



DEVELOPING AN EDUCATION EQUITY PLAN IN THE PRE-K TO 12 EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

1. WELCOMING NEW PARTNERS

After a four-year interruption in equity programming, the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission is looking forward to rebuilding its pre-K to 12 education equity program and working with its partners to make the program simpler and more effective. In the immediate future, this will involve renewing our working relationships with school divisions and organizing the next round of equity reporting, currently planned for the fall of 2008.

We have been pleased to receive inquiries from new school divisions wishing to adopt education equity plans. For the reasons outlined below, it is not possible or appropriate for the Commission to provide school divisions with a detailed template for equity plans. However, we can provide general recommendations and advice to new equity sponsors. We can also indicate what kind of information we will be asking school divisions to provide in their annual education equity reports to the SHRC. These reporting requirements may well have an impact on the shape of individual plans.

2. A SHORT HISTORY OF EDUCATION EQUITY IN SASKATCHEWAN

The education equity program developed in the mid 1980s, in response to studies showing that up to 90 percent of Aboriginal students were leaving school before completing grade 12. Community groups approached the Human Rights Commission, and asked it to use its approval authority under section 47 of *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code* to help address what was widely perceived as a crisis in the delivery of educational services to Aboriginal youth. After public consultation, the SHRC released its 1985 *Education Equity Report*. This report concluded that Aboriginal students did not receive the same benefits and opportunities from the educational system as their non-Aboriginal classmates. It stated that equality in education requires more than an equal opportunity to enter the educational system, and that students are unlikely to succeed if they feel like outsiders in schools that fail to meet their needs or permit discriminatory behaviour.

The Commission initially asked school divisions with five percent or more Aboriginal students to develop education equity plans for approval under section 47 of *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code*. Initially, these plans had five components: hiring more teachers of Aboriginal ancestry; increasing Aboriginal content in the curriculum; increasing parental involvement in school activities; reviewing school policies and practices for bias or systemic barriers; and providing cross-cultural training for teachers. Later, two more components were added: hiring more Aboriginal people into non-teaching positions; and developing anti-discrimination policies and procedures.

The response to the Commission's request was encouraging. By 1989, most school divisions with significant enrolments of Aboriginal students had approved plans. The program quickly expanded beyond divisions with a high proportion of Aboriginal students, because it was recognized that all students in the province need a good understanding of Saskatchewan's Aboriginal peoples, history and knowledge. Today, over half of pre-K to 12 students in the provincial system are in school divisions with approved plans.

During the Commission's 1993-94 review of *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code*, many groups and individuals said education equity should be strengthened and expanded. They recommended that education equity, along with human rights education, be made mandatory in all Saskatchewan schools. They also recommended that education equity be expanded to include gender equity and ensure equality of educational benefit to all students, including Aboriginal and visible minority students and students with disabilities.

Subsequently, the Commission joined with all major stakeholders in the K to 12 educational community to form the Equity in Education Forum, a network and advocacy group. In 1997, the Forum released a policy framework entitled *Our Children, Our Communities and Our Future*. It articulated an expanded vision of education equity:

"Ensuring that each person has equitable opportunity and benefits, regardless of ethnic origin, physical or mental disability, religious preference, cultural gender, family structure and lifestyle, social or economic background or other difference, is a critical priority. Excellence within Saskatchewan's education system will only be achieved when education equity is a reality."

The Forum identified specific groups of students who are unlikely to receive equal benefit from the K to 12 system in the absence of proactive equity initiatives. These included, among others, Indian and Métis students, students with exceptional needs, rural students, northern students, and students at risk of school failure because of social and emotional problems such as poverty, family breakdown, violence, neglect

and teen pregnancy. The Forum also expressed a need for gender equity in the school environment.

In accordance with the expansive vision of the Forum, the Commission began encouraging school divisions to broaden the focus of their education equity plans to encompass all students who experience disadvantage. Some school divisions began to respond to this request; others expressed a need to continue concentrating on the barriers faced by Aboriginal students.

In 2002-2003, the Commission undertook a comprehensive review of its education equity and employment equity programs. During the community consultation which formed a part of the review, the Commission received many constructive suggestions from educators working within the K to 12 system. One event, a focus group limited to Aboriginal persons working within the educational system, was particularly helpful.¹ This group expressed strong support for the education equity program, and for the leadership of the Human Rights Commission.

The Commission made major changes to equity programs following the review, but unfortunately events intervened before those changes could be implemented. In 2004, the SHRC was obliged to discontinue equity services because of governmental funding reduction. The Equity in Education Forum also disbanded at that time. Subsequently, the Commission's funding was increased, and the SHRC began the process of rebuilding equity programs and implementing the planned changes. Over the past two years, the Commission has focused on employment equity. In 2008, it wishes to make the re-establishment of education equity a priority. This process will include continued dialogue on what education equity should look like, and the specific role of the Human Rights Commission.

The 2002-2003 review of equity programs resulted in procedural changes that make the approval and monitoring of equity plans faster and simpler. Details can be found in *Working Together*, a report which can be downloaded from the Commission's web site at www.shrc.gov.sk.ca. This report contains the basic implementation documents of the new equity program: the SHRC *Policy on Equity Programs*; the standard-form *Equity Partnership Agreement*; and a two-page guide on *How to Develop an Equity Partnership*. School divisions can now receive program approval by entering an *Entering Partnership Agreement*.

The review process also led the Commission to change the emphasis of equity programs from approvals and monitoring to support and capacity building. The Commission has committed itself to an approach based on flexibility, accessibility,

¹ See *Aboriginal Educators Consultation*, which can be downloaded from the SHRC's web site at www.shrc.gov.sk.ca.

expansion, innovation and accountability, and to collaborating with its partners in program development. In *Working Together* it stated: "The Commission . . . will view the reporting process as a collaborative cycle of progress and improvement. Every year, sponsors will be asked for suggestions on the format and content of future reports. These suggestions will affect the monitoring guidelines of subsequent years, as well as priorities for resource development (p. x)."

There have been major external changes which will also have an impact on how education equity evolves. The Ministry of Education has made important changes to its own programs, including the development of School^{PLUS} and community schools. One goal of the SHRC will be to align its education equity program with recent Ministry initiatives such as the Pre-K to 12 Continuous Improvement Framework. There has been tremendous growth in the development of First Nations schools since 1985, and this affects the services which school divisions are asked to provide to students from neighbouring First Nations. At the same time, the proportion of Aboriginal students in the provincial system continues to grow, reaching approximately 20 percent of the total student population in major centres and close to 40 percent in northern municipalities. Awareness of the need for anti-racism education has also grown.

3. TWO-STEP PROCESS: APPROVAL AND DEVELOPMENT

In the past, the Human Rights Commission required school divisions to prepare fairly well-developed equity plans before applying for Commission approval. Under the new equity program, an educational institution can receive approval for an education equity plan under section 47 of *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code* simply by entering into an equity partnership agreement with the SHRC. Approval requirements have been reduced to a minimum, and an agreement can usually be prepared within a matter of weeks. Developmental work that would previously have been required before plan approval can now occur afterwards. **It is therefore recommended that a new school division – one developing an education equity plan for the first time – make its first step the development and signing of an agreement.** Although some program elements must be in place in order to fulfill the Commission's reporting requirements, the school division can continue to develop its equity plan after approval has been granted.

4. APPLYING FOR APPROVAL

As indicated in *How to Develop an Equity Partnership*, educational institutions are not asked to undertake surveys or provide base-line data in preparation for entering partnership agreements. Where Aboriginal students are an equity group, however, sponsors will be asked to provide statistical information on the representation of

Aboriginal students, teachers and non-teaching staff by the time of their first progress reports.

By entering a partnership agreement, the school division obtains Commission approval for an equity plan pursuant to section 47 of *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code*. Typically, this approval will be extended on a yearly basis, when sponsors submit progress reports as required by the Commission. **Approval entitles a school division to undertake the preferential recruitment of Aboriginal staff, as well as other preferential measures needed to achieve the goals of the equity plan.**

5. CREATING AND DEVELOPING A PLAN

While education equity partners may choose to focus their efforts on one or more equity groups, the Commission encourages the expansive approach recommended by the Equity in Education Forum. In particular, the Commission recommends that education equity plans address the barriers experienced by Aboriginal students, visible minority students, students with disabilities, and students who experience disadvantages because of gender or gender identity.

Because the Commission has committed itself to the principles of flexibility and collaboration, it would be inappropriate to create a detailed template for an education equity plan. Plans may vary considerably from one school division to another. However, the Commission recommends that education equity plans include the following components. (Please note that these are only preliminary suggestions, and may change in future.)

A. Process and Planning Recommendations

1. Formal, organizational statement(s) of commitment to the development and implementation of the education equity plan.
Formal expression of commitment by senior management. Documents could be in the form of letters, minutes, or policy statements.
2. Establishment of a joint labour-management committee to develop, monitor and implement the education equity plan.
3. Designation of responsibility
 - (a) Director or senior manager responsible for plan
 - (b) Contact person for education equity monitoring, if different from (a)
 - (c) Names and titles of members of education equity committee
4. Communications strategy for plan (internal)
5. Goals, timetables and accountability measures

B. Original Action Areas

Although the original action areas of education equity need updating, they can still provide a solid basis for education equity plans.

1. Increasing the proportion of Aboriginal teaching and non-teaching staff.

If a school division wishes to hire preferentially from other equity groups, it may contact the Commission about adopting an employment equity plan.

2. Increasing Aboriginal content in the curriculum.

Much work has been done in this area by the Ministry of Education, school divisions and others, and there is a need for it to continue. In addition, there is a need to increase curriculum content reflecting the history, knowledge and experience of students of other ancestries.

3. Increasing parental involvement in school activities.

It is recommended that this action be expanded to include the parents of immigrant and refugee students, and of students from other racialized groups.

4. Reviewing school policies and practices for bias or systemic barriers.

5. Providing cross-cultural training for teachers.

Today, this action area would be better conceptualized as anti-racist training.

6. Developing anti-discrimination policies and procedures to protect both students and staff:

Some suggestions:

- anti-discrimination policy
- anti-racism policy
- anti-harassment policies
- accommodation policy

C. Additional Action Areas

7. Accessibility measures for students with disabilities.

8. Accommodation of student needs.

9. Partnership development .
Some suggestions:
- work-education partnerships that will promote the success of equity students following graduation
 - partnerships with community organizations representing equity group members

D. Data Collection and Reports

As an education equity partner, you will be asked to provide the Human Rights Commission with brief annual reports that have both narrative and statistical components. Although the SHRC has not yet developed its 2008 reporting guidelines, they will be similar to the 2002-2003 guidelines (attached). Please note that the SHRC will request the same kind of statistical data with regard to Aboriginal students and staff. You can expect to receive the 2008 guidelines by June 1, 2008.

6. ONGOING CONSULTATION AND COLLABORATION

The Commission's role in education equity flows from its legislated mandate, its experience with discrimination complaints, and its responsibility to promote equality through the approval of equity programs. Section 25 of *The Saskatchewan Human Rights Code*, setting out the Commission's obligations, makes it clear that the Commission has very broad duties with regard to promoting equality and protecting human rights.

Section 25 provides that:

The commission shall:

- (a) forward the principle that every person is free and equal in dignity and rights without regard to religion, creed, marital status, family status, sex, sexual orientation, disability, age, colour, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, race or perceived race or receipt of public assistance;
- (b) promote an understanding and acceptance of, and compliance with, this Act;
- (c) develop and conduct educational programs designed to eliminate discriminatory practices;
- (d) disseminate information and promote understanding of the legal rights of residents of the province and conduct educational programs in that respect;
- (e) further the principle of the equality of opportunities for persons, and equality in the exercise of the legal rights of persons, regardless of their status;
- (f) conduct and encourage research by persons and associations actively engaged in the field of promoting human rights;

(g) forward the principle that cultural diversity is a basic human right and fundamental human value.

The Commission does not work within the educational system, and does not see its role as making detailed recommendations for how the educational system should operate. Rather, the Commission sees itself as a partner in the joint project of promoting equity in education. The Commission will collaborate with its education equity partners on an ongoing basis to develop goals, guidelines, promising practices and resources for education equity.

As equity partners, school divisions are entitled to use the equity seal pictured below in whatever ways they consider appropriate. The image signifies an organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion, and confirms its status as an organization with a current approval under section 47 of the *Code*. Education equity partners have a right to hire Aboriginal persons preferentially. The seal may also be used in promotional materials or correspondence. School divisions wishing to obtain electronic versions of the seal may contact Fiji Robinson, the SHRC Communications Coordinator, at frobinson@shrc.gov.sk.ca or (306) 933-5952.

The Commission would like to thank participating school divisions for their commitment to the important task of creating equitable learning environments, to encourage them in their efforts, and to pledge our assistance wherever possible. For more information, please contact:

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Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission



APPENDIX A

SASKATCHEWAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION Reporting Guidelines for K-12 Education Equity Plans

2002-2003 Academic Year

The reporting guidelines for K-12 education equity sponsors have been revised. The new guidelines set out a brief, standard reporting format intended to collect information in an efficient manner and share it among K-12 school divisions.

For purposes of monitoring K-12 plans for the 2002-2003 academic year, the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission asks sponsors to provide the following information by **October 15, 2003**. Continued approval of your plan will be extended for one year, following receipt of the report in the requested format.

1. **Statistical Report** - data on students from the equity groups, and on Aboriginal teaching and non-teaching staff. (See attached tables.)

Please note that the sample tables included with these guidelines refer to Aboriginal students and staff members. If your plan tracks statistics for other equity groups (e.g. persons with disabilities or visible minority members), please provide this statistical information in additional, comparable tables. Your organization is also welcome to provide any other statistical data that demonstrates progress towards plan goals.

2. A brief (2 to 3 page) **narrative description** of significant activities in the implementation of your organization's equity plan. It should address the following topics:
 - (a) activities or approaches contributing to school success for Aboriginal students;
 - (b) activities promoting an inclusive school environment for Aboriginal and other students (e.g. anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies, parental involvement, activities promoting cross-cultural awareness);
 - (c) recruitment, retention and promotion of Aboriginal teaching and non-teaching staff;
 - (d) efforts to partner with other school divisions, Band/Tribal Councils or other organizations to promote positive school experiences for Aboriginal students;
 - (e) measures addressing physical accessibility and other accommodation needs; and
 - (f) forward planning and priorities.

(Where an equity plan addresses more than one equity group, please provide the above-noted information for each group.)

Please include an assessment of the usefulness of the activities listed – for example, through impressionistic evidence of teachers, administrators and/or students, or through other indicators of success. Your report may include cross-references to other reports on your education equity initiatives, such as longer reports produced for internal purposes or materials posted to your institution’s web site.

Thank you for your continued commitment to equity in education.

**K-12 Education Equity Report
2002 - 2003 Academic Year**

Name of school division:

Brief description of social/geographical characteristics of school division: (e.g. urban, rural, or urban/rural; range of student enrolments in the division’s schools; range of Aboriginal enrolments in division’s schools; and proximity to and relationship with First Nations communities)

Year of initial approval:

STATISTICAL REPORT, 2002 - 2003

**Table 1
Representation of Aboriginal Persons Among Staff and Students**

Division Totals	Total Number (Ab. + non- Ab.)	Aboriginal		Data Collection Date
		Number	% of Total	
Students				
Teachers				
Administrators *				
Para-professionals *				
Other professionals*				
Non-teaching staff *				

* Please list below the employee positions included in each category in your division.

Administrators (e.g. Directors, Superintendents, Principals, Vice-Principals):

Para-professionals (e.g. teacher aides, teacher associates, oral facilitators, tutors, etc.)

Other professionals (e.g. speech therapists, social workers, etc.)

Non-teaching staff (e.g. caretakers, clerical staff, bus drivers, etc.)

Table 2
Student Graduations Within Division

Division Totals	Total Number of Students (Ab. + non-Ab.)	Aboriginal Students		Data Collection Date
		Number	% of Total	
Grade 12				
enrolled Sept./02				
graduated June/03				