

## Parents pen public letter alleging 'Black children in UGDSB are not safe'

Written By Robin George

Some parents are frustrated by how the Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) responds to anti-Black racism and are calling on the Ministry of Education to conduct an equity audit of the board.

Following more than a year of incidents involving their children, Rockwood residents Nia James and Nyesha Ward, along with a group of other UGDSB parents, penned a public letter to education minister Paul Calandra outlining what they call 'deeply entrenched and highly dangerous anti-Black racism within the UGDSB.'

About 200 people signed the letter within a week of its release.

The Upper Grand Black Parent Council, a grassroots group of UGDSB families with Black children and their allies that advocates for Black children in the UGDSB, is behind the letter.

'Though the group has been brought together through trauma, we are working to ensure that UGDSB is effectively addressing and dismantling anti-Black racism specifically,' James said.

The letter's co-signers include Be the Change, Parents of Black Children, Wellington Water Watchers, Policing-Free Schools and the Black Teachers Association of the Halton Catholic District School Board.

'Despite years of advocacy by Black families and organizations like Parents of Black Children, concerns of Black communities have been ignored by UGDSB's senior administration,' the letter states.

It claims systemic racism within the UGDSB has led to Black students experiencing chronic and debilitating anxiety, trauma, tics, self-harm and suicidal ideation.

UGDSB director of education Peter Sovran and human rights, equity and accessibility commissioner Alicia Ralph strongly refuted the letter's claims.

'At the UGDSB, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to dismantling systemic anti-Black racism and advancing human rights throughout our schools,' Ralph stated in a media statement issued in response to the letter.

'We recognize the lived experience of Black students and families and are dedicated to fostering environments where every student feels affirmed, safe and supported.'

In a separate statement, Sovran added, 'We will not allow misinformation, personal attacks, or inflammatory narratives to undermine the real, difficult, and ongoing work being done by many in our system.'

### **Letter names Ralph, Sovran**

The public letter accuses Ralph of 'inaction' and 'failing to hold the board accountable.'

In response, Ralph stated board officials are 'deeply concerned by the use of public platforms to launch personal attacks' particularly those directed at Black leaders within our system. This must stop.

Sovran added, 'The public targeting of Black women in leadership' is not only deeply unjust, but emblematic of the very inequities we are working to dismantle.'

The public letter also names Sovran, alleging he "has refused to engage with our families and has consistently failed to directly respond to our emails."

There have been multiple emails from James, Ward and their husbands asking to meet Sovran to discuss anti-Black racism, along with dozens of emails to at least 20 UGDSB staff members, board officials and trustees regarding anti-Black racism.

According to Ralph, "many of the referenced matters (in the letter) have already been addressed through school-based and systemic processes."

The letter does not refer to any specific occurrences, and James and Ward say their concerns have not been resolved.

### **Group requests meeting**

The letter asks the minister to ensure UGDSB's senior leaders, including Sovran, meet with affected families and groups, including Parents of Black Children, to address issues directly.

(Parents of Black Children is a not-for-profit organization that advocates for Black students facing racism at school.)

The letter also requests an immediate, "third-party equity audit of UGDSB's policies and practices to assess and provide actionable recommendations for eliminating anti-Black racism in both the short and long term [and] clear timelines for implementing the audit's recommendations and regular public updates on UGDSB's progress in addressing these issues."

The statements from Sovran and Ralph do not mention any of the requests, but list "bold, concrete" steps the UGDSB has taken to address anti-Black racism since 2021, including:

- " supporting Black students through partnerships, programming and Black student unions;
- " offering anti-racism training;
- " launching an Africentric Grade 12 English course;
- " implementing identity-based harm reporting tools;
- " completing a third-party review of its anti-racism and anti-oppression work and and developing localized plans;
- " advocating to the Ministry of Education for a graduation coach for Black students; and
- " establishing a human rights, equity and accessibility office.

"None of this work is symbolic," Sovran states, "our day-to-day operations and decision making are grounded in a human rights framework."

The board is also working on a human rights policy that Ralph says "is designed to eliminate systemic barriers, uphold dignity, and offer clear mechanisms for addressing discrimination."

The Upper Grand Black Parent Council states in its letter the draft policy does not specifically address anti-Black racism, which "reflects the board's highly problematic approach to dismantling anti-Black racism and demonstrates a lack of commitment of addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by Black students."

Ralph said board officials "welcome dialogue that is constructive, respectful, and solutions oriented [and] remain committed to working with all families and partners who share our vision for an inclusive, equitable and safe public education system."

"The work continues and it must be done in collaboration, not conflict," Sovran added.

The Ministry of Education officials did not respond to requests for comment.

To read the letter visit [win.newmode.net/ugdsb-feb2025](http://win.newmode.net/ugdsb-feb2025).