

Free The Children

Volunteer Now End of Program Reflections

Presented to the J.W McConnell Family
Foundation

McCONNELL REPORT – FINAL REFLECTIONS & LESSONS LEARNED

Establishment of a Regional Office in BC serving the West Coast:

- 1- The McConnell Grant was our entry point to expanding to the west coast. The program in its first year depended on facilitators making special trips to BC to implement and monitor the growth of the program. The growing need to be locally present led Free The Children to establish a regional office in BC, in part, to best deliver the Volunteer Now program.

The establishment of a regional office was critical to:

- a. Understand the local context, the culture in the West coast and how it is different from Ontario where we have worked for the past 15 years
 - b. Be close to our stakeholders and direct beneficiaries: building strong relationships by visiting the schools, face to face meeting with the educators and close mentoring of youth leaders
 - c. Ensuring a high touch approach which distinguishes us from other organizations as we mentor our youth and equip them with tools and resources to help them with their engagement locally and internationally
 - d. Personalize and customize the program according to those local needs as we observe trends on the ground and recommend changes to be made to fit the cultural and local context
- 2- Ongoing learnings from the regional office model includes:
 - a. Striking the fine balance between carrying the organizational culture as it is globally while being culturally and regional sensitive and relevant to the west coast and BC context
 - b. Ensuring the vision of Headquarters in Toronto is inclusive of regional offices needs and contexts while empowering them to create their local vision that ultimately fits within the global organizational vision
 - c. Ensuring quality of the program while maintaining the same volume of activities with a much smaller team in those regional offices compared to headquarters; ultimately the need to increase staff, ongoing training and development and strong mentoring mechanisms to ensure quality of program
 - d. Ensuring sustainable funding of the BC office as the McConnell grant comes to an end by securing other grants

Standing out in a saturated market of youth engagement organizations:

There are many competing organizations (i.e. the Red Cross, Check your Head, Katimavik, Girls & Boys Club etc.) that offer youth empowerment and leadership services to School Districts and schools across British Columbia, therefore, it is important for Take Action (formerly Volunteer Now) to be highly customizable and tailored to meet the needs of every educator and student group.

- 1- From this past year of engagement, one major lesson we learnt was that schools enjoy leadership training sessions that fit within their service learning mandate. Therefore, our workshops varied from a few hours to multiple days depending on how they envisioned Take Action to fit within their classroom.

- 2- Schools love the opportunity to cluster with other schools in the district, neighborhood or community because it provides an opportunity for cross sharing, cooperation and rapport building.
- 3- It also provides a platform for mentorship where older students or youth who have been involved in leadership really model positive behavior amongst those new to these types of opportunities.
- 4- Free The Children team and facilitators are young, passionate and energetic. It makes easy for youth to relate to them and take them as their role models.
- 5- Finally, being affiliated with well known Canadian icons like Craig and Marc Kielburger definitely helped to establish credibility and generate excitement about the program.
- 6- We also provide students and educators with unique tools and resources through which they can get further involved with Free The Children having worked in youth engagement and leadership programming for over 10 years. We offer tangible alternatives and tools to students like: Me to We Books, Music, Volunteer Trips, Summer Academies, guides to educators that all themed around social justice issues and can encompass multiple talents and objectives both from the youth and the educators end.

The importance of building solid relationships with stakeholders:

- 1- One of the main stakeholders in this process have become teachers and educators who are ultimately the program champions that can allow its growth and foster the youth action plans etc .
Even after signing school board partnerships, it is crucial to the ongoing implementation and the efficacy of the program to have strong educator champions, which relies upon establishing personal and independent rapport with the school itself and the educators within them. In BC we have at least one teacher present at every workshop and their participation is crucial in ensuring students follow through with taking action. It ensures there is some kind of accountability and feedback loop within the school once we have left.
- 2- School board partnerships have allowed the Take Action (Volunteer Now) model and workshops to be part of curricular and co-curricular activities which ensures commitment and follow through both from students and educators while still having fun and enjoying the multi-faceted sides of the program
- 3- Ensuring transparency and accountability back to stakeholders when it comes to community reports, fiscal reports, and information regarding donations allocated to projects overseas with Free The Children is vital for the sustainability of those relationships
- 4- We Day in Vancouver this year has had a tremendous impact on building credibility of our programs to stakeholders and to providing schools who were once only involved with Take Action (Volunteer Now) exposure to the vastness of our programming. It was however a double edged sword that portrayed the organization as all glamor when it is really, more specially in BC, an organic grass-roots organization. We have started lately to organize office tours so people can actually see how small the office and the team is and feel the organic/grass-roots vibe that makes who we are.

Mandatory Community Service vis-à-vis Service Learning and long term civic responsibility

- 1- The connection between mandatory volunteerism and civic responsibility is subjective in that it depends upon the definition of volunteering used and where along the spectrum of choice, compensation, structure and benefit the experience lies. To truly foster a youth's sense of pride and ownership over their community service experience, it is important to give them a choice over what cause they are supporting, whether it will be in a formal or informal setting and whether it will benefit strangers, community, friends, family and/or themselves.
- 2- Community service hours are often perceived by youth as a modern form of punishment, or simply a stipulation for graduation contributing to the idea that one must receive some form of compensation for their time. We believe volunteering is important to provide youth with a basis for making new connections and experiencing first hand the importance of giving back without expecting anything in return. Through the program we have been able to draw connections to volunteerism showing that the personal benefit one can get can still be altruistic- feeling good about their contribution, building a team of peers, playing fun activities, getting thanks, admiration or school credits, it is important to put community service in a positive light.
- 3- To avoid the negative connotations of mandatory volunteering, in the Take Action (Volunteer Now) program we have reframed it in light of 'service learning'- a more inclusive and positive term for compelling students to take part in experiential experiences that are an extension of their formal education. "Service learning" is a sustainable way of encouraging life long volunteerism by having students discuss and understand social issues, take action on an issue they care about and have school give them a platform to reflect. It is the values/orientation shift that also contributed to the renaming of the program from Volunteer Now to Take Action, as the program serves as a platform for schools to have students take action, reflect and receive kudos.
- 4- Overall, we have observed that it is not the quantity of time spent volunteering but the quality of the experience that ultimately has the greatest impact both on the individual and for the cause/ group for which they are serving; therefore, it is important for community service, especially where it is part of the academic mandate, that students are able to plan their own experiences and spend time in class reflecting on them. That way it is seen as an educational experience to develop skills and build rapport with the community rather than as punitive or imposed. By dedicating time to the reflective process, one is able to recognize the value of their contributions and feel encouraged to give more.

Program related observations and learning:

- 1- There has been a huge growth in the area of youth leadership development in British Columbia, with the city of Vancouver's Youth Outreach Team, Social Policy Division, meeting twice a year with a group of organizations (like ours) that provide youth empowerment in order to facilitate the development and delivery of programs in a manner that most benefits youth. There has also been a huge growth in the number of professional Life Coaches (sometimes even known as "Soul Coaches" depending on their foundational philosophy) that work with youth, adults, and organizations.

Based on the expansion of these areas, one can only assume that there has been an increase in general youth engagement (at least within the province of British Columbia).

However, there are several challenges for the Take Action Program that have accompanied the proliferation and expansion of nonprofit activities in these areas, namely:

- Youth empowerment/ leadership training over-saturation in the BC market and in schools which have been faced with significant funding restrictions, making it difficult to recoup any program costs or to charge for programs when so many are being offered free of charge. This is especially challenging considering that one key tactic for the long-term continuation of the Take Action program in BC was to have schools pay a portion or have Districts sponsor the program, as they have in Ontario.
- The same educators are often called upon or targeted to participate in/ lead the variety of programs which are similar in nature. Partnerships and workshops are about building relationships; therefore, it takes time and a lot of meetings, face to face discussions, phone calls, proposals etc. to coordinate and confirm workshops with schools, school districts and students. As educators are being stretched thin with competing offerings and the requirements around participating in forums like Vancouver Youth Outreach Team, etc increase, the time that they are able to dedicate to the Take Action program is increasingly limited.
- A Great demand for Aboriginal Leadership programs has emerged as the focus on youth engagement/ empowerment further enters the mainstream and strategic thinking about service-learning, but success depends on collaborations between the Aboriginal Education department, the communities themselves, Girls Groups, School District Superintendents and Directors of Instruction etc. The BC office has responded with special aboriginal programming, the expansion of which is dependent on strong partnerships with these institutions.

It is worth noting that youth civic engagement has become a huge trend in BC's culture and there are now projects emerging to assess the effectiveness and empirical validity of engaging North American youth in global citizenship and service learning while supporting developing countries. One such project at the forefront of this movement is the University of British Columbia's "Ethicize: the Ethics of International Engagement and Service-Learning Project". We look forward to learning from their study.

Internal challenges, learning and planned action/response

- 1- Ensuring Educator Participation:** A necessary component of Me to We Leadership is engagement with teacher leaders and their participation in all workshops. Consistent teacher leaders are able to support students in their plans and advocate for them to the school administration. It can be a challenge to engage educators in every step of the process when their roles and responsibilities are not clearly laid out from the initial meetings with the Program Coordinator at the District level.
 - In order to promote educator participation in the future, we plan to offer teacher leaders individual or district-wide leadership meetings to address any concerns, incorporate the teacher's ideas, hand out all resource materials and give advance notice of the itinerary and expectations of them and their students for the year.
- 2- Consistent student groups and key teacher contacts:** Having a cohesive core group of students that are consistently engaged in all workshops and action plans is crucial to the success of the program. Certain

schools did not provide the same teacher leaders throughout the course of the program and selected a new group of students for each workshop.

- We hope to address this concern and educate teachers on the need for consistency amongst student group members and teachers through initial meetings.

3- Student Ambassadors required more time to implement plan of action: It is important to give students ample time between each leadership training session to finalize their action plans.

- **Opportunities for the Aboriginal Student pilot program and Me to We students to come together:** There were few opportunities for the Sacred Circle Ambassadors and Mainstream Volunteer Ambassadors to come together and celebrate their actions.
- During teacher meetings, we plan to bring educators from both the School District and Aboriginal Education department together to discuss how they can collaborate and celebrate their successes together.

4- The majority of youth engaged in our workshops were involved in leadership beforehand and were selected because of their leadership role in their school. The challenge then arises that Me to We leadership should reach out more to students who have not yet had the opportunity to be highlighted as leaders. The lack of a clear definition on what it means to “volunteer” resulted in students not considering leadership activities or time spent helping out their community (as seen in the Sacred Circle program) as volunteering.

- The change in the name of the Volunteer Now! program to Take More Action! Will help appeal to a larger demographic of students interested in simply helping out their community. Next year, we plan to reach out to alternative types of educational centers (i.e. Learning Centre’s in Surrey) and to give educators sufficient time to select a diverse group of students who have are not typically recognized as “leaders”. We also plan to offer a multi-workshop model where we will continually stay in contact with students and support them in their efforts.

The multi-workshop model will mitigate the issue of incomplete action plans by ensuring concrete facilitator follow-up, support, feedback as well as the sustainability of student action plans.

5- Lack of Male Participation in Me to We Leadership: Only 30% of participants were male.

- To reach out to a larger male demographic next year, we will work with educators and encourage they select key male role models. Our promotional materials will be adapted to include an emphasis on the experiential (physical activities) side of our workshops and should feature male participants that are involved in diverse projects for change (i.e. drama, sports events etc.).

December 17, 2009

Ms. Sandra Sorial
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Dear Ms. Sorial:

Thank you for your letter of December 16th and the enclosed final report for the Volunteer Now program of Free the Children. ...

The Foundation always appreciates receiving reports that outline not just what was achieved, but also the major challenges and “lessons learned” along the way. We particularly appreciated your final reflections, a very insightful piece about the nature of engagement and the particular role that Free the Children plays in this process.

We have noted the following highlights from your report:

- **Program highlights:** The grant has certainly allowed the Volunteer Now program to grow and to take a firm foothold in Western Canada; by any quantitative measure the program has been a success. Your report underlines two challenges: the low percentage of males and the fact that the majority of the program’s participants were already engaged in leadership positions or projects within their schools. In short, you are trying to move beyond preaching to the choir of previously engaged female students. From the Foundation’s experience with YouthScape, this is quite common. Engaging youth who do not have a sense of belonging and who do not have the motivation to get involved requires a different mindset and approach. “If you build it, they will come” does not generally work with this cohort; you have to be much more proactive in creating space for different kinds of participation. We will forward to you the YouthScape Guide Book which should be published shortly to assist with your reflections.

- **Youth Empowerment versus youth engagement:** We have noticed that these expressions are used interchangeably in your report. From the Foundation's experience there is a significant difference between *empowerment*, which focuses on the development of the individual's voice and capacities, and *engagement*, which refers to individuals committing themselves to something larger than themselves; moving from me to we, if you will. As we have commented before, the program seems to focus largely on the development of leadership skills among youth. In your reports, you emphasize the benefits to young people and the responsibility to deliver appropriate support to schools and teachers but accountability to communities seems to be largely absent. Is the impact on communities important or are communities primarily seen as the context within which young people learn?
- **Community Service Learning:** This question is particularly important as you make the transition away from a mandatory volunteerism model towards one of community service learning. The Foundation has supported CSL across Canada over the past six years. One of the lessons is that it is easy for community impact to become an afterthought with all the emphasis on student learning and the priorities of the academy. Also, the word "service" carries with it a trace of *noblesse oblige*, the notion that the privileged have an obligation to help the poor. In the CSL context, it can come across that the educated will help those less fortunate in the community or around the world. This contrasts with an assets-based approach which starts from the assumption that communities and individuals possess undervalued and underutilized gifts and skills that, if mobilized, can build resilient communities.
- **Organizational brand:** We were intrigued by your comments about the effect of Free the Children's branding. There is no question that the high profile events and charismatic leadership of the organization create awareness and a certain type of credibility about the program. However, as you suggest, We Day was a "*double-edged sword that portrayed the organization as all glamour.*" There are parallels in many domains within the national and international voluntary sector. One player, through force of character and superior marketing, is sometimes able to monopolize the communications landscape related to the issue. However, people within the domain and even within the dominant organization know that there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality on the ground. The fact that you are aware of this tension is a healthy sign.

- **Organizational structure:** It is interesting that you chose to establish a BC office during the grant in order to adapt the Ontario-based program to local realities and to provide “high touch” support. Many Canadian NGOs took this route in the 1970s for precisely the reasons you cite. Many national organizations (as opposed to federations) have since closed them due to the challenge you are now facing: it is not evident that a string of regional offices is a financially sustainable model. At the same time you mention that the region is saturated with youth engagement organizations offering free leadership programs within schools. This would seem to undermine your efforts to charge schools for Take Action programs. Perhaps you could consider collaborating with some of these BC-based organizations to deliver Take Action within schools using minimum specifications and according to principles negotiated with Free the Children. Of course, this means sharing responsibility, power and branding which may be a challenge. Evidence is emerging that some of the most successful organizations leverage the assets (human, financial, reputational) of others by collaborating in innovative ways rather than trying to build an empire. In short, if no one cares who gets the credit, you can accomplish almost anything!

Thank you again for your report and sharing with me the inside story of the Volunteer Now journey. We look forward to following the progress of your efforts.

Yours sincerely,

John Cawley
Senior Program Officer

Enclosure
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