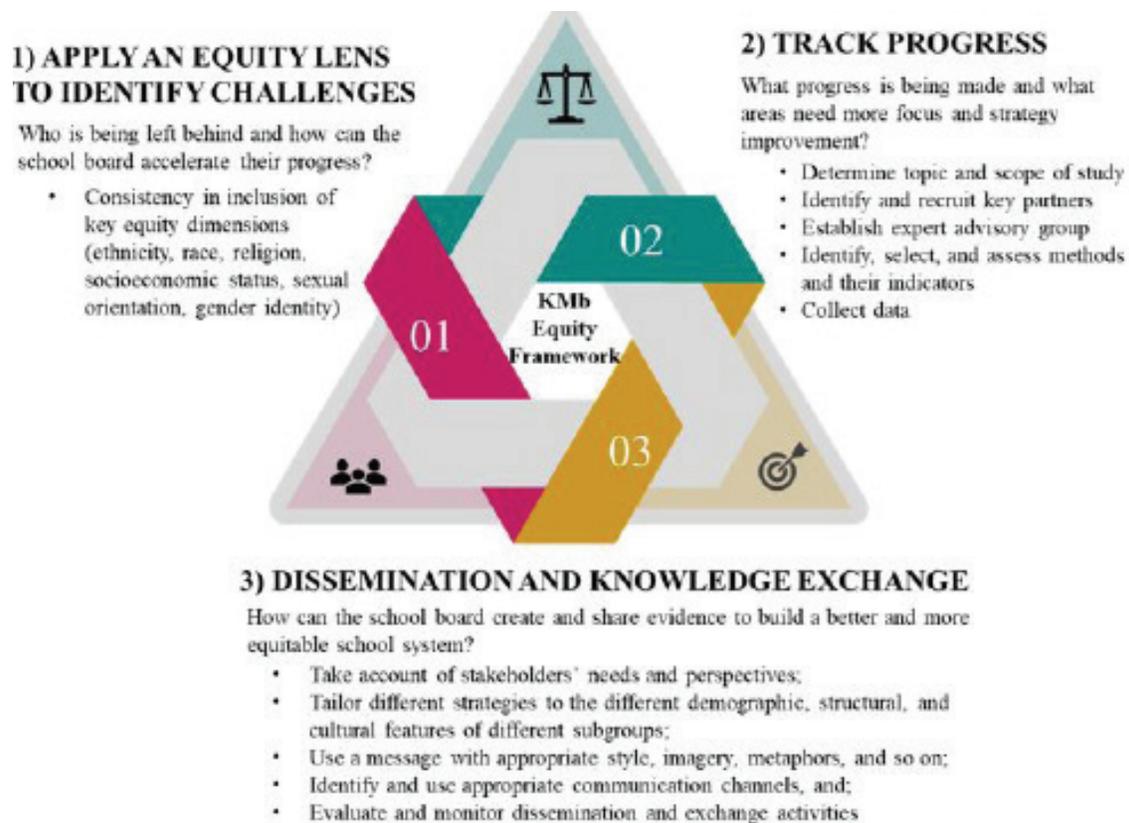


Figure 7. Framework to assess equity initiatives to develop policy and drive practice

We recommend that schools and districts apply an equity lens to identify challenges, track the progress of equity initiatives, and share findings with key education stakeholders through dissemination and knowledge exchange strategies.

### Apply an Equity Lens to Identify Challenges

We agree with Datnow and Park (2015), Datnow, Choi, Park, and John (2018), and Carr (2008) that data-informed decision making is critical to tracking progress and gauging success, but school boards must use data cautiously in order to avoid increasing inequity through reifying prejudice and stereotypes (Datnow & Park, 2015). Datnow and Park (2015) highlight that “data use provides a lever for school improvement, but if the process isn’t implemented effectively, it won’t deliver” (p. 49). Datnow and colleagues (2018)

further highlight this point by presenting a vignette of a principal who lacked the tools and strategies to facilitate data-driven decision making to improve student performance. During the first staff meeting of the year, the principal displayed data from the previous year's large-scale assessment. The graphs revealed "the majority of English language learners and low-income students [were] performing below grade level" (pp. 49–50). The principal was concerned that some teachers were blaming students and their families for the low scores but unsure of how to discuss these data with her staff, she decided to quickly move onto the next agenda item. Afterwards, she realized that she had missed an opportunity to

address some teachers' deep-seated beliefs about race, social class, and student achievement. . . . This wasn't simply about looking at data patterns but about examining the school's commitment to equity. It was about articulating not just the practice of data use—that is, how staff members analyze data and the data they look at—but also the purpose: How does this process serve school improvement goals? (pp. 49–50)

As such, "data use also needs an equity lens" (Datnow et al., 2018, p. 149) which frames research in relation to who (using key equity dimensions: ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity) is being left behind and how the school board can accelerate their progress. Other research (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; Kumpulainen & Lankinen, 2016) has suggested that schools that have improved achievement for all students keep equity at the core of all decisions and everything they do.

**Track progress.** The first step in tracking the progress of an equity initiative is to identify the topic and scope (through explicit operational goals and action plans) of the equity area being analyzed (Carr, 2008; Datnow & Park, 2015). School boards should have operational goals for each of the eight EIE guiding principles (strategic policy, leadership, curriculum, extra-curricular, service learning, community involvement, training, and evaluation) set by the Ontario Ministry of Education. In addition, key partners (research team and education stakeholders) should be identified and recruited (Corburn & Cohen, 2012). The research team should have sufficient knowledge in community engaged research, evaluation, and the specific equity topic being addressed. An expert

advisory group should be established with key education stakeholders such as teachers, parents, students, and community partners (Corburn & Cohen, 2012). In consultation with the research team and expert advisory group, the school board should identify, select, and assess methods and their indicators for their sensitivity to equity (Corburn & Cohen, 2012). Corburn and Cohen (2012) put forth that “drafting, measuring, tracking and reporting indicators can be viewed as not as a technical process for experts alone, but rather as an opportunity to develop new participatory science policy making, or what we call governance” (p. 2). Carr (2008) suggests tracking progress across eight areas: (1) inclusion, (2) representation, (3) decision-making process, (4) communication, (5) funding, (6) data collection processes, (7) accountability, and (8) monitoring/review. We propose that schools and districts would collect data for each of Carr’s eight areas in relation to each operational goal.

***Dissemination and knowledge exchange.*** These data would be used by the research team and expert working group to create KMB plans that would include passive (e.g., posting updated policies and procedures to websites and sending newsletters home with students) and active (e.g., targeted interventions) strategies for sharing information to all education stakeholders (parents, students, teachers, community members, policymakers, and researchers). Strategies should “take account of stakeholder needs and perspectives; be tailored to the different demographic, structural, and cultural features of different subgroups; use messages with appropriate style, imagery, metaphors, and so on; identify and use appropriate communication channels, and; evaluate and monitor dissemination activities” (Greenhalgh et al., 2004, p. 603). Keeping education stakeholders updated with the most current information about policies and procedures is particularly important in relation to equity because parents and communities often need to act in relation to a particular equity area (such as religious accommodations), and because of this, current information about processes should be shared through newsletters and school board websites. In Malik’s (2016) dissertation of the knowledge mobilization efforts of education organizations in Ontario, she argues that “in order to reach user audiences, efforts need to extend beyond simply posting information of a website. Often, target audiences may not be aware that the website exists, they may not access the websites, and if accessed, mediation activities are needed in order to understand and apply the use of the research findings” (p. 25). Therefore, the expert working group and research team should work

together to create resources, activities, and training materials to provide direction and build capacity for teachers, educational leaders, students, parents, and community partners in relation to equity.

## **Conclusion**

Canada—and Ontario, in particular—is proud to be characterized by and celebrated for diversity. While the province is ahead of the curve in many ways with the EIE strategy, it is incumbent upon leaders in the ministry, district school boards, and communities to ensure they are aware of, and focused on addressing the stark disparities in our system among different groups in the province. The education system cannot address what it does not acknowledge. Therefore continued research that tackles known data gaps and under-researched equity issues, and research that examines the effects of the EIE policy and program responses are needed help to identify effective solutions. Ontario already has one of the best school systems in the world, and with continued vigilance, resources, and capacity-building efforts in relation to equity issues, we have no doubt that the province will continue to narrow the achievement and learning-opportunity gaps that exist for “invisible” populations. Admitting a system’s weaknesses takes courage and the determination to confront those shortcomings head-on. The Ontario system is full of passionate educators and leaders working tirelessly on behalf of their students, and with their talent and commitment, we can continue to make the schools more equitable for all Canadian citizens regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

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## Appendix: List of School Districts

District School Board	Website
Algoma	<a href="http://www.adsb.on.ca">http://www.adsb.on.ca</a>
Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic	<a href="http://schools.alcdsb.on.ca">http://schools.alcdsb.on.ca</a>
Avon Maitland	<a href="https://yourschools.ca">https://yourschools.ca</a>
Bluewater	<a href="http://www.bwdsb.on.ca">http://www.bwdsb.on.ca</a>
Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk Catholic	<a href="http://www.bhncdsb.ca">http://www.bhncdsb.ca</a>
Bruce-Grey Catholic	<a href="http://www.bgcdsb.org">http://www.bgcdsb.org</a>
Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est	<a href="https://www.ecolecatholique.ca">https://www.ecolecatholique.ca</a>
Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario	<a href="http://www.cepeo.on.ca">http://www.cepeo.on.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire catholique de district des Grandes Rivières	<a href="https://www.cscdgr.education/">https://www.cscdgr.education/</a>
Conseil scolaire catholique du Nouvel-Ontario	<a href="https://www.nouvelon.ca">https://www.nouvelon.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire catholique Franco-Nord	<a href="https://www.franco-nord.ca">https://www.franco-nord.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire catholique Providence	<a href="http://www.cscprovidence.ca">www.cscprovidence.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire catholique MonAvenir	<a href="https://www.cscmonavenir.ca">https://www.cscmonavenir.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l'Est Ontarien	<a href="https://csdceo.ca">https://csdceo.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Aurores boréales	<a href="https://www.csdcab.on.ca">https://www.csdcab.on.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire du district du Grand Nord de l'Ontario	<a href="http://www.cspgno.ca">www.cspgno.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire public de district du Nord-Est de l'Ontario	<a href="http://www.cspne.ca">http://www.cspne.ca</a>
Conseil scolaire Viamonde	<a href="https://csviamonde.ca">https://csviamonde.ca</a>
Dufferin-Peel Catholic	<a href="http://www.dpcdsb.org">http://www.dpcdsb.org</a>
Durham	<a href="https://www.intranet.durham.edu.on.ca">https://www.intranet.durham.edu.on.ca</a>
Durham Catholic	<a href="http://dcdsb.ca">http://dcdsb.ca</a>
Eastern Ontario Catholic	<a href="http://www.cdsbeo.on.ca">http://www.cdsbeo.on.ca</a>
Grand Erie	<a href="http://www.granderie.ca">http://www.granderie.ca</a>
Greater Essex County	<a href="https://www.publicboard.ca">https://www.publicboard.ca</a>
Halton	<a href="https://www.hdsb.ca">https://www.hdsb.ca</a>
Halton Catholic	<a href="http://www.hcdsb.org">http://www.hcdsb.org</a>
Hamilton-Wentworth	<a href="http://www.hwdsb.on.ca">http://www.hwdsb.on.ca</a>

District School Board	Website
Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic	<a href="https://www.hwcdsb.ca">https://www.hwcdsb.ca</a>
Hastings and Prince Edward County	<a href="http://www.hpedsb.on.ca">http://www.hpedsb.on.ca</a>
Huron-Perth Catholic	<a href="http://www.huronperthcatholic.ca">www.huronperthcatholic.ca</a>
Huron-Superior Catholic	<a href="http://www.hscdsb.on.ca">www.hscdsb.on.ca</a>
Kawartha Pine Ridge	<a href="http://www.kprschools.ca">www.kprschools.ca</a>
Keewatin-Patricia	<a href="http://www.kpdsb.on.ca">http://www.kpdsb.on.ca</a>
Kenora Catholic	<a href="http://www.kcdsb.on.ca">http://www.kcdsb.on.ca</a>
Lakehead	<a href="https://www.lakeheadschoools.ca">https://www.lakeheadschoools.ca</a>
Lambton Kent	<a href="http://www.lkdsb.net">http://www.lkdsb.net</a>
Limestone	<a href="https://www.limestone.on.ca">https://www.limestone.on.ca</a>
London Catholic	<a href="http://www.ldcsb.on.ca">http://www.ldcsb.on.ca</a>
Near North	<a href="https://www.nearnorthschools.ca">https://www.nearnorthschools.ca</a>
Niagara	<a href="https://www.dsbn.org">https://www.dsbn.org</a>
Niagara Catholic	<a href="http://www.niagaracatholic.ca">http://www.niagaracatholic.ca</a>
Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic	<a href="http://www.npsc.ca">http://www.npsc.ca</a>
Northeastern Catholic	<a href="http://www.ncdsb.on.ca">http://www.ncdsb.on.ca</a>
Northwest Catholic	<a href="https://www.tncdsb.on.ca">https://www.tncdsb.on.ca</a>
Ontario North East	<a href="http://www.dsb1.edu.on.ca">http://www.dsb1.edu.on.ca</a>
Ottawa -Carleton	<a href="http://www.ocdsb.ca">http://www.ocdsb.ca</a>
Ottawa Catholic	<a href="http://www.ocsb.ca">http://www.ocsb.ca</a>
P.V.N.C Catholic	<a href="http://www.pvnccdsb.on.ca">http://www.pvnccdsb.on.ca</a>
Peel	<a href="http://www.peelschools.org">http://www.peelschools.org</a>
Rainbow	<a href="http://www.rainbowschools.ca">http://www.rainbowschools.ca</a>
Rainy River	<a href="https://www.rrdsb.com">https://www.rrdsb.com</a>
Renfrew Catholic	<a href="http://rccdsb.edu.on.ca">http://rccdsb.edu.on.ca</a>
Renfrew County	<a href="https://www.rcdsb.on.ca">https://www.rcdsb.on.ca</a>
Simcoe County	<a href="https://www.scdsb.on.ca">https://www.scdsb.on.ca</a>
Simcoe Muskoka Catholic	<a href="http://www.smcdsb.on.ca">http://www.smcdsb.on.ca</a>
St. Clair Catholic	<a href="http://www.st-clair.net">http://www.st-clair.net</a>
Sudbury Catholic	<a href="http://www.scdsb.edu.on.ca">http://www.scdsb.edu.on.ca</a>
Superior North Catholic	<a href="http://sncdsb.on.ca">http://sncdsb.on.ca</a>
Superior-Greenstone	<a href="http://www.sgdsb.on.ca">http://www.sgdsb.on.ca</a>
Thames Valley	<a href="http://www.tvdsb.ca">http://www.tvdsb.ca</a>
Thunder Bay Catholic	<a href="https://www.tbcschools.ca">https://www.tbcschools.ca</a>
Toronto	<a href="http://www.tdsb.on.ca">http://www.tdsb.on.ca</a>

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District School Board	Website
Toronto Catholic	<a href="http://www.tcdsb.org">http://www.tcdsb.org</a>
Trillium Lakelands	<a href="http://tldsb.ca">http://tldsb.ca</a>
Upper Canada	<a href="http://www.ucdsb.on.ca">http://www.ucdsb.on.ca</a>
Upper Grand	<a href="https://www.ugdsb.ca">https://www.ugdsb.ca</a>
Waterloo	<a href="https://www.wrdsb.ca">https://www.wrdsb.ca</a>
Waterloo Catholic	<a href="https://www.wcdsb.ca">https://www.wcdsb.ca</a>
Wellington Catholic	<a href="http://www.wellingtoncssb.edu.on.ca">http://www.wellingtoncssb.edu.on.ca</a>
Windsor-Essex Catholic	<a href="http://www.wecdsb.on.ca">http://www.wecdsb.on.ca</a>
York Catholic	<a href="http://www.ycdsb.ca">http://www.ycdsb.ca</a>
York Region	<a href="http://www.yrdsb.edu.on.ca">http://www.yrdsb.edu.on.ca</a>