

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Connections High School Multicultural, Environmental, Leadership Program (“Connections”) is an anti-racism and leadership initiative of the Connections Education Society in Calgary, Alberta. The Connections program seeks to increase high school students’ understanding of cross-cultural understanding, race relations, racism, discrimination, stereotyping, and environmental stewardship, and to help them to develop the leadership and inter-personal skills to change their own attitudes and behaviours and to influence positive change in their own schools and communities.

These are very ambitious goals. Evaluations of anti-racism and anti-discrimination programs show that they sometimes produce short-term changes in attitude, but these changes are rarely sustained over time. In addition, programs virtually never result in long-term behavioural change.

This comprehensive, quantitative and qualitative longitudinal evaluation revealed that the Connections program fully achieved all of its objectives. Youth who completed the program demonstrated sustained improvements in leadership abilities and behaviours in conjunction with pro-environmental and anti-racist and anti-discrimination attitudes and, most importantly, behaviours. In fact, rather than fading over time, some of the program’s impacts had increased three months after program completion, and statistically significant attitudinal and behavioural changes were sustained one year after program completion. The success of the Connections program may be unique among anti-racism and anti-discrimination programs.

Comments from participants were consistent with the quantitative outcomes. For example:

- *Connections had a huge impact on my life, and I think the best thing that changed is that I always speak up now when I hear ridiculous things that people say.*
- *Lots has changed for me because I have been standing up for things that I never used to and I have been hearing a change around our school because we do not use any words that can offend someone.*
- *The program made me say something at home...my dad and my brother are always cracking jokes, but some of them were maybe not hurtful to them but to other people they would be.*
- *This program has made me think twice about things, and I believe it has changed who I am as a person and I think I’ve become a better person because of this program.*
- *This program impacted my life in an incredible way. I have learned to be more accepting and miss it a ton. I have brought the light I saw at Connections back to my school.*
- *This program was amazing! It really made/makes me think and helped/helps me to make better decisions and learn about racism. Plus I made great friends there!!*
- *I could never say enough about this program it was so life changing to me. I learned so much not only about me but about the people around me; this program should be offered to everyone.*

The success of the Connections program appears to be attributable to the following programming features:

- The program is grounded in research and was thoughtfully refined and updated over a 30-year period.
- The program includes multiple, sequenced strategies and active learning activities to simultaneously increase knowledge and awareness and develop the leadership skills and confidence required to put this knowledge into action—approaches which facilitate learning with any audience about any issue or subject matter.
- The program is delivered in accordance with criteria identified by research as helping to facilitate positive outcomes.
- The full program takes several months to complete, unlike many strategies that involve a single training session.
- The program goes beyond providing information and raising awareness; it also includes practical skills development strategies.
- Strategies used in the program several different theoretical foundations.
- The program does not exclusively target members of the dominant cultural group. In fact, it explicitly includes and empowers participants from all diversity groups.

It is recommended that the Connections Education Society present the findings of this evaluation to the Government of Alberta and seek to have its program reinstated as a high school credit course. It is generally recognized that racism and discrimination create profound problems for those who experience it and for society as a whole, and it is abundantly clear that the results achieved by the Connections program are not and cannot be achieved through other existing programming, including the provincial social studies curriculum. In times of shrinking budgets and fiscal restraint, government and other funding bodies have a heightened duty to make the best use of their limited resources by investing in programs that demonstrate results. Ideally, the Connections program should be a mandatory course for all high school students in Alberta. In the meantime, it is recommended that Connections Education Society seek sustained funding from all possible government and charitable funding sources in order to continue to offer the program to as many high school students as possible.