

Program aims to turn apathy into action

A new Internet portal helps secondary students develop social awareness by teaching them about some of humanity's darkest periods and encouraging them to make sure they are never repeated

BY MEAGAN BOISSE



There's no denying the Internet can be a murky place fraught with hateful messages and insidious agendas. From cyber bullying to terrorist propaganda on social networks, it seems at times impossible to navigate the online world without encountering some form of vitriol.

However, the Internet is as much a boon as it is a bane. As employees at **FAST (Fight Anti-Semitism Together)**, a human rights activism group, know it can be an incredible tool with which to engage, enlighten and educate today's young people.

That's why the organization, dedicated to teaching young Canadians about the dangers of anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry, launched **Voices Into Action** last October. This educational program aims to help secondary school students develop social awareness by teaching them about some of humanity's darkest moments, such as the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and Canada's own residential schools.



"Social justice concerns all aspects of society and we have to remember that each person merits respect and dignity," says Daniel Amar, who works with FAST. "However, more often than not, Canadian youth seem to choose apathy over action when it's time to engage against discrimination. There are many reasons why (lack of time, money, understanding, a conflict of ideologies, individualism etc.) but it is this inaction that this program wants to quash."

Voices into Action is an extension of the organization's flagship social injustice educational program, Choose Your Voice, which was launched in 2005 and has been implemented in 19,000 schools across Canada reaching more than two million secondary students.

The main difference is that Voices Into Action will be accessible through a web portal, which will contain five units that meet the

provincial requirements for secondary school curriculum and can be linked to numerous high school courses.

The units explore issues concerning human rights, genocide, understanding prejudice and discrimination, immigration, and personal action as well as analyzing why and how past crimes against humanity occurred. There are also interactive elements, such as videos, questionnaires and artistic exercises.

The program is tailored toward students in Grades 9 to 11. Educators teaching at high schools can register to use the program for free to access customizable teaching tools in both English and French, such as rubrics, assessments, curriculum connections and lesson plans, all designed and developed by a team of curriculum experts at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Students will have access to their own portal, which they can explore on their own time.

Sascha Martel, a teacher at **Joseph-François Perrault High School** in Montreal, implemented some of the information and exercises from the program into her Grade 10 Ethics, Religion, and Culture class.

“You’ll need to adapt the material according to your time constraints and tailor them to suit your students, but it’s very well done,” she said. “The texts and activities make class more interesting because they provoke debate and discussion on important social justice issues, and make students think about things outside their own world.”

Martel chose to focus on three subjects on the portal: discrimination, Islamophobia and genocide. She believes the material, which is rife with witness accounts, has helped break some of the stereotypes her students might have carried about others, and has helped them be less apathetic when it comes to violence, discrimination and hate.

Since the program was launched last October, it has been made available to 21,730 students in 94 schools across Quebec, including classes at 20 public schools and 10 private schools within the Commission scolaire de Montréal, the Marguerite Bourgeoys and Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Boards.

“This program will see enduring success because it responds and fulfills curriculum requirements while advancing relevant questions concerning current social justice issues,” Amar says.