

Leadership Academy Proving a Great Success

We teach our young people many things in the schools of the Northwest School Division. We teach them to appreciate the beauty of a sonnet, how to factor a quadratic equation, how to read, and write and paint pictures, to play sports with passion and skill and we teach them how to weld. But do we teach them how to make a difference in the world? Do we teach them the how and the why of service to others? To get an answer to that question I spoke to Don Wheler, a teacher in charge of an innovative and one-of-a-kind leadership program in the division. I asked him how it all began, and he told me that it started over a coffee in the summer holidays when a new superintendent, Ron Biberdorf, asked the question ‘What’s being done for student leadership training in our division?’

The answer to that question was that each school was dealing with it, but that while all kinds of good things were being done, there was no grand scheme and no deliberate plan. In effect, said Don, ‘leadership training was happening between the lines and accidentally as opposed to having a planned program to teach our students how to become leaders. We felt that the SRC advisors in the schools were doing a fine job of leading student government, but the student government had the expectation of leadership without the investment. We were asking students to be leaders in the schools without any training’.

Faced with this scenario it only seemed sensible to try to find a way to replace accidental success with intentional success. The question was then asked ‘What can we do to give the students in all of our schools the chance to have access to and the expectation of leadership training?’

Initiated by Ron and a group of motivated teachers (past and present) the answer was the Northwest Leadership Academy. The Board and the Director of Education Glen Winkler, provided the support and the funding, the mandate to proceed and the leap of faith that was necessary, given the obstacles to success that were apparent from the beginning.

‘The biggest problem,’ said Don, ‘was the delivery mechanism. It’s easy to offer a course in leadership in a large school: thirty students sign up and the course is offered within the timetable. We, however, have many small schools spread out over a large geographical area. So we said let’s take the Northwest School Division and assume that it’s one big school. We knew we would have between thirty and fifty students who would be willing to take on an extra load outside of regular classes, so we arranged for joint transportation with the principals when they go to their meetings and this enables us to get together approximately once every six weeks to offer the course in day long sessions’.

The course itself is a credit course that’s spread over two years, fifty hours per year. The curriculum includes standard content on styles of leadership, group dynamics, conflict resolution, team building, planning a project, and evaluating. Students are brought into contact with local mentors, introduced to leaders from many walks of life, taken to conferences and expected to push themselves beyond the classroom. The emphasis is on learning by doing, with every student

carrying out both an in-school and a community service project in their first year: projects that are not normally being done by a student council or a community service group.

To determine how the theory translates into practice I spoke to five students, all in the second year of their programmes and asked them to comment on their experiences and accomplishments.

Tess Formanek-Loncar of Turtleford Community School was able to spend ten days with 18 other students attending the Lieutenant Governor's Leadership Forum. Tess believes that one of the reasons that she was accepted was because of her Leadership Academy experience: 'the people that I met in my academy sessions made it important for me to make leadership a priority in my life, not only just for now, but for the long-term. I'm president of our SRC, so the tools and skills that I learn in the Leadership Academy are things I can apply at school and at home. It taught me so much and made me so much more capable. Meeting the CEO's and leaders in both the private and public sectors, and the President of the University of Saskatchewan, Peter MacKinnon, as well as the Lieutenant-Governor, Dr. Gordon Barnhart and his wife Naomi, was an outstandingly valuable experience'. Tess then went on to say that Lieutenant-Governor Barnhart would be flying in to attend the next Leadership Academy session in Edam on the afternoon of March 10th.

Tanya Robertson, one of a group of three students from Carpenter High in Meadow Lake who, as their community service project, organized an overwhelmingly successful two day youth rally last year for young people in their diocese (which stretches from Prince Albert to Goodsoil) finds the Leadership Academy liberating, not least because she enjoys working with very involved young people who have experienced the same sorts of problems and joys. Her comments on her trip to the National Student Leadership conference in PEI this past fall sum up her feelings clearly: 'I loved the PEI trip... it was the most amazing thing to be with 900 kids who are just like you from all across Canada. There are no words to describe it! It was just amazing'.

For her service project Rebecca Macnab of Turtleford Community School hosted two information nights on behalf of Ubuntu, an organization that was formed to provide support for the widows and orphans who survived the Rwandan genocide (see www.ubuntuedmonton.org for an overview). She also ran an information booth at the summer games in Lloydminster. Altogether Rebecca's work raised a remarkable \$6000.00, which is being used to provide direct services to the people of Kimironko, a village near Kigali, in Rwanda.

When I spoke to Jennifer Bozak and Amanda Lazar of Carpenter High School they remarked that they were drawn to the academy because it seemed a perfect fit for what they were already doing as leaders in their school. The girls are co-presidents of their school's SRC and were responsible, along with Tanya Robertson, for staging the youth rally. 'It has exceeded our expectations... it has given us so many opportunities. Without it I never would have wanted to do a project or put myself out there' said Amanda. Jennifer agreed, 'you know we have to travel, usually for an hour to get to the meetings, and on the way we often wonder if the session will be worth it, and every time we leave we're always talking about the things we've learned and how we can put them to use in our life. It has changed our lives'. Amanda agreed noting 'before the

academy I would never have thought of service goals in life and now I want to join Kinettes and work in a soup kitchen... things that before I never would have thought of doing’.

Both girls spoke enthusiastically about their experiences at the PEI conference, about mentoring younger elementary school children in after-school programmes and organizing staffing and running the school’s noon hour concession, and finally about how they feel about participating in the Academy:

‘I told the board that I was grateful for the opportunities to not just to listen to the guest speakers and delegates, but also to be able to bring that back to our schools and share it with our fellow students and teachers and communities’.

‘It’s made you want to change things for the better and it has given you the means to do so’.

‘It would be a great thing if somewhere in the future we can come back and say that I changed another person’s life because of Leadership Academy. We want to make ourselves proud, but I think that in the end the greatest thank you that they could receive is having us succeed and in succeeding teach other people that they can succeed too. That would be so cool’.