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## Prohibiting the Use of the N-Word

### Introduction

This document outlines the Limestone District School Board's commitment to creating an affirming and inclusive environment, addressing the use of slurs and epithets, with a particular focus on the use of the N-word. LDSB is committed to creating environments for students and staff that are affirming, welcoming, respectful, equitable, accessible, accountable, and inclusive. Slurs and epithets are pejorative, disparaging, or abusive terms, remarks and phrases used to describe specific people or their attributes or identities. Slurs and epithets perpetuate historical and ongoing discrimination and trauma resulting in negative impacts on mental health, well-being, and sense of belonging in schools and the broader community. This can include the reinforcement or perpetuation of stereotypes. Use of slurs and epithets prevents students and staff from fully accessing their education or workplace and violates the Ontario Human Rights Code.

LDSB's Memo on Slurs and Epithets explicitly prohibits uttering, writing, or using derogatory and pejorative slurs and epithets (including pictorial/physical representations) within the workplace/school community. This includes reading aloud texts or teaching course content that will reinforce oppressive and discriminatory practices or language.

Slurs and epithets take various forms that target people based on their real or perceived identity(-ies) and/or attributes in our workplaces/school communities. While there is no hierarchy in terms of the impact of the harm caused by different forms of slurs or epithets, the Board recognizes the need to specifically address the use of the N-word and other slurs and epithets that target Black people because:

1. Most of the reported incidents of slurs and epithets in the Board have been related to anti-Black racism.
2. Almost half of all human rights complaints received through the Board's Student Human Rights Incidents and Complaint System were related to anti-Black racism, almost exclusively around the use of the N-word.
3. The Student Sense of Belonging Report also showed that students who identify as Black reported the highest levels of being made to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable at their school because of their race, cultural background, or skin colour.

4. The response to these racial slurs and epithets has been inconsistent, and there is some uncertainty about how staff should respond, particularly in situations where the slur or epithet was used by a Black student.
5. There are members of the Black community who have “reclaimed” the N-word and believe they should be able to use the N-word in our working and learning environment.

LDSB prohibits the use of the N-word in its unabbreviated form, verbal or written, and any variation of, on LDSB property (including but not limited to LDSB sporting events, competitions, online learning platforms and events or trips) by any member of the LDSB community. This includes any use of the unabbreviated N-word, or any variation, irrespective of the intent of using it and/or how the person who used it self-identifies. This includes quoting another person’s use of the word, including from songs and books, or any media that have the unabbreviated word.

## **Background**

The N-word is deeply rooted in the enslavement and oppression of Black people. The N-word, in its unabbreviated form, whether used orally or in writing, and no matter the variation, is a hateful, racist, and derogatory term that invokes painful memories and trauma for Black people. It has been used historically, and continues to be used, as part of the oppression of Black people. The N-word is not just a word. It is an idea veiled as a word. It carries negative connotations about Blackness, among which is that Black people are less than White people.<sup>1</sup> Its history is rooted in degradation, enslavement, dehumanization, colonization, hate, racism, and the deaths of countless individuals that have lost their lives due to the beliefs perpetuated by the use of this word.

## **Reclaiming the N-word**

There are members of the Black community who reclaim the N-word by self-labeling with the N-word to reject its pejorative meaning while simultaneously using it in contexts that are not racist or harmful to remove the historical meaning associated with the word. Some members of Black communities have reclaimed the N-word and may use this term in certain contexts and/or as a term of endearment with certain people, such as when the word is concluded with an “a” and not “er.”

However, Black people are not a monolith, and not all Black people approve of using the N-word. Most Black communities in Ontario, including LDSB’s Black community, do not support the reclaiming of the word in the context of its use in the workplace/school community. The

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<sup>1</sup> Sulaimon Giwa, “The N-word has no place in the classroom,” CBC, Feb 19, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/giwa-opinion-n-word-classroom-1.6354944>

use of the N-word perpetuates a hostile environment for Black students.<sup>2</sup> While Black students and families may choose to use the N-word outside of LDSB working/learning environments, it shall never be used in its unabbreviated form, verbal or written, and any variation of, on LDSB property (including but not limited to LDSB sporting events, competitions, online learning platforms and events or trips) by any member of the LDSB community. This includes any use of the unabbreviated N-word, or any variation, irrespective of the intent of using it and/or how the person who used it self-identifies. This includes quoting another person's use of the word, including from songs and books, or any media that have the unabbreviated word.

Within our workplace/school environments, there is often a need to balance individual expression with creating an inclusive and respectful atmosphere for everyone. It is important to balance the desire to reclaim the word with the harm you might cause someone else. The N-word creates an unsafe and hostile learning and work environment for not just Black colleagues and students, but the LDSB community as whole. Moreover, allowing the use of the N-word as a term of endearment by certain people will undermine the efforts to ensure that others do not use it in a racist or harmful way. The right of every staff, student, or LDSB community member to an affirming, equitable, and inclusive working and learning environment supersedes the right to reclaim the N-word within the workplace/school environment where the use of the word causes harm to others.

### **Students**

- All Limestone students are prohibited from using the N-word in its unabbreviated form, verbal or written, and any variation of, on LDSB property (including but not limited to LDSB sporting events, competitions, online learning platforms and events or trips). This includes any use of the unabbreviated N-word, or any variation, irrespective of the intent of using it and/or how the person who used it self-identifies, or quoting another person's use of the word, including from songs and books, or any media that have the unabbreviated word.
- Students are encouraged to speak to a teacher, principal or vice-principal, or other trusted adult about the use of slurs or epithets or submit a complaint online using the Student Human Rights Incident and Complaints Form.
- Students who use the N-word or any other slur epithet will be subject to progressive discipline per AP 376: Student Human Rights Incidents and Complaints and AP 353: Progressive Discipline.

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission, Anti-Black Racism in Education Roundtables, 2023

## **Employees**

- LDSB employees are prohibited from use of the N-word in its unabbreviated form, verbal or written, and any variation of, on LDSB property (including but not limited to LDSB sporting events, competitions, online learning platforms and all LDSB sanctioned events or trips) and any such use is subject to discipline. This includes when the word is being used by an employee who identifies as Black and/or being used with the intent of it being a form of reclaiming and/or as a term of endearment. This also includes when quoting a song or text, replaying a song, and/or any materials and media, visual or auditory, with the unabbreviated word.
- In fulfilling the employee expectations to report human rights incidents under Administrative Procedure 376: Student Human Rights Incidents and Complaints, employees may photograph the unabbreviated word where primary evidence may need to be preserved (such as taking photographs of graffiti, screenshots, etc.) for the purposes of reporting the incident.
- When typing up the incident, quoting what was said, and/or citing a text, employees are to refrain from using the full word and are to use the abbreviation only, if it must be used.
- Employees are expected to affirm the expectations and consequences associated with using the N-word and other slurs and epithets, and always make clear that they are not welcome in our learning and working environments.
- LDSB employees who use the N-word, or any other slur epithet will be subject to progressive discipline.

## **Teaching Materials**

The Slurs and Epithets memo spells out factors to consider when selecting texts or materials for use in classrooms. Below are additional factors to consider when teaching materials that contain the N-word:

- Think of the Black students who navigate a school system where they are often the only ones in the classrooms where the N-word is repeated; where their educators share a different lived experienced from them; and where they must internalize a curriculum that does not reflect who they are as individuals and as a people.
- It is important to reflect on your social identity. For instance, what does it mean as a white person teaching material that contains the N-word? Consider how you have been socialized, how you have internalized ideas of Black people through your learning in school and at home.

- As an educator, how are Black people represented in what you teach, if at all? Do you provide narratives of Black people that are positive and affirming? Or do you tend to use materials that reinforce stereotypes and other negative messages about Black people?
- What does an inclusive curriculum mean to you? Do books like “To Kill a Mockingbird” or “Othello” promote an inclusive curriculum? What does it mean to amplify the voices of writers who do not reflect the lived experiences of Black people?
- Think about the students in front of you: are you teaching to predominantly White students? If there are a few Black students in the class, what impact does it have on them to read materials that contain the N-word? Without seeking their perspectives, consider doing research on the impact of using the N-word when you teach.<sup>3</sup>
- Educators need to know where the challenging passages are in any text they present to the class, so they can contextualize the complex content or language and the impact it may have on students, in terms of the overall purpose it serves to the plot or theme.
- Think about occasional/support staff who might have to teach your material and may not have the context or know how to unpack the material.
- Explicitly teach students what to do if they come across a slur. State that the teacher will not use those words, even when referring to them, and model the expectation first. It is important to give students the language they need when reading.

### **Administrators**

- School administrators must consider all relevant contexts and should focus on the adverse differential impact and harm caused to students and or the learning environment when determining appropriate progressive discipline, interventions and support to respond to the use of the N-word. School administrators must consider the social positionality of the students. For example, where a student has used a discriminatory slur or epithet, school administrators should consider whether the student who engaged in its use is from the same identity or lived experience as the community that has been a target of the slur or epithet, and if so, the purpose and context behind its use.
- School administrators must also consider their own social positionality and must assess how their own identity may influence how they respond.

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<sup>3</sup> Parents for Diversity, “Does the N-word belong in the classroom?”, <https://parentsfordiversity.com/does-the-n-word-belong-in-the-classroom/>

- A student's intent is not relevant in determining whether or not a student engaged in discriminatory or prohibited conduct, but the intent may be relevant in determining the appropriate response to be taken to ensure the student does not engage in similar behaviour following the incident.
- When typing up the incident, quoting what was said, and/or citing a text, employees are to refrain from using the full word and are to use the abbreviation only, if it must be used.

## **Conclusion**

The Board recognizes the gravity of slurs and epithets, particularly the N-word, which holds a deeply rooted history of oppression and racism. By addressing the use of such language within our learning and working environments, we aim to create spaces that empower individuals, promote equity, and celebrate diversity.

The complexities surrounding the concept of reclaiming the N-word highlight the importance of these guidelines. While some may argue for its reappropriation as a means of empowerment and self-expression, we must also consider the diversity of perspectives within the Black community and the potential harm that its use can inflict.

Ultimately, the right to an affirming, equitable, and inclusive learning and working environment transcends the desire to reclaim the N-word. These guidelines are not only about rules and consequences but also about fostering a culture of respect, empathy, and understanding. We must be mindful of the historical and contemporary significance of slurs and epithets, recognizing that their use can perpetuate stereotypes, discrimination, and harm.

## **References**

Administrative Procedure 376: Student Human Rights Incidents and Complaints  
LDSB Slurs and Epithets memo  
Administrative Procedure 353: Progressive Discipline