

Creating We Schools ... Social Justice Fair and Film Festival

About the project ...

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board hosted a We Day event at which local, national and international role models challenged over 2 000 students in grades 5 to 12 to create their own 'We Schools' by taking action on social justice issues, both locally and globally. This project supported the student activities that followed, which were showcased at a Social Justice Fair later in the school year. Students were also invited to submit documentary-style films to highlight the issues from their projects at a Social Justice Film Festival. Students took action on a wide range of issues. For example, genocide learning about the Holocaust was linked to anti-bullying campaigns; a board-wide "Rainbow Prom" initiative supported LGBTQ activism; secondary students helped teachers deliver literacy and numeracy workshops to elementary students; and an outdoor sleepover event raised awareness about poverty and homeless issues. More than 40 members of the community representing local, national and international social justice organizations, such as UNICEF and Free the Children, also attended the Social Justice Fair, both to share information about their work and to learn about student actions.

Impact on student learning and school culture ...

- Students developed numeracy skills as they organized and managed fundraising activities to support their projects, such as raising funds to purchase hockey equipment for a Northern Ontario community whose youth suffer from high suicide rates.
- Literacy skills were enhanced as students researched local and global social justice issues, such as world wide child labour law discrepancies.
- Organization and leadership skills were developed as students planned and led presentations about their issues for their peers.
- The needs of English Language Learners were supported through projects that focused on issues affecting local refugees and other newcomers to local communities.
- The Social Justice Film Festival gave students opportunities to complete rich performance tasks linked to their classroom learning and to use technology in authentic ways. It also motivated students to produce high-quality work which was reflected in their achievements in final assessments.
- Teachers noted significant improvements in engagement in literacy because of the resources provided to schools to support the projects, such as books linked to social justice issues. Improvements in engagement led to corresponding improvements in learning and achievement.
- Teachers involved in Teaching Learning Critical Pathway cycles in schools that used the big ideas prior to We Day reported that students were more engaged and demonstrated better understanding of their learning.

Lessons learned for moving forward ...

- Teacher requests for additional supports and information, particularly about the actions of students in other schools, has resulted in a plan for additional release time to facilitate work in small learning teams that will focus on sharing resources, expertise and best practices.
- An online conference has been created to support information sharing among staff directly involved with board-wide social justice initiatives.
- The board plans to include students and, if possible, administration, in future in-servicing to support character initiatives.