

**About the project ...**

The purpose of the Algoma District School Board’s *Be the Change* Student Leadership Conference was to have students lead and engage their peers and members of their communities in a character-centred conference to motivate involvement in service learning and leadership opportunities. Over 160 students in Grades 7-12 participated in the conference, with over 40 students leading interactive multimedia workshops about student voice, environmental concerns and school-based student initiatives such as student councils, respect and diversity clubs, fundraising, proposal writing and action research projects. Students from across the board shared the leadership opportunities at their schools and within their communities and promoted action-based initiatives to affect positive change at local and global levels. Senior secondary students served as conference ambassadors while teachers and board staff took part in the workshops to learn from and with the students. In addition, senior administrative staff attended the student-led sessions to inform their planning for board priorities in student engagement and equity initiatives.

Over 15 community partners hosted program displays and promoted the importance of active citizenship. Students used passport postcards to collect information during their walkabouts through the displays, as they learned about the many ways to become involved in service learning. The community partners provided handouts for students to take away to share with their friends and families about the opportunities for involvement.

**Impact on student learning and school culture ...**

- Students learned powerful lessons about what it means to be involved, accountable and committed citizens of diverse communities and were empowered to be leaders. The value of increased student involvement is supported by research that directly links it to higher academic achievement.
- Students made connections to their learning in meaningful ways by seeking real-life opportunities to get involved. They were able to articulate what was important to them in their education, thus supporting research that student “readiness” and motivation to learn is a key to student success.
- Students articulated their beliefs that their voices matter and they can make a difference in their schools and communities.

**Lessons learned for moving forward ...**

- Student voice and engagement are essential to character development. Student knowledge and awareness of character is a first step (what it looks like, feels like and sounds like); however, it is the intentional consolidation of that awareness through practise that leads to character development.
- Students need opportunities to determine and reflect on their involvement in service learning activities (autonomy and metacognition).
- Administrative support and teacher involvement are key to successful character development at both school and board levels. Character development actions must be explicit, intentional parts of school and board improvement planning with specific, monitored goals and focused strategies for action.
- The board is committed to making sure that student voices are included in board actions and believes that the successful implementation of student voice initiatives, when combined with student action, will increase student learning and achievement.