



Student Equity Inventory 2009: Development, Administration, Findings, & Next Steps

Report presented to the Committee of the Whole,
February 8, 2010

Student Equity Inventory, 2009 Development, Administration, Findings, and Next Steps

Background

Equity matters. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) is committed to providing relevant and supportive programming to meet the needs of all learners, to ensure that every student reaches his/her full potential. Over the past decade, the board has developed a series of policies, and has provided related staff development, in support of equity in the areas of racism, classism, sexual orientation and gender identity. Many stakeholders have been involved in the development and implementation of these policies. To further inform this important work, the HWDSB has decided to engage our most central stakeholder group, our students.

To determine the degree to which students perceive their school environments to be welcoming and inclusive for all, and to gather their suggestions for ensuring safe and equitable learning opportunities, a Student Equity Inventory was developed. It was administered in spring 2009. The development, administration, and findings of the first HWDSB Student Equity Inventory are described in this report.

Development

The Student Equity Inventory was developed, over a period of two years, by a committee that was comprised of HWDSB staff from a number of departments and employee groups, and of representatives from a range of diverse communities. This committee was charged not only with developing the survey tool, but also with creating the protocols for implementation and communication. The committee began by examining the work of other schools boards that have gathered input using the student voice, and by reviewing the literature related to creating safe and equitable schools. Legal, methodological, and ethical advice was sought throughout the development process to ensure that the best interests of our students were always central to decision-making. Given that this work was stimulated, and funded, by the Aboriginal Self-Identification mandate, the development process included careful consideration of issues relevant to this community.

Decisions about Survey Content

The committee determined that it was important to not only gather information about student demographics, but to align this with student perceptions about their school experience. To this end, the 2009 Student Equity Inventory included items in the following areas:

Student Identification:

- ◆ Culture
- ◆ Faith
- ◆ Exceptionalities
- ◆ Sexual Orientation

Student Perspectives:

- ◆ Cultural/Diversity Education
- ◆ Discrimination
- ◆ School Climate
- ◆ Academic Achievement
- ◆ Destinations

Decisions about Protocols

Decision-making about protocols was completed using two main lenses: protection of students and consideration of diverse community perspectives.

Protection of Students. Student safety and comfort during survey completion was foremost in the minds of committee members. The protocols for administration that were developed were very sensitive to issues of privacy and protection. For example, while it would be most advantageous to be able to link student level demographic information with student level perceptions, the committee decided that the information might be too sensitive to permit this level of data analysis at this time. As a result, it was determined that the survey would be administered anonymously, rather than including a student identifier like the Ontario Education Number. This had implications for the implementation of the voluntary Aboriginal self-identification process, which was a key original intent for the survey. To balance this tension, members of the committee are developing a separate process for aboriginal self-identification.

Diverse Community Perspectives. The Student Equity Inventory was developed in close collaboration with members of diverse communities. Through the committee, ranging perspectives were brought to bear on critical decisions. For example, because of the sensitivities related to asking about sexual orientation, the committee considered leaving this content area off of the survey during the first administration of the Student Equity Inventory. Through the committee, and in wider consultations, the community pointed out that do so would underscore the discrimination felt by students from LGBTQ communities; further reinforcing their sense that they do not belong and do not matter at school. Following this considered dialogue, the committee decided to include sexual orientation questions within the survey in the first year.

Communication and Vetting Process

Communication was viewed as central in the development and administration of the survey. The committee arranged two large community consultations prior to finalizing the survey protocols and team leads also visited a number of specific community groups to ensure their understanding of the survey intent, and to gather input into particular aspects of the content and delivery. In addition, the survey was brought to parent groups and the student senate to glean the perspectives of these key stakeholders.

Once the survey and protocols were finalized, these materials were submitted for review by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. This board made further suggestions to ensure student protection during survey administration and reporting, and ultimately approved the revised protocol.

Survey administration also required careful communication so that schools understood the survey rationale, scope, timelines and requirements for successful completion. The committee organized presentations for principal and information packages, and provided continuous support during survey implementation.

Administration

All grade ten and eleven students in HWDSB secondary schools were informed about the Student Equity Inventory via a verbal description delivered by their teacher (following a script) and an information package that was sent home. Within this package was an information letter and a consent form for parents to review, sign, and return to the school. Only those with written parent consent to participate were invited to complete the survey. Note that consent forms were translated into ten languages and these versions were sent home as required to ensure parent understanding of the survey and their child's rights as a participant.

The survey was administered on-line, at school, under the supervision of a school-appointed teacher or team (e.g., Equity Lead, Student Success Lead). This Lead had received training, and a detailed information package, to guide them through survey administration. The supervising teacher used a script to introduce the survey, and was asked to ensure that students were sitting a desk apart so that they could not view one another's computer screens. To further ensure privacy, the surveys were delivered in one of three orders, so that students would not be working on the same questions at the same time. Teachers were instructed to quietly help individual students with reading a survey item, if necessary, but to supervise in a way that students felt assured that no one was viewing the screen they were working on.

Based on board data, ten languages were selected for translation for the Student Equity Inventory (Arabic, Chinese, Czech, English, Farsi, Karen, Korean, Punjabi, Somali and Urdu). On-line versions of the translated surveys were prepared so that students could select from these on the screen if they chose to do so.

Findings

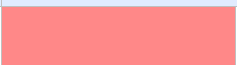


Participants

All 18 HWDSB secondary schools participated in the SEI administration. A total of 1588 students, of approximately 8109 grade 10 and 11 students in the system (based on fall enrollment numbers), or 19.6%, participated in the survey. Based on this sample size, we can be 95% confident that responses reflect the views of the total grade 10 and 11 population within HWDSB, with 3% margin of error.

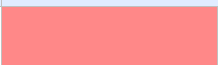

As noted in the charts below, most participants were in grade ten and eleven, the target grades for the 2008-2009 Student Equity Inventory. Some grade twelve students also participated, possibly because they were in a grade 11 home room class. More female students than male volunteered to participate.

In order to get a more complete view of the sample of participants, students were asked to report on their secondary school program pathway, their participation in support programs offered by the board, and their destination following secondary school. As detailed in the charts below, reported responses suggest that the sample of students participating in the first HWDSB Student Equity Survey is relatively high-achieving. Most respondents are in academic-level courses, do not utilize support programs and aspire to university programs after secondary school.

Grade:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
10		56.2%	866
11		40.3%	621
12		3.6%	55

Gender:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Female		56.4%	818
Male		42.3%	614
Transgender		1.2%	18

Reported Pathway:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Applied		17.8%	259
Academic		51.6%	753
Workplace		2.1%	30
College		4.7%	68
University		23.9%	349

Specific Support Programs:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Credit recovery		5.3%	79
Credit rescue		1.5%	23
Co-op		7.4%	111
Summer school		13.8%	206
Alternative education		2.3%	34
Carry over		3.7%	55
None		67.4%	1009

Destinations:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Apprenticeship: work towards a skilled trade (e.g. Tool and Die, Auto Mechanic)		4.1%	60
College: go to college (e.g. Mohawk or Sheridan)		21.2%	308
University: go to university (e.g. McMaster University or University of Toronto)		60.8%	885
Work: start to work right away		2.3%	34
Don't know		8.0%	117

Findings - Student Identification and Expression

About Culture:

This section of the survey inquired about student Aboriginal status, citizenship and language, and cultural expression at school. The survey was “branched” so that respondents only viewed items that were relevant to their experiences (e.g., if students reported that they were Canadian citizens, they did not see the suite of items that related to immigrant and refugee students). Note that only three students chose to complete a version of the survey that had been translated into a language other than English (all three completed the Chinese version).

Aboriginal Status

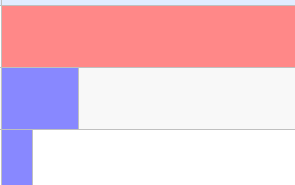
Approximately 5.7% of respondents indicated that they were of Aboriginal descent, higher than reported in the 2006 census (1.5%). Of these students, approximately 14% identified as Inuit and 24% identified as Metis. Approximately 20% of Aboriginal students reported that they were born on a First Nation Reserve and 29% indicated that they currently live within the jurisdiction of the school board.

Citizenship and Language Status

Approximately 83% of respondents indicated that they were born in Canada and that English was the language predominantly spoken at home (78% reported that English was their first language). Students most often indicated that they identify with North American and/or European culture. Of those who are not Canadian citizens, most (68%) reported that they were permanent residents. 12% of these students reported that they are refugees. Most newcomers indicated that they were from the **East Asia and Pacific region** (23% of newcomers; e.g., China, Japan, Korea)), the **South Asia region** (16%; e.g., India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) or the **Eastern Europe and Central Asia Region** (15%; e.g., Russian Federation, Turkey, Czech Republic).

Cultural Expression

Asked if they found it easy to express their culture at school, students reported:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Yes		75.0%	1126
Somewhat		18.4%	276
No		6.6%	99

About Faith:

This section of the survey inquired about student faith and its expression at school. Participating students reported that they belonged to the following faith groups:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Bahai		0.0%	0
Buddhism		3.1%	46
Christianity		40.0%	596
Hinduism		1.7%	25
Islam		6.8%	101
Jainism		0.0%	0
Jewish		1.5%	22
Sikhism		1.7%	25
Unitarian		0.7%	10
None of the above		32.9%	491
Other (please specify):		11.7%	174

Responses in the “other” category were content analyzed. The most common responses were: Atheist (75 students), Orthodox (29), and Agnostic (11). Students were asked to indicate the importance of practicing faith at school. Most students responded that it was “not at all” or “a little” important to express faith at school:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Not at all		60.8%	900
A little		13.7%	203
Somewhat		12.6%	186
Very		7.4%	109
Extremely		5.5%	82

Asked the degree to which faith could easily be expressed at school, most students reported that this was easy (53%), or somewhat easy (26%) to do.

About Sexual Orientation:

Most students who participated in the survey reported that they are “straight / heterosexual” (see below) and that they feel safe expressing their sexual orientation at school (86.8%). The complete breakdown of responses is listed below.

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Bisexual		5.4%	82
Gay		1.6%	25
Lesbian		1.4%	21
Queer		1.0%	15
Questioning		2.9%	45
Two-spirited		1.0%	15
Straight/heterosexual		88.6%	1356
Other (please specify):		2.2%	34

8.1% of students said that they feel only somewhat safe, and 5.1% indicated that they do not feel at all safe to express their sexual orientation at school.

About Individual Learning:

Approximately 10% of students reported that they had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to assist them with their special learning needs. A fairly significant number of these students couldn't provide the name of their exceptionality (34.1%) and others said that they had not been formally identified (5%). The most common exceptionalities named by students were: Communication – Learning Exceptionality (Learning Disability, 13.6%), Giftedness (10%), and Behavior (5.5%). Most students who reported that they were on an IEP indicated that it was easy (49.1%), or somewhat easy (41.4%), to do well at school, but 9.5% of students reported that it was not easy for them to do well.

Findings – Student Perspectives

About Diversity at School

Students were asked to reflect upon the frequency with which they learn about the achievements and experiences of each of the following groups. Their responses are shown in the table below.

		Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total	Mean	Std Dev
Women	Count	269	569	445	102	62	1447	1.391	1.004
	% by Row	18.6%	39.3%	30.8%	7.0%	4.3%	100.0%		
Aboriginal people	Count	89	317	544	355	137	1442	2.093	1.042
	% by Row	6.2%	22.0%	37.7%	24.6%	9.5%	100.0%		
Different cultural or racial groups	Count	160	474	510	217	84	1445	1.717	1.036
	% by Row	11.1%	32.8%	35.3%	15.0%	5.8%	100.0%		
Different religious/faith groups	Count	100	297	533	358	145	1433	2.105	1.063
	% by Row	7.0%	20.7%	37.2%	25.0%	10.1%	100.0%		
Persons with different abilities	Count	118	302	483	383	145	1431	2.094	1.098
	% by Row	8.2%	21.1%	33.8%	26.8%	10.1%	100.0%		
LGBTQ persons	Count	75	118	293	518	433	1437	2.777	1.120
	% by Row	5.2%	8.2%	20.4%	36.0%	30.1%	100.0%		
People of different levels of income	Count	170	381	510	254	129	1444	1.855	1.117
	% by Row	11.8%	26.4%	35.3%	17.6%	8.9%	100.0%		








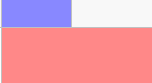
Mean scores suggest that students believe there is the least emphasis at school on LGBTQ persons, and those of different faith groups. Students suggested that those from diverse groups are frequently represented in posters and special events, but less often as part of course content or school publications.

About Discrimination at School

Students were asked if they were treated differently at school because of any aspect of their identity. Their responses are displayed below.

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Your Aboriginal background		1.7%	26
Your gender		11.6%	174
Your culture or racial background		10.2%	153
Your language background		5.2%	78
Your religion or faith background		9.3%	140
Your sexual orientation		4.5%	68
Your exceptionality (students on an IEP)		3.5%	52
Your grades or marks		23.0%	346
Other (please specify):		4.2%	63
Doesn't apply to me		54.2%	817

Students were asked to indicate if they had been bullied at school. Approximately 30% of respondents indicated that they had been the victim of bullying. These responses are similar to levels reported on the HWDSB Safe Schools Survey, through which 34% of students reported that they had been bullied at least once during the current school year. On the Student Equity Inventory, these students were asked if this bullying was related to any aspect of their identity. Their responses are outlined below.

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Your Aboriginal background		2.9%	14
Your gender		12.3%	60
Your culture or racial background		12.1%	59
Your language background		5.7%	28
Your religion or faith background		9.2%	45
Your sexual orientation		11.0%	54
Your exceptionality (students on an IEP)		4.5%	22
Your grades or marks		14.7%	72
Other (please specify):		36.4%	178

About School Climate











Students were asked to comment on their perception of the school climate. Responses are displayed below.

		Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A lot	Quite a lot	Total	Mean	Std Dev
Do you feel like you belong in your secondary school?	Count	79	104	280	487	518	1468	2.859	1.137
	% by Row	5.4%	7.1%	19.1%	33.2%	35.3%	100.0%		
Do you find your school to be welcoming place?	Count	79	129	399	466	395	1468	2.660	1.123
	% by Row	5.4%	8.8%	27.2%	31.7%	26.9%	100.0%		
Do you feel that there is a climate of respect in the school?	Count	118	207	476	406	248	1455	2.315	1.153
	% by Row	8.1%	14.2%	32.7%	27.9%	17.0%	100.0%		

Do you feel that there are high expectations for success in this school?	Count	78	133	407	489	353	1460	2.621	1.106
	% by Row	5.3%	9.1%	27.9%	33.5%	24.2%	100.0%		
How much do you like coming to school each day?	Count	160	233	448	412	213	1466	2.194	1.192
	% by Row	10.9%	15.9%	30.6%	28.1%	14.5%	100.0%		
Total	Count	514	806	2010	2260	1727	7317	N/A	N/A
	% by Row	7.0%	11.0%	27.5%	30.9%	23.6%	100.0%		

Barriers to Graduation

92% of students were very or extremely confident that they would graduate from secondary school. 2.3% were not at all or only a little confident they would get their diploma. All students were asked, what, if anything, was standing in the way of graduation for them. They indicated:

Response	Chart	Frequency	Count
Nothing		48.3%	721
Trouble with learning		10.7%	160
English language problems		4.2%	62
Emotional problems/worries		11.5%	172
Getting along with teachers		6.2%	93
Getting along with students		5.0%	74
Feeling like I don't belong		7.0%	104
Problems staying focused		17.0%	254
Involvement with a gang		0.9%	13
Substance use		2.7%	40

My part-time job		6.2%	92
Not interested in school		11.5%	171
My athletic pursuits		6.2%	92
Other priorities (please specify):		3.3%	49
Other (please specify):		6.4%	96

Summary

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board developed and implemented the first Student Equity Inventory in spring 2009, in an effort to hear the voice of students on issues related to diversity education, discrimination, school climate, aspirations, and achievement. Student safety during administration, and community collaboration throughout the process of development and implementation, were deemed paramount. The survey and its administration protocols were vetted through a number of parent, student, and community forums, and a formal ethics/methodological review was completed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. The survey was made available to all grade ten and eleven students within HWDSB. Active parent consent, and student assent, was required for participation. The Student Equity Inventory was administered on-line, at school, under the supervision of designated teacher leads in each school.

Approximately 20% of the grade 10 and 11 population participated in the survey in spring 2009. This level of response is large enough to make some broad statements about student perspectives in HWDSB secondary schools, but it is not possible to draw solid conclusions about the perceptions of particular sub-groups of students at this time. Overall, over 2/3 of students indicate that they feel that they belong at their school, and can express their culture, faith, and sexual orientation freely. At the same time, those who identify with particular diverse groups suggest that they are treated differently because of their culture, faith, exceptionality or sexual orientation and are sometimes bullied because of their differences. Students reported that they often hear about the accomplishments of individuals from some diverse groups (e.g., women, different cultures), but not others (e.g., LGBTQ, different faith groups). Most students in this sample indicated that they were taking academic courses and planned to go on to university after secondary school. Still, approximately 52% of students indicated that there was at least one factor standing in the way of graduation for them. Of these, most students indicated that difficulty staying focused, emotional problems/worries and a lack of interest in school were obstacles to graduation.

A preliminary review of the data suggests that students in aboriginal and LGBTQ communities may be at more risk than other students (e.g., a greater percentage of these students reported being bullied, indicated lower academic achievement, and suggested that emotional problems stand in the way of graduation). These early results will need to be validated with larger samples of students before firm conclusions are drawn. Further investigation is clearly warranted.

While valuable information was yielded from participating students, it is important to note survey limitations. Specifically, the spring 2009 Student Equity Inventory was completed by a relatively small number of students. The sample may not be representative of the entire grade ten and eleven population (e.g., most students who returned consent forms indicated that their courses were academic/university level). In addition, this was the first administration of the survey and some of the items used may require further refining. Results should be interpreted cautiously.

Recommendations

Within the context of these limitations, there remain some important actionable messages delivered through the voice of HWDSB students:

- ◆ Student participants suggest that while it is relatively easy to express one's identity at school, for some this has been perceived as risky (i.e., of the 30% of the total sample who say that they have been bullied, 64% indicated that this experience was related, at least in part, to an aspect of their diverse identity). This suggests that there may be a place for increased attention to diversity issues in Safe Schools intervention planning.
- ◆ Many students reported that they rarely or never hear about the experiences and achievements of LGBTQ individuals, persons from different faith groups, those with different abilities, and Aboriginal people. There is an opportunity to enrich instruction by incorporating positive references and examples from these groups.
- ◆ The obstacles to success identified by the full sample of student participants warrant consideration. Difficulties with focus, mental health, engagement, and learning, were identified as barriers to graduation. It will be important to further examine needs in this area. For example, the most often endorsed obstacle to graduation, "problems staying focused", may have several interpretations. Follow-up with key student informants is a good next step towards deepening our understanding of student-perceived obstacles to success at school.

- ◆ Many of students with special learning needs could not name their Identification category. A key strategy is to educate students about their learning profiles so that they can better advocate for themselves.
- ◆ Preliminary data suggests that special focus should be given to students from Aboriginal and LGBTQ communities. This information requires validation with larger samples of students, but is in line with anecdotal reports. The HWDSB should continue to pursue supports and services to ensure a healthy sense of belonging at school, and enhanced academic/social well-being, for students in these communities.

Next Steps

Spring 2010

During spring 2010 the HWDSB will work to analyze some of the Student Equity Inventory findings in greater depth, using focus groups and key informant interviews. In addition, the Equity Department will assist schools with related action planning and with implementation of the handbook, *Using an Equity Lens*. The department will also continue with cultural proficiency training for staff across the system.

2010-2011

In the coming year, the board will deepen its commitment to student equity via strategies such as:

- Continue to work closely with the Hamilton Aboriginal Education Committee (HEAC) to provide greater opportunity for Aboriginal Youth
- Continue to work with HCCI and other community organizations
- Continue with the implementation of Secondary ESL/ELD Improvement Plan
- Expand the ALPHA program (Accelerated Literacy Program Hamilton Area) for secondary schools
- Support the creation of LGBTQ positive spaces (staff training, student group support etc.)
- Develop effective and meaningful methods for Aboriginal Self-Identification.

The Student Equity Inventory will be aligned with the current HWDSB Safe Schools Survey to create a single tool for capturing the student voice (tentatively, Safe and Equitable Schools Survey). It is anticipated that this new combined survey will be administered in spring 2011 across all secondary school grades. A Student Equity Inventory Implementation Advisory Team will oversee survey development and implementation.