

Toronto school survey

Race and poverty matter as early as Grade 3

First study finds learning gap starts at tender age in some groups

Survey a 'call to action,' director says

Toronto Star

Feb 28, 2009 04:30 AM

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Students who live in poverty or come from certain racial backgrounds are falling behind in school as early as Grade 3, says a

groundbreaking survey of Toronto's public elementary schools.

With such a diverse student body – just one-quarter report two Canadian-born parents and less than half learn English as a first language – the survey found while there are high achievers from all backgrounds, there is a big overall gap when children are as young as 8.

"All parents have high expectations for their children," says the report, released yesterday.

"Indeed ... 95 per cent said that they wanted their child to complete further education beyond high school, particularly university."

However, "at this early age, there are already differences between the achievement of some children based on student and family background characteristics, with some of the largest gaps" seen among black, Latin American and Middle Eastern students.

Gerry Connelly, the board's director of education, said the results confirm that lower-income families "face other challenges as they are more likely to be single parents, immigrants to Canada, have low educational attainment and come from racialized groups."

"Poverty in this city is not new, but it is growing at an alarming rate," she said, noting half of the families surveyed earn less than \$50,000 a year.

"This requires a call to action on all of our parts. For the (board), it means we need to continue to find ways to close that achievement gap so that our students have the skills, knowledge, hope and positive job choices to be successful.

"It also means we need to advocate for better nutrition programs, housing and social services."



Grade 1 students from Robert Tonks's class show off their knowledge during an African Heritage day at Kingsview Village Junior School in Etobicoke.

The board is already addressing the gap through programs, such as the Model Schools for Inner Cities, which pumps extra money and resources into schools in high-needs areas and provides free and low-cost snack and meal programs, as well as creating a more diverse curriculum and starting up a new black-focused, or Africentric, school this fall.

When asked if the board can overcome the hurdles students have in their home lives, Connelly said she "feels strongly that when students come to school, they spend six to eight hours in school, and we can, and must, make a difference ... we can level the playing field."

More than 95,000 parents of students in kindergarten to Grade 6 – or more than two-thirds – completed the voluntary, wide-ranging survey, which went out last spring and asked about everything from income to education levels to feelings about safety or the need for snack programs.

Most families reported high satisfaction with their schools and said their children feel safe there.

The board has linked the survey information to provincial test scores, and will use it to provide programming where it's most needed. Individual schools will receive their results in the coming weeks.

The data is so detailed that the board knows that black students whose parents emigrated from Africa tend to do better on the province's standardized tests than black students whose parents were born in Canada or the Caribbean.

This survey follows on the heels of one completed by middle and secondary students in 2007 that asked about everything from racial background, to sexual orientation, to whether they felt safe in their schools, which the majority said they did. Connelly said following that survey, the board set firm targets to lower dropout rates among at-risk teens.

Superintendent Jeff Hainbuch said he learned from the secondary survey that Spanish-speaking parents "were feeling a disconnect" with the schools he oversees, so a network was created for them to arrange information nights and other events.

For elementary students, however, the achievement gap is the biggest concern, Connelly said.

The survey notes a "consistent gap" in standardized test results between students living with two parents and those in single-parent families.

But the "biggest discrepancies are among different racial groups, followed by income groups," the report, by researchers Janet O'Reilly and Maria Yau, notes.

It's not that those falling behind are new to Canada; in fact, almost 80 per cent of students in Grades 1 to 3 were born here.

The survey's authors recommend schools "pay extra attention" and reach out to parents and communities for help, and notes that extracurricular activities, homework programs, vision and hearing tests are needed to support children once they get to school.

They also call for early learning programs for preschoolers and parents.