



Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association

November 29, 2021

VSBC Trustees and Management,

We acknowledge that the efforts to create and support anti-racism training in the district through the Anti-Racism Training Day on September 7, 2021 comes from a desire to address, in a more comprehensive fashion, the need for consistent knowledge across staffing groups in connection to all of our work in the district. The 2021 in-service was supported by VESTA, reflected many of our shared priorities, and was a good first step in the direction of a commitment from the district.

The work of unlearning racism, and coming to identify and address systemic racism in our district and schools is an essential part of our work. We urge the district to continue to advance and diversify the anti-racism in-service for VSBC staff, as the ways that we teach about and represent racism can have a significant impact on the types and kinds of learning that will eventually create anti-racist working and learning environments. For these reasons, we offer feedback to the Board on the first Anti-Racism Training Day.

In terms of our process, VESTA's Executive Committee and Staff Rep Assembly, after previously reviewing and providing feedback on the 2020-2021 Indigenous Focus Day, determined that teacher input into the September 7, 2021 Anti-Racism Training Day would be helpful in supporting the continuation and improvement of district-initiated training. We hope that this feedback is received in the spirit of collaboration and generosity, in that teachers deeply feel the need for this training and are seeking increasingly relevant and supportive training in anti-racist and decolonizing pedagogy and practice.

Through VESTA Weekly newsletters, we solicited feedback from staff reps, which we suggested should be representative of whole school discussion. Some schools held meetings for the purpose of discussing, and some collected and collated individual feedback. More than half of Elementary Schools participated in the feedback sessions.

Once we had synthesized the feedback, the input went back to our Staff Rep Assembly and Executive Committee for evaluation and finalizing. The feedback we provide in this letter represents broad consultation with members and significant and deep procedural rigor.

In general, feedback from teachers fell into a few primary categories: Format, Content and Context, which we will outline below. Additionally, some school staff chose to provide feedback in the form of questions, suggestions and concerns, which are also included in the relevant sections. Where appropriate, we have included quotes or comments from members, with the clarification that these reflect more broadly-held feedback.

Overall

While teachers were vocal in their appreciation for the topic and the district's commitment to a district-wide, mandatory training day on anti-racism, there were concerns expressed with both the format and



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the timing of the in-service day. There was an overall frustration with the lack of meaningful integration time and opportunity for dialogue. In the words of one staff, "Anti-racism isn't an 'information' topic – dialogue, not silence, is needed to eliminate racism."

Feedback in general on the content was mixed, particularly in terms of the scope and representation. In general, we hope to support the Board to avoid future trainings that are experienced as "self-serving," a "token commitment with token representation," or a "feeling of completion" or "check-box mentality"

Format

Much of the feedback centred on the first day of school as a challenging time for teachers, due, in part, to the multiple and significant emotional and material efforts connected to this day for staff. There were additional concerns with confusion about the scheduling, especially in the Adult Education system. TTOCs in particular identified a lack of clarity about expectations for attendance, and felt isolated in their experience of the session as a result. It was also noted that the Anti-Racism Training Day was scheduled on Rosh Hashanah, which increased a perception of a lack of internal consistency between the Board's actions and words.

Regarding the pedagogy of the day, feedback on the pedagogy expressed almost universal concern. Not only were teachers frustrated with the lengthy, back-to-back videos that they felt were, in the words of one staff, "not designed for adult learning," but that there were severe concerns about the lack of obvious connections to practice and opportunities to integrate their learning. Some commented that the material was "too dense for the format." Teachers spoke clearly about the desire for meaningful activities with which to build and collaborate on understanding and action, which led to concerns that the activity was a "checking of a box" or "avoiding discussions of racism in the workplace," and "lacking clear next steps." One staff commented that: "the one-off format undermines the message of year-round, integrated anti-racism practice"

In terms of feedback on the format, teachers requested discussion time and prompts, the inclusion of parents in the work, community agreements to support discussion, examples and solutions, and concrete ideas. The overarching feedback was that teachers desired better integration of activities, discussion, thinking and meaning-making, with greater inclusion of both connections to instruction and resources for teachers to follow up on. There was also an identification of need that staff are in different places in their anti-racism journey, and one size, in this subject matter, does not fit all.

A significant majority of feedback indicated that it was important to continue this training in every coming school year, and that they wished for those future trainings to include community building activities, virtual discussion spaces, concrete and applied content, and ongoing training throughout the year.



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Content

The feedback on the Anti-Racism Training Day was mixed, indicating, perhaps, that the content was appropriate and timely for some, and insufficient for others. While teachers generally indicated that they perceived the training as “genuine” and supported the content and aim as necessary and significant, they again noted the lack of disconnect from teachers and their work.

Some teachers felt that the lack of exploration on the concepts and ideas introduced caused confusion for participants, and that there wasn't an opportunity to work through the learning and clarify the presented material. Put another way, “complicated concepts were not unpacked, and there was little

application to the concerns in our school communities.” This echoes comments made in other sections about the disconnect from teachers and teacher work.

Teachers appreciated the presentation of different perspectives throughout the workshops and were much more satisfied and appreciative of the content of Modules 2 and 3. In particular, teachers enjoyed hearing from students, and were surprised and disappointed by the consistent and obvious lack of teacher representation. There were significant concerns raised about Module 1 in terms of the appropriation and discomfort with the way that the voices and words of BIPOC community members and staff were solicited and used.

In particular, the concerns about Module 1 reflected a perception that the session exploited the voices and experiences of People of Colour, and that it “seemed to avoid the concept of racism entirely.” The feeling expressed by many was stated, in the words of one, as: “the session catered to white fragility, minimizing the uni-directional harm of racism.” The perception that Board staff who identified as People of Colour were being questioned, off camera, by their supervisor, that the questions were problematic and the structure encouraged both essentialism through the representation of a single voice being perceived to speak for a group, or problematic notions of model minority or exceptionalism.

Teachers spoke strongly in support of the concept of cultural humility as presented in the training, appreciated the focus on concrete language on anti-racism and anti-oppression, and spoke highly about the need for anti-racism training to include intersectionality as a priority. However, there were concerns about the way that the concept of “good will” in Chief Joseph's opening was misused throughout the interviews as a mechanism of reconciliation, and presented in a way that conflated good intentions with anti-racism. Teachers wanted their union to know that anti-racism requires much more than good will, and that training needs not to centre white comfort, but rather to identify and eliminate systemic racism.

In terms of content, teachers felt strongly that future training needed to reflect those who are underrepresented in the curriculum, connect more actively and purposefully with educators or those using an education lens, and to provide a greater number of entry points for learning.



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Context

While there is some overlap between this section and the previous two, the matters included under this heading reflect some of the broader application of anti-racism work in this district at this time. The strongest message from teachers was that they experienced a disconnect between the words and actions of the district. Teachers felt strongly that the Anti-Racism Training "...did not represent the Board having reflected on their own context or positionality related to supporting BIPOC students and staff."

The lived experiences of teachers caused some dissonance, and many forwarded comments naming the underserving of Indigenous students, English Language Learners, and the understaffing of positions that serve and support vulnerable students as systemic racism and white supremacy. It was felt that these learning contexts, frequent Human Resources and policy decisions that are contrary to equity, and the district's overrepresentation of their own insufficient anti-racism work was brought starkly into focus when the Anti-Racism Training failed to adequately acknowledge the systemic or institutional racism in

the work of the district itself. This generated concern among teachers that the work of anti-racism was not only being downloaded onto staff while downplaying or occluding the role of the district, management and funding in creating increasingly equitable and anti-racist workplaces and learning places.

Teachers noted that while there was a tricky sign-off procedures and a feeling of vigilance and distrust about teacher participation, there was a concomitant lack of clarity on what training Administrators had been provided with, and no referencing of VSB policy or Administrative Procedures. In other words, the accountability felt one-way, and avoided responsibility for the systemic work that needs to be done. Teachers felt this reflected a district perception that anti-racism work is individual and about learning processes and "good will", rather than about identifying and ameliorating the aspects of our work and the school system that contribute to, perpetuate or enforce racism and colonialism.

Teachers questioned what work had been undertaken at the district, management and board levels, and what policies are in place to support anti-racist work in the classroom. They queried district mechanisms for reporting and interrupting racism and expressed concern that appropriate steps were often not taken and support of anti-racist work was not prioritized or valued with time, funding, staffing or procedures. Members also identified that the lack of discussion about racism among employees was a missed opportunity.



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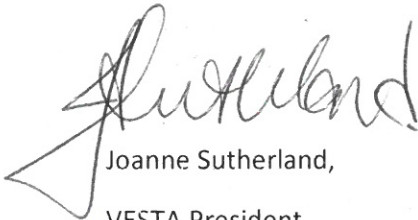
Conclusion

Vancouver Elementary Teachers are wholly on board with district efforts to increase knowledge and support for anti-racism in the district. Teachers appreciated the effort to bring consistent information and opportunities to all staff across the district, but provided some constructive feedback on the format, content and context of the September 7 Training. Our feedback included the need for:

- ongoing, coordinated and situated learning on anti-racism, decolonization and intersectionality
- consideration provided to the role of the district and accountability of all district staff, management and trustees in all aspects of the operation of the Board, not just in relation to students
- consideration of the ways that funding, Human Resources decisions and staffing allocations perpetuate systemic and institutional racism at the district
- an in-service pedagogy that provides opportunities for staff to discuss and actively participate in constructivist learning about anti-racism
- experiences of BIPOC students and staff to be centred, rather than white fragility or defensiveness

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have further questions on this feedback, or to collaborate on future Anti-Oppression training or in-service.

Sincerely,



Joanne Sutherland,
VESTA President