



Policy Committee
Thursday, December 4, 2025
EC-340D & Virtual Meeting

AGENDA: 6:00 p.m.

1. Call to Order/Roll Call
2. HWDSB Land Acknowledgement
3. Approval of the Agenda
4. Review of the Committee Workplan

Policy Reviews:

5. Indigenous Education
6. Barrier-Free Physical Learning Environments for Students

Discussion:

7. Notice of Motion: Policy Gap Analysis
8. Adjournment

BE YOU. BE EXCELLENT.

Subject: Indigenous Education Policy

Executive Council Member Responsible: Jolene John
Indigenous Education Lead



BACKGROUND

The Indigenous Education Policy, approved by the Board in May 2024, was scheduled for review after its first year to incorporate refinements. Following this review, staff have made targeted updates to strengthen the reconciliation focus within the Guiding Principles, emphasize relationships with learners, families, kinship networks, and Treaty Partners, and align the policy framework with the Two Row Relational Accountability Framework and Ethical Space of Engagement.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the Indigenous Education Policy be recommended for approval.

	POLICY NO: 6.6
Adopted	XXXX
Projected Review Date	XXXX
Revisions	XXXX

POLICY: INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION POLICY

ABSTRACT

“We come from truth holders and truth tellers. We carry history. We come from the ancients, from the villages of our Ancestors. We represent the new village. As we walk forward to a brighter future knowing our collective potential, we know that we can do anything. We will find the protection of Peace at the base of that white pine tree. Our homes will be strengthened and protected. Our minds will be straight, like smoke that rises. We are still here. We will always be here”.

- E. Doxtater (2023) to
CC:ROSE Learners

Our relationships are grounded in our shared treaty agreement responsibilities.

By virtue of nation-to-nation and Indigenous-Crown relationships, symbolized in wampum, every treaty partner has a moral, ethical, and fiduciary responsibility to maintain the spirit and intent of these original agreements.



We recognize our location within the **Sewatokwà:tshera, One Dish wampum** treaty territory. This treaty recognizes the responsibility of everyone to harvest only what is needed and to share what is harvested. The agreement conveys that the Earth provides for everyone, so no one should go hungry. It also includes the understanding that anyone who benefits from what the Earth provides has a responsibility to care for and protect “all of the entities on her body (Restorative Journey, Indigenous Educational Wellness, OCT. 2021).

The local Indigenous host nations are the Six Nations of the Grand River and the Mississaugas of the Credit. We acknowledge the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the three guiding principles of the Great Law of a good mind, peace and power. We also acknowledge the Anishinaabe Three Fires Confederacy and their guiding Seven Seven Teachings of bravery, honesty, humility, love, respect, truth, and wisdom.

Tékeni Niyothatátye Kahswéntha (The Two Row Wampum)



The treaty agreement represents “the two vessels, they in their ship, and we in our canoe travelling down the river of life. The two purple stripes represent our respective ways of being. Each having our own governance ways, cultures, language, and beliefs. The three white stripes would represent peace, friendship and equality...We would respect each other and not interfere with each others ways, or try to steer the others vessel. This living document would last forever as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow. We would be ‘brothers’ as equals” (Tehahenteh).

Silver Covenant Chain¹



Another agreement symbolizing friendship and relational accountability was also introduced and it is called **Teyontatenentshónteron (We are connected by our arms)**. Rope would not be used as it would break. Iron would not be used as it would rust, and so silver would be used because when it would tarnish, the two brothers would get together to polish the chain and renew their covenant. It is said when there would be an issue that would arise, one would tug on the chain and request a meeting where they would resolve the issue that came before them.

¹ The second part of the Two Row Wampum agreement, the Silver Covenant Chain is also widely referred to as the Friendship Belt and both terms are used interchangeably.

PURPOSE:

Education systems have been built upon dominant Eurocentric ideologies which have reinforced the intentional erasure of Indigenous Knowledges, languages, cultures, governance systems and beliefs. The purpose of this policy is to provide direction to cultivate and nurture meaningful relationships between Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB or the Board) and the Indigenous Education Circle (IEC) to action the shared goal of Indigenous Educational Wellness in a restorative education system.

As we untangle the legacies of colonial schooling systems as systems that were implemented under the guise of education, and by understanding how the deprivation of Indigenous Knowledges resulted in a spectrum of contemporary consequences, we approach this work in peace, friendship, and with mutual respect. The Two Row Relationship Framework² is rooted in relational accountability. We walk forward together, recognizing our common learning journey: *Every Child Matters*.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples³ (currently called the Declaration formerly called UNDRIP) maintains the conditions for ethical engagement and consultation with Indigenous Peoples and communities (i.e. the IEC) and respects inherent rights to self-determination and free, prior, and informed consent. Thus, the Board of Trustees' meaningful engagement and ethical consultation with the Indigenous communities through the Indigenous Education Circle (IEC) and Indigenous Education Department is appreciated and evidence of intentional steps towards respectful, reciprocal and reconciling relations.

Host Nations/HWDSB is located *between two important rivers*: the Credit River is fed by Lake Ontario at the location now known as the City of Mississauga, the original village site of the Mississaugas of the Credit. The Grand River, for the Six Nations community, is the marker for the Haldimand Deed of 1784⁴, which promises to protect 6 miles deep on each side of the Grand River from the 'mouth to the source', and goes on to say, 'which them and their posterity are to enjoy forever'.

"Between two rivers" translates as:

- *Edooying mijoonoon niizh ziibiin*⁵. Ojibwe

² The Two Row Wampum treaty belt is the original relationship framework between the Haudenosaunee and the Europeans, with emphasis on mutual respect and non-interference (see Appendix A).

³ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples' Timeline: 2007 Canada voted against the adoption; 2016 Canada fully endorsed and committed to its implementation; and; 2021 it received Royal Assent and came into force in June 21, making UNDRIP law in Canada.

⁴ [Haldimand Deed](#)

⁵ We credit and extend gratitude to Nokomis Martina Osawamick, Ojibwe/Odawa from Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, amik/beaver clan, for this Anishinaabemowin language translation.

- *Tsi nya'tekyátere ne tekahyónhake*⁶. Mohawk

HWDSB continues to foster an honest understanding of Indigenous host nations' cultures, which includes the traditional role as the original "stewards of these lands". In friendship with Mississaugas of the Credit (MCFN), Six Nations of the Grand River (SNGR), and the Indigenous Education Circle (IEC), HWDSB will continue to nurture this alliance, recognizing everyone has a responsibility as committed Treaty Partners.

HWDSB understands and upholds our shared Treaty Partner responsibilities to the Indigenous Education Circle Strategic Action Plan's (IECSAP) purpose and vision:

Honouring Our Ancestors: We will revitalize, reclaim, renew, restore, and celebrate Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing to foster intergenerational healing and wellness.

Within HWDSB, each person makes a meaningful commitment towards "Truth and Reconciliation by nurturing respectful and reciprocal relationships among Indigenous Peoples and Treaty Partners, and by cultivating intergenerational healing and wellness in a restorative education system" (Multi-Year Strategic Plan).

In a restorative education system, we make meaningful space for our shared but distinct Indigenous and Treaty Partner (Western, Eurocentric) perspectives and approaches to commemoration, education, healing and wellness⁷. We do this to benefit current students, families, the whole HWDSB community, and the 'approaching faces', also known as the future generations. We carry these truths forward.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

HWDSB approaches the Indigenous Education Policy in friendship with Indigenous Peoples. We make intentional space to first honour, recognize, and affirm the guiding philosophical principles of the host nations and the IEC, who, co-determine Indigenous Education Standards at HWDSB, for-Indigenous-by-Indigenous. We acknowledge the enduring legacy of systemic, institutionalized racism and the broader impacts of colonialism, including gender-based violence, racism, genocide, and forced assimilation. These have been perpetuated through legislation, policies, and practices that have deeply oppressed Indigenous Peoples. We then take our place alongside the IEC to outline the philosophical principles that inform our work in-relationship.

Host Nations' Natural Laws & Guiding Principles: A shared commonality across many Indigenous worldviews is our path to connectedness and interconnectedness, interdependency, and inter-relationality. HWDSB understands the importance of recognizing host nations Mississaugas of the Credit

⁶ We credit and extend gratitude to Tehahenteh, Mohawk, turtle clan from Six Nations of the Grand River for this Kanyen'kéha translation.

⁷ Commemoration, Education, Healing, and Wellness are main components of the Federal Indian Day School Class Action Lawsuit.

and Six Nations of the Grand River. We honour their distinct and inherent laws, rich cultures, languages, philosophies, traditional governance models and ways of knowing, being, and doing.

- Haudenosaunee Great (Natural) Law:
 - *Ka'nikonhrí:yo* - The Good Mind
 - *Skén:nen* -Peace - Healthy mind, healthy body
 - *Ka'satsténhsera* - Strength through Unity
- The Anishinaabe, Three Fires Confederacy and the Seven Sacred Teachings:
 - Aakwa'ode'ewin – Bravery
 - Gwekwaadziwin – Honesty
 - Dbaadendiziwin – Humility
 - Zaagidwin - Love
 - Mnaadendimowin - Respect
 - Debwewin - Truth
 - Nbwaakaawin - Wisdom

Broader Contextual Policies, Principles, Legislation & Legislative Abuse:

- 2007 We are guided by the international [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(the Declaration\)](#), as presented to UN members
- 2007 We are guided by the [Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework](#)
- 2007 We are guided by the spirit and intent of Orange Shirt Day, September 30th
- 2014 We are encouraged that Indian Residential School was removed from the Indian Act.
- 2014 We are guided by the [Implementation Plan: Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework](#)
- 2015 June 2nd We are guided by the National [Truth and Reconciliation Commission's \(TRC's\) 94 Calls to Action](#) and make explicit connections to [Education](#) as per calls to Action 62 to 65
- 2015 We are guided by the complete [National Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Final Reports](#)
- 2016 We are guided by Canada's announcement to fully adopt the UN Declaration, and recognize the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#) (2021) receiving Royal Assent and thereby legally advancing the UN Declaration's implementation, and furthermore, the (2023) [The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act: Action Plan](#)
- 2019 We are guided by the provincial [Ethical Standards & the Standards of Practice of the Teaching Profession \(OCT\)](#)
- 2022 We are guided by provincial [Restorative Journey: Indigenous Educational Wellness \(OCT\)](#) We are encouraged by the recognition of National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, September 30th
- 2023 We are encouraged that the Indigenous Education Lead was welcomed as a member of HWDSB Executive Council.

IEC Guiding Principles:

- [Indigenous Education Councils](#) guide school boards and schools in building stronger relationships with communities, sharing information, identifying promising practices and enhancing collaborative work to support Host Nation members, First Nations, Métis and Inuit student achievement and well-being. All school boards must have formal structures such as IECs to support Indigenous [E]ducation in school boards (Ontario Ministry of Education).
- The IEC is guided by the principles of the host nations and broader contexts.

HWDSB Guiding Principles:

- We proceed with open minds, a willingness to learn, conscious of the gaps in historic truths.
- We are mindful of the need for sincere engagement, and we commit to our own ongoing learning.
- We are guided in the spirit of educational wellness, and in consultation and collaboration with the Indigenous Education Department as the liaison with local Indigenous community partners.
- We value each learner by actively seeing, hearing, and listening to them and reflecting on and responding to their educational wellness needs. (Every Child Matters).

“I see it... [engaging with Indigenous Peoples in friendship] ...as initiatives created by Indigenous people for everyone. In that way, we transform the way Indigenous people in this country are perceived from a burden to a resource” (K. Doxtater, 2024).

INTENDED OUTCOMES:**Learners**

HWDSB will support and provide guidance to every learner, honouring peace, friendship, and respect. As treaty partners, we each represent a *Pillar in the Palisade*. We work together with the intent to protect Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. We value the unique *gifts/strengths* and distinct cultural identity of each learner and provide them with the tools to:

- Identify their gifts/strengths.
- Nurture their gifts/strengths.
- Value their gifts/strengths.
- Identify, nurture and value their gifts/strengths and their whole selves in relation to their own respective home and/or urban Indigenous communities, HWDSB community, and broader community, and global village contexts.
- Co-author an individualized learning and wellness plan with HWDSB supports to reach their full potential.
- Create innovative responses and/or implement appropriate cultural responses and approaches

to reflect and respond to the needs of learners (e.g., Indigenous Critical Incident Response Team - ICERT).

- Improve achievement, friendships and well-being among Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.
- Promote restorative Indigenous educational wellness and educational equity of access, opportunity, and outcome for Indigenous learners in the areas of:
 - Providing strength-based learning conducive to promoting self-esteem.
 - Identifying, honouring and nurturing the gifts that each learner brings to contribute to our village (i.e. classroom, school, HWDSB and broader community environment/context).
 - Fostering creativity, critical thought, and choice, through an individualized and co-authored learning plan.
 - Upholding Indigenous epistemologies, methodologies, pedagogies and wholistic learning opportunities, while ensuring the utilization and application of the 4A's: Authenticity, Accuracy, Accountability to all levels of community and Appropriateness.
 - Teaching literacy and numeracy.
 - Offering support and guidance to encourage meaningful engagement, successful completion, and retention of students in school.
 - Contributing to increased number of commencement and graduates.
 - Creating opportunities for engagement, and active participation.
 - Supporting advancement to post-secondary studies reflective of all pathways.
 - Understanding the current and historic cultural, experiential, economic, social and political patterns of the urban Indigenous population, MCFN, SNGR, home First Nations that reside within the HWDSB umbrella.

Parents, Caregivers, Families and Kinship Relations

We work together with the intent of nurturing meaningful and trusting relationships with caregivers, parents, families, communities, host nations, and bands to:

- Honour their inherent rights to self-determination and free, prior, and informed consent.
- Ensure they are seen, heard, respected, and that their contributions are valued.
- Create meaningful space to actively listen to understand their needs, ideas, and contributions to Restorative Indigenous Educational Wellness that is responsive and reflective.
- Practice ethical engagement, consultation, and collaboration in school and system-based initiatives to ensure content and perspectives are locally informed, reflected, and responsive.
- Integrate accuracy, authenticity, and accountability to Indigenous communities as cultural norms and protocols to working in-relationship with local Indigenous community members.
- Enable them to inform culturally relevant, responsive and nation-specific approaches to school and system policies, practices, and procedures.

Indigenous Peoples and Treaty Partner Relationship

We work together with the intent to make space to foster respect and reciprocity rooted in ‘relational accountability’ between the HWDSB Governance Structure and the IEC Kahwà:tsire, Zaagi’idiwin Family Structure (as referenced in the Responsibility section) on Indigenous Education, Restorative Indigenous Educational Wellness and Truth and Reconciliation by:

- Reaffirming the historic covenant of peace, friendship, and respect as our foundation (The Two Row Wampum and the Silver Covenant Chain also known as the Friendship belt).
- HWDSB will entrench the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the UN Declaration) into these relationships.
- HWDSB will action the Calls to Actions from the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).
- HWDSB centers the host nations: Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River.
- HWDSB acknowledges guest First Nations (Status and Non-Status), Métis and Inuit Peoples.
- Indigenous Peoples, authentic Knowledges and protocols, resources, and contributions are treated with care, protection, respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.
- During this monumental time of Truth and Reconciliation, HWDSB remains committed to peace, friendship, and respect by including authentic Indigenous Education leadership and voice to ensure accuracy and accountability to the IEC, MCFN, SNGR host nations, as well as local Indigenous communities of Hamilton and the collective HWDSB umbrella.

RESPONSIBILITY:

Two Row Relationship Framework is a tool to enable us to consider the relational accountability between the IEC - Indigenous Education Kahwà:tsire, Zaagi’idiwin, Family, and HWDSB.

The Indigenous Education Circle (IEC) – Indigenous Education Kahwà:tsire, Zaagi’idiwin, Family Structure	Ethical Space of Engagement	HWDSB Governance Structure
Indigenous Learners (CC:ROSE, Our Sustenance, and, Shakowennakarà:tats)	<p style="text-align: center;">Syncretism:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>We blend our tools together with care as we walk forward</i></p>	Director of Education, Secretary of the Board of Trustees
Elders, Knowledge Guardians, Language Speakers		Executive Council
Parents, Caregivers, Aunties, Uncles, Families (Kinship relations, extended clan families)		Principals, Vice-Principals, System Leaders
		School and System-based Support Staff
		Administrators, Custodial Staff
		Educators, Teachers

Local urban Indigenous community partners		Parents, Families, and Communities
Host Nations		Students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous Learners)
Neighbouring Nations		
Indigenous Staff Employed by HWDSB		
Indigenous Education Lead, accountable to the learners, IEC, the Indigenous Education Office (IEO) of the Ministry of Education, and the HWDSB Governance Structure.		

TERMINOLOGY:

4A's: The 4A's serve as a guide to enable Staff to critically discern the fidelity of resources (e.g., texts, articles, books, songs, film, poetry, art, etc.,) made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous content creators.

- **Authenticity:** In alignment with cultural protocols, the content creator(s) positions themselves (their nation, clan, communities) and situates themselves in relation to their work (i.e., how they are called to this work; their purpose in relation to giving back to the greater good).
- **Accuracy:** The content creator(s) respects and accurately reflects the philosophies, principles, values and beliefs relevant to their home community or nation, while precisely conveying historical and contemporary contexts, and where relevant, responds to current unique realities and lived experiences from a critical social justice lens.
- **Accountability [to the Indigenous Community]:** The content creator(s) demonstrate evidence of reciprocity and responsibility in relation to their community, to the Elders, Indigenous Knowledge Guardians, Language Speakers, Survivors, Supervisors, Mentors, contributors, co-authors, editors, etc. demonstrating gratitude and appreciation for the cumulative and collective efforts of the co-creation.
- **Appropriateness:** The ability to critically discern authentic, accurate, and accountable content, while also considering a contextual approach (time, place, space) and to situate the students (beneficiaries of the content) to ensure that the subject matter is respectful, relevant, reciprocal and responsible to their home nations, communities, to the land they are on, and to broader contexts.

Autonomy: Indigenous Peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing autonomous functions (UN, Discussion Paper Indigenous Peoples' Autonomy and Self-Governance, 2022).

Collective Rights: the inherent rights which Indigenous peoples have practiced and enjoyed since time immemorial. Each First Nation historically functioned as a distinct society, so there is no one official overarching 'Indigenous' definition. In general, rights to the land, rights to sustenance and subsistence resources and activities, the right to self-determination and self-government/governance, and the right to practice one's own culture and customs including language, ceremony and/or beliefs. Collective rights are the result of Indigenous peoples' own occupation of their ancestral home territories as well as ongoing social structures, patterns, political and legal systems. Therefore, collective Indigenous rights are separate and distinct from rights afforded to non-Indigenous citizens under Canadian common law and were to be protected in Indigenous/Crown treaties. It should be noted that inherent rights were entrenched with responsibility. For example, Sewatokwà:tsera/the One Dish treaty agreement outlines the rights to utilize the entities that Mother Earth carries on her body, to share the sustenance and to protect her, to ensure future generations will be able to practice these same rights.

Colonialism: The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with '*unsettlers*'⁸, and exploiting it economically. In Canada, this historically and currently means that Western European-derived ways of being, believing, knowing, and doing are implicitly or explicitly imposed as the standard or norm. Colonialism remains embedded in the legal, political and economic context of Eurocentric Canada today and in the lived experience of marginalized and systematically oppressed Indigenous peoples. For example, the 1876 Indian Act and the Canadian institutions known as Indian Residential "Schools", and "Indian Day School", historic provincial child welfare misapplications commonly known as '60's Scoop', and non-Indigenous peoples' refusal to acknowledge the land rights and treaty agreements made with Indigenous people continues to contribute to this legacy.

Compassion: Leading with peace, friendship and love creates space for compassionate accountability, where we are responsible to one another in creating a culture of care (HWDSB [MYSP](#), Value).

Cultural genocide: is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next (p. 1, TRC, Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: summary of the final report of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015](#)).

Decolonization: In Canada, decolonization is related to Indigenous peoples reclaiming and restoring their culture, land, language, laws, relationships, knowledge, and a reaffirmation of traditional governance. Decolonization is also associated with other relationships between groups of people within Canada and in other countries and contexts around the world and can be linked to broader principles of inclusion and equity. Canada's identity as an '*unsettler*', colonial state complicates the task of decolonization, since the original colonizers are still here and acts of colonization continue to persist. Graham Smith

⁸ Term used in place of "settler" as Indigenous Peoples don't see colonization as settling anything.

resists the term to describe transformational change, as the term decolonization is a “reactive notion; it immediately puts the colonizer and the history of colonization back at the “centre”. In moving to transformative politics we need to understand the history of colonization but the bulk of our work and focus must be on what is it that we want, what [it] is we are about and to “imagine” our future (G. Smith in S. Cote-Meek, *Colonized Classrooms*, p. 162).

Dignity: Reciprocity, anti-racism and anti-oppression lead to a just and equitable learning community, where every person is included, respected and valued (HWDSB [MYSP](#), Value).

Dominant group: The group at the top of the social hierarchy. In any relationship between groups that define each other (men/women, able-bodied/person with disability), the dominant group is valued more highly...Dominant groups set the norms by which the minoritized group is judged. Dominant groups have greater access to the resources of society and benefit from the existence of the inequality (Sensoy and DiAngelo. 2017. *Is everyone really equal?*, p. 223)

Eurocentric ideology (Eurocentrism): Eurocentrism has been defined as an attitude, conceptual apparatus, or set of empirical beliefs that frame Europe as the primary engine and architect of world history, the bearer of universal values and reason, and the pinnacle and therefore model of progress and development. In Eurocentric narratives, the superiority of Europe is evident in its achievements in economic and political systems, technologies, and the high quality of life enjoyed by its societies (J. Sundberg in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2009). Honorable Justice Murray Sinclair talked about the twin myths of European superiority and Indigenous inferiority. Verna St. Denis references Ng (1993)’s assertion that the *ideology of European superiority* was deployed to justify the subordination of Aboriginal People and had material consequences, as it justified the taking of Indigenous land, the confinement of Aboriginal people to reserves, and their subjugation to Christian education ([V. St. Denis, Aboriginal Education and Anti-Racist Education: Building Alliances Across Cultural and Racial Identity, Canadian Journal of Education 30,4 \(2007\): 1068-1092, p. 1072](#)). Other such examples of Eurocentric ideologies include the assertions that Indigenous peoples were uncivil, child-like and dependent upon the paternalistic control of Europeans, and inconsequently justified actions such as assimilative education [E. Bagshaw, L. Cherubini and J. Dockstader. \(2002\). Truth in Education. From Eurocentrism to Decolonization. www.ntssconf.org.](#)

Free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC): emphasizes the importance of recognizing and upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples and ensuring that there is effective and meaningful participation of Indigenous peoples in decisions that affect them, their communities and territories. More specifically, FPIC describes processes that are *free* from manipulation or coercion, *informed* by adequate and timely information, and occur sufficiently *prior* to a decision so that Indigenous rights and interests can be incorporated or addressed effectively as part of the decision-making process - all as part of meaningfully aiming to secure the consent of affected Indigenous peoples (Department of Justice, Canada).

Genocide: any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Eliminating members of the group;

- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Article II, United Nations, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide).

Guest nation members: Indigenous peoples who are guests and/or visitors to this territory.

Hegemony: The imposition of dominant group ideology onto everyone in society. Hegemony makes it difficult to escape or to resist believing in this dominant ideology, thus social control is achieved through conditioning rather than physical force or intimidation (Sensoy and DiAngelo. 2017. *Is everyone really equal?*, p.224).

Ideology: The big, shared ideas of a society that are reinforced throughout all of the institutions and thus are very hard to avoid believing. These ideas include the stories, myths, representations, explanations, definitions, and rationalizations that are used to justify inequality in society. Individualism and “Meritocracy” are examples of ideology (Sensoy and DiAngelo. 2017. *Is everyone really equal?*, p.224).

Indigenous: A Latin term meaning “born of the land” or “springs from the land”. When you create something from an Indigenous perspective, you are creating it from that environment, from that land that it sits on. Indigenous peoples’ traditions and customs are shaped by the environment, the land, their relationship; their spiritual, emotional, and physical relationship to that land. It speaks to them; it gives them their responsibility to stewardship (Lewis in S. Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, p.88). Currently the preferred collective name for the original people within Canada and their descendants. This includes First Nation (Status and Non-status), Métis and Inuit peoples.

Indigenous Education Circle (IEC): Is also referred to as the Indigenous Education Kahwà:tsire, Zaagi’idiwin, Family and is a structure that recognizes all of our kinship relations that we are accountable to. It is inclusive of participation of host nations (Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee) and local urban Indigenous community of Hamilton, Indigenous students, families as well as extended community support networks ranging from Indigenous community service agencies to Elders/Knowledge Guardians to cross-sector representation in the fields such as Health, Justice, and higher Education.

[Indigenous Education Councils](#): Guide school boards and schools in building stronger relationships with communities, sharing information, identifying promising practices and enhancing collaborative work to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit student achievement and well-being. All school boards must have formal structures such as IECs to support Indigenous Education in school boards (Ontario Ministry of Education).

Indigenous Educational Wellness: There is opportunity to create space for this initiative. We can work collaboratively to develop an understanding of the relationship between education and wellness, and the historic legislative abuses from which our communities continue to heal. We can use the frame of mind of our ancestors when they were in the ancient villages. Then we foster understanding that education is a part of total wellness and reframe Indigenous education discourse using rich Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies (Restorative Journey).

Joy: Curiosity, play and fun are catalysts for meaningful student learning outcomes and support joyful and enriching experiences (HWDSB [MYSP](#), Value).

Local Host Nations/Communities: Refers to the responsibility of ethical engagement with the local Anishinaabe community, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the local Haudenosaunee community, Six Nations of the Grand River and local urban Indigenous communities that call Hamilton-Wentworth home.

Palisade Model: Our message to learners is that we each represent *a pillar in the palisade* that surrounds our ancient village. Even though we do not live in the ancient villages anymore, we can understand they are homelands where we can still carry ourselves with the dignity of our ancestors. We are responsible for individual contributions to protecting what our ancestors placed in that canoe as part of the Two Row Wampum treaty of eternal peace and friendship: language, culture, ceremony, governance, and territory. We are also responsible for fulfilling the original instruction “to help the people” (*Restorative Journey*).

Protected knowledge: Refers to respecting and honouring the collective knowledge of all Indigenous nations and communities passed on by Elders/Knowledge Holders/Traditional Teachers, storytellers, artists, musicians, architects, botanists, astronomers, scientists, law makers, traditional governance keepers, etc. from generation to generation in the areas of Ancestral Knowledge, wisdom, traditional teachings and cultural practices. Local Elders typically share information when the recipient is considered ready and willing.

Reconciliation: In Canada, the term was used by the federal government when it was required to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. It has come to describe attempts made by individuals and institutions to raise awareness about colonization and its ongoing effects on Indigenous peoples. Reconciliation also refers to efforts made to address the harms caused by various policies and programs of colonization. For some, the word represents an opportunity to reflect on the past, to heal and to make right. For others, however, current gestures of reconciliation are merely performative and lack meaningful action to address the harms done by colonization. Ideally, reconciliation is something that both parties would agree to, as opposed to having it announced, ordered, or proclaimed.

Relational Accountability: Being accountable to your relations means that the researcher has a vested interest in the integrity of the methodology (*respectful*) and the usefulness of the results if they are to be of any use in the Indigenous community (*reciprocity*) (S. Wilson, p. 77). The methodology needs to be based in a community context (*be relational*) and has to demonstrate respect, reciprocity and responsibility (be accountable as it is put into action) (S. Wilson, p. 99).

Restorative Indigenous Education: We celebrate Indigenous knowledge, pedagogies, ways of knowing, ways of celebrating, ways of expressing and applying that knowledge while no longer living in fear from reprimand or punishment. This restorative education model offers a tempered learning environment that reflects true reconciliatory actions and the re-emergence of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies that communities were deprived of for so long (*Restorative Journey*).

Revillagize: Displace, decolonize is the next step toward healing. The people will have the frame of mind our ancestors had when living in the ancient villages.

Self-determination: The right of Indigenous Peoples to manage their affairs, provide stewardship over the land, maintain a cultural and political community, and uphold government-to-government relations with all other nations, including present-day nation states. The criteria for maintaining nationhood status, language, culture, ceremony, governance, and territory, must be honored.

Settler colonialism: A structure that assumes the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples into mainstream society (S. Pete, p. 41, *Decolonizing Equity Praxis* in 'Decolonizing Equity', B. Allen & V.C. R. Hackett, 2022).

Sovereignty: Indigenous peoples maintain a distinct identity as the only group who have nation-to-nation agreements with the Crown. Treaty and other rights and freedoms entrenched in *The Royal Proclamation of 1763* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* related to land resources and protections, as well as the right to deal directly with the Crown. The preferred term is *autonomy*.

Strength-based learning: To nurture, acknowledge and empower Aboriginal learners to develop their own talents based on their individual strengths through differentiated teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Syncretism: The blending of our best tools.

Treaty: A legal, nation-to-nation agreement. Indigenous/European treaties were expressed as promises and conveyed in wampum (purple and white beads of quahog shell) between peoples. They are sacred and are to be honored forever – “as long as the sun shines, as long as the grass grows, as long as the rivers flow”.

Treaty Partner: Everyone has a role and a responsibility as a treaty partner as we take this restorative journey towards Indigenous Educational Wellness together.

Trust: Humility and transparency build the trusted relationships, connections and education system necessary for growth, change and evolution (HWDSB [MYSP](#), Value).

ACTION REQUIRED:

In their respective areas of influence, every individual in each department should/can practice vigilance in identifying the gaps and areas of Indigenous omission and work collaboratively with the Indigenous Education Department on restorative solutions for meaningful inclusion and integration of Indigenous thought, pedagogy, voice, perspectives, and contributions.

For this we must:

- Maintain a full-time dedicated Indigenous Education Lead, Maintain and recognize the Indigenous Education Circle (IEC) as the formal governing structure for Indigenous Education at HWDSB, who will lead the regular review, implementation, monitoring and revising of:

- The Board Action Plan (BAP) on Indigenous Education and ensure alignment between HWDSB and Ministry of Education Priorities;
- The Voluntary, Confidential, Self-Identification Policy including student, parent/caregiver/guardian, and community engagement (e.g. IEC) adjacent to Student Census and through the position of data governance;
- The Indigenous Education Procedures;
- The Smudging Policy and Procedure to reflect the IECSAP and importance of protecting Sacred Ancestral Knowledges, Ceremonies, Sacred Items, Medicines, etc.;
- An Indigenous Research Methodology Framework and;
- Develop Indigenous Education Standards that are locally relevant and responsive to land/territory and the worldviews and aspirations of the host nations and the IEC

To further support these initiatives and engage in reciprocal engagement and action:

- Trustees will read and absorb the IECSAP, Restorative Journey, and the TRC Final Report and Calls to Action to begin to reframe their knowledge and understandings of Indigenous Educational Wellness through local Indigenous community-driven and community-informed approaches.
- HWDSB System Leaders will integrate all five Strategic Directions of the MYSP into their Board Improvement Plans, School Improvement Plans, and department Work Plans recognizing that everyone has a responsibility to action this work and contribute to meaningful change and transformation.
- HWDSB will maintain and continuously evaluate structures of accountability, accuracy, and authenticity by working collaboratively with and alongside the Indigenous Education Department on curriculum development, course delivery, unique program development (i.e., teacher selection, lesson plans, activities, vetting resources/learning materials), guest speakers, and assessment/evaluation approaches, etc. with the Indigenous Education Department leading as identified

We can all:

- Enable individuals to position themselves in relation to Indigenous learners, families, communities, along historical and contemporary contexts to build an understanding and appreciation for Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Examples of doing this? For example, individuals become critically self-reflexive practitioners who utilize the Indigenous Education Department Placemat (See Appendix) and other tools to support their own personal and professional growth along the Indigenous Cultural Safety (ICS) Continuum.
- Enable individuals to recognize their own gifts/assets to nurture *syncretism* to support instructional practice, cross-curricular Indigenous teaching and learning approaches, and to contribute to Indigenous Educational Wellness.

- Implement system-wide improvement and proficiency on the protection of Indigenous Knowledges and pedagogies, and the care of all students, staff, educators, system leaders, community partners, and learners on the restorative journey of Indigenous Educational Wellness and Reconciliation with Indigenous leadership.
- Generate collaborative and proactive solutions and strategies to practice respectfulness, maintain friendships and restore the “peace”.

PROGRESS INDICATORS:

Preamble:

Research involving Indigenous peoples in Canada has been defined and carried out primarily by non-Indigenous researchers and often supported colonial goals. The approaches used have not generally reflected Indigenous worldviews, and the research has rarely benefited Indigenous peoples or communities. As a result, Indigenous peoples continue to regard research, particularly research originating outside their communities, as extractive and exploitative.

In support of autonomous Indigenous nations, in an effort to build trust, and to decolonize, re-villagize and re-Indigenize research, assessment and, more generally, the measurement of progress within HWDSB, the progress indicators listed below aim to reorient indicators to align more closely with the values of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility, as well as an Indigenous worldview centered on interdependence, and interconnectedness.

For these reasons, some of the assessment measures listed below will include Indigenous methodologies and approaches, which may look very different from assessment measures in other HWDSB policies.

Through individual and collective commitment to professional learning and development and ongoing capacity-building with respect to Indigenous Knowledges and ways of knowing, being and doing, and through ethical engagement, cooperation and partnerships with the IEC: Indigenous learners, families, communities, host nations and organizations; and the Ministry of Education’s Indigenous Education Office, HWDSB will:

Intended Outcome	Assessment
Improve Indigenous student achievement and well-being.	Indigenous Education Circle Strategic Action Plan (IECSAP) Learning Nest and Strengthening Hamilton Aboriginal Education (SHAE) Native Youth Advancement With Education Hamilton Cultivating Community: Reclaiming Our Spaces in Education (CC:ROSE) and Shakowenna’kará:tats Native Second Language Indigenous Education and Indigenous Studies NBE Course Development and implementation

	<p>Voluntary Confidential Self-Identification of Indigenous Learners</p> <p>Continuous Learning and Improvement (CLI)</p> <p>Student Census</p> <p>Disproportionality Data</p> <p>Graduation/Commencement Rates</p> <p>Credit Accumulation</p>
Promote Indigenous educational wellness and educational equity of access, opportunity and outcome for Indigenous learners.	<p>Indigenous Education Circle Strategic Action Plan (IECSAP)</p> <p>Learning Nest and Strengthening Hamilton Aboriginal Education (SHAE)</p> <p>Cultivating Community: Reclaiming Our Spaces in Education (CC:ROSE) and Shakowenna'kará:tats</p> <p>Native Second Language</p> <p>NBE Course Development</p> <p>Voluntary Confidential Self-Identification of Indigenous Learners</p> <p>Continuous Learning and Improvement (CLI)</p> <p>Student Census</p> <p>Disproportionality Data</p> <p>Graduation/Commencement Rates</p> <p>Credit Accumulation</p>
Improving and expanding knowledge of all students and educators on Indigenous and host nations' histories, perspectives, contributions and ways of knowing.	<p>Indigenous Education Circle Strategic Action Plan (IECSAP)</p> <p>NBE Course Development</p> <p>Cultivating Community: Reclaiming Our Spaces in Education (CC:ROSE) and Shakowenna'kará:tats</p> <p>Native Second Language</p>
Continued cultivation and nurturing of meaningful relationships, engagement and collaboration with and alongside local Indigenous partners, communities, organizations and host nations.	<p>Increased understanding of roles and responsibility as Treaty Partners.</p> <p>Increased individual and collective system-capacity of reconciliatory efforts towards Indigenous Educational Wellness.</p> <p>Increased appreciation, acceptance and validation of Indigenous Education, Ancestral Knowledges and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing as beneficial for everyone.</p> <p>Strengthened relationship with Indigenous Education Circle and the Indigenous Education Circle Strategic Action Plan</p> <p>Cultivating Community: Reclaiming Our Spaces in Education (CC:ROSE) and Shakowenna'kará:tats</p> <p>Friend/Advisor to the Board of Trustees</p>

REFERENCES:

-
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 - S. Wilson. (2008), Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods. Fernwood Publishing.
 - [Towards Braiding \(E. Jimmy, V. Andreotti with S. Stein\), 2019.](#)
 - [Truth and Reconciliation Commission's \(TRC's\) 94 Calls to Action](#)
 - [The UN Declaration explained \(justice.gc.ca\)](#)
 - [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
 - [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)
 - [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#) and [The United Nations](#)

[Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act: Action Plan](#)

- [United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect](#)

Subject: Barrier-Free Physical Learning Environments for Students

Executive Council Member Responsible: Sharon Stephanian
Superintendent of Special Education, Inclusion and Equity, K-12



BACKGROUND

The Barrier-Free Physical Learning Environments for Students Policy was reviewed following public consultation and input from the Policy Committee last school year. Staff also examined related policies and procedures to ensure alignment.

[Appendix A](#) includes the consultation feedback and a chart indicating whether and how each suggestion was incorporated into the policy.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the Barrier-Free Physical Learning Environments for Students Policy be recommended for approval.



Barrier-Free Physical Learning Environments for Students

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PURPOSE:

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) is committed to providing learning and working environments that are welcoming, respectful, accessible, and free from discrimination and harassment.

We will strive to have learning environments that are physically and culturally accessible, equitable, inclusive and learner-centered by removing and preventing physical accessibility barriers impeding students with disabilities from fully participating in and fully benefitting from all aspects of education. Barrier-free physical learning environments should be considered in the development of other policies related to physical space on and off school property (including school excursions). HWDSB is committed to meeting the physical accessibility needs of students with disabilities in a timely and responsive manner to ensure all students can fully participate and thrive in learning spaces.

HWDSB recognizes the importance of upholding the rights and educational wellness of Indigenous students and families. This includes acknowledging the unique histories, cultures, and experiences of Indigenous communities, and support the development of barrier-free physical learning environments that reflect and support Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (e.g., land-based learning, use of circles).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

- Building inclusive, barrier-free learning environments begins with valuing, seeking out and integrating student perspectives.
- Ensuring students and parents/guardians/caregivers are active partners in the shared decision-making process for students with disabilities.
- Ensuring students with disabilities have the right to dignity, respect, equality, choice, voice and full participation in a barrier-free environment.
- Identifying and removing physical barriers that impede students' access to educational services to ensure our duty to accommodate. This may include environmental comfort and sensory accessibility.
- Collaborating and proactive planning with students and parents/guardians/caregivers for student accommodations as part of the student's transition planning.
- Designing physical learning spaces and instructional practices from a Universal Design for Learning (UDL)



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- Ensuring every effort will be made to accommodate students in their home school. Where this is not possible, HWDSB will collaborate with students and parents/guardians/caregivers on placement within programs or classrooms throughout Hamilton Wentworth District School Board.
- Recognizing and committing to understanding that barriers to equity and inclusion are often intensified by intersecting identities such as race, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and other dimensions of diversity.
- All decisions within this Policy will align with the Ontario Human Rights Code and HWDSB's Human Rights Policy, Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA), Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) and HWDSB's Privacy Policy.

INTENDED OUTCOMES:

- Student voice will inform the planning and evaluation of barrier-free physical learning environments.
- Students and parents/guardians/caregivers will be active partners in the shared decision-making process for students with disabilities.
- HWDSB will provide students with disabilities an environment which maximizes inclusion, integration, full participation, dignity, respect and honours voice and lived experiences.
- Accessibility needs of students will be met in a timely way, which is clearly communicated with the student and parents/guardians/caregivers.
- HWDSB will have an ongoing plan for new construction and renovation projects that includes barrier-free physical learning environments.

RESPONSIBILITY:

Director of Education
Members of Executive Council



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TERMINOLOGY:

Barriers: According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), a barrier is not the disability itself, but rather any external obstacle that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in society. Barriers may be:

- Physical – such as inaccessible buildings or spaces.
- Attitudinal – including stereotypes, stigma, or discriminatory attitudes.
- Systemic – embedded in policies, procedures, or practices.
- Technological – such as digital platforms that are not accessible.
- Communication – including formats or methods that are not inclusive of all abilities.

HWDSB recognizes these barriers and is committed to identifying, removing, and preventing them to support full participation, dignity, and inclusion for all students with disabilities.

Duty to Accommodate: A legal obligation under the Ontario Human Rights Code requiring organizations to identify and remove barriers and make necessary adjustments to policies, practices, and physical environments so that individuals protected under the Code—such as students with disabilities—can participate equally and fully. Accommodation must be provided up to the point of undue hardship.

Environmental Comfort: The degree to which a physical space supports the well-being, safety, and full participation of students with disabilities.

Intersectionality: Recognized as the understanding that each person simultaneously exists within multiple and overlapping identities.

Multi-Year Accessibility Plan: As part of the Ontario with Disabilities Act (2002), all school boards in Ontario are required to prepare an annual accessibility plan, after consultation with people with disabilities, and to make the plan public in December. This plan is used to meet the requirements of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005), where all public-sector organizations, as well as private and non-profit organizations with 50 or more employees, must create written multi-year accessibility plans, update them annually and post them on their websites, if they have one.

Sensory Accessibility: The intentional adaptation of physical and learning environments to support individuals with diverse sensory processing needs. This includes minimizing sensory overload and providing options that promote comfort, regulation, and engagement for every student.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): A conceptual and instructional framework designed to make learning accessible to all students by avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach. It is based on the core principles of multiple means of engagement, representation of information and action and expression.



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ACTION REQUIRED:

- Update and maintain a Procedure aligned to this policy that is accessible and culturally responsive to the HWDSB community and communicated annually.
- Develop communication material on Policy and Procedures for students.
- Accessibility training for students and staff.
- Publicly share progress on barrier-free physical learning environments through the HWDSB Annual Accessibility Report on the Multi-Year Accessibility Plan.
- Review policy effectiveness through inclusive consultation as part of the Policy review process.

PROGRESS INDICATORS:

Intended Outcome	Assessment
Student voice will inform the planning and evaluation of barrier-free physical learning environments.	Student Voice Surveys Student Advisory Circles
Students and parents/guardians/caregivers will be active partners in the shared decision-making process for students with disabilities.	Student Voice Surveys Parent and Family Voice Surveys Student and Staff Affinity Group(s) Student Advisory Circles Staff Advisory Groups
HWDSB will provide students with disabilities an environment which maximizes inclusion, integration, full participation, dignity, respect and honours voice and lived experiences.	Student Voice Surveys Parent and Family Voice Surveys Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) PowerSchool Special Programs – Facility accommodation tracking Student and Staff Affinity Groups Student Advisory Circles Staff Advisory Groups
Accessibility needs of students will be met in a timely way, which is clearly communicated with the student and parents/guardians/caregivers.	Student Voice Surveys Parent Voice Surveys SEAC PowerSchool Special Programs – Facility accommodation tracking



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	Student and Staff Affinity Groups Student Advisory Circles Staff Advisory Groups
HWDSB will have an ongoing plan for new construction and renovation projects that includes barrier-free physical learning environments.	Multi-Year Accessibility Plan Long-Term Facilities Plan

REFERENCES:

Government Documents

Education Act

Ontario Human Rights Code

OHRC – Policy: Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities

Proposed K–12 Education Standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA)

Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA),

Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) and HWDSB's Privacy Policy.

Policy Consultation Feedback and Response Chart

POLICY:

Feedback was gathered through:

- SEAC – representing community agencies who provide support to students and families
- Principal/Vice Principal Special Education, Inclusion and Equity Advisory Committee
- Student Advisory Circles (3 elementary, 10 secondary)
- ENGAGE HWDSB
- Sharing Your Thinking – Online Drop-In Session
- Direct Email – specialeducation@hwdsb.on.ca

The Consultation Report can be found in [Appendix A](#), at the end of the Policy Package.

Categories	Comment/ Feedback	Response
Title	Clarity on who the Policy applies to.	Barrier-Free Physical Learning Environments for Students . Future consideration of a Policy for staff/visitors (or is this covered under AODA)
Purpose	Accountability on timelines and responsiveness.	Added (bold) – HWDSB is committed to meeting the physical accessibility needs of students with disabilities in a timely and responsive manner to ensure all students can fully participate and thrive in learning spaces .
	Intersectionality should be a Guiding Principle and not a contextual note in Purpose	Added a Guiding Principle on intersectionality.
Guiding Principles	Strengthen commitment to student and parent/guardian voice and collaborative decision-making.	Added “Ensure” to the beginning of sentences involving students and parent/guardian voice and collaborative decision-making.
	Include environmental comfort and sensory needs when planning for barrier removal. Environmental and sensory needs are part of the physical learning environment.	Added - Identifying and removing physical barriers that impede students’ access to educational services to ensure our duty to accommodate. This may include environmental comfort and sensory accessibility.

	Reference commitment to human rights and privacy legislation	Added - All decisions within this Policy will align with the Ontario Human Rights Code and HWDSB's Human Rights Policy, Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA), Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) and HWDSB's Privacy Policy.
Intended Outcomes		
Terminology	Additional definitions are needed – Duty to Accommodate, Environmental Comfort, Intersectionality, Sensory Accessibility, UDL	Added definitions for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duty to Accommodate • Environmental Comfort • Intersectionality • Sensory Accessibility • Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
Action Required	NA	NA
Progress Indicators	NA	NA
Overall Readability/understandability	Create a student friendly version	Next step after approval
Items for the Procedure		Staffing models Facility repairs Collaborative placement processes Partnerships AODA Accessibility work Inclusive furniture Inclusive activities and experiences Staff learning
Other	Add to Government Documents	Added – Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA) and Personal Health Information Protection (PHIPA) and HWDSB's Privacy Policy

APPENDIX A



Summary

In October 2025, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) launched a public consultation to gather feedback on revisions to the Barrier-Free Physical Learning Environments policy. The community consultation was hosted on the Engage HWDSB platform. In schools, the consultation took place with students guided by Special Education Class teachers, Learning Resource Teachers (LRT) who gathered student voice using a Student Advisory Circle Structure. Feedback was summarized and submitted electronically. The purpose of this consultation was to ensure that the revised policy promotes community-based approaches to learning environments that are inclusive of all students and foster personal growth and academic success for students.

The consultation process through Engage HWDSB invited community to review the original policy, the proposed changes, respond to guiding questions, and share their experiences and perspectives on school learning environments. In total, 448 people visited the Engage site, 52 opened documents or tools on the project page, and 10 provided feedback.

The consultation involving students took place in 10 elementary schools and 3 secondary schools. Three classrooms were Special Education classes or programs, and the remaining groups were led by LRTs. The resulting summaries of feedback submitted in electronically represented the voices of students in two classrooms, and four small groups. There was one response submitted on behalf of an individual student.

The quality of the feedback received demonstrates passion and shared commitment to equity and inclusion. However, most comments extend beyond physical accessibility to express concerns about social, systemic, and operational barriers in practice, such as staffing, inclusion models, and behavioural supports.

While these insights are invaluable, many are better suited to informing procedures and implementation frameworks rather than requiring direct policy revision.

Key Takeaways

- **Affirmation of Policy Purpose**

Participants support the goal of a barrier-free learning environment and the policy's emphasis on inclusion, dignity, and accessibility for all students. Students, especially, emphasize the importance of seeing these principles reflected in everyday practices.

- **Clarity and Ongoing Communication**

Students suggest the policy be communicated in accessible, age-appropriate language to ensure all students understand its intent as well as their rights as learners. They also highlighted the need for communication about how and when changes related to the policy will occur. They requested direct updates to students and families that will help ensure progress is visible to the school community.

- **Need to Address Social and Attitudinal Barriers**

Feedback from both consultations emphasized that barriers are not only physical. The policy could more clearly acknowledge social and attitudinal accessibility as part of a barrier-free environment. To achieve this, one suggestion was for school-wide learning on neurodiversity accessibility and inclusion to foster empathy, understanding and respect.

- **Expansion of Physical Accessibility Definition**

Feedback from parents/guardians and students suggests the policy could explicitly recognize environmental comfort and sensory accessibility (e.g., temperature control, lighting, sensory spaces) as part of physical accessibility.

- **Clarity on Family Partnership and Voice**

Both families and students expressed a desire for greater input into how accessibility decisions are made and communicated. Parents requested clarity on how their feedback informs accommodations, while students advocated for the creation of ongoing student voice groups to share accessibility ideas and experiences. Embedding mechanisms for both student and family engagement will ensure the policy remains responsive and inclusive over time.

- **Cultural and Indigenous Accessibility**

Some feedback highlighted the importance of culturally relevant and Indigenous-inclusive environments. The policy could reference cultural accessibility as a component of equitable physical learning spaces.

Much of the feedback received relates to operational and procedural matters rather than policy itself. Families raised concerns about the lack of sufficient Educational Assistants and specialized supports in classrooms, describing safety issues and disruptions that affect all students. Others highlighted challenges accessing behavioural and therapeutic programs, suggesting that services such as ABA or SNAP be offered within schools to improve equity and convenience for working families. Many comments focused on the day-to-day realities of inclusion, such as inconsistent support, limited communication with schools, and long waits for assessments, emphasizing a gap between policy intent and lived experience. These insights, while not requiring changes to the policy, are valuable for informing procedural improvements in staffing models, program delivery, communication practices, and training for educators to better realize the goals of a barrier-free learning environment.

Similarly, students were concerned about infrastructure improvements (repairs, upgrades, accessibility), increased support staff, comprehensive accessibility (e.g., digital tools. Software, online learning platforms), and community engagement. Overall, students demonstrated a deep understanding of the steps necessary to translate the principles and intentions of a policy into practical, day-to-day actions that can effectively enhance the learning environment for all students.

Summary of Policy vs. Procedural Implications

Theme	Policy Implication	Procedural/Implementation Focus
Visibility of policy implementation	Strengthen progress indicators	Directly communicate actual changes made in learning environments
Physical accessibility (A/C, sensory rooms)	Supports stronger inclusion in facility planning	Inform facility design guidelines
Social/attitudinal barriers	Policy already includes this concept	Consider training and awareness initiative
Staffing and support	Operational issue	Review staffing models and inclusion supports
Program access (ABA, SNAP)	No policy change	Explore build in-school program partnerships
Indigenous and cultural inclusion	Broader inclusion agenda	Integrated into cultural curriculum and training
Communication and student/family voice	Reinforce engagement outcomes	Review communication tools for clarity and transparency

Next Steps

Families and students support the Barrier-Free Learning Policy's intent, but ask for visible, practical improvements in how it is carried out, especially in school environments, and regarding staff capacity and family/student communication.

HWDSB remains committed to working collaboratively with our communities and our students to ensure that our school learning environments are safe, inclusive, and equitable where every student can thrive.

This consultation will inform the final revisions to the policy and the feedback related to implementation of the policy, i.e., procedures and operations, will be used to strengthen our practices.

Notice of Motion: Policy Gap Analysis

Submitted by: Trustee Todd White
November 18, 2025

WHEREAS the Board maintains a variety of board-approved strategies, action plans, and processes; and

WHEREAS high-level content in these documents may not be reflected in Board policy; and

WHEREAS the current Board of Trustees is in the final year of its term.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Policy Committee perform a gap analysis of the Board's policies and identify any potential policy areas that may be absent from its policy structure.