Ontario's Student and Family Advocate Program

Annual Report:
April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024

www.studentandfamilyadvocate.com

Everyone deserves a place to feel safe

The past fiscal year has been a period of significant achievements and growth for the Student and Family Advocate Community of Practice (SFA COP). Our collaborative efforts have focused on enhancing advocacy, increasing access to educational and legal support, and strengthening the capacity of our community to support Black families and students across Ontario.

The year in review

The 2023-2024 year has truly highlighted the Student and Family Advocate's crucial role in bridging gaps in the education system, advocating for systemic change, and providing direct support to Black students and thier parents who are experiencing systemic barriers, anti-Black racism and oppression within the education and other systems. Our work not only changes lives in the immediate but also lays the groundwork for a more equitable and inclusive future in the education and adjacent systems. Through the unwavering commitment and collaborative efforts of the SFA organizations, we continue to provide support and offer hope for change for Black students and families across Ontario.

The annual survey conducted provides crucial insights into the operations and impact of the Student and Family Advocate (SFA) program over the year. The responses collected from six organizations revealed important details about the services provided and the demographics of those served.

Service Delivery and Reach:

Organizational Participation: Out of several organizations listed, only six responded, including the Centre for Resilience & Social Development, For Youth Initiative in Toronto, HM Youth Foundation, Markham African Caribbean Canadian Association, Midaynta Community Services, and Parents of Black Children Canada.

Geographical Reach: The SFA services were delivered across various regions, with the most significant coverage in the City of Toronto (66.67%) and notable activity in York Region and Ottawa (both 33.33%).

“The proactive approach in addressing systemic issues has not only resolved immediate concerns but has laid the groundwork for substantial systemic changes.”

SFA Survey respondent

564

Number of students served

300+

Parents and/or guardians supported

1/3rd

of cases from York Region and Ottawa

Key Themes of the Year

- **Advocacy and Legal Support:** We've made significant strides in providing targeted legal support, addressing systemic issues within the education system, particularly anti-Black racism.
- **Capacity Building and Educational Support:** Numerous workshops and training sessions were conducted to enhance the capabilities of SFAs and their host organizations.
- **Community Engagement:** Our focus has also been on increasing parent and community engagement, which is crucial for the comprehensive support of the students.

Impact on Individuals:

Students Served: A total of 589 students received services this year. The breakdown across educational levels shows services provided to elementary (127), middle (131), and high school students (310), with a few in post-secondary (16) and not in school (16).

Parents and Guardians: Services were extended to approximately 467 parents/guardians, highlighting the program's family-centric approach.

Student Demographics: The racial distribution of the students served includes a significant proportion of Black (280), Bi-Racial (11), and smaller numbers across other racial groups including East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Indigenous.

Program Successes

The successes of the Student and Family Advocate (SFA) program this year have been significant and diverse, demonstrating the program's impact across multiple areas:

- **Legal Support and Advocacy:** The SFA program has been instrumental in addressing complex legal challenges that families face. Additionally, the program provided essential legal guidance to undocumented students, helping them access education rights, and supported a teen mother in securing housing and financial aid.
- **Family and Community Engagement:** SFAs have been active in maintaining continuous contact with families, particularly in York Region and beyond. This consistent engagement has been crucial in providing timely support and addressing needs.
- **Addressing Racism and Bullying:** In response to racism and bullying, some SFAs facilitated a healing circle involving Black Student Association (BSA) students and their non-Black peers, focusing on the sensitive issue of racial slurs during Black History Month. This event not only allowed BSA students to express their perspectives but also educated their peers, promoting a more inclusive school environment.

Educational Workshops and Policy Advocacy: SFAs identified a success as facilitating a deep understanding of educational policies enabled effective advocacy, leading to significant outcomes such as the reinstatement of students in schools and the removal of suspensions. Additionally, workshops for parents have been notably successful, empowering them to better understand and navigate the educational system to advocate for their children's rights.

Challenges

The Student and Family Advocates (SFAs) in Ontario confront a myriad of obstacles, entrenched in systemic racial inequities, that hinder their capacity to support and empower students and families. Grounded in anti-oppression and critical race theories, their experiences highlight a pervasive resistance within educational systems. School boards often exhibit a reluctance to engage, effectively gatekeeping critical conversations and silencing the voices of those most affected by educational disparities. This exclusion is a manifestation of institutional power structures that prioritize certain narratives over others, particularly marginalizing Black and racialized communities.

These issues call for a strategic reevaluation of how educational systems interact with and respond to marginalized communities, emphasizing the need for genuine collaboration and reform. Crucially, ministerial support from both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism is imperative as sponsors and stewards of the Student and Family Advocate Program through the Black Youth Action Plan. Only through a concerted effort to dismantle these barriers, bolstered by governmental backing, can SFAs hope to achieve an educational environment that is truly inclusive and equitable.

The Student and Family Advocates (SFAs) have identified several significant challenges they faced over the year, impacting their ability to support and advocate effectively for students and families:

1. **Resistance from School Boards:** One of the major obstacles has been the denial of meeting requests by school boards, which has hindered the SFAs' ability to advocate for families and discuss critical issues impacting students directly with educational leaders.
2. **Parent Engagement:** SFAs have struggled to engage parents adequately, which is crucial for effective advocacy and support. Despite efforts to increase involvement through workshops and parent-teacher meetings, these initiatives have not yielded the desired results, partly due to the difficulty in building trust with parents who are navigating complex challenges with their teens.
3. **Promoting the SFA Program**: Accessing platforms to promote the SFA Program and its benefits has been challenging, limiting the program's visibility and reach to potential beneficiaries who could greatly benefit from the support offered.
4. **Reception of Anti-Black Racism Feedback:** A significant issue has been the defensive responses from white students, educators, and parents to feedback regarding anti-Black racism (ABR). This resistance complicates the process of addressing and rectifying systemic issues within educational environments.
5. **Navigating Administrative Barriers:** SFAs have found it particularly challenging to navigate the complexities of school administration systems, including uncovering and addressing loopholes that adversely affect students, which has been a persistent hurdle in advocacy efforts.

These challenges underscore the need for strategic approaches to improve engagement with school boards, enhance parent participation, increase program visibility, manage sensitive feedback constructively, and effectively navigate administrative systems to advocate for necessary changes.

RESOURCES:

Resources provided to SFA organizations this year:

This year, the Student and Family Advocates (SFA) Community of Practice (CoP) has been instrumental in developing and disseminating resources and hosting capacity-building workshops that directly address the challenges faced by Black families in educational settings. They successfully created four new one-page resources, each tailored to educate and empower Black families on critical issues:

Reporting Anti-Black Racism: This resource details the mechanisms for reporting anti-Black racism within school boards and communities across the province, providing clear guidelines on navigating these processes effectively.
The Connection between Children's Aid Societies and the Education System: This guide explores the relationships between Children's Aid Societies and educational systems, offering insights into their impact on Black families and advocacy strategies.
Navigating Police Interactions: This resource educates families on their rights and best practices for safely managing interactions with police in educational settings.
Advocacy Framework: Know Your Rights: This page offers a comprehensive overview of students' and families' rights within the education system, with strategies for effective advocacy.
These resources are available on the SFA's collaboration space and their website, enhancing accessibility and support for the community.

In addition to resource development, the SFA CoP held six significant meetings focusing on capacity building within the SFA network, including an in-person SFA Conference. The workshops covered topics such as legal supports, school board reporting tools, rights for children and families, mental health, trauma, anti-Black racism, advocacy coalition-building, securing funding, and strategic planning. These sessions were crucial in enhancing the SFAs' knowledge and effectiveness in addressing systemic issues and advocating for equitable educational opportunities.

6

SFA Workshops held

7

Leadership meetings for SFA Executive Directors and Senior Leaders

1

In-person confernce for the SFA Communtiy

WORKING TOGETHER *In partnership*

THE SFA ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The "Student and Family Advocate Conference: Empowerment Through Collaboration" held on March 8th at the Rexdale Community Hub in Toronto was a pivotal event for the Student and Family Advocate (SFA) community. This in-person conference successfully united representatives from nearly all SFA organizations, creating a dynamic platform for unity and shared learning.

The theme of the conference, "Empowerment Through Collaboration," was fully embodied through the day's activities, which focused on exploring innovative advocacy approaches, exchanging valuable insights, and fostering meaningful discussions. The inclusion of family voices in our panel discussions enriched the conversations, ensuring that the real-world impacts and perspectives were highlighted.

Dr. Ann Lopez, the keynote speaker, delivered a powerful exploration of the history and evolution of advocacy, providing both inspiration and practical guidance to our advocates. Her insights offered a deep dive into the roots and progression of advocacy efforts, equipping attendees with a stronger foundation for their work.

The conference was marked by high energy and active participation from all attendees, underscoring the passion and commitment within the SFA community towards advancing advocacy and empowerment. The event not only facilitated a valuable exchange of knowledge and strategies but also strengthened the connections among all participants. This has set the stage for continued collaboration and mutual support within the SFA network, promising to enhance future advocacy efforts and impact.

LOOKING AHEAD

As the Student and Family Advocate Community of Practice (SFA COP), we have engaged in collaborative sessions to explore strategies for sustainable growth and enhanced effectiveness in supporting Black students and families. These sessions have been pivotal in gathering feedback and shaping a forward-looking strategy for our community.

Vision and Strategic Directions

We are committed to creating more equitable systems in childcare, education, and justice, aiming to integrate and streamline our activities to better serve the needs of Black students. Our community has reached a strong consensus on developing strategic priorities focused on fund development, collaboration, and enhancing equity, diversity, and access. There is also substantial support for formalizing our structure to boost our impact and ensure long-term sustainability.

Recommendations

To solidify our foundation and expand our reach, we are advised to:

- Consider establishing a social purpose multi-stakeholder cooperative to provide a more robust organizational structure.
- Take advantage of shifting social, economic, and political landscapes to uncover new funding opportunities and tackle systemic issues more effectively.
- Develop a comprehensive strategic plan that prioritizes collaboration, builds community capacity, and fosters inclusion.
- Strengthen our partnerships with academic institutions, government agencies, and international organizations to enhance our advocacy and research capabilities.

Our informative sessions have underscored the necessity for continuous dialogue to leverage the strengths of our CoP and address the systemic challenges faced by Black children and families in the education system. There is a palpable drive among our members to transform our CoP into a sustainable entity that can effectively counteract anti-Black racism, demonstrating our deep commitment and vibrant energy towards this cause.

Thank you!

to all SFA organizations and SFAs across this province for your continued support of Black students and families!

It is incorrect to think of a struggle as a series of individual acts. It is a collective struggle.

Huey Newton

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