

**About the project ...**

The goal of Durham Catholic District School Board's *Virtues in Action* project was to expand character development practices that are holistic in their approach and that reflect the academic, social, emotional, attitudinal and behavioural domains of learning. Representative teachers and Grade 7 students from all elementary schools were invited to a leadership forum to learn about the Catholic Virtue 'hope' and to develop a plan to integrate this virtue into their school community in ways that would support their specific needs and interests. Student leaders from grades 9 to 12 facilitated group discussions and served as peer mentors for the elementary students during the forum. Within the overarching theme of 'hope,' presentations and discussions focused on environmental responsibility, global awareness, economic astuteness and social responsibility – competencies that relate directly to the social teachings of the Catholic faith. By the end of the forum, each team had developed initial plans to expand their school's healthy living, restorative practice, anti-bullying, recess club, social justice and environmental initiatives, with an ongoing focus on ways to be inclusive of all students in their schools. The involvement of Grade 7 students built capacity at the elementary schools as they planned the integration of 'hope' with the 2010-11 school year activities in mind.

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

- Student voice and engagement were evident and encouraged throughout all parts of the *Virtues in Action* project – from planning, leading, facilitating and participating in the forum to the actions that students took back at their schools to support character development through the integration of 'hope' into their activities and initiatives.
- Students strengthened their leadership and collaborative skills as they worked together to engage their fellow students and present ideas to teachers and administrators.
- The forum provided opportunities for Grade 7 students to network with each other and with secondary students, supporting their upcoming transition from elementary to secondary school.

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

- A key factor to the success of the *Virtues in Action – Youth Forum* was the time given to students to listen, learn and become motivated prior to planning their own school-based projects. The discussions among schools also strengthened students' comfort levels in public speaking.
- Anecdotal feedback from students, teachers and administrators indicated that, when students are engaged in planning processes, their commitment to follow-up actions is increased.
- Including secondary students in planning and facilitating the forum was another important factor to its success. They strengthened their leadership skills as well as the relationships between secondary schools and their feeder schools.