

Developing Our Future Leaders' Voices: Walking the Path

About the project ...

Developing student voice and increasing student engagement in education are key features of board and school plans. The program, *Walking the Path* became one component of Rainy River District School Board's plan to achieve these goals. A board analysis revealed that Aboriginal males were the most at-risk group with regard to student achievement, engagement and graduation; therefore this empowerment program was developed to raise their self-esteem and leadership skills and in doing so, increase their confidence and engagement in school. *Walking the Path* was developed with the Ontario Provincial Police First Nations Program and The Anishinabek Police Service to provide Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students with lessons about the history, traditions, beliefs and cultures of Aboriginal peoples. The lessons serve as a vehicle for youth empowerment, promoting self-esteem and respect for others. Local OPP, Treaty Three Police and board personnel delivered the program to ten male students from Grades 7–12 from across the board.

As follow-up to *Walking the Path*, the first annual *Challenge 2010*, a young men's conference facilitated by board staff and additional student leaders, focused on at-risk youth in Grades 7 and 8, mentored by students from Grades 9–12. *Challenge 2010* provided participants with outdoor education experiences including a nature hike at Quetico Provincial Park, where students learned about marine life, plants and animals native to the area. It also included learning how to make basic knots, shelter building and GPS navigation. The event had an additional focus on healthy living as students earned their Basic Canoeing-Level One, Ontario Recreational Canoeing and Kayaking Association certification.

Impact on student learning and school culture ...

- Surveys from mentors and at-risk students who participated in *Challenge 2010* were overwhelmingly positive. At-risk students learned to recognize the skills needed for successful transition into high school.
- The conference provided the opportunity for all participating students to gain valuable certification and to develop wilderness survival skills.
- *Walking the Path* will contribute in future years across the district to building at-risk students' self-esteem, promoting understanding of Aboriginal cultures and featuring Aboriginal role models for all students.

Lessons learned for moving forward

- When Ontario Provincial Police and Treaty Three Police Officers deliver the *Walking the Path* program to Aboriginal youth, the values of leadership, Aboriginal culture and healthy lifestyle choices (including alcohol and drug awareness) are promoted in authentic ways and lead to positive youth-police relationships.
- Culturally relevant experiences help to raise students' self-esteem and leadership skills and contribute to increased confidence and engagement in school.