



Enhancing Equity in Ontario Elementary Education Symposium

PANEL F SUMMARY:

Equity for Students Living in Low Sociodemographic Neighbourhoods

PANELISTS

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Despite having one of the best public education systems in the world, the cost of attending school in Ontario has become a reality. In a panel on equity for students in low sociodemographic neighbourhoods, three speakers explored the challenges, promising practices, and possible next steps for change.

Fees for school activities have become commonplace in Ontario, with families frequently being asked to pay for trips, activities, transportation, technology, and fundraising efforts. However, not everyone can afford these requests and so it is important to have policies and procedures in place to provide support to lower-income families. These resources can take the form of subsidies (i.e., for school trips and activities), lower-cost technology initiatives, school-based nutrition programs (i.e., breakfast, lunch, snack), and additional staffing in schools with increased needs, among others. While these initiatives can be helpful, they are ultimately a temporary solution to the systemic issue of poverty.

“Poverty is intersectional. It doesn’t exist in a vacuum. In fact, it combines and intersects with so many other identities to create layered forms of oppression that our students experience in and outside of our classrooms.”
- Yvonne Kelly

In Ontario, [Indigenous and racialized individuals have the highest rates of poverty](#) (approximately six times more than white individuals). It is vital to acknowledge that poverty is systemic and intersectional with other facets of our identities, such as, but not limited to race, religion, and immigration status. A crucial step to supporting students who are living in poverty is to interrupt and challenge negative stereotypes and discrimination. After all, what we believe about people in poverty informs how we advocate for social justice, with students experiencing poverty often being seen through a deficit-approach (e.g., the belief that there is something lacking in individuals rather than considering strengths and how one’s environment and circumstances have contributed to marginalization).

“[V]ery often, educators overlook... opportunity gaps. That is something that’s behind the achievement gaps and especially opportunity gaps outside of school.”

- Maria Yau

“This is not just a Toronto phenomena, this is not just a large urban center, GTA phenomena, but this happens right across the province.”

- Michael Kerr

When we support students living in poverty, it not only benefits the holistic well-being of students, but it leads to ripple effects in the surrounding environments (school community, family life, neighbourhood, etc.). There is a rapidly growing need for more affordable programs and resources that offer the potential of sustainability (e.g., a community garden instead of a food drive, teaching food preparation instead of only nutrition, etc.) and flexibility (e.g., not only a sports or homework program, but options for students to choose what is meaningful to them). To understand varying needs across different geographical areas, data collection and reporting can play a valuable role in policy and program development. This information can inform system-wide professional development and training on poverty and these discussions must include voices from low-income communities.

RESOURCES SUGGESTED BY PANELISTS

- [Fix Injustice, Not Kids and Other Principles for Transformative Equity Leadership](#) by Paul Gorski
- [Addressing Anti-Asian Racism document](#) (ETFO & TDSB)
- [Count Me In! Handbook](#) (a guide to collecting human rights-based data)

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