

# Kentwood's Teen Leadership Class scores big with students

Posted by Aliciamarie Belchak April 07, 2008 14:05PM

Building relationships and fostering personal responsibility is the aim of education at Kentwood's Freshman Campus these days, a place where staff are trained to "capture kids' hearts" and students are taking the new Teen Leadership class.

Students are responding by speaking in front of groups and even showcasing the class to the Board of Education recently. Six Teen Leadership students recently told a group of 45 teachers and administrators at the Kent Intermediate School District what the class has meant to them.

"You guys really have made an impact," Mimi Madden, secretary for the Board of Education, told students about their presentations to the Kent ISD. "There's always a perception about our community, but you should have heard all the positive comments."

Four more students presented their stories about the impact of Teen Leadership to the Board of Education at its last meeting.

"I used to be absolutely terrified of talking in front of people, especially in front of a group of adults," noted Greg Gauthier, speaking to the Board of Education.

"Teen Leadership has taught me not to judge people before you get to know them," said freshman Alicia Pagan of her experiences. "I've learned to be more out-going and social than I would have been otherwise."

The course seems to be a big hit with the students, with small class sizes facilitating the intimate sharing, relationship building, and self-esteem boosting so important to students entering a big high school setting, according to Michelle Siderman, principal at the Kentwood Freshmen Campus. She cites this as one of the reasons all 790 freshman are required to take Teen Leadership.

"It's just been a great year, and we're really glad that we could run these classes in the small class sizes that the Flippen Group recommended," Siderman told the Board of Education.

The Flippen Group, developers and trainers of the "Capturing Kids' Hearts" series in which the district has been participating, designed the Teen Leadership Class for Kentwood and now uses video footage from the freshman leadership classes to highlight what can be achieved.

"This class really teaches a lot, like self-confidence, empathy, and how to be more social," said Ena Muhameclozic. "You really can see people change in this class. They become more confident, caring, strong, and really become leaders. Having that confidence when you're job-shadowing or volunteering is really important."

For ninth-grader Carla Hernandez, the class has meant opening up instead of shutting down.

"This class has changed me. In this class, I learned to express feelings that I never would have expressed," she said. "It makes you feel like someone is there for you and that's really important. It's so exciting to go to a class that is so full of

positive energy."

"It's a transformational class - it's developing relationships. So many people never have a chance to be vulnerable in front of others like this," said Steve Dabrowski, board treasurer. "It makes our jobs as a board so much easier to know that we're doing something positive for the future of America."

For the four teachers trained specifically to teach Teen Leadership, it has been rewarding to watch students grow and challenge each other. Kids are eager to start class and guide discussions, often volunteering stories and making touching speeches that bring their peers to tears, according to teacher Aaron Blain.

"I am always telling the kids that 'you are constantly representing more than just yourself. You represent your school, your religion, your family, your values,'" Blain said.

"The freshman year is a tough, tough year," Board Trustee Sandi Talbott told the students who presented. "You have just warmed our hearts by what you have just said."

Board Trustee Bill Joseph agreed, noting that these kids "are going to make the difference in America not to mention Kentwood and Michigan."

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