

Change Maker Program Inspires Students to “Be the Change”

Elora’s Story

Teacher Elora Lake, of Columbia School in Yorkton, created a new extracurricular Change Maker Program to teach the Grade 8 students about social activism, human rights and global citizenship. She is teaching students how to embrace their personal power to be a positive force for change in the world. In its first year at the school, the group has already developed programs that have helped their community, their classmates as well as school children on the other side of the world.

[View Elora’s #theteacherproject video.](#)

Read more to find out how the Change Maker Program is empowering students while teaching them about compassion, accountability and leadership.

1. Tell me about Columbia School’s Change Maker Program?

Columbia School is one of the bigger public schools in Yorkton, Saskatchewan. We have around 470 kids from prekindergarten to Grade 8. We’re a diverse community with families from all over the world. We have local families who grew up here, immigrant families who moved here and families with Indigenous heritage.

This year, our school has undergone a number of changes. We have 12 new staff members, due to retirements and other movement within the division. I am also new. I used to work at Yorkdale School, which had similar programming. I wanted to blend programs to create a “super group” of Change Makers; student leaders who would take ownership and be really engaged in the day-to-day activities at the school. With the amount of change at Columbia School, the timing felt right. We are still a new program so things are continuing to evolve.

The Change Maker Program is about more than raising money or getting involved in “x” amount of community initiatives; it’s about building leaders for tomorrow and setting them up for future success. Our Program is a blend of a few different programs. We have a leadership council that meets to plan dances and spirit days. When we want to change or create new policies, we

have focus groups to ensure the student perspective and voice is included. We recently finished a health initiative looking at various health issues around the world, like access. The students raised \$1,200 which they sent to Kenya to help educate new moms about preventative health measures at local clinics. We've volunteered at a food bank so students can see how it works and benefits the community. We are learning about human rights, past and present. We started a breakfast program so all kids at Columbia can begin their day with a full stomach. We put on a community holiday lunch in December and the kids cooked ham, turkey and potatoes to feed 600 people. That's a difficult feat for adults, never mind a bunch of 13 and 14-year olds. We're hoping to make it an annual event. We've started a mentorship program. Our Grade 8 Change Makers are paired up with students in Grades 1 to 4; teachers submit student names based on need. It teaches relationship building and social interaction skills, and it gives Change Makers an opportunity to be leaders.

Right now, we are getting into our education initiative. We're looking at Nicaragua specifically, as I'm headed there this summer to build latrines; we'll be sending school supplies: pencils, notebooks and other supplies.

2. What are students learning in the Change Maker Program?

Responsibility, time management and accountability. We meet every Monday at lunch. We discuss different strategies like how do you relate to your "mentee" and get them to open up if they're shy; what are some fun games and activities you can do with your "mentee"? If we're planning an activity, like a dance, we make sure everyone has a job. That might involve researching different initiatives around the world. If someone volunteers to take care of the posters to promote the dance, that's their job. I don't do a lot of handholding or following them around. The expectation when they are in Change Makers is that they are accountable to contribute to the group.

Students are also learning compassion, to think about the world and move beyond what is right in front of them. Even though we don't live in the same city, province or country, we're all humans who think and feel and care; that's our connection. Our needs really aren't that different from someone living in Africa, Central America or Russia.

And they're learning how to acknowledge our differences. Not everyone is living the same truth. We're all dealing with different things. Quality of life and access to essentials differ greatly depending on where you live, even within your own province. We're going to be talking about water security at the end of the year. If you look at a lot of our Northern communities, we have people right here in

Saskatchewan who don't have access to clean drinking water. It is important for students to be aware of these things because the world can't change if we are not aware.

3. Why do you spend your free time supporting an extracurricular program?

Global citizenship, current events and world issues are things I am very passionate about. It drives my motivation. I'm the type of person that has my hands in 17 different pots. I am in a musical right now, and am taking my masters in educational leadership and administration. The musical is almost done. I told my husband I'll finally be able to sit down and relax and he laughed because he knows I'll find some other commitment by Monday.

Recently, I applied for a Canadian Teachers' Federation role in social justice and human rights. I have ideas and I like to get involved so when things happen, I can't complain because I was part of those processes.

Doing this is fun. It motivates me. Extracurricular programs aren't just for students; they are a creative outlet for teachers as well. When I was a student, math wasn't what got me to school every day. For me, it was theatre. I want Change Makers to be that for my students. I want the world to evolve into a better place today than it was yesterday. Raising a strong generation of individual thinkers and compassionate young people is how we'll do it.

4. Do you have any advice for teachers interested in creating a similar program?

If you want to have a program like this, you have to make sure your school is on board. Although this program is for Grade 8 students, 90 percent of what we do affects the entire school. With the mentorship program, we are pulling 40 kids out of their classroom for half an hour every single cycle. That means other classroom teachers need to be flexible. I'm really lucky because our staff accommodates these things. With the breakfast program, teachers need to be okay with students eating in the classroom first thing in the morning if they are running late. That flexibility and buy-in from staff is so important.

Once you've got the buy-in, look at the needs of your school. What needs fixing? What needs attention? Then look into what organizations exist that can help. The [WE Day organization](#) provides a lot of good resources that support the things we are doing. They have really good classroom resources. Find out what motivates your kids, what matters to them and what you are hoping to

accomplish. For this to be meaningful, it has to come from them. It loses its magic if you tell them what to do. Ask questions to help them make their own discoveries. Set expectations high and then continue to challenge them. Our Change Maker group is now talking about creating a blog so we can share our journey with others.

5. How are you living the values you are teaching?

In 2016, I was having conversations with some social studies teachers about global citizenship and activism. These are things teachers advocate for students to be a part of. As we were talking we thought, “When was the last time we did any of that?” That motivated me to co-found a group called Yorkton and Area Teachers Give Back. We went to Nicaragua and built a home for a family. We work with a grassroots organization. All funds go to the project. Similar to the Change Maker program, we alternate between supporting global and local actions. When we returned from Nicaragua, we did a back-to-school drive delivering over 30 backpacks to Yorkton schools for students who were showing up without supplies.

We are heading back to Nicaragua this summer to build a latrine block and a hand washing station at a school in one of the rural areas. Six of us are going. We’re hoping it catches on so we can do even more local initiatives. We’d love to have more people join. Who knows? Maybe the next time we go abroad, there will be 12 of us. If people want to learn more or become part of the group, they can email me at elora.wiest@gmail.com or yorktonteachersgiveback@gmail.com. We’ve even talked about expanding it beyond Yorkton; it could be Saskatchewan Teachers Give Back.

6. How do you define success?

Kids are so smart. We definitely don’t give them enough credit. We want to protect them and have them believe the world is full of unicorns and rainbows. They know that’s not true. All they have to do is look on social media and the internet. But these kids are capable of some pretty amazing things. We’ve got some really caring, compassionate kids. I tell them all the time what rock stars they are. They are doing great work and they’ve got a lot to be proud of. They’re learning skills that will help them succeed throughout their lives. I teach them to make their own opportunities. If you’re interested in robotics and there’s no robotics team in Yorkton, create one. That kind of free-thinking, self-advocating personality is what Change Makers is all about.

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And we're already seeing changes in the Grade 8 Change Makers in terms of responsibility, accountability and school pride. We're seeing a decrease in behavioural incidents. Students are quicker to help each other and lend a hand. It makes me so proud to see a Change Maker step up and speak out if they see someone being put down. Hearing them say, "Hey, that's not cool" – to me, that's success.