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### **Africentric Alternative School Debate In Toronto May Lead To A New Organizational Model For High Schools**

*REFLECTIONS* by...

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The Toronto District School Board's decision to open at least one Africentric school under its jurisdiction has generated a great deal of debate in that city with critics citing that the policy will promote segregation. Supporters point out that attendance at the school will be voluntary and will be open to students of all races.

In actual fact, the only difference between an Africentric School and other schools in the system is that it will enhance the Ontario curriculum with Africentric materials and content that better reflects the heritage of people of African descent. The whole purpose is to re-integrate disengaged kids back into public schooling. Such a school would be a first for Ontario, although there are some in the United States in cities such as Detroit , Washington and Kansas City .

Advocates of the system claim that black students who study about black authors, scientists and thinkers, have more black teachers as role models, and attend schools that set clear, high expectations for black students can fight the alienation some black teens say leads them to drop out of mainstream schools. They say that with so many people now living in the Toronto region from the Islands or from Africa, this would come close to the education system they had back "home" which included the use of mentors from the community who became role models and supported them through their formal school studies.

Creating a school which addresses the needs of a specific group of students is not a new concept. The Toronto board already has a grade school and high school for First Nations students and an alternative high school for gay and lesbian teens.

We don't have to go very far to find other examples of "alternative schools". In The City of Greater Sudbury we have some very obvious alternative schools currently in place. Marymount Academy is an all-girls school that covers grades 7 to 12; Sudbury Secondary School has long been recognized as the school for students with a special interest in the creative arts, dance and drama; Lockerby Composite School is known as a school for students with an interest in advanced technology; Loellen is a school that is noted for it's Baccalaureate Program with a high academic focus; in addition, we can't forget the French Language schools and the Catholic schools.

In each of the above examples the "school-culture" has a fundamental philosophy that

emphasizes the distinct nature of their student body. Even teachers at those schools must be prepared to demonstrate a passion for the distinct specialty of the school in order to be good "role models" for their students. Students attend these schools for more than just the normal academic benefits. They are also looking for experiences that fuel their own particular passions and interest – passions and interests that many of them hope to pursue beyond high school.

It is important to note that most alternative schools which have a special focus are open to all students. The exceptions obviously being single-gender or French language schools. The Ontario curriculum is covered in all schools and the courses must prepare students for whatever post-secondary path they wish to follow. The only difference is that there is a special "character or identity" to the school and it is a place where students with appropriate special interests will be allowed to blossom.

We must never lose site of the fact that underachieving students and high dropout rates are a literacy problem, not a racial or a language one. It is estimated that over 25% of Canadians lack the literacy skills needed for daily living. Furthermore, low literacy rates affect all cultures and socio-economic classes and are not due to low intelligence.

Low literacy may actually be a result of a school system that is not "engaging" students in ways that help them relate learning to their own cultural experiences or personal preferences. In other words, we must find better ways of motivating students so that they want to learn. Alternative schools may be the answer and the Toronto District School Board must be given credit for bringing this matter out into the open.

It has always been my personal belief that every child has the ability to learn, some just learn differently. It has also long been held by most people that higher literacy levels will improve society, lower dropout rates, reduce crime and make communities stronger. If we can increase literacy levels among our children by creating "alternative schools" which are more in tune to the interests and passions of specific groups of students from different cultural backgrounds, then it is something we should examine more closely.

The debate in Toronto may soon result in an organizational model where we create schools, or classes within schools, designed specifically for students who are interested in computer games; in the outdoors; in fitness; in hockey; in soccer; in medicine; in animals; in math; in writing; the list goes on and on. Bringing students together in an environment where they can study and work with other students who share common interests or passions may be all that is needed to generate the excitement in learning and help students achieve their full potential. Up until now, we have been grouping students in accordance with their academic abilities. Perhaps it is time to remember that "if we always do what we've always done, we'll always get what we've always got." If we are not totally happy with what we are getting out of our education system today, then perhaps it is time to do things differently.

There are obviously some organizational challenges that must be addressed before this model can be implemented, but that doesn't mean we can't take the first steps to making it happen.

**SPECIAL NOTICE:**

For a video clip on this topic, go to the following link:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqI32wVu7ec>

	
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