

Programs, Services and Supports for Newcomer and Culturally Diverse Families within Model Schools for Inner Cities

Context and issue

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) created the Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) initiative to help address inequities facing students from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The TDSB is the largest school board in Canada, with over 450 elementary schools. Since it began in 2006, the MSIC initiative grew from being implemented in four pilot sites in the first year to over 150 schools six years later¹. Grounded in a vision of maintaining high expectations for students and promoting excellence, the MSIC initiative is guided by five essential components²:

1. Innovation in teaching and learning practices
2. Support services to meet the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students (including nutrition and after-school programs)
3. Supporting the view of school as the heart of the community
4. Frequent research, review and evaluation of students and program effectiveness
5. Commitment to share successful practices

Newcomer and Culturally Diverse Families

Newcomer and culturally diverse families can face unique challenges and marginalization, particularly as it relates to learning how to navigate the education system in Canada. The Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) program aims to support all families and reduce inequities in their children's educational success and well-being through innovation in public education. Programs and resources offered board-wide, through MSIC, and at the local school-level contribute to diverse families' sense of well-being and belonging in their schools and communities.

Goals of Model Schools for Inner Cities

The goals of Model Schools are as follows²:

Equity: achieving fairness and equity to ensure the lives and realities of our students are reflected and affirmed. The strategic focus is on closing opportunity gaps and removing barriers to support equitable outcomes for all students.

Community: equitable educational opportunities and adequate school resources to allow schools to become the heart of their communities.

Inclusiveness: an inclusive culture that respects, reflects, welcomes, and encourages all students and families.

Expectations: high expectations to enable all students to reach their full potential as valuable and contributing members of society.

Our approach

In 2019, we spoke to TDSB administrators and parents in four Toronto-area MSIC schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas to gather their perspectives on the MSIC initiative. By "parents" we refer to the adults(s) who is responsible for the child, such as the parent, step-parent, guardian, grandparent, etc. Parents were offered the option of translation services. We asked them about their experiences with various MSIC programs and activities, and specifically about what their school is doing to engage newcomer and culturally diverse families. The TDSB website and MSIC reports helped to contextualize the findings.

This report is based on focus groups with parents and interviews with school administrators in 2019.

What we found

PROGRAMS, SERVICES AND SUPPORTS FOR NEWCOMER AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES WITHIN FOUR LOCAL MODEL SCHOOLS

*SOME OF THESE PROGRAMS ARE EXPLICITLY MSIC PROGRAM FEATURES

1. Child and/or Family Focused Programming and Supports:

- School-based collocated childcare program
- *MSIC *Beyond 3:30* program (after-school program for students in grades 6-8)
- School-based Adult ESL classes for parents and caregivers
- School-based parent committees (e.g., Parent council, 'Moms of the World' parent group)
- *MSIC Parent Academy for parents across different schools to connect and share
- School-based co-located *EarlyON Centres (TDSB Parenting and Family Literacy Centres)* for families

"They have a parent program for bringing in your little kids before they start kindergarten...I use[d] it for my son, my daughter and I use it for my other son... It's so good. I come in like Monday to Thursday like when I drop my other kids off from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. I am always there... It was like a daycare but with the parents there. They have... [an] art thing, they have story time. It's like everything was happening when we reached kindergarten. It's like a little room of training your mind what is going to happen. It's like an introduction to school." – Parent, 2019

"We've got an active school council... And we were very intentional in ensuring that the composition of the executive of that council reflects the diversity of the community... I've seen in many schools the executive will reflect the dominant culture... We've got families that have been in [this community] for a number of years that are on our executive. We have some newcomer families. We have got a range of cultural backgrounds and again that was constructed intentionally." – School Administrator, 2019

"The evening programs that they have are so frequent that if you don't have a lot of extra curriculums on the outside of the school you will be very active just attending and being a part of the community. We're talking Wellness nights, we're talking Basketball Programs... there's so many things that it's just every week it's going on." – Parent, 2019

2. Health and Nutrition Programming:

- *MSIC Pediatric Health Initiative (school-based health clinic)
Supporting access to healthcare for families in neighbourhood schools [e.g., through partnerships - *The Coping Power Child Program* (CAMH), St. Michael's Hospital, paediatricians, etc.]
- *MSIC nutrition program (i.e., breakfast, lunch, and snack)

"Having the clinic within the school [is] extremely beneficial. You don't have to find a clinic to go bring your child to or find that specialist or... make an appointment at X,Y,Z. [If a] teacher is there and [notifies] something in relation to the child's learning, they have the hearing clinic here. They have the eye seeing clinic here. They have dental programs that come in. They have resources... One stop. This is model school. All schools should be modeled like this across the city..." – Parent, 2019

3. Community Outreach and Getting to know Families:

A. School outreach within neighbourhood catchment area

- Staff community walks to become familiar with community members, cultures, environments and resources
- Hosting programs in community buildings (e.g., 'Inter-generational book club' for families, etc.)
- School newsletters to communicate with families (electronic and hard copy dissemination)

"... we had a number of new staff and a lot of people who were new to our school - don't know our community... So we did a community walk. [We went] to our buildings next door, we went to [community centre], there is a mosque... we want to know where kids go after school or on the weekends... Well we did it right at the beginning of the school year... there is a food bank in the building... There is a clothing bank. There is an Early Year's centre. We weren't even aware. People had been teaching at this school for twenty years and had no idea ... The staff said that was the best PD they ever had... [Staff members said] it's much better than going through data but to just go and walk and talk with community members. [The students were] so excited to see our whole staff walking around their neighbourhood, in their buildings, walking around." – School Administrator, 2019

B. Welcoming Families in the School

- *MSIC Community Support Workers (i.e., staff to support families by providing resources and programming opportunities, working in collaboration with Settlement Workers, building relationships with families, etc.)
- Schools hosting informal gatherings for parents and families (e.g., 'Tea and Talks', etc.)
- Guest speakers and parent workshops for families (e.g., promoting literacy in the home, financial literacy, managing debt, having a healthy relationship with public health, etc.)

C. Data-informed decision making

- *MSIC data collection with children, families, educators, and administrators (e.g., Resiliency Survey, etc.) communication with families

4. Supporting Settlement:

- TDSB Settlement Workers to work with families
- TDSB translation supports for in-person and print communication with families

5. Celebrating Diversity:

- School-based diversity focused clubs for students (e.g., 'Kings Club', 'Black Girl Magic', 'Black Boys Coding Club', etc.)
- African Heritage Month celebrations (e.g., fashion show, etc.)
- TDSB Black Student Achievement and Excellence Initiative at local schools

6. Equity-Focused Staff Professional Development

- Teaching and Learning Coaches (i.e., they provide pedagogical support for educators)
- Anti-oppression training
- Anti-Black racism professional development (e.g., 'Africentric additional qualifications', etc.)

"My time here has been really good so far. The different programs that the community worker sets up like with the building, the Reading Club and all of these things that's really excellent. It really encourages you as a parent to do more for your child. I think they're trying to equip the parent themselves so that they will be able to have the needed so that they help their children and I think that's really good for me." – Parent, 2019

"I believe the CSWs [community support workers] do excellent work...they work hard and they mediate between parents and staff sometimes and workshops, and they bring community everyday and the support and any newcomer. You find them, they are the first, it's amazing." – Parent, 2019

"We came as new Arabs and we were newcomers. They [school staff] helped us to try to overcome the language barrier. There was always an Arabic speaking employee who helped us at school." – Parent, 2019

"[At our school] a significant percentage of our families are new Canadians or refugees. They are lovely...wonderful...very supportive. I think that many are educated but under-employed so it's a weird neighbourhood in that everyone lives in an apartment...There are issues around density in their living structure, in their homes, in the entire neighbourhood. So, if I am looking at sort of barriers to engagement sometimes it's language - they don't speak English - so that can be a challenge. Sometimes it's around the work. They are working two or three jobs and they just don't have the time. But in this community, parents are very supportive of the school...so we have a day care. We have three settlement workers. We have a nutrition program." – School Administrator, 2019

"I think its ongoing work around equity and putting an anti-oppressive stance at the centre of the work that we do... When our newcomer Black families see the work that we are doing around promoting excellence explicitly for Black children and naming it, it makes them realize we care deeply about their children. We see where there are gaps in provision of services for Black children across the system and how we are trying to address that at [our school] ... that equity and this notion that school is the heart of the community is something that is part of the on-going work that we are doing [with families]. They are not just one-offs. It's at the core of what we do." – School Administrator, 2019

"There were funds allocated to be able to do PD [professional development] providing release for staff... working with staff to talk about their power and privilege, [conversations] around race and identity and privilege and more specifically white privilege, anti-Black racism, some really heavy stuff... some common understanding of the language and how does that impact the students that we serve, the families that we serve... Understanding [that] in order to really impact student learning you need to understand who you are. And understand your own identity and how your identity influences your teaching and your biases and all those sorts of pieces." – School Administrator, 2019

Table 1 Additional student and school administrator quotes

Programs, Services and Supports for newcomer and culturally diverse families	Quotes
Child and/or Family Focused Programming and Supports	<p>“...If we are looking at trying to build a community piece for parents. We have our community fair, we have our STEM night, we have students showcasing their skills so we are able to provide some [MSIC] funds to be able to bring them Black Inventors Museum. Being able to obviously provide childcare so that parents are more willing to come into the space. The nutrition program that allows for students to have a morning snack.” - School Administrator, 2019</p> <p>“[To create our] school council we partnered with [community organization] who already had a network of parents. And viewed it as a leadership opportunity so that they would provide training for things that we might take for granted...I am aware of the informal leaders within diverse groups...The [Moms of the World] steering committee is actually representative of different moms,...so what I did intentionally was pick moms who would be leaders within their sub-communities and...the moms of the steering committee, they go and recruit their friends.” - School Administrator, 2019</p>
Health and Nutrition Programming	<p>“We’ve got a highly subsidized breakfast program. So breakfast is offered for 50 cents ... called morning meals. [The] snack program [is] offered to all the children for free ... snack is for everybody. Then a warm lunch program ... it is subsidized ... \$2 for the lunch or \$35 for the month.” - School Administrator, 2019</p>
Community Outreach and Getting to know Families	<p>“Whenever you need the [community support worker] you can call the school or you can get in contact with her, she is always around.” - Parent, 2019</p>
Supporting Settlement	<p>“We have a Settlement Worker. Two of them. [Their job is] to help people that are new to the country. They both came to the Parenting Centre and told us who they were and if there was anybody who needed help we should let them know.” - Parent, 2019</p>
Celebrating Diversity	<p>“Out of the Black Student Success and Excellence program initiative we created a boys group which is our Kings Club our girls group which is our Black Girl Magic – [the Community Support Worker] runs the Kings Club with one of our teachers...it was a ten week initiative, so they met every Friday to do different sorts of programming around issues [of] identity, public speaking – just different initiatives that might be specific to the young boys. And at the same time, we also have the girls group running that are doing similar pieces... I mean there’s forty years plus of data that speaks to the [systemic] challenges [experienced by] ... some of our students particularly Black students, more specifically Black males in the system and drop out rates ... all those pieces.” - School Administrator, 2019</p>
Equity-Focused Staff Professional Development	<p>“When you look at our early years coach, our learning coach, the work that I have been able to do [around equity initiatives] at [this school] would not have been able to happen without the [coaches] support.... Getting them as part of the support team was the only way this was going to happen here at [our school]. Because I did not have the time to be able to do all those additional pieces, be in all the classes that you need to be in particularly in a school that you are trying to rebuild because it takes many hands on deck...if you want to really improve student success you have to be intentional. And what I mean by that is you have to be very deliberate who you place in certain spaces and the supports you provide to that person.” - School Administrator, 2019</p> <p>“And if the leader, I [parent] come to the leader and he doesn’t understand things,...he would not give the right support to this newcomer [from Asia or Africa]...That’s why some schools, their leader, TDSB, they have to send them to this kind of school to study or to have some workshop or some training if he doesn’t have this kind of training he cannot handle diversity. And like you know Canada is a diverse country and there is no white school, Black school, we are all here, or Muslim school. It is a public school that can contain all nationalities, all diversity.” - Parent, 2019</p>

Recommendations and implications for practice

While the mandate of TDSB's Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) program is to reduce inequities in educational success and improve overall family well-being for historically marginalized student populations, the findings demonstrate that its philosophy along with its enriched program features also provide a comprehensive model for supporting students and families from newcomer and culturally diverse communities.

- Equity, community, inclusiveness, and expectations are the goals of MSIC². These principles can be exemplified and enhanced through the school-based MSIC and board-wide programs and services aimed at improving health and well-being for newcomer and culturally diverse families.
- Positive family-staff relationships and open communication are vital to newcomer and culturally diverse family engagement. A welcoming and supportive school culture helps families to feel that they are not alone.
- Programs offered outside of school and work hours can increase family engagement, and benefit the lives of families and children that may be facing adversity.
- Celebrations and acknowledgement of diversity are an important way to showcase various cultures and ethnicities and can contribute to an increased sense of belonging for newcomer and culturally diverse families.
- School-based access to healthcare and language services can help reduce feelings of stress and 'otherness' that may be associated with status as a newcomer or culturally diverse family member.
- The availability of specific support staff (i.e., Community Support Workers, Settlement Workers, etc.) helps in building networks and social support for newcomer and culturally diverse families, providing opportunities for families to connect, and contributing to an overall sense of well-being and community.
- To sustain change at the systemic level, professional development for staff is needed, including conversations related to power and privilege, identity, anti-oppression and anti-Black racism. Families emphasize the importance of educators and administrators understanding how their own identity and privilege can influence their teaching and their work.
- Including the voices of newcomer and culturally diverse families in decision making around school and educational policy is key to upholding the goals of MSIC, and should help to inform practice in schools and communities.
- Results highlight the importance of school staff outreach and getting to know your community of families.

1. Toronto District School Board. (2017). Enhancing Equity Task Force: Report and recommendations. Toronto, ON: Author. Retrieved February 13, 2019 from: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/community/docs/EETFReportPdfVersion.pdf>

2. Toronto District School Board. (2005, May). Model Schools for Inner Cities task force report. Retrieved February 13, 2019 from: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/Community/ModelSchools/InnerCityReportMay2005.pdf>

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