

Colour of Poverty

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April 6, 2009

The Honourable Kathleen Wynne
Minister of Education
22nd Floor, Mowat Block
900 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 1L2

Via Fax: (416) 325-2608

Dear Minister Wynne:

Re: School Information Finder

On behalf of the Colour of Poverty Campaign, we are writing to express our grave concerns about the Ministry of Education's School Information Finder initiative. As it is currently designed, the School Information Finder has the effect – if not the intent – of promoting segregation and undermining the values of inclusion and equity that are fundamental to the public education system in Ontario.

The Colour of Poverty Campaign is a province-wide coalition of individuals and community based organizations concerned about the increasing racialization of poverty and the rise of racial inequities in this province. Launched in 2007, the Campaign has been working towards a number of goals with a view to improving racial justice, one of which being enhancing access to and promoting equity within the public education system for students from racialized and other marginalized communities.

It is our understanding that the School Information Finder is intended to allow parents and students to make decisions about what school to choose based on EQAO results and the demographics of a school. Yet it also includes statistics on:

- Percentage of students who live in lower-income households;
- Percentage of students whose parents have some university education;
- Percentage of students who receive special education services;
- Percentage of students identified as gifted;
- Percentage of students whose first language is not English;
- Percentage of students who are new to Canada from non-English speaking country;
- Percentage of students whose first language is not French; and
- Percentage of students who are new to Canada from non-French speaking country

Not only are such statistics totally irrelevant in determining whether a particular school is able to meet the needs of any individual child, the inclusion of these statistics legitimize the selection of schools based on factors such as the economic status, race, country of origin, ability/disability and language ability of the student body.

This is absolutely unconscionable, and in our view illegal, as most of the selection criteria made explicit by the School Information Finder fall under the grounds of discrimination as prohibited both by the Ontario Human Rights Code and by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

It is not hard to imagine that with such information being made available to the public, the School Information Finder will actively enable if not in fact openly encourage "white flight", as well as "ableist and classist flight", "anglophone and francophone flight" as well as intellectual forms of segregation.

What is equally troubling is that this "tool" was launched before the Ministry's much anticipated release of its long-pending equity policy framework and implementation plan.

While we have yet to see what the Ministry's equity strategy will look like, one would certainly hope that, at the very least, the strategy will include such measures as anti-racism and anti-discrimination initiatives, support for students with special needs, promotion of English as a Second Language Programs, or perhaps even the collection of ethno-racially and otherwise disaggregated school performance data. Either by default or by design, the release of this ill-conceived and downright mean-spirited School Information Finder will only serve to create backlash against any and all progressive initiatives that the Ministry's equity strategy may call for.

At best, releasing this "tool" at this moment reflects poor judgment if not incompetence on the part of the Ministry staff. At worse, it smacks of a deliberate attempt to sabotage the Ministry's own equity policy and implementation plan – before it even gets off the ground.

The only solution that will undo the harm that the School Information Finder may have already caused and will no doubt continue to create in the future is to withdraw this tool completely and take it off the Ministry's website immediately. The Ministry should refrain from releasing any new Finder guide until after the release of the Ministry's equity policy and implementation plan. Further, any new Finder guide the Ministry wishes to launch must be designed in such a way as to ensure their compliance both with the Ministry's own policy and with the human rights law in Ontario and the Constitution of this land.

Should the Ministry refuse to withdraw the existing School Information Finder, the Colour of Poverty Campaign will not hesitate to pursue other legal remedies that are available to us and to those communities who are directly and adversely affected by this tool.

Yours truly,

Avvy Yao-Yao Go
Clinic Director
Barrister & Solicitor
Metro Toronto Chinese & Southeast
Asian Legal Clinic and Steering Committee

Member Colour of Poverty Campaign

On behalf of COPC Steering Committee members:

Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services
African Canadian Legal Clinic (ACLC)
Canadian Arab Federation (CAF)
Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO)
Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA)
Hispanic Development Council (HDC)
Midaynta Community Services
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)
Sistering – A Women’s Place
South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario (SALCO)
Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office (TNO)
Prof. Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Ryerson University
Uzma Shakir, Economic Justice Fellow – Atkinson Charitable Foundation

and endorsed by Urban Alliance on Race Relations

about colour of poverty – colour of change

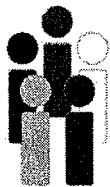
Working for racial equity and racial justice and to build community based capacity to address racialization, the growing racialization of poverty and the resulting increased levels of social exclusion and marginalization of racialized communities in Ontario

As is well documented the gap between rich and poor in Ontario (and Canada) is widening generally, but what is much less well understood is that the impact of this growing gulf is being much more profoundly felt by racialized group members. The increasing “racialization” of all the major social and economic indicators can be gleaned not only from the statistics on income and wealth, but also from any one of a number of different measures – such as the increasing rate of incidence and ethno-racial differentials with respect to targeted policing, inequalities with respect to health status as well as learning outcomes (eg. higher drop out rates among racialized learners), and the re-emergence of racialized residential enclaves. All of these are products of the growing social and economic exclusion of racialized groups from the so-called mainstream of society.

The growing exclusion of racialized group members in Ontario in particular has in fact led to what some social scientists have described as the racialization of poverty. In the words of Prof. Grace-Edward Galabuzi of Ryerson University, we’re creating an “economic apartheid” in Canada, and the trend will continue until and unless action is taken to address and redress the underlying structural and systemic inequity.

The **Colour of Poverty Campaign – Colour of Change Network** is working to build concrete strategies, tools, initiatives and community-based capacity through which individuals and NGO’s (especially those reflective of the affected racialized communities) can begin to develop coherent shared action plans, including creating effective coordinated strategies for collaborating with mainstream policy analysts and institutions, anti-poverty advocacy groups, governments, funders and the media so as to best work together to address and redress this disturbing and growing structural or systemic ethno-racial inequality.

The **Colour of Poverty Campaign – Colour of Change Network** Steering Committee membership currently includes Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services, the African Canadian Legal Clinic, the Canadian Arab Federation, the Chinese Canadian National Council - Toronto Chapter, the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians, the Hispanic Development Council, Karuna Community Services, the Metro Toronto Chinese & South East Asian Legal Clinic, Midaynta Community Services, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), Sistering - A Women’s Place, the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario, the Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office - with two research and academic members - Prof. Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Ryerson University, Toronto and Uzma Shakir, Economic Justice Fellow, Atkinson Charitable Foundation.



For more information, contact:

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