



## **Follow Up Report Regarding the St. Mary CSS Yearbook Incident**

March 2021

### **Introduction**

It is the mission of the Durham Catholic District School Board to celebrate and nurture the God-given talents of each student as we serve with excellence in the light of Christ. To authentically fulfill this mission, we have a moral and legal responsibility to ensure that students and staff are able to learn and work in an environment that is free from harassment or discrimination. Both the Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church (#65 and #415) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#2357) instruct us to treat everyone with respect, compassion, and sensitivity and that every sign of unjust discrimination should be avoided. Moreover, our Board's multi-year strategic plan, *Discovery 2023*, identifies Equity as one of our three core commitments with a specific goal of cultivating a positive sense of self and belonging for each individual by respecting and responding to diverse identities and strengths.

This report is being issued as a follow up to the October 2020 racist incident involving the St. Mary Catholic Secondary School yearbook.

When incidents occur in schools, it is the expectation and practice that school administrators, accountable to the appropriate Supervisory Officers, will investigate, manage and respond to the individuals involved and/or affected by the matter. Generally, this occurs at a school level.

In this particular case, the nature of what happened had an impact that went beyond the immediate community. Given the mandate outlined above, as well as the Board's stated core commitment to Equity, it is appropriate in this circumstance to report back to the broader community on the steps and actions that were taken to respond to the incident and the outcomes of the investigations that took place.

### **Background Information**

On Saturday, October 10, 2020 (Thanksgiving weekend), St. Mary Catholic Secondary School arranged an event to honour their Grade 12 Graduating Class. During this event, the 2019-2020 yearbook was distributed to students along with diplomas and awards. Later that same day, it was brought to the attention of the School Administration that in the section of the yearbook where graduates were able to include a personal comment, a racist comment had been attached to a Black student's picture. The student had

## **St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 2 of 9**

originally submitted a comment honouring his deceased grandmother who had supported him during high school which did not appear in the yearbook.

The incident, an act of anti-Black racism was deeply distressing to the student's family, the staff and students of St. Mary Catholic Secondary School, the broader Black community and the Board. Since its occurrence, School Administration and Board personnel have worked diligently with stakeholders and community partners to:

- i. recall and collect the yearbooks that contain the racist comment;
- ii. support and make restitution with the individuals most directly affected;
- iii. investigate the incident and implement appropriate corrective action and accountability measures;
- iv. respond to present student needs and the concerns of the community; and to
- v. continue to identify and take concrete action to eliminate anti-Black racism and systemic discrimination.

The Durham Catholic District School Board recognizes and respects the interests of the community in this matter and is particularly conscious of the importance of its accountability to the Black community at this time. By way of this follow up report, the Board seeks to outline the processes followed, the outcomes of the investigations which have taken place, the ongoing efforts to engage with the community and the actions being taken to identify and eliminate systemic racism within our Catholic school system.

### **Investigative Response and Processes**

A multitude of independent but related investigation processes were initiated upon discovery of the racist material in the yearbook.

#### School

- School Administration contacted their Family of Schools Superintendent
- The Principal, under the recommendation of the Superintendent contacted the Durham Regional Police and reported the incident
- School Administration reviewed the printed copy of the yearbook to identify any other matters of concern
- Launched formal investigation on return to school
- Having identified through the review of the yearbook several other inappropriate, discriminatory and hurtful comments, School Administration contacted all students/families directly impacted to alert them to the comments and subsequently interviewed the students as part of the investigation;
- Interviewed students from the yearbook class;
- Contacted ICT (Information, Communication and Technology Services) to investigate what occurred from a technical perspective;
- Contacted Google, in an attempt to obtain the IP address(es) of the individual(s) who created the racist and discriminatory comments;
- Contacted the yearbook company to review process used for comment collection and approval;
- Established an anonymous tip line

## St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 3 of 9

- Regularly reviewed investigation with Superintendent of Education;
- Submitted all findings to Human Resources

### Durham Regional Police Services

- Conducted an investigation of the incident
- Interviewed students and faculty
- Issued a media release outlining the incident and requesting assistance from the community in providing information to aid in the investigation (Appendix B)
- Established anonymous tip line through Crime Stoppers
- Reviewed electronic records and contacted Google to request the release of IP addresses

### Board

- Superintendent of Education immediately notified the Director of Education
- Director of Education notified the Chair of the Board and Board of Trustees in writing and indicating that investigations were being launched
- Director of Education notified the Ministry of Education's Regional Field Office
- Director of Education contacted the provincial Equity Secretariat to advise of the incident and seek advice
- Director of Education wrote a letter to the Minister of Education and Deputy Minister to advise of the incident and the response to date as well as seek any additional input;
- Superintendent of Education met and communicated regularly with the Principal to monitor the school level investigation and response;
- Human Resources Department conducted an investigation of the yearbook development and approval process conducting formal interviews with key staff including past and present administration; students and representatives of the Yearbook company;
- The Board's Chief Information Officer reviewed the electronic communications; interviewed staff and students and has made regular and repeated contact with Google to endeavour to obtain additional information that might aid in the identification of the individual(s) responsible for writing the malicious and offensive comments.
- A survey of all schools in DCDSB regarding processes for yearbook development was conducted.

## Outcomes

As a result of the investigations which have taken place, the following information has been ascertained with respect to the racist and offensive comments:

- In addition to the racist comment that was originally identified, nine additional students, of various genders, races and cultural backgrounds indicated that their yearbook comments did not reflect what they had submitted for publishing.

## **St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 4 of 9**

- The comments which appeared in the yearbook for these nine additional students were hurtful and malicious and targeted individuals for things such as their appearance and/or academic abilities.
- One of the additional nine comments was racist in nature.
- At this time, the individual(s) who wrote and submitted the comments in question have not been found.

### **How were comments collected?**

- An open source Google forms document was used for graduating students to enter the comments that they wished to include in the yearbook.
- The form required the graduate to enter their name and their comment.
- The form allowed for multiple entries from the same name.
- The form was not password protected.
- The Durham Catholic District School Board utilizes Microsoft Office 365 as its primary platform. When using Microsoft Office, each individual user must sign into the platform with their unique username and password which is linked to their Board assigned email.
- Google forms was recommended by the Yearbook company as it had been used in other Boards, however it is not a platform supported by the Board and therefore the Board is unable to trace the entries back to a user email address.
- The link to the Google form was shared through public social media.
- Neither the Board nor the Durham Regional Police Services have been able to obtain IP addresses associated with the offensive comments that were written; even if Google released the IP addresses, the Board does not have the means to determine physical location addresses associated with the IP addresses.

### **Yearbook Development and Approval Processes**

- Individual schools across the board utilize a variety of different processes to create their yearbooks ranging from clubs to a formal yearbook course and a combination of both.
- At St. Mary CSS, a yearbook course existed. Students in this class worked under the direction of their teacher with a commercial yearbook company to create and publish the yearbook.
- The inclusion of graduate comments in yearbooks is not a consistent practice at all schools.
- Due to the platform and process used for comment submission in a number of cases, multiple comments were submitted over time under the same name.
- Ultimately where there were multiple entries, it appears that the most recent comment submitted was the one that was included for publishing.
- An electronic draft of the list of graduate comments was reviewed by the School Administration and multiple revisions were directed via email.
- Normal communication and approval processes were hampered due to the provincial shut down which was in place from March to June 2020. Because schools were closed unexpectedly staff were forced to adapt with little to no preparation to relying on electronic means for all teaching, learning and

## St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 5 of 9

communications. In non-COVID times it was the practice to have hard copy proofs reviewed in June by committee prior to final approval. This did not happen.

- Ultimately the processes established for collection and approval of the student comments failed to effectively ensure that comments published in the final version of the yearbook were appropriate and written by the student themselves.

### Communication and Remediation Efforts to Date

The following communications and actions have been taken by the school to support the individuals most directly affected by the incident and endeavour to remediate the situation:

#### School

- Sunday, October 11, 2020, a letter from the Principal was sent to parents/guardians and students acknowledging the racist, discriminatory and hurtful nature of the comments; issuing an apology to the school community and requesting the return of all yearbooks to the school; (Appendix A)
- The issue was discussed in class with Student Services supports available in the school
- A list of all graduates in receipt of yearbooks was compiled
- Individual phone calls were made to all graduates to request the return of the yearbooks containing the racist comments to the school
- Distributed yearbooks were retrieved from the graduates\*
- Revision and reprinting of the school yearbook
- Administration has met and continues to meet with the St. Mary CSS's Student Unity group to hear and respond to their concerns

\*As of the time of the writing of this report, notwithstanding the efforts of the school to contact families which included written communication and phone calls, eleven yearbooks are outstanding. Some of these individuals indicated they had destroyed the book themselves. A registered letter has been sent from the Office of the Director with a postage paid return envelope to each of these families as a final to endeavour to secure their return.

#### Board

- Social media statement and apology by Director of Education
- Formal public statement and apology issued by the Board (Appendix C)
- Verbal acknowledgement and apology by the Director of Education at Board meeting on October 26, 2020 – included in online highlights on Board website
- Direct communication with the family who brought the matter forward and engagement in resolution processes
- Meeting with St. Mary's Student Unity Group to debrief, listen and respond to student concerns

## **St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 6 of 9**

- Ongoing communication and response to inquiries from the public as well as numerous direct conversations with advocacy groups and organizations representing members of the Black community
- Full internal investigation and implementation of appropriate corrective actions
- Re-emphasis with all staff regarding the importance of using only Board approved electronic platforms.
- Development of standard yearbook processes for all schools
- Establishment of an Advisory Group and acceleration of the Board's Equity plan with a focus on Anti-Black Racism and Systemic Discrimination
- Superintendent and Senior Manager – Equity, Anti-Racism and Engagement presentation on the Board's Anti-Black Racism Strategy to St. Mary Catholic School Council meeting of February 3, 2021.

## **What we have learned**

The Durham Catholic District School Board is rooted in Faith and aligns our strategic actions to the core commitments of Excellence, Equity, and Engagement. We are committed to cultivating a positive sense of self and belonging for each individual by respecting and responding to diverse identities and strengths.

This overt act of racism has caused us to reflect deeply not only on the processes that failed to prevent its occurrence, but on the broader issue of Anti-Black racism that exists in our schools, our Board and the society at large. Systemic racism is often far less visible to those in positions of privilege and is consequently more easily dismissed or denied altogether. The historic and ongoing impact of systemic and anti-Black racism results in disproportionate and negative outcomes for our students who are part of the global majority which cannot be left unaddressed.

Every staff member is a part of our solution. We have a professional, moral and legal obligation to create equitable, safe, respectful and inclusive spaces for all students and their families. Now more than ever, we continue in our actions and efforts to dismantle racism, discrimination and systemic barriers that exist within our schools.

## **Identifying and Dismantling Systemic Racism**

**The following actions highlight some of the concrete steps taken over the past year:**

- Creation of Equity and Inclusive Education Webpage dedicated to updating the community on our steps and actions (January 2020)
- Meetings with TAIBU Community Health Centre and student focus groups, including the St. Mary CSS Unity Group (began in June 2020)
- Consultation sessions with Turner Consulting to debrief and review the Workforce Census and next steps including other stakeholder consultations (June 11, 2020, July 2, 2020, October 28, 2020)

## **St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 7 of 9**

- Black parent focus group meetings for input and feedback on next steps (ongoing since June 16, 2020)
- Began staff engagement in the conversation around anti-Black racism through the Thought exchange platform (launched June 22, 2020)
- Half day focus on anti-Black racism during the Director's Summer Institute with the expectation that a half-day focus would be repeated on the September 2, 2020 PA Day for all staff
- Engagement of Equity Steering Committee to provide input on Anti-Black Racism Strategy (October 22, 2021 and January 21, 2021)
- Planning for Student Census in collaboration with the Equity Secretariat, Ministry of Education (tentative administration date of Fall 2021)
- Consultations with Black and racialized students, parents and guardians, and the Student Senate from the secondary panel (November 2, 2020 to December 15, 2020)
- Anti-Black Racism Strategy (2020-2021) presented to the Board of Trustees at the January 25, 2021 Board Meeting
- Board of Trustees participation in Intensive Human Rights Program for School Board Leaders (two half-day sessions)

### **Staff Training**

#### Anti-Black racism pilot workshop

- Group A – Oct. 20 and 27, 2020
- Group B - Oct. 22 and 29, 2020
- 40 teachers across 4 secondary schools

#### Challenging System Barriers: Anti-Racism and Equity - training for leaders

- November 3, 17 and December 2, 2020
- Over 80 principals, vice-principals and consultants
- 13 schools are running this series for staff

#### Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP) Practitioner Inquiry

- Learning opportunity with the Ministry of Education Equity Secretariat – 3 secondary schools and a Board team involved in deeper learning about micro-aggressions
- Critical Inquiry Question: How will work with staff (book studies, PD, consultations) on micro-aggressions and discrimination impact feelings of belonging for racialized students
- Board members – System Faith Animator, Indigenous Education Advisor, Equity and Engagement Officer, Superintendent (Academic Services), Superintendent (Equity)
- November 4-5, 2020 – 2-day learning symposium
- February 23, 2021 – Workshop: Growing in Cultural Competence

#### Mandatory Anti-Black Racism Training

## St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 8 of 9

- Secondary staff engaged in a half-day mandatory training on Anti-Black Racism on the February 12, 2021 PA Day
- This training was led by Margaret Brimpong, Senior Manager of Equity, Anti-Racism and Engagement

### Racial Equity Facilitator Training

- 10-hour course in February (every Thursday) offered through the Equity Literacy Institute and EdChange (led by Paul Gorski and Marceline DuBose)
- Board Team of 20 leaders trained in February
- Topics covered:
  - ⇒ How to design and sequence racial justice professional learning effectively around a set of specific learning objectives
  - ⇒ How to pace racial justice professional learning based on the basic principles of equity literacy
  - ⇒ Advanced content knowledge related to the equity literacy framework and its tools
  - ⇒ How to manage resistance

### Human Rights for Education Professionals Training

- Members of Senior Administration engaging in 4-day training in Human Rights Theory and Practice through Osgood Hall Law School, York University (February and April 2021)

## Upcoming

- Anti-Racism Policy being brought forward for first reading at the March 8, 2021 Policy Board Meeting
- Establishment of an Advisory Committee focused on Black Excellence and critical issues in anti-Black racism
- Protocols and training for responding to issues involving racism and discrimination are in development and will be rolled out upon completion
- Learning symposium for all staff focused on intersecting identities and belonging (May 17-20, 2021) – speakers include Dr. Albert B. Campbell and Dr. Kofi Belfon

## Summary

In Durham Catholic District School Board's multi-year strategic plan, Discovery 2023, Excellence, Equity and Engagement are identified as our three core commitments. More specifically we are committed to enhancing relationships with our students, staff, families, parishes and community partners through:

- ongoing communication;
- transparent decision- making processes; and
- cultivating a positive sense of self and belonging for each individual by respecting and responding to diverse identities and strengths.



## **St. Mary Yearbook Report – Page 9 of 9**

This report has been provided in an effort to live out our stated goals and commitments.

The Board acknowledges and assumes responsibility for the fact that the processes utilized in the development, approval, publishing and distribution of the St. Mary CSS yearbook were insufficient and failed to prevent the hateful, racist and malicious comments which appeared therein. As a result, students and their families suffered. We are grateful for the courage of the family who came forward to alert the school to the situation. While it is recognized that words alone are insufficient, our deepest apologies are extended to them and the individuals most directly impacted by what occurred.

Every effort has been made at all levels of the organization to respond quickly and effectively through investigation, police involvement, restitution, corrective action and remediation guided by third party consultants with expertise in matters pertaining to Human Rights. Working with individuals and their families toward restitution, satisfactory resolutions have been reached.

At this moment in history, more than ever, an incident of this nature speaks to the larger, more pervasive issue of the systemic conditions that contribute to and allow anti-Black racism in our schools and society at large. The Board has committed to authentic change through its active engagement with the Black community, students, parents, advocacy groups and local organizations. While we deeply regret the harm that was caused, we have redoubled our efforts to provide culturally responsive and equitable learning environments for all students through our intentional focus on strategic actions to combat and eliminate anti-Black racism.

# Appendix A



1918 Whites Road  
Pickering, Ontario L1V 1R9  
Tel: 905-420-7166 | stmary.dcdsb.ca  
**To Love and to Serve**



October 11, 2020

Dear Students and Staff:

On Saturday, October 10, 2020, St. Mary CSS held a Diploma/Yearbook/Awards drive-thru pick up at the school. The traditional St. Mary Catholic Secondary School yearbook is intended to capture fond memories for students and staff. We are horrified to discover that inappropriate comments were unknowingly published in the 2019-2020 edition. These comments were malicious, hurtful and racist in nature. These comments are not a reflection of our mission, vision or values as a Catholic learning environment. We sincerely apologize to the school community for the offensive, hurtful and unacceptable nature of these comments.

We have launched a formal investigation, in collaboration with the Durham Regional Police Services, to ensure that all individuals responsible are held accountable. Those who produce offensive or disrespectful content will be subject to disciplinary action according to the Ontario Schools Code of Conduct and/or applicable policies of the Durham Catholic District School Board.

The first step in this process is to recall all yearbooks that have been distributed at this point. **All students are asked to return their yearbooks to the school on Tuesday, October 13, 2020 directly to the office.** Further direction will be provided in the coming days/weeks, and we ask for 100% cooperation from all students, parents/guardians and staff.

A full inventory will be completed to ensure that every copy is accounted for.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Susan Duane  
Principal

## **Appendix B**

### **SUBJECT: UPDATE - Investigation into Pickering High School Yearbook**

An investigation into racist and inappropriate content in a high school yearbook continues and nine other students have come forward to say their profiles were also tampered with.

The West Division Criminal Investigations Bureau (CIB) interviewed faculty and students at St. Mary Catholic Secondary School in Pickering this week to determine who was responsible for a racist yearbook entry involving a student. A quotation originally provided by the student had been switched out by person(s) unknown.

Nine other students who brought their yearbooks back said their submitted quotations were also changed, without their knowledge. However, only one other entry had racist overtones. One female student was criticized for her weight; and another for his low grades. These nine students were a mixture of female and male, from various cultural backgrounds.

Our investigation continues and we would like to speak with anyone who knows the person(s) responsible. In order to advance this investigation, West Division CIB is asking anyone with information to step forward and call D/Cst. MacKinnon at 1-888-579-1520 ext. 2529.

Anonymous information can be sent to Durham Regional Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS (8477) or online at [www.durhamregionalcrimestoppers.ca](http://www.durhamregionalcrimestoppers.ca) and tipsters may be eligible for a \$2,000 cash reward.

# Appendix C

**From:** DCDSB Communications DCDSB.Communications@dcdsb.ca  
**Subject:** Statement from the Durham Catholic District School Board  
**Date:** October 13, 2020 at 10:21 AM  
**To:** DCDSB Communications DCDSB.Communications@dcdsb.ca

DC

## **Statement from the Durham Catholic District School Board in response to racist content in St. Mary CSS yearbook**

The Durham Catholic District School Board (DCDSB) extends deepest apologies to all individuals who have been impacted by the hurtful, malicious and racist comments that were published in the 2019-2020 St. Mary Catholic Secondary School yearbook. In a time where we are taking intentional steps to address systemic discrimination and anti-Black racism, we would like to extend a direct apology to the Black community that we serve.

We recognize that words cannot repair the hurt that these comments have caused, and the horrific experience this has been for families and friends within the school community and beyond. This offense is not acceptable in our schools, nor is it a representation of our Catholic values and core commitment to equity.

In collaboration with police, an investigation is being conducted to determine the circumstances that allowed this to happen and the individual(s) who were involved. We assure you that this offensive act of misconduct, disrespect and racism is taken seriously. Appropriate disciplinary actions and/or restorative justice, will be enacted in accordance with board and Ministry of Education regulations and the law.

To our students and staff, we extend our support to assist those who are experiencing heightened emotions at this time. Students who may be struggling are encouraged to reach out to a caring adult to arrange for additional support through our social workers, child and youth workers and school chaplains, in addition to community resources which can be accessed by phone:

- The Black Youth Helpline: 1-833-294-8650
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868

We support the school's decision to recall all copies of the yearbook, and appreciate the full cooperation of all recipients. Circulation was limited to members of the 2019-2020 graduating class and school administration continues to work with the community to ensure all copies are returned to the school.

We also recognize that in our roles as educators, we have a responsibility to lead and inspire change that is necessary to end racism. We know we have a lot of work to do and have made this a key priority as part of our Equity Action Plan. Board staff will continue to work in consultation and collaboration with stakeholders, as we aim to eliminate barriers, and promote an anti-racist culture of respect, belonging and acceptance.

[Click here to view this statement online.](#)