

Guiding Circles Helps Distribute Strength, Hope and Worth through Toronto Schools

For the past three years, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has committed both staff and funding to an innovative project destined to influence student career choices and create healthier, more prosperous futures.

With a number of its teachers using the *Guiding Circles* program (a training product of the Aboriginal Human Resource Council and the program authors), the TDSB has significantly advanced many students' ability to discover their career potential through an interactive, flexible and fun approach that allows each participant to realize their individual strengths.

"The power of the *Guiding Circles* program is in going through the actual process," says Lorna McPherson, guidance program coordinator for the TDSB.

"Through storytelling and active engagement, children gain a positive self-reflection, school becomes more relevant, there's less risk of disengagement and they build resiliency. And, after all, that's our job as educators," she says.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) first piloted the *Guiding Circles* career development program in 2006, by having the Aboriginal Human Resource Council provide practitioner training to more than 50 teachers recruited from within the district's numerous schools.

It was a decision that carried the power to positively change the lives of hundreds of students, especially those in the 10-14-year-old age range.

"It engages students on a subject they know best – themselves," says McPherson. It is what career development is and should be."

The *Guiding Circles* program combines traditional Aboriginal teachings with contemporary career exercises that awaken the individual's sense of self-esteem. Through activities, students are able to tell their own story and relate their life experiences to career planning. These activities also promote self-confidence, restore hope and create vision where, perhaps, none existed before.

"Students need to feel honoured and valued for what they can share and for who they are," McPherson says. "The strength of every child is not just in academics...some may never read or write but they are no less worthy," she adds.

During the 2006/2007 school year, as some teachers were busy learning about the *Guiding Circles* method, a team of seven others were writing the curriculum modules so that the initiative could be field-tested, in various settings, during the 2007/2008 school year.

By putting a teacher slant on the program, the TDSB was able to customize the program without changing its core messages.

“We fell in love with the training but we needed it to be self-sustaining,” explains McPherson.

The *Guiding Circles* program is now used to support four of the TDSB’s nine critical education targets which include:

1. Creation of sustainable partnerships
2. Development of nine essential skills (*Guiding Circles*)
3. Expanded opportunities for experiential learning (*Guiding Circles*)
4. New courses and program packages that are sector and skills focused
5. Career awareness for students (*Guiding Circles*)
6. Parental awareness of new realities
7. Use of classroom resources with sector applications, websites and labour market information
8. Skills recognition and industry-recognized certificates and credentials
9. Effective transitions to work or post-secondary training (*Guiding Circles*)

In December 2008, the TDSB launched its second *Guiding Circles* initiative – a train-the-trainer initiative that brought 15 staff together for an intensive two-day workshop. Now, skilled as trainers, this group is available to train other teachers at any of the district’s 27 schools.

Today, those trainers are deployed and actively delivering teacher training – although workshops have been limited somewhat due to the need for each course to be sponsored or funded.

However, McPherson and the rest of the team have high hopes for the program.

“We see uses for it everywhere...it’s limitless in how it can be incorporated into teaching,” says McPherson. “Educators sometimes see education as getting on to the next level. “*Guiding Circles* is about getting on with life.”

To learn more about how you or organization can get involved with *Guiding Circles* visit aboriginalhr.ca or call 1.866.711.5091.