

## *Embedding a Culture of Care: Character Development and Student Achievement*

Board website: [www.ucdsb.on.ca](http://www.ucdsb.on.ca)

### **About the project ...**

The *Embedding a Culture of Care: Character Development and Student Achievement in the Upper Canada District School Board* project was an inquiry about adolescent learners within the context of school culture and curriculum. The board recently moved to a Grades 7–12 school organization structure, and staff wanted to examine the relationship between school culture and curriculum and study them as interdependent variables that contribute to school effectiveness. They wanted to know if a cultural and curricular focus on character development contributed to student success and if a focus on student leadership and staff connections leads to improved student achievement. Staff in two schools were asked to look at character development and adolescent learners in the context of curriculum connections and school culture. They focused on relationships between students and staff, among students and among staff; on bundled curriculum expectations and big ideas; and on the role of character development and student voice in curriculum planning and daily programming. The project involved over 400 students and staff members at both the school and board levels.

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

- Teachers analysed and mapped curriculum expectations, advocated for students and studied adolescent brain research. They reported that the emphasis they placed on the continuum of curriculum expectations, on big ideas related to life and experiences, on student voice, on student connections to caring adults and on student leadership opportunities became the driving force for both student learning and teacher planning.
- An emphasis on student voice was a major component of the project. Students worked with staff to focus on school culture and climate, as well as to take part in learning that connected their real-life situations and experiences to the curriculum.
- Student surveys revealed specific aspects of school life that were problematic. Grade 7 students were anxious about being in a high school setting. Many boys stated that a high school diploma was not a priority and many Grade 7 girls stated that they did not feel connected to the adults in their lives. These comments led to a focus at both school sites on supporting students in developing a sense of worth and belonging along with a sense of pride in themselves, their schools, their communities and their academic achievement.

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

- When curriculum expectations are bundled, they support a cross-curricular emphasis on character development through learning about concepts such as point of view, environmental stewardship and belonging.
- In the study of adolescent learner research, it was discovered that character-based teaching and thinking lead to increased student engagement. Staff will continue to monitor their students to determine the accuracy of this research in the Upper Canada DSB experience and will look for corresponding improvements in student learning and achievement.
- The board character values were the basis of the work in both school sites. There was agreement among the project participants that everyone needs to walk the talk and “put more behind the Character Always posters than the wall.”
- Students need to be given the voice, encouragement and opportunity to take ownership of their learning and their environment.

**For more information, contact** Amanda Nieman, Vice-Principal, at (613) 342-0371, ext.1241, or [amanda.nieman@ucdsb.on.ca](mailto:amanda.nieman@ucdsb.on.ca).