

SUMMARY OF STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE PROGRAMS

**Prepared by The Centre of
Excellence Research Team**

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Introduction

Since 2021, the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement (“the Centre of Excellence” or “the Centre”)¹ has worked with educators, parents/caregivers, students, and community partners to offer programs to support and improve the education experiences of Black² students at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Mobilized by a multidisciplinary team, the Centre of Excellence recognizes the overlapping spheres of influence in Black students’ lives (e.g., school, family, and community partnerships), and the importance of locating, centering, and recognizing students as the main actors in their education, development, and success in school. As we learn more about the impact of the ongoing community partnerships and collaborations, we are developing a complete understanding of how programs and other community partnerships and initiatives can be organized to help Black students succeed while building their awareness of various graduation pathways.

This learning will build a foundation that is meaningfully designed to engage, guide, energize, and motivate Black students, and in turn, show how we can work intentionally to increase their chances of success in K-12 education and beyond. The Centre of Excellence has partnered with and/or offered approximately 15 student-centred programs and initiatives from 2021 to present. These include, but are not limited to, focus areas such as: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), Special High Skills Major (SHSM), Literacy and Identity Development, Career Exploration, Post-Secondary Engagement, Community Involvement, and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR).

Development of Student Programs at the Centre of Excellence

- Year 1: 2020-2021
 - Black Student Summer Leadership Program

- Year 2: 2021-2022
 - ADVANCE: Canada’s Black Music Business Collective, Black Girls Book Club, Black Student Leadership Course (University of Ottawa, Faculty of Engineering), Black Student Summer Leadership Program, Sunnybrook Hospital: Ultrasound High School Summer Research

¹ <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/CEBSA>

² The term Black refers to individuals, peoples or communities of Black/African descent living in Canada. This may include, but are not limited to, individuals or peoples from the Black diaspora with varying geographical, historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences (e.g. African, African -Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, Afro Latin, Afro indigenous, Afro- Europeans).



- Year 3: 2022-2023
 - A Day in Aviation Program: Partnership with the Black Aviation Professionals Network, ADVANCE: Canada's Black Music Business Collective, Black Girls Book Club, Black Student Leadership Course, Black Student Summer Leadership Program, Black Students Adventures in Engineering Program (University of Toronto), Black Students in Business Collective (York University, Western University, and Queen's University), Black Veterinary Association of Canada: Pathways to Veterinary Medicine, Dalla Lana School of Public Health - Pathways to Public Health (University of Toronto), Interac, Intuit, Life Education Program, Pathways to Public Relations (Humber College), Sunnybrook Hospital: Ultrasound High School Summer Research and Meet the Scientist, YPAR Conference (York University)

- Year 4: 2023-2024 (recurring programs)
 - A Day in Aviation Program: Partnership with the Black Aviation Professionals Network, Black Girls Book Club, Black Student Summer Leadership Program, Black Veterinary Association of Canada: Pathways to Veterinary Medicine, Dalla Lana School of Public Health - Pathways to Public Health (University of Toronto), Interac, Life Education Program, Pathways to Public Relations (Humber College), Sunnybrook Hospital: Day of Discovery and Meet the Scientist, YPAR Conference (York University)

As illustrated above, the Centre of Excellence programs and initiatives began to increase over the years. To demonstrate, one of the most successful programs at the Centre of Excellence is the Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP).³ Student participation has increased significantly over the years. Feedback from students who have participated in these programs demonstrates positive student experiences, high level of engagement, developed leadership and analytical skills, gained clarity on post-secondary and career pathways, and academic improvement.

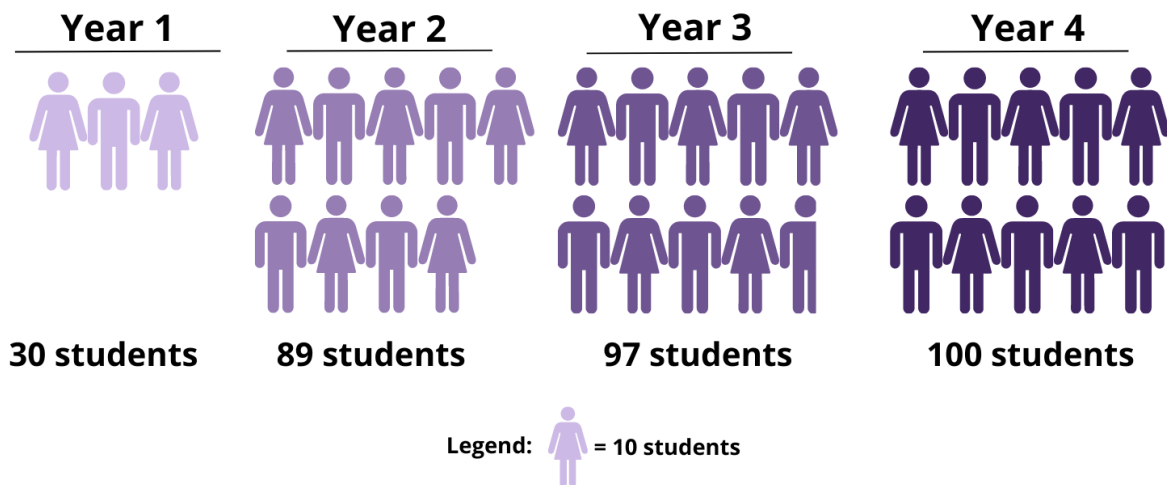
³ <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/CEBSA/Black-Student-Summer-Leadership-Program>

Student Enrollment in the BSSLP

Figure 1 (see below) is a visual representation of the increased enrollment in BSSLP. Each unit in the graph represents a total of 10 students.

Figure 1

Student Enrollment in the BSSLP



BSSLP has increased its impact of providing experiential learning opportunities tied to career and post-secondary pathways. Included in this program is the research component, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)⁴. Using an Afrocentric research approach, Black students engage in collective action both in school and community. It is important to note that the success of this program in particular is credited to the team of Graduation Coaches for Black Students at the Centre of Excellence. The team continues to work with many of these students in their schools and through system-wide initiatives.

Collaborative and Holistic Approach

K-12, post-secondary institutions and community organizations tend to function in silos. However, Black students' persistence and success are directly related to interactions with supportive adults both inside and outside the school community. By eliminating those silos, the Centre of Excellence has coordinated and co-designed

⁴ <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/CEBSA/Programs/Youth-Participatory-Action-Research-Conference>

programs that have afforded Black students with access to hands-on experiences, career exposure, and academic and professional growth. This is done by working alongside TDSB departments such as Continuing Education, English Literature, Research and Development, Teachers Leading and Learning, and Student Engagement Experiential Learning.

Through a collaborative and holistic component embedded in the aim and purpose of each program, the Centre of Excellence plays an essential role to elevate Black students’ learning experiences. The holistic component involves engaging all students in various high schools by communicating purposefully to them in a timely manner and providing all-inclusive comprehensive support services — this is in line with the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement mandates focused on Black students as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

The Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement Mandates

| Students | Families and Communities | System and Staff |
|---|---|---|
| <p>1. Provide support to Black students in TDSB schools to combat racism, navigate complaint processes, identify barriers to success and access appropriate resources (e.g., scholarships, networking, mentoring).</p> <p>2. Identify, develop, and facilitate culturally responsive, and relevant healing practices for groups of students.</p> <p>3. Establish effective mechanisms for monitoring improvement in the achievement of Black students.</p> <p>4. Inform changes to policies and procedures so that all students may benefit from the learning and innovative practices developed by the Centre of Excellence.</p> | <p>1. Support meaningful engagement and advocacy of caregivers for their children in TDSB schools and programs and improve communication to them about Black student success, system navigation and complaint process.</p> <p>2. Engage in strategic community partnerships related to education within the annually identified approved budget for this purpose.</p> | <p>1. Use evidence to highlight promising practices and engage in meaningful research on topics relevant to Black students that are then integrated across schools and at the system level within the TDSB.</p> <p>2. Create professional learning in anti-Black racism and collaborate with other staff in facilitating learning in decolonization, anti-racism, anti-oppression & human rights recognizing the similarities and intersections of various forms of oppression.</p> <p>3. Provide annual accountability reports and recommendations to the Board of Trustees and staff.</p> |



Recommendations

The evaluation of each program is captured at an aggregate level. The recommendations offered by Black students are based on their experience in the programs and are used to highlight key areas of program impact or areas of improvement. These include:

- Understanding the impact of the program on graduation pathways and career interests;
- Developing Black students' awareness of courses offered in their high schools;
- Implementing positive intervention of community engagement and partnership to support Black student achievement;
- Determining whether programs met the criteria for strong, moderate, or promising evidence based on the Centre of Excellence mandates;
- Embedding a strong context of cultural responsiveness throughout the programs that honors, affirms, and validates varying intersecting identities of Black students; and
- Improving programs based on Black students' experience and recommendations.

Key Themes Based on Student Recommendations (Year 1- 4)

While recommendations in the following section reflect different student programs, there are commonalities among the themes that emerged from discussions in reports. Educators, school staff, and community partners are encouraged to examine their principles, practices, and systems regarding the following themes. In addition, all stakeholders are strongly encouraged to engage in culturally specific and relevant approaches to strengthen and support Black student learning outcomes.

STEM and SHSM Pathways

- Afford Black students more hands-on opportunities for them to interact and utilize resources to support their learning in programs such as STEM career pathways.
- Provide opportunities to help students challenge long-held conceptions of Blackness and STEM spaces (e.g., workshops, academic fairs, and community



events that focus on celebrating Black success).

- Improve efforts in mobilizing community outreach and mentorship programs to increase Black and racialized students' access and exposure to professions and career pathways in STEM (e.g., Aviation). Equally important is extending support for students to complete the application process for different pathways to STEM careers.
- Enhance Black students' knowledge in SHSM and STEM fields in schools. In doing so, Black students can make informed decisions about their career path or field of interest.

Black Students' Identity Development

- Educators need to incorporate a wide range of learning models to understand the concepts of identity, racial identity, and racial identity development.
- Create affinity spaces to help strengthen students' identity and sense of self.
- Provide explicit training for teachers and administrators on social justice and racial, linguistic, culturally responsive pedagogy and practice.

Creating Safe and Positive School Environments

- Cultivate safe and positive classroom spaces for Black students, especially girls, to improve and honour their literary practices.
- Apply action-oriented advocacy programs to counter institutionalized anti-Black racism that Black students, families, and communities encounter.



Establishing a Network of Support: School-Community Partnership

- Establish an ecosystem of support with community stakeholders, families, and policymakers at the school, system, and community levels to support Black students' development in SHSM and other programs.
- Partner with parents/caregivers in decision-making processes concerning their child's educational outcomes, while also creating accessible resources for them to learn about different educational programs to support their child's learning.
- Share information with community members related to board policies and procedures, school system changes, and research conducted with Black students. Communication must be clear, direct, and accessible for all families.

Increase Access to Teaching Resources and Support

- Provide equitable access to resources and Black professional support to enhance Black students' academic achievement in different programs.
- Improve hiring practices to foster equitable and diverse representation of Black educators and staff across different programs, including STEM, to support students' needs.

Networking Opportunities for Black Students

- Provide in-school networking and mentorship opportunities in spaces exclusively for Black students with Black professionals who can provide insight on various professional and post-secondary pathways. These opportunities should start at a young age and be frequent and ongoing.
- Create a database of Black professionals, agencies, and professional networks to help Black students build stronger connections between academic programming, mentorship, and pathways which align with their professional



interests.

- Establish a peer network in schools for unique mentorship and educational opportunities so that Black students can have a fulfilling student experience through personal, academic, and professional development opportunities.

Preparing Black Students for the Future Workforce

- Develop Black students' 21st-century skills — including critical thinking, leadership, collaboration, problem-solving, negotiation, self-direction, accountability, ingenuity, initiative, and work ethic — that are integral to their survival in the world.
- Integrate financial literacy skills in school programs, as this is foundational in building Black students' economic well-being.

Professional Learning Opportunities for Educators

- Organize professional learning for educators to cultivate an understanding of identity development among Black students. Professional learning should focus on learning about and recognizing racism, anti-Black racism, and anti-oppression in school.
- Train educators to implement the principles of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies to improve classroom conditions.
- Create training models that will encourage educators and career guidance professionals at the K-12 level to engage, inspire, nurture, and develop Black students' interests in academic programs.



Strategies for Increasing Pathways to Post-Secondary Institutions

- Establish partnerships with post-secondary educational (PSE) institutions, specifically with administrators, alumni, and graduate counselors to ensure Black students have equitable and early access.
- Partner with established peer mentorship programs to increase Black students' interest and enrolment in PSE affiliated programs. For example, increase Grade 10-12 students' access to Black peer mentors in university programs that are aligned with their career interests.
- Provide educational and social opportunities in communities that promote post-secondary and career readiness.
- Leverage partner network of supporting Black mentors to guide Black students in selecting academic programs and career pathways at the post-secondary level. Black mentors are better positioned to support, validate, and affirm Black students' racial identity and success.

Utilizing Student Input to Improve Program Impact

- Develop and disseminate information to students and experiential partners before placement and at different intervals of the program. Students and partners will have the opportunity to understand program expectations and impact.
- Organize additional information sessions to discuss the program with students and experiential partners to maximize student involvement.
- Incorporate more frequent interval check-ins with experiential partners and students to highlight areas of needed improvement and progress.

Duration of Programs

- Extend the duration of the program to facilitate placement exploration, student preparation, and enhancement of research skills, among others (e.g. BSSLP/YPAR).
- Consider extending and managing the time required and needed for the programs to meet the needs of students and program partners.

Student Experiences

| Student Program | Students Highlights |
|---|---|
| <p>A Day in Aviation Program: Partnership with the Black Aviation Professionals Network</p> | <p>“I've known for a while now that I want to become a pilot. My experience served as a motivation booster to keep pushing in my last year of high school to reach my goal. The trip allowed me to picture myself in the aviation industry also at the same time as talking to some familiar faces from UPN and BAPN.” (A Day in Aviation Program, Student Participant, 2023)</p> |
| <p>ADVANCE: Canada’s Black Music Collective</p> | <p>“I was motivated to join the ADVANCE music program because of my passion for music. I've always had an interest in music however, I love learning new things and improving my knowledge about the music industry. Not only this but, also knowing that the group of individuals who are teaching and surrounding me throughout this journey would be of the same ethnicity as me and interested in music as well also made me feel the need to join the ADVANCE music program.” (ADVANCE: Canada’s Black Music Collective, Student</p> |



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| | Participant, 2022) |
| Black Girl Book Club (BGBC) | “I feel like the BGBC contributes to my identity because it helps me remember that I’m black and not alone and there are people just like me.” (BGBC Student Participant, 2023) |
| Black Student Summer Leadership Program (BSSLP) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) | “I also realize that as a university student and political coordinator, I’ll be doing a lot of writing, so I want to use this research opportunity to better my writing skills and have a piece of work to introduce to the McGill administration when I begin my studies.” (BSSLP, Student Participant, 2021) “[Allocate] more time during YPAR sessions for research, etc.” (YPAR, Student Participant, 2023) |
| Black Veterinary Association of Canada: Pathways to Veterinary Medicine | “I would like to say that I am very thankful for you guys taking the time to help us and guide us on our goals even if it may not necessarily be a veterinary pathway, it made me really happy learning more about your experiences and how you guys were really supportive and nice. So thank you and I hope we can do something like this again or maybe even an in-person workshop.” (Pathways to Veterinary Medicine, Student Participant, 2022) “I am excited that I was able to learn more about biology in high school and college from the Black vets! I wish the staff at our schools made Black students know what we need to succeed in these fields.” |



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| | (Pathways to Veterinary Medicine, Student Participant, 2022) |
| Life Education Program | "This program made me feel like I belong to something bigger — a community that understands me. We're not just friends; we're family, and that sense of belonging fuels our positivity towards school and life." (Life Education Program, Student Participant, 2024) |
| Pathways to Public Relations Program | "I would have liked to have seen information about people in PR careers that work for different fields; such as a PR person working for the TDSB." (Pathways to Public Relations Program, Student Participant, 2024) |
| Sunnybrook Hospital: Day of Discovery and Meet the Scientist | <p>"I really enjoyed listening to the graduate students talk about their lifestyles and education before working at Sunnybrook because it gave me more confirmation that not everyone shares the same background and there's no 'perfect' student." (Sunnybrook Hospital: Day of Discovery, Student Participant, 2023)</p> <p>"I feel having the Black guest speakers helped me and other students really envision ourselves in that job or working in that field." (Sunnybrook Hospital: Meet the Scientist, Student Participant, 2023)</p> |



| | |
|---|---|
| <p>The Dalla Lana School of Public Health Program</p> | <p>“One suggestion I have is to explore more health sciences programs other than just Epidemiology. I understand the availability of guest speakers but it would be nice to have quick lessons on the mentors' university experiences and their job.” (Dalla Lana School of Public Health Program, Student Participant, 2023)</p> |
| <p>The Interac Experiential Learning Program</p> | <p>“The opportunity to meet with Black professionals in my future field, learn from their experiences and gain valuable knowledge I can use in the future.” (The Interac Experiential Learning Program, Student Participant, 2022)</p> <p>“My experience was really good. Each session was informative and insightful. I learned about pathways that I didn't really consider before or had much interest in, like information technology. The presenters all had different backgrounds which was really nice because it was interesting to see how each individual got to the career they have now. This program helped me learn that education and life is not linear and it's ok to go at your own pace.” (The Interac Experiential Learning Program, Student Participant, 2023)</p> |



Conclusion

The Centre of Excellence collaborations with community partners, organizations and post-secondary institutions have demonstrated an ability to enhance students' interest and awareness in various course selections. Through student programs, initiatives and exposure to different graduation pathways and career opportunities, Black students at the TDSB can be better equipped to meet their goals. Prioritizing a targeted, multifaceted outreach approach continues to create positive conditions for the effective involvement of educators, community partners, and institutions. With that in mind, the Centre of Excellence understands that Black student perceptions, experiences, expectations, and values are related to their goals and aspirations. Therefore, we will continue to provide program opportunities that focus on their needs, success and well-being.