

Student Voices: How to inspire environmental and global citizenship in students

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Where do these student voices come from?

The following student leaders in environmental education and global citizenship in Alberta presented to over 350 adult delegates at the 2010 Symposium to Advance Environmental Education and Global Citizenship, Canmore Alberta, 8 May 2010.

Students were asked to comment on what had influenced them – and what should be in place to create more students like them! This text has been excerpted from their responses by ACEE.

You can find a brief synopsis of these student voices on the last page.

Were the student voices heard?

Absolutely! Their presentations electrified and galvanized the audience – all these students received standing ovations. Adults then spent the day in small groups, and suggested a number of strategies and actions that would help optimize the K-12 education system in Alberta. The Alberta Council for Environmental Education has committed to act as secretariat for a process to create a 2010 Framework to Advance Environmental Education in Alberta, which will be authored by a Multi-Stakeholder Steering Committee. Over 73 individuals and organizations have committed to delivering on the Framework thus far! For more information, please visit <http://abcee.org/EE-framework>

...But now, let's hear from the kids...



Sophie Barry with her parents, mentor Jeff Reading, and ACEE Executive Director Gareth Thomson (right)

Sophie Barry, Grade 6, Elboya Elementary, Calgary: “Today I would like to share with you the stories of some of my favourite people who have inspired me to optimize my global citizenship. I hope along the way you might catch a glimpse of yourself in these people and realize the role that you can play in influencing our youth.

First let’s take Mrs. Palmer, my not so ordinary science teacher. I’ve been lucky enough to have her as a teacher and friend for three years. From the very beginning she has implemented environmental awareness into her daily lessons by adapting curriculum to provide a green theme. She encourages students to look beyond themselves and realize how everything that we do and every decision that we make has a ripple effect on the world we live in. Mrs. Palmer is truly a positive role model. She makes environmental awareness important to herself and by doing that it becomes important to her students.

Our real strength will come in numbers – we need to engage ALL students in becoming good global citizens, and involve each and every one of them. One of the initiatives that I would like to see implemented is for every school to take on one greening project per year that would involve the entire community – students, staff, and parents.

I've been fortunate to meet a number of community experts over the past year and they have definitely been another source of inspiration for me. One such individual is Jeff Reading who challenged me to take my passion to the next level. Jeff has been a great supporter encouraging me, introducing me to others in the environmental field, and providing me with opportunities to share my passion.

Alberta classrooms are the perfect forum for optimizing global citizenship and environmental education. Every child goes to school, and it's the only place that we can touch every one of them. And it's critical that we do. We are the leaders of tomorrow but that doesn't mean we can't be leaders today. These kinds of programs may not make as big of an impact on the environment as tackling some of the larger global problems we face. But they could not make a larger impact on inspiring a child...

Inspire us to think beyond our own corner of the world and realize the consequences of our actions.

Inspire us to become great global citizens today and tomorrow.

Inspire us to lead.

Inspire us to act.

Inspire us.



Sabrina Niesman (right) with fellow student Dustin Saxton and teacher Glyn Hughes

Sabrina Niesman, Grade 12, George McDougall High School, Airdrie: The dedication and passion that I have had instilled within me for human rights has been shaped by many different influences. For me it started at an early age with my parents reminding me to be grateful for what I have and for the life I've been given. "Because there are many who would trade almost anything for what you have," they used to say. They used to tell me about Africa, a place where children went to bed hungry and where many were parentless, left to a life of constant struggle, a life I would never have to live. This helped me to grow into a very caring and educated young person, but still I did not realize how only I could make a difference in a world with so many problems.

The person who helped me realize my own potential as a leader and as a global citizen is my teacher and mentor, the co-founder of our Students for Change club, Mr. Glyn Hughes. His enthusiasm for humanitarianism is contagious. It is impossible to walk into his classroom and not feel his love for helping youth and his fellow mankind. He has stories about his travels and about Students for Change alumni who have gone on to do incredible things that inspire and captivate. What he does above everything else, though, is give us opportunities and never lets us forget that they are there.

And when we make a commitment, he holds us accountable. Young people need that; they need to be held accountable. They need to know that they have responsibilities and that people are counting on them. With that comes a sense of accomplishment and worth when they have fulfilled their duty. And as much as Mr. Hughes is there pushing us to do our best and to contribute, he is also there to congratulate when we have success.

At the end of the day, I believe it is education and getting the conversation going that counts. Alberta's social studies curriculum states that students should be active and engaged citizens throughout their courses. Classrooms are where this can start. If people are educated about the issues they will be able to discover their passion to change them. I have seen the change in some youth as they began to talk about the issues. Given a safe environment where they could learn and share their opinions and thoughts, without feeling judged, I began to see a passion open up in them that was not there previously. They need to feel that what they care about matters and, more importantly, they need to feel that there is someone there who will support them as they strive to make a difference.

I challenge you to do this for the youth in your communities - educate them. There are so many ways! Give them a safe place where they feel they can discuss and state their opinions. Challenge them to look at things from other perspectives and develop critical thinking skills. When they find injustice in the world, challenge them to create change. And when they have an idea, encourage them to pursue it. Be there to support them and hold them accountable. Above all, listen to them; for every youth has something they care about, they might just not have discovered it yet. That's why they need caring teachers to show them the truth that the world does not always want to see.

Thank you for your work to engage youth and making leaders of tomorrow. It is because of people like you that I am here today, determined to make a difference in this world.



Chelsey Dawes (centre) with her mother and teacher Glyn Hughes

Chelsey Dawes, previous graduate from George McDougall High School

I have always been very interested in social justice issues – however, it was not until grade 10 that I began to get involved. Glyn Hughes (see excerpt above) about said to me one day: *“Chelsey, there are problems in this world, what are you going to do about it?”* To this day I don’t think he realizes the impact that question had on me. It made me think, and I mean really made me think, about what those problems were, how I could make a difference, and where I should begin.

Inspiring students is not just about presenting an issue and encouraging students to get involved. It is about presenting an issue, and then discussing the possibilities for their individual involvement. and leading by example. It is one thing for a parent or teacher to suggest that an individual should get involved, but it is another thing for that adult to say: *“Hey come join me, let’s do this together”* – or perhaps even *“Hey, can I join you? Lets do this together”*. So - lead by example, and ask yourself, *“There are problems in this world, what am I going to do about them”*.

In order for parents to fully instill a sense of possibility, there needs to be support. Supporting I think is the most difficult part. Being a support is about going to an event when you would rather sleep, making time for that extra practice of the speech you have heard a thousand times, and to be there when events, and efforts don't go as planned.

My mom was always asking to come hear me speak, or to join me at the homeless shelter, even volunteering to pick up garbage with me, drive for bottle drives, even taking me to the airport to allow me to go to countries like El Salvador, even when she was not so sure of the idea. My dad was also always encouraging me as well, asking me: "Chels, what's our next project?" What can we do together?"

Encouragement through doing is completely different than encouragement through saying.



*The ASCENT team, from left to right:
Students Emily Bolton, Taelor Stark; teachers Ken Symington and Jodi Anderson; and student Kyla Schenk*

*The following are all Grade 10 students in the ASCENT program at Canmore Collegiate High School. * ASCENT is a multidisciplinary course developed by Canmore teachers Ken Symington and Jodi Anderson that integrates four different curricula into one course.*

Taelor Stark: My teacher Ms. Murphy went completely out of her way for the sole purpose of giving me a new experience. This is what I think teachers need to do - go outside the job description to help kids achieve their dreams. Although our passions and interests come from ourselves (and, occasionally, our parents), teachers and schools can still help inspire. By providing guidance that is above and beyond the normal reaches of a teacher, teachers can inspire, influence and motivate.

Kyla Schenk : Through my personal experience I have had one teacher in particular who truly inspired me to embrace my passion. Mr. Brent Bittner doesn't just tell you that you can do something, he shows you. Any teacher can hand a student a text book and send them on their way, but it takes a true mentor to actually demonstrate to their students

that they can become whatever they put their minds to. I believe that the reason Mr. Bittner is such an excellent role model is because he leads by example rather than by the book, he has personal experience and a true passion for what he teaches.

Emily Bolton: Social issues first registered with me through my grade six mentorship, where I spent part of my school year doing a sort of work experience.. My teacher matched me with a local not for profit group that does international development work called CAUSE Canada, which was really eye opening. I've always wanted to go to Africa and this mentorship showed me how big the problems were.

Then we get to my current Grade 10 program. Programs like ASCENT* are so important in unifying efforts! One of the key aspects of ASCENT is that you stay with the same class all day so you can really get to know each other and make connections, which brings us together as a team. Every so often our groups get switched up - you can't stay in your own little world with just your chosen friends. This type of group dynamic is important because everyone needs to be on board in order for society to move forward in fighting environmental and social issues.

There are so often division in classes: students can go months without having to talk to the person sitting right beside them, only three feet away. How can we join forces if we're not even communicating? We aren't often pushed to collaborate with each other, even group work is mostly just a division of labor: "OK, you're in charge of that and I'm in charge of this, do your part and we'll slap it together in the end."

In classrooms we need to work with each other not beside each other, we need to help each other along and grow together. We've got to get to this point of environmental and social responsibility together. We've got to work side by side and support each other throughout the journey so everyone can reach the same point.

Citizenship is about your responsibility to the group, it's about everyone doing their part so we achieve success as a collective. After family, schools are the first community we are really involved in, it's the place where these values of community and responsibility to others need to develop and grow. If we can't feel responsibility to help the people who sit next to us succeed, how can we feel responsibility to help people a world away in Africa?

So I believe that we need to foster community in our schools. Then small scale will transfer to a large scale, one step at a time, as we move from a caring school community to a caring global community.. Schools need to supply the infrastructure and foundation of citizenship in youth.

What we need are schools full of communities not classrooms.

What do these students say about the role of teachers, school, community resources, and parents in creating environmental and global citizens?

A brief synopsis, by Gareth Thomson, ACEE

Teachers can integrate environmental and global learning into their curriculum. They can create a safe place in the classroom, seed important conversations that help students find their passion, and bear witness to the student as they discover those passions. They can challenge students with statements like “There are problems in this world, what are you going to do about it?” Teachers can inspire, can help students commit to making a difference, and teach them responsibility by holding them accountable to that commitment. Teachers can go outside the job description to help kids achieve their dreams – when they do this, students notice!

Teachers can present an issue and encourage students to get involved – but better than that, a teacher can say “Hey come join me, let’s do this together” – or perhaps even “Hey, can I join you? Lets do this together!” The very best teaching occurs through modeling, when the teacher walks the talk: ‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’

Schools can organize school-wide themes to engage entire student bodies. And school and classrooms can look for ways to practice what they preach: we can only be good global citizens if we practice good citizenship beginning where we teach, working together as a community in our schools and in our classrooms.

Parents can instill values in their children, model citizenship behaviours, and be a rock-solid and active source of support that their children can rely upon.

Community groups can present to students and develop mentorship programs in partnership with schools. **Community experts** can develop significant mentorship roles as they strike up and nurture important one-on-one relationships with students and their parents.