

## QUICK FACTS

# Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy

*The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy is designed to support an education system where all students in our publicly funded schools have the opportunity to achieve their highest potential.*

## Why an Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy?

Publicly funded education is a cornerstone of our democratic society. Ontarians share a belief in the need to develop students as learners and prepare them for their role in society as engaged, productive and responsible citizens. Yet, some groups of students – such as recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys, and students with special education needs are just some of the groups that may be at risk of lower achievement. In *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education*, the Ontario Ministry of Education outlined its plan to create the best publicly funded education system in the world. The paper identified three core priorities:

1. High levels of student achievement;
2. Reduced gaps in student achievement;
3. Increased public confidence in publicly funded education.

An equitable, inclusive education system is fundamental to achieving these priorities and is recognized internationally as critical to delivering a high-quality education for all learners (UNESCO, 2008). Thus, equity and excellence go hand in hand. Equitable, inclusive education is also central to creating a cohesive society and a strong economy that will secure Ontario's future prosperity.

## Why now?

Canadians embrace multiculturalism, human rights, and diversity as fundamental values. However, there are ongoing incidents of discrimination in our society that require our continuing attention. Homophobia has risen to the forefront of discussion. Cyberbullying and hate propaganda on the Internet were not issues ten years ago but now are major concerns for parents and students. Racism, religious intolerance, homophobia and gender-based violence are still evident in our communities and – unfortunately – in our schools. Rejection, exclusion or estrangement are associated with behaviour problems in the classroom, lower interest in school, lower student achievement and higher dropout rates.

Ontario is Canada's most diverse province and must find solutions to these concerns. We must also address the needs of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society by ensuring that our policies evolve with changing societal needs.

To date only forty-three of Ontario's seventy-two school boards report that they currently have some form of equity policy in place. Although there are increasing numbers of students from various faith communities in our schools, only twelve boards report that they have policies or guidelines relating to religious accommodation, and only three of those could be considered comprehensive. We need to strive to achieve a truly equitable and inclusive publicly funded education system, in keeping with our values of human rights and social justice.

## VISION

We envision an inclusive education system in Ontario in which:

- all students, parents and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected;
- every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.

To achieve an equitable and inclusive school climate, school boards and schools will strive to ensure that all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable and accepted. We want all staff and students to value diversity and to demonstrate respect for others and a commitment to establishing a just, caring society.

## What will the Strategy accomplish?

The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy builds on successful government, ministry, school board and school initiatives that have already helped Ontario become a more fair and equitable society.

In order to achieve equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools, we must pursue the following three goals:

1. **Shared and committed leadership** by the ministry, boards and schools will play a critical role in eliminating discrimination through the identification and removal of bias and barriers;
2. **Equity and inclusive education policies and practices** will support positive learning environments so that all students can feel engaged in and empowered by what they are learning; supported by the teachers and staff from whom they are learning; and welcome in the environment in which they are learning;
3. **Accountability and transparency** will be demonstrated through the use of clear measures of success and through communication to the public of our progress towards achieving equity for all students.

## Who is involved?

The resulting equity and inclusive education strategy calls for:

- the ministry to provide direction, support and guidance to the education sector, so that every student has a positive learning environment in which to achieve his or her highest potential;
- each school board to develop and implement an equity and inclusive education policy and guidelines for the board and its schools; and
- each school to create and support a positive school climate that fosters and promotes equity, inclusive education and diversity.

## How is the Strategy being implemented?

We recognize that embedding this Strategy into policies, programs and practices will take time, and involve phased-in implementation. The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy is being implemented over the next four years beginning the 2008/09 school year through to the 2011/12 school year.

The Strategy outlines a series of annual action items that provide a clear direction for the Ontario education community to identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers to student achievement and celebrate diversity and respect for all in our schools. Although schools and boards may be at different places when it comes to equity and inclusive education policy and program development, it is our expectation that all schools and boards will demonstrate continuous progress towards meeting the needs of our diverse student population and our ever-changing society. By taking these actions, Ontario will be a global leader in building and sustaining an equitable and inclusive education system.

### WHAT IS...

**DIVERSITY:** The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation and socio-economic status.

**EQUITY:** A condition or state of fair, inclusive and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences.

**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:** Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected.

### WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

Posted on the EDU website (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.html>)