

**About the project ...**

The *Student Voice in Character Education* project put students into leadership roles among their peers to establish learning environments that infuse and align character development and restorative practice with Aboriginal cultural perspectives. It was facilitated by a team of eleven teachers, three board staff and two superintendents who worked with elementary and secondary student leaders from two families of schools. The project began with a one-day workshop in which the student leaders participated in learning activities about character attributes, Aboriginal teachings and restorative practice. Throughout the workshop, students considered how a variety of resources connected with their own experiences and were given the autonomy to determine which would best convey the key messages in their presentations to the students at their own schools. The following term, they collectively presented interactive workshops to students in Grades 3 to 8 and made group presentations to staffs and councils in ten schools.

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

- Learning about the history of Aboriginal people in Canada and the Medicine Wheel gave students and teachers the context for the big idea at the centre of the learning goal – student learning about social and personal injustice so that they could be more accepting of and caring about others.
- Mutual respect, shared leadership and a clear purpose led to group recognition of the importance of the project goals and of each person's role within both the project and their own school communities. This understanding led to a deep sense of accomplishment among all project participants – students and staff.
- Students noted improvements in their own self-confidence following their experiences in leading workshops and delivering presentations.

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

- Staff must balance explicit learning goals with an openness for student input. Changing paradigms is fundamental to changing behaviour and big concepts such as social injustice, bullying, prejudice, racism and respect can be taught in many different ways. Giving control of the school presentations to the student leaders, while maintaining staff support, led to meaningful learning for both the student leaders and the students in each school who participated in the workshops.
- Facilitating student leadership means teachers must hold back and allow the learning to happen, while supporting students in ways such as mini-lessons in presentation skills and opportunities to practice presentations – teachers need to refrain from jumping into every decision and action.
- Inspiring, authentic resources that teach students truths about big ideas and also touch their hearts and move them to action are imperative. For example, students watched a video about racial discrimination which forced them to confront real issues and opened the door to courageous conversations about the big ideas. The video proved to be a critical factor in helping all students – leaders and workshop participants – develop empathy for people who experience discrimination. It also led them to reconsider their own prejudices, to talk about where racism comes from and to make an explicit effort to treat everyone with respect.
- Providing students with authentic leadership opportunities, engaging them with powerful resources and entrusting them to deliver messages of hope are effective strategies in moving school communities towards the goal of creating safe, caring, positive school climates for learning.