Poverty Reduction Strategy:
A Literature Review

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August 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose
Currently, the Peel District School Board is in the process of developing a poverty reduction strategy to support our students and their families who live in poverty. The purpose of this literature review is to help inform the work of the board's poverty reduction committee, by highlighting some background information as well as strategies that have been used in school boards to address poverty.

Background
In 2008, the Ontario government released its first poverty reduction strategy, *Breaking the Cycle* (2009-2013) to combat the negative impact of poverty on children and families in Ontario (https://dr6j45jk9xcmk.cloudfront.net/documents/3367/breaking-the-cycle.pdf). In its current poverty reduction strategy, *Realizing Our Potential* (2014-2019), the government has expanded supports for vulnerable families in Ontario (https://www.ontario.ca/page/realizing-our-potential-ontarios-poverty-reduction-strategy-2014-2019-all). In both plans, the Ontario government maintained its commitment to reducing child poverty by 25 percent within five years (Canada Social Report, 2016). A list of programs offered by the Peel board to support the government's first poverty reduction strategy was presented to the Regular Meeting of the Board in 2010 (http://www.peelschools.org/aboutus/labour/Documents/11.1.pdf).

How is poverty defined?
Although there is no official definition of poverty in Canada, a number of different approaches have been used to measure poverty (Ross, Scott, & Smith, 2000). Some of the most widely used measures in Canada include: Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-off (LICO), Statistics Canada Low Income Measure (LIM) – before tax or after tax, and the Market Basket Measure (Frank, 2016). Families may experience intergenerational poverty or episodic poverty (e.g., downturn in the economy leads to business closures or downsizing) (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2015), or may be considered working poor (i.e., working but not earning enough to meet basic living expenses). In 2014, Canada's child poverty rate (0 – 17 years) was 18.5%, but rose to 19.7% for children birth to five years of age (First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2016). This supports the American Academy of Pediatrics/Council on Community Pediatrics (2016) assertion that, "Infants and toddlers more commonly live in poverty than do older children." (p. 2). Recent analyses suggest that things are only getting worse for lower income families in Ontario, as average family earnings for those in the lowest income deciles have dropped from 2000 to 2015 (Block, 2017).

Poverty in Peel Region
In Peel Region, there are high rates of poverty among children and families. In 2014, the percentage of low income children ages 0 – 17 in Peel Region was 19.2% (based on the Low Income Measure-after tax) (Source: Peel Region Data Centre/Region of Peel), higher than the Canadian average of 18.5%, and the Ontario average of 18.8% (First Call BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, 2016).

At the regional level, a Three-Year Action Plan (2012-2015) was developed by the Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee (which includes multiple community partners), and is available at: http://povertyinpeel.ca/pdfs/peel-poverty-reduction-strategy.pdf. An updated action plan is currently being developed by the committee.

Some facts about poverty

Poverty is a complex construct which intersects with many different factors. The World Health Organization (2003) has identified ten social determinants of health: (1) social and economic circumstances, (2) stress, (3) early development and education, (4) social exclusion, (5) work and working conditions, (6) unemployment, (7) social support, (8) addiction, (9) healthy food, and (10) transportation. In 2008, the Public Health Agency of Canada released a similar report on the determinants of health inequality, with many similar factors (e.g., income, social support systems, environment and housing, education and literacy, access to health care). As Lightman, Mitchell and Wilson (2008) indicate, "To be sure, poor health often precedes, and causes, entry to welfare." (p. 5).

Of these factors, household income is the most important, as it impacts other areas that promote healthy and thriving families (e.g., adequate and nutritious food; stable housing; safe neighbourhoods; access to or use of: quality early childhood programs, health/mental health services, sports/recreation programs, arts/cultural programs, family resources/programs, etc.). In Canada, higher rates of child poverty have been found within the following groups:

- Indigenous children
- children of immigrants
- racialized children
- children with disabilities or with a disabled parent
- children living in lone-parent families
- children living in larger families (i.e., with three or more children)

(Best Start Resource Centre, 2010; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2009; Frank, 2016; Lightman, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2009; Macdonald & Wilson, 2016; Polanyi et al., 2014)

Some of the impacts of poverty on families

As "child poverty does not exist outside of family poverty" (Frank, 2016, p. 6), any poverty reduction intervention must include family supports. The impact of poverty on children and families is far-reaching and negative. For example:

- Children from low income families have poorer outcomes in the following areas: school achievement and cognitive development (e.g., lower literacy and math test scores, grade point average), social/emotional and behavioural development, and child health (Cooper & Stewart, 2017).
- Living in lower-income neighbourhoods is associated with higher rates of children's vulnerability in five domains of early childhood development (using the Early Development Instrument, a tool that measures children's developmental health and well-being) (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2014).

- Students from low income families are more likely to drop out of high school (Schoeneberger, 2012), and "Young adults who do not complete high school are especially vulnerable to unemployment." (White, 2013, p. 2)
- Children living in poverty are at greater risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, failure to graduate from high school or attainment of a post-secondary degree (Suitts, 2016).
- Students from low income families are more likely to be chronically absent from school (Romero & Lee, 2008).
- Vocabulary development has been linked to family income, with children from welfare-recipient or working class families hearing and producing significantly less words than children from professional families (Hart & Risley, 1995).
- Poverty is associated with food insecurity, unstable housing and lack of basic health care in families (Williams Shanks & Danziger, 2015).
- The rate of food insecurity among families who rely on social assistance is 11 times higher than the national rate. Furthermore, 1 in 6 children in Canada under 18 years of age is affected by food insecurity (Proof Food Insecurity Policy Research; see http://proof.utoronto.ca/resources/fact-sheets/).
- Persistent poverty is associated with increased family stress, higher rates of mental health concerns in both children and adults, decreased levels of community engagement, and decreased access of services (Best Start Resource Centre, 2010).
- The World Health Organization (2003) reports that, "Poverty and social exclusion increase the risk of divorce and separation, disability, illness, addiction and social isolation and vice versa, forming vicious circles that deepen the predicament people face." (pp. 16-17).
- According to the American Academy of Pediatrics/Council on Community Pediatrics (2016), poverty profoundly affects "birth weight, infant mortality, language development, chronic illness, environmental exposure, nutrition, and injury" (p. 1). The impact of these negative childhood health outcomes can last a lifetime.
- People who live in poverty have shorter life expectancies and more illnesses (e.g., cardiovascular disease) than the non-poor (World Health Organization, 2003).
- Canadians living in poverty have: higher rates of multiple chronic health conditions; significantly higher rates of disability; higher rates of depression, diabetes, heart disease, eye disease, migraines, asthma, arthritis, anxiety, stress, and unmet health care needs. They are also less likely to have a regular family doctor as well as health insurance for prescription medication, dental care, eyeglasses/contact lenses or hospital stays (Lightman, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2008, 2009).

Poverty strategy documents in Ontario

Most poverty reduction strategies focus on change in several key areas, such as: income security, housing, transportation, food security, access to services, jobs and employment, health, rural supports, early childhood education and care, community involvement and more. Some examples of poverty strategy documents in Ontario

include:
- ***Canadian Teachers' Federation***, available at: http://www.ctf-fce.ca/Research-Library/CTF-Poverty-Brief-to-HUMA.pdf
- ***City of Ottawa***, available at: http://vibrantcanada.ca/files/04_-_poverty_reduction_strategy-eng2.pdf
- ***City of Toronto***, available at: https://www1.toronto.ca/City%20Of%20Toronto/Social%20Development,%20Finance%20&%20Administration/Strategies/Poverty%20Reduction%20Strategy/PDF/TO_Prosperity_Final2015-reduced.pdf
- ***Durham District School Board***, available at: http://ddsb.ca/MediaDesk/SchoolNewsHighlights/Documents/Addressing-Poverty-in-Ontario-School-Boards.pdf and http://www.ddsb.ca/Programs/EarlyYears/Make_a_Difference/Documents/Early%20Years%20Initiative%20Booklet%20Report.pdf
- ***Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario***, available at: https://www.tcdsb.org/Board/TrusteesoftheBoard/Committees/AgendaDocs/Catholic%20Social%20Justice%20Committee/_Possibilities-Addressing%20Poverty%20in%20Elementary%20Schools.pdf
- ***Government of Ontario***, available at: https://www.ontario.ca/page/realizing-our-potential-ontarios-poverty-reduction-strategy-2014-2019-all
- ***Tamarack Institute*** (2016), available at: http://events.tamarackcommunity.ca/ten

In their national anti-poverty plan for Canada, the Dignity for All Campaign (2015) suggests that the key elements needed in an anti-poverty strategy include: (1) consistency with international human rights obligations, (2) a comprehensive approach, (3) a focus on those most in need, (4) measurable goals, targets, and timelines, (5) review and accountability, (6) community involvement, and (7) integration with existing efforts (p. 9). Similarly, the Tamarack Institute (2016) offers ideas for poverty reduction in cities, such as: create a multi-sectoral initiative, strengthen neighbourhoods, engage public health agencies, ensure finances are not a barrier to accessing community services, and embrace a social justice and human rights-based approach (p. 9). Furthermore, they suggest that, "when you involve people who are or have been living in poverty, they bring not only real wisdom, but they ensure that the process is authentic and accountable" (p. 40).

SOME APPROACHES USED BY SCHOOL BOARDS TO ADDRESS POVERTY
In the following section, the strategies used by school boards to address poverty tend to fall under two approaches – (1) holistic, and (2) piecemeal or siloed approaches. It is worth noting that there appears to be a paucity of available research on the ***impact*** or ***effectiveness*** of poverty reduction strategies in school boards (with some exceptions). However, there are many policy and school board documents which outline ***suggested*** programs or approaches to adopt to address poverty in schools. Although not exhaustive, an overview of some of the approaches used in schools or recommended for use in schools is provided in the following section.

HOLISTIC APPROACHES
School as Community Hub Model
Although the idea is not new, the school as community hub model is one way to provide easy access for families to needed supports and services (e.g., health services, parenting programs, speech-language services, English language classes, etc.), all in one location. These schools, also known as full-service schools, extended use schools or community schools (Abdal-Haqq, 1993; McShane, Watkins, & Meredyth, 2012), have garnered considerable attention in Australia and internationally (McShane et al., 2012). In the United States, support for community schools gained traction in the late 1990s (America's Promise Alliance, 2015; Chang, 2011). In the past, this holistic model has been promoted in particular in the early years field and with vulnerable populations such as Indigenous, rural and high poverty communities (Ball, 2005; McShane et al., 2012; Pascal, 2009; Pelletier & Corter, 2005; Suitts, 2016; Williams Shanks & Danziger, 2015). In recent years, the community hub model has received considerable attention from the Ontario government, as it looks to coordinate and integrate the various supports and services available in communities with local partners (Government of Ontario, 2015, 2016). Organizations like the Canadian Teachers' Federation and the City of Ottawa endorse the use of schools to house social services for students and the community as part of their recommended poverty reduction strategies (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2016; City of Ottawa, 2010). For many, the school as community hub model addresses the fragmented delivery of services and lack of service coordination that is commonplace in communities (Abdal-Haqq, 1993). As an example, our Canadian child care system has often been referred to as a "patchwork service" (Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, 2004, p. 10).

Bireda and Moses (2010) believe that "schools are ideally positioned to become effective connection points for a broad range of social welfare services" (p. 3). They highlight the advantages of using the school as a community hub to address poverty, through the provision of family supports and services in schools. These include:

- *Access* – Schools have unparalleled access to students and families in need of services.
- *Convenience* – Schools are often located in neighborhoods where low income families live, which reduces their transportation burdens.
- *School community* – Teachers and principals … often have insights into what types of public benefits are most needed by their students' families.
- *Familiarity* – Beyond proximity, the school may be less threatening to families than other social agencies.
- *Reducing stigma* – … if schools take a more child-centered approach to public benefits, suggesting that supports are being offered as a part of an educational plan or to promote better educational outcomes, then parents may be less likely to view their circumstances as a personal failure.
- *Improving student and family connection to school* – Studies have demonstrated that parents who utilize services at school participate more in school activities and attend more parent-teacher conferences. (Bireda & Moses, 2010, pp. 9-11).

The United Way of Toronto has established principles that should guide the development of a community hub, which include: (1) neighbourhood based and locally responsive, (2) accessible and engaging of diversity, (3) community involvement in decision-making, (4) service coordination and collaboration, (5) community space, (6) financial sustainability, and (7) evaluation (Andrews, 2013, pp. 23-24).

In Canada, research on the school as community hub model has been undertaken in the Toronto First Duty project (Pelletier & Corter, 2005). In five pilot schools in the Toronto District School Board, integrated services included kindergarten, childcare, family supports (e.g., child/family health services, empathy and social skills training for children, special needs services, recreation, family literacy) and other programs. Although there was variation across the sites, some of the results from this multi-year research project revealed improvements in program quality (as measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998), lower levels of daily parenting hassles, easier access to services, greater parental involvement, and improved Early Development Instrument (EDI) scores for participating children (Janus & Offord, 2007).

In the United States, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) community schools and the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) are two examples of the school as community hub model. In 2011, the OUSD began to roll out an initiative that would transform all of its schools into full-service community schools, complete with a whole host of integrated services for children and families. With 27 full-service community schools in 2015, they aim to have 50 of their schools staffed with community school managers by 2020 (https://www.ousd.org/Domain/97) (Fehrer & Leos-Urbel, 2015). Staff in these full-service schools have reported improvements in student school readiness, attendance, behaviour, academic learning, and engagement, as well as enhanced teacher support and improved school climate (Fehrer & Leos-Urbel, 2015).

Similarly, the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) began in the 1990s as a pilot project where integrated supports and services were provided to children and families within a one block area in Harlem with high rates of poverty. With its "cradle-to-career" range of education and supports, this project expanded to 24 blocks in 2000 and then to 97 blocks in 2007 (McCarthy & Jean-Louis, 2015, p. 2). Some of the results from this initiative which serviced 25,007 children and adults in 2016 include a 96% college acceptance rate across their programs, and 100% of children in the Pre-K Gems® program deemed school-ready (http://hcz.org/results/).

PIECEMEAL or SILOED APPROACHES

Many school boards have implemented a number of programs or supports to assist children and families affected by poverty. These supports may be implemented system-wide or only in certain schools, and may be driven by the work of specific individuals in schools. However, as Suitts (2016) notes, when you have piecemeal strategies, it is unlikely to serve all of the needs of low income students whose needs will vary from community to community. The struggle for schools is that, "Few schools, however, come close to having enough resources to respond when confronted with a large

number of students who are experiencing a wide range of barriers that interfere with their learning and performance." (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2007 Revision, p. 1). Although not exhaustive, the following list includes some of the most commonly used approaches to addressing poverty in school communities. Please note that there is overlap among the various approaches highlighted. Furthermore, some of the available reports listed in this section include only recommendations for future policy changes. Continued research into the effects of these suggested approaches needs to be conducted on a long-term basis with children and families who live in poverty to determine their impact (i.e., track and monitor over time).

1. **Early Years Initiatives** *(e.g., early literacy development, parent/family programs and services, early years centres)*
   - There is an abundance of research related to the positive impact of quality early childhood programs for children and families living in poverty (e.g., improved language, literacy and numeracy skills; enhanced social behaviour skills; lower rates of grade retention and special education placement, etc.). Please refer to the literature review conducted by the Peel District School Board in the *Peel Early Years Hubs and Readiness Centres Implementation and Outcome Evaluation: Final Report* (2009, February) for a detailed list of the benefits.
   - More recent research has highlighted the importance of children's self-regulation skills (e.g., ability to remain calm, focused and alert – Shanker, 2012) for enhanced academic success (e.g., de la Riva & Ryan, 2015). University of Toronto researcher Dr. Janette Pelletier has conducted research on full-day kindergarten in our school board and her most recently research findings (awaiting publication) have shown that children in the full-day kindergarten program have significantly better literacy, numeracy and self-regulation skills than children in the half-day kindergarten (see August 9, 2017, Globe and Mail: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/ontario-children-gain-learning-benefits-from-full-day-kindergarten-study/article35933248/)
   - "Quality early literacy development is central to sustainable schooling and long term educational outcomes that will enable families to break the cycle of poverty (World Declaration on Education for All, 1990; World Education Forum, 2000)" (Ngwaru, 2013, p. 241).

2. **Health and Well-being Supports for Children/Families** *(e.g., physical/mental health, student nutrition program)*
   - The American Academy of Pediatrics/Council on Community Pediatrics (2016) highlights the positive benefits of the following supports for families living in poverty: (1) access to comprehensive health care, (2) early childhood education, (3) nutrition support, (4) home visiting, (5) family and parenting support in the medical home, (6) early identification of families in need of services, and (7) interventions for adolescents and parents of young children (pp. 4-7).

- o The Canadian Teachers' Federation (2016) has recommended that the government of Canada create a national school lunch program, complete with subsidies for children living in poverty.

3. **Out-of-School Programs**
   - o Out-of-school programs can include a wide range of opportunities for children, families and communities, and can take place after school, on weekends or during the summer (Blazer & Romanik, 2009). Some options for: (1) **students** may include enrichment opportunities (e.g., music, drama, clubs), academic enhancement (e.g., literacy/language skills, math, science), and recreation opportunities (e.g., social activities, organized sports, arts and crafts); (2) the **community** may include child care, adult learning (e.g., English language/literacy classes, employment support programs, parenting courses, seniors programs), and other recreation and community resources (e.g., health and social services, crafts, community events) (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2007 Revision). Among other things, participation in high quality programs for children has resulted in enhanced social/emotional skills, academic achievement and behaviour in school, in comparison with peers who have not participated in after school programs (see Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2007 Revision, p. 2).
   - o Berliner (2009) reports that summer school programs have been shown to positively impact students' knowledge and skills. Some of the features that contributed significantly to these differences included smaller class sizes, more one-to-one instruction, and parental involvement.
   - o Additional studies suggest that participation in quality after-school programs can lead to decreases in criminal activity and risky behaviours; decreases in aggression and school suspensions; improved social skills, self-confidence and feelings of safety (Afterschool Alliance, 2014).

4. **Adult Education Programs/Workplace Support Programs** (including adult literacy programs)
   - o Participation in flexible and responsive adult education programs helps to increase rates of high school completion among young adults (White, 2013). This in turn enhances employment opportunities and reduces the risk of unemployment and entry into poverty.
   - o "Interventions such as adolescent mentoring, residential training (e.g., Job Corps), and workplace-based apprenticeship programs can increase academic achievement, employment success, and other nonacademic accomplishments over the life span" (American Academy of Pediatrics/Council on Community Pediatrics, 2016, p. 7).
   - o Shalla and Schellenberg (1998) report a strong "link between literacy and economic security," showing that individuals with weaker literacy skills in Canada "are more likely to be unemployed, work in lower-paying jobs and live in low-income households." (p. 45).

5. Professional staff learning/Professional development

Ciuffetelli Parker (2015) recommends that school boards strive to enhance teacher awareness, build school culture, and enhance professional practice in the classroom in some of the following ways:

- o Develop an understanding of, and sensitivity to, issues related to poverty (e.g., stereotypes and assumptions, understanding the context in which students and their families live).
- o Use positive language when talking about your students and develop a bias-free school climate and culture.
- o Foster greater engagement with families and partner with community groups.
- o Hold high expectations for all students.
- o Create an inclusive and respectful classroom environment for all students. (pp. 2-3)

- Similarly, ongoing professional development for teachers and principals is recommended by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2009) as one way to support low income students. In the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario's resource, *Possibilities: Addressing Poverty in Elementary Schools* (Brown & Giles, 2012), the authors explore the role that school staff play with respect to teachers' expectations; relationships with children, families, and the community; students' non-academic needs; and mindsets regarding poverty. Many suggestions for schools are included in the resource (https://www.tcdsb.org/Board/TrusteesoftheBoard/Committees/AgendaDocs/ Catholic%20Social%20Justice%20Committee/_Possibilities-Addressing%20Poverty%20in%20Elementary%20Schools.pdf).

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