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Education

Do BC's Schools Need a Discrimination Checkup?

Fed up with stories of racism and ableism, parents call for an independent review of all 60 provincial districts.



Katie Hyslop 22 Jun 2021 | TheTye.ca

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Aisha Kiani, founder of the I Dream Library, says they and their son have both experienced racism in their interactions with the Vancouver school district. Photo by Katie Hyslop.

For a combined eight years, Tracy Humphreys and Kerry Cavers have been holding British Columbia's school districts accountable for the racial and disability discrimination that happens within schools.

In that time the two Victoria-based parents have mostly worked separately, with Humphreys collecting data on kids with complex needs kept home from school due to lack of supports, and Cavers calling out racism in how children are educated.

But several high-profile incidents over the past year have convinced Humphreys and Cavers that the Education Ministry must order an independent review of discrimination — based on race, disability and other factors — in all 60 districts across the province. And now they're working together to push for it.

“We've had many parents raise examples of racism their children are experiencing in schools, until it was getting to a point where something needed to be done,” said Cavers, founder of **Moms Against Racism Canada** (<https://www.momsagainstracism.ca/canadian-chapters>), who identifies as biracial with African and European heritage.

It's not only racism that bothers them.

A press release issued last month by Moms Against Racism Canada and the **BCEdAccess Society** (<https://bcedaccess.com>) founded by Humphreys, which advocates for the education of kids with complex needs, points to the transphobic comments about **Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity** (<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase/sogi>) education resources by a trustee in Chilliwack (<https://www.theprogress.com/news/chilliwack-school-trustee-calls-for-b-c-s-minister-of-education-to-resign/>); an Abbotsford teacher who asked students (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/residential-school-homework-assignment-1.5816491>) to find six positive aspects of residential schools; and a district budget survey (vicnews.com/news/sd61-budget-survey-question-ranks-indigenous-learners-success-against-others/) in Victoria that parents say asked them to rank human rights in order of importance.

Since the **press release** (<https://bcedaccess.com/2021/05/05/press-release-advocacy-groups-call-for-review-of-systemic-discrimination-by-bc-school-boards-and-districts/>) came out on May 5, there have been further **examples** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/burnaby-test-apology-1.6061568>) of **discrimination** (<https://www.trailtimes.ca/news/school-districts-approach-to-indigenous-learners-leaves-victoria-teachers-disgusted/>).

Tackling discrimination — in particular, racism — is part of B.C. Education Minister Jennifer Whiteside's mandate letter from Premier John Horgan. “Our government has a moral and ethical responsibility to tackle systemic discrimination in all its forms,” the letter reads.

Which is why Humphreys and Cavers, inspired by the **In Plain Sight report** (<https://theyee.ca/News/2020/11/30/Anti-Indigenous-Racism-Health-Care-Report/>) into anti-Indigenous racism in the provincial health-care system, are calling on Whiteside to launch a similar independent review of B.C.'s school districts for discriminatory behaviour.

Among the areas they want investigated are:

- An examination of the diversity of school trustees;
- The number of reports of discriminatory actions by school boards and district staff;
- Analysis of each district's relationship with local First Nations and work towards the **94 Calls to Action** (http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf) of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and
- Each district's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion work.

“Kerry came up with the ideas around an independent review, because it was just coming to this realization that it was this big systemic issue,” said Humphreys, who identifies as white.

Neither Cavers nor Humphreys think school trustees are bad people. But B.C.'s trustees, who are mainly white, cis-gender and able-bodied people, can't possibly understand the lived experience of everyone who accesses the school system, Cavers says.

“That's why we feel it's important for the ministry to do a review, because we need to know: Where is everybody in their understanding of diversity,” she said. “What lens are they making these decisions through? Are they just continuing to perpetuate harmful colonialist ideas? Or are they working to really make things inclusive?”

A collaboration turned sour

Aisha Kiani says they've experienced how racism can manifest in a B.C. school district.

Kiani is founder of **I Dream Library** (<https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/bc-news/vancouver-mother-launches-anti-racism-library-after-young-son-faces-racism-in-class-2669058>), an education initiative to promote racial, gender, sexual orientation and disability diversity in the literature and learning materials Vancouver students are exposed to.

Since 2018, I Dream Library has provided the Vancouver School Board with free Black and Women's History Month resources, as well as professional development workshops and curated lists of diverse, age-appropriate children's books to help educators access stories that go beyond the **predominantly white ones** (https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/diversity-kids-books-statistics_ca_5d0bb0f8e4b0859fc3db38c3) available today.

However, Kiani was caught off guard in February when they received an email from a district communications official telling them to take the school district's logo off the **partnership section** (<https://www.idreamlibrary.com/partners>) of the I Dream Library website.

"If I've offered free resources, and you're sharing them, that's a partnership to me," said Kiani, adding the logo had been on the website for two years up to that point.

Kiani understands the district's point of view: no official partnership agreement was ever signed. But when Kiani asked to discuss the issue with district staff, the communications department told them no further discussion was needed.

By early March, the situation escalated, with a lawyer emailing Kiani on the district's behalf.

The lawyer's letter, which Kiani shared with The Tyee, concluded with an allegation that Kiani had taken \$4,000 from the district to produce a video of a panel discussion of Black authors that I Dream Library curated for the district in February 2020. But the video was never produced.

Kiani showed The Tyee event budget estimates they shared with the district, which showed the \$3,300 of the \$4,000 provided covered the honorarium for speakers and host, while the rest paid for a camera operator and a sound technician. Kiani also provided the district with multiple budget estimates for video production, ranging in cost from \$15,340 to \$21,690.

In an email Kiani shared with The Tyee, associate superintendent Jody Langlois said the district could not afford the video services. So Kiani went ahead with the panel discussion, but not with the video.

On Feb. 26, 2020, the district posted its own short video of the event, which included students from Vancouver Technical Secondary, on Twitter.



Kiani said that video was shot by the district's communications department.

Kiani, who is of Pakistani, Norwegian and French heritage, says their treatment by the communications department was racist.

“You’re spending money, since Black History Month, to come for an anti-racist organization,” they said. “I was engaged with legal action from the district because somebody didn’t want to have a conversation with me.”

While Kiani was being pressured to remove the logo, their son in Grade 4 was called a racist slur by his classmate. For Kiani, both events are examples of the direct and systemic racism that occur in the B.C. school system.

VSB has done anti-racism work

The Tyee requested an interview with the Vancouver district officials Kiani has worked with, specifically Langlois, superintendent Suzanne Hoffman and Deena Kotak-Buckley, director of instruction for learning services. None were made available.

Instead, district communications officials sent an emailed statement rejecting Kiani’s version of events.

“The I Dream Library business did not work for the district. The business owner voluntarily provided a curated reading list and accompanying lesson plans to the district for use by schools, which were shared with schools, and the district was and remains grateful for the contribution,” the statement reads.

The communications department acknowledged paying I Dream Library for work, including for the video they maintain Kiani still owes them. “The District also paid I Dream Library to conduct a workshop and posters,” the statement reads, adding the panel discussion was an I Dream Library event, not a district event.

But the brief video of the panel shot by the district opens with the VSB logo. And a February 2020 **post (https://www.vsb.bc.ca/news/_layouts/15/ci/post.aspx?oaid=2ac281af-6042-4f91-922e-9857d6c5f39d&oact=20001)** on the district’s website mentions the panel in a section about activities the district and “community partners” had curated for students during Black History Month.

This is not the first time the district has been accused of racism.

Several allegations have come to light since the discovery of a 2018 anti-Black racist video made by a Lord Byng Secondary student led to two Black students eventually leaving the high school because they **did not feel comfortable** (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2019/09/11/Vancouver-School-Racist-Video/>) there. Earlier this year, the district settled a **human rights complaint** (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/01/30/Vancouver-Family-Reaches-Settlement-Racist-Video-Fallout/>) filed by one of the students over how the video was handled.

However, VSB has also done **anti-racism work** (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2020/11/20/Two-Years-Ago-Racist-Video-Vancouver-School/>) many other districts have shied away from.

This includes:

- Hiring an outside expert to help create an anti-racism policy;
- Working on an anti-racism and anti-discrimination strategic plan;
- Updating the district and school-based codes of conduct to include “racism” and “acts of hate” under behaviour that will not be tolerated;
- Mandatory anti-racism training for staff; and
- A district-wide review of the school liaison officer program that ultimately led to the suspension of the program because of its negative reputation among Black and Indigenous students.

These initiatives have **not been** (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/02/08/VSB-Review-Armed-Police-Schools/>) without their **critics** (<https://thetyee.ca/News/2021/04/27/VSB-Ends-Police-Presence-Schools/>), particularly members of the Black, Indigenous and people of colour communities who say they do not see these changes impacting their children at school.

Trustee president doesn’t support review

BC School Trustees Association president Stephanie Higginson, who identifies as white, says the Vancouver school district’s actions are examples of good practice that other districts would do well to emulate.

“I look at what Burnaby has done in the past year,” said Higginson, pointing to the **anti-racism action plan** (<https://www.burnabynow.com/local-news/burnaby-school-board-approves-anti-racism-engagement-process-3598794>) that district has been working on.

“There’s a lot of really good examples of individual trustees and boards taking on this work in a global way... really looking at it from a whole district and board perspective and creating thoughtful strategic plans about how they’re going to address this.”

Higginson recognizes educators and the school system play a vital role in ending discrimination, not only within a school system based on colonial ideals but in society as a whole. However, she doesn’t support the call for an independent provincial review of school districts for regarding discrimination.

That’s partly because the requested review focuses on some issues that are outside of districts’ control, such as teacher professional development, but also because school boards are elected and have their own independence from the Education Ministry as legislative authorities in their own right.

While the ministry could force districts to do this work through legislation, Higginson said it would be better if districts embraced and pursued anti-discrimination work on their own.

“There isn’t a guarantee that it would be done. But we know through this work and through education in general that the more somebody takes ownership of their own learning, the more impactful it will be.”

The trustees’ association is beginning to do that work itself, including putting an anti-racist view on the voluntary professional development workshops it provides trustees.

Higginson says the association has a vital role to play in not only seeking out trustee candidates from communities marginalized by society, but also in making space for those trustees to be heard.

The Tyee asked Education Minister Jennifer Whiteside for an interview on the independent review idea, but she was not available. An email from ministry staff did not respond to questions about the proposal for an independent review.

However, the email listed the anti-discrimination work the ministry is working on, including a three-year provincial anti-racism action plan for kindergarten to Grade 12, which is scheduled to finish later this year.

An anti-racism community round table, which met in summer 2020, will reconvene again this summer, and a provincewide, \$1.9-million anti-racism advertising campaign is also in the works.

‘It can be transformative’

Greater Victoria School Board chair Jordan Watters does support an independent review of districts and discrimination.

“We’re very well placed to do this work, and it can be transformative. And I think what we’re seeing, being called out right now, is a part of that,” she said, adding she is grateful that both Moms Against Racism Canada and BCEdAccess hold her district accountable.

“Lots of good work has been happening in different pockets of the district, and we need a district-level plan, and we do not have one in place right now. That’s the work that needs to happen.”

Watters would like to see the ministry provide districts with funding to move the school system “beyond this white supremacist, colonial mind frame.”

Cavers and Humphreys agree long-term, sustainable funding and a collective effort by all education officials is required to reform the education system.

“When it’s one leader in 20 yelling into the void, nothing’s going to change,” Cavers said. “But if we have everybody on the same page working towards this, then we can see change.” As for Kiani, I Dream Library is in talks with the Vancouver district to make their partnership official. Asked why, Kiani said the work does not get done if you walk away.

“Me leaving isn’t going to change anything,” Kiani said. “I believe in all the people of this district who want the same thing that I want. I don’t believe I’m the only person that wants it.” 🍌