

Dismantling Systemic anti-Black Racism:

A Participation Process for the Nova Scotia Teachers Union

Context

The past several years have highlighted the unquestionable realities of systemic anti-Black racism and violence in action at home and abroad:

Santina Rao.

Breonna Taylor.

Trayvon Martin.

Ahmaud Arbery.

George Floyd.

These are but a few on the long list of Black people who have RECENTLY suffered from or lost their lives to brutal anti-Black violence and racism.

2020 has seen systemic and institutionalized racism rise to the forefront through unprecedented, sustained global protests and social media attention. Leaders within the global Black community have called upon all people, but especially white people and leaders, to act to dismantle systemic racism and take tangible action to realize a truly just society for Black people and all racially oppressed peoples.

In response to this call, white people have an opportunity AND obligation to engage in the real work of tearing down anti-Black racist systems.

In some places, municipal governments are passing legislation to defund police regimes and reallocate that funding to community services to address systemic anti-Black racist policies and realities of housing, education, incarceration, poverty, unemployment, addiction and many other complex social problems.

However, dismantling anti-Black systems needs to happen in other vital social institutions: democratic governments, public education, universities, churches and faith communities, unions and professional associations and colleges. Perhaps, for the first time, there is widespread acknowledgement that the systems at the heart of our society have played key roles in perpetuating anti-Black racism and the harms it creates.

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Systemic anti-Black Racism in Nova Scotia's Public Schools

The incredible scholarship, comprehensive consultation and critical analysis of 1994's *BLAC Report*¹ made it clear the public education system in Nova Scotia was rife with systemic anti-Black racism. It showed that Black students, as bright and talented as any others, are consistently subjected to lesser grades, lower graduation rates, higher placement on Individual Program Plans, more severe disciplinary consequences and high rates of suspension and expulsion, among many other harms.

While data about the experiences of Black teachers, principals and school staff are not as visible, Black Nova Scotians remain grossly underrepresented in both teaching and school/education leadership ranks. Further, Black staff report that they face serious discipline and performance reviews by human resources, achieve permanent employment status more slowly and experience harassment, racism and abusive behaviour far more often than their white colleagues.

The *BLAC Report* left no doubt that all of this was true, and had been for a very long time. A case for change was plainly made. It also offered specific recommendations that would have realized justice if implemented. Yet, little happened.

Fifteen years later, Dr. Enid Lee's *Reality Check*² reiterated that these realities persisted. Once again, a plan to right these wrongs was provided.

Eleven years passed, and still, in 2020, the vast majority of the recommendations from both reports have effectively been ignored by "the system." The harms resulting from systemic anti-Black racism in Nova Scotia's schools continue with few improvements to show for over twenty-five years of opportunity to make change.

¹ *BLAC Report on Education: Redressing Inequity- Empowering Black Learners*. Nova Scotia: Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994.

² Lee, E., & Marshall, C. (2009). *Reality Check* (Rep.). NS: EnidLee Consultants.

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White Teachers/Unionists: How We Can Engage in the Work

White Nova Scotia Teachers Union members are citizens and can/ABSOLUTELY SHOULD support/demand systemic change to eradicate anti-Black racism in all public institutions. Mobilizing and lobbying our elected representatives to enact legislation and policy that dismantle systemic racism are most definitely actions we need to be consistently engaged in to realize justice in society at large.

However, that's not enough.

As white teachers, school counsellors and school-based specialists in Nova Scotia, it's up to us to act now to tear down systemic anti-Black racism in our schools. It's an undeniable reality in our schools for students and staff.

I referenced "the system" earlier *on purpose* because Nova Scotia's public education system is not a flow chart, a physical manufacturing process featuring a multi-faceted production line or a series of independent component processes that dovetail to result in something complete.

The fact is that WE are the system. Inaction that has perpetuated anti-Black racism in our schools isn't some faceless process's problem. While it unquestionably belongs to political and system leaders, it's equally true that it belongs to me and to every teacher in this province- most importantly, white teachers.

Some may ask: "But how? Why?"

Because. White teachers, school counsellors and school-based specialists are lead actors- we make up the vast majority of teaching and specialist professionals in public schools in Nova Scotia. Schools don't run without us.

It's our professional and ethical duty to lead the work of both learning what systemic anti-Black racism is and how it works, and take the steps required to make our classrooms and schools are places where it never happens again.

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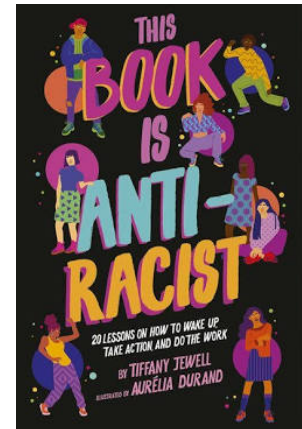
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So, How Do We Do This Work?

As a first step, I invite you to join me in completing a reading/reflection project.

If we are to lead and engage in the work, we must first understand the ideology and concepts that support and sustain white dominance and anti-Black racism so we can create a more just present and future.

This project will involve reading a shared text, *This Book is Anti-Racist*, by Tiffany Jewell, a Black biracial teacher from the United States of America. Tiffany wrote the book for early teen-aged students.



You can order a physical copy from your favourite bookseller, or purchase and use the Kindle edition on your tablet, phone or notebook computer.

I chose it for two reasons:

1. Because it is accessible- it helps the reader understand deeply complex issues in relatable ways
2. Because it is a resource that we could use with students in our schools and classrooms after we work through it.

This Book is Anti-Racist is designed to educate readers about critical concepts (privilege, identity, race, prejudice, discrimination, racism, systemic racism, for starters) and self-identify personally held ideas, beliefs and classroom/workplace practices that contribute to the harms of systemic anti-Black racism.

As part of reading this book, we will complete a series of activities. To do so, you will need a journal. I recommend a notebook of some sort with at least 80 pages (my grade 10 English teacher self immediately thinks of the kind of hardcover notebook common at Dollar stores I use with students for Reading/Writing workshop, but you decide what works best for you!).

Over the next several months, we will complete a series of readings and connected reflective activities as a foundation for continued action.

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Together vs. Alone

Earlier we reflected on how “the system” of public education in Nova Scotia is us. There are a whole lot of individuals, who together, make up “the system” our province relies on to support students and families. *We don't teach and support students in isolation- we do this work as part of a wider team.* If you're like me, you're immediately thinking of teaching/education peers at school or work that you can't imagine supporting kids without. Hold that thought and feeling.

Beyond reading and journaling, I'm going to encourage you to participate in this project with at least one partner who is also a white teacher, school counsellor, school-based specialist, educational assistant or school administrator. I'm going to encourage you to make a habit of discussing each reading and your reflective work after each activity. You can meet with your partner in person (respecting current physical distancing requirements), through FaceTime or other video meeting technology of your choice or by phone.

Here's why partnership is a critical component of participation: sharing the process with other white people normalizes accountability- that we challenge others, and that we need others to challenge us. Additionally, doing this work with other white people is an important step to normalizing anti-Black racism discussion, consideration and work for white people.

Black people have never had the luxury of not being immersed in this thinking and work.

For white people to truly contribute to the process in a manner that our privilege demands, we must learn to be at home with the discomfort and struggle anti-Black racism creates in society and the lives of everyone around us.

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The Set Up

The next part is pretty straightforward. Attached is a schedule that lays out which chapters to read and which activities to complete by specific due dates. *Consider adding these dates/details as reminders/invites on your smartphone or digital calendar to stay on track with your partner!*

At the end of each “section,” I invite you to join me for a virtual gathering online. These gatherings will happen around the time that the NSTU’s Provincial Executive meets during the school year.

These gatherings will be opportunities to hear and share with a wider group of white teachers, school counsellors and school-based specialists about what we’ve learned, what actions we know we must take in our schools and classrooms, and what adjustments we will make as we care for and support our students and colleagues.

What about NSTU leadership? Leading by example matters!

I couldn’t agree more.

That’s why, as the person responsible for the work and business of the Provincial Executive, our Provincial Executive leadership development process will include participation in the process I am sharing with you here. Leaders can’t expect frontline members to do work they don’t engage in themselves. Know that when you attend a gathering, your provincial union leadership has already done and shared the same work you’re being invited to do.

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Why This? Why Now? Why Us?

Some of you may be wondering about all the times I've referenced "white teachers..." in this outline, and why the focus of this project is on engaging white teachers and union members.

It's not by mistake.

Of course, it doesn't mean that Black teachers, school counsellors or school-based specialists can't participate. Of course, they're welcome and there's no question that their lived experiences as former students, current colleagues and fellow union members matter deeply.

But Black students, families, teachers and union members didn't create and perpetuate systemic Anti-Black racism in Nova Scotia's schools over generations that has harmed students and staff and community.

White people did.

So, it's not their work to change our thinking, beliefs and actions that allow anti-Black racism to exist. It's ours. For that reason, it matters that we complete this project together as the first of many steps in a daily, lifelong commitment to see systemic Anti-Black racism dismantled in our union and our schools.

Lastly, this work isn't about earning a pat on the back or qualifying for an "ally" badge. Each and every one of us, as white teachers, school counsellors and school-based specialists, has a legal and professional duty to provide learning spaces that create safety for all students. Sadly, that hasn't been true for Black children and adults in Nova Scotia.

While we can't change the past that has led to the unjust, flawed system that exists now, WE are responsible for the present and future system. It has ALWAYS been our job as white teachers to provide just schools free of systemic racism and harm.

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Final Thoughts

So, this is me, as your president and fellow teacher, learning beside you as a peer and a leader in a shared first step: to see our profession and union engage in the necessary work of dismantling systemic Anti-Black racism and ending white supremacy in our schools and workplaces.

I know we're starting in the middle of a global pandemic. I know life will be hectic. There will be more convenient times with less pressures to get this work started in the future.

But I understand this much: anti-Black racism won't take a break for anything. If we don't pick up this work and follow through every day, nothing will change. Justice can't wait any longer, so it's up to us to do what is right, and do it right now.

Let's make sure that we're the white teachers/members who deliver on the promise of public education that ensures Black children and Black staff can rise to their full potential free of the systemic barriers we have allowed to exist for too long.

We *can* do this together. Let's get to it because #BlackLivesMatter.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Wozney', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Paul Wozney,
President, Nova Scotia Teachers Union