

Secondary school students come from afar to learn about life, leadership at E.C. Drury-hosted event

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

Last Friday was a typical day at E.C. Drury High School, except for the 250 extra student bodies clad in vivid orange t-shirts roaming the halls.

Or the room jam-packed with their belongings, enough to see them through an intense four-day Ontario Secondary School Student Association (OSSSA) conference hosted by E.C. Drury.

Student delegates came from across south-western Ontario for the annual event with the aim of learning a little about leadership and a lot about life.

"There was one girl who told me it had really changed her life," said E.C. Drury teacher Ross Thomson.

But students on the conference committee began learning well before the event, which was officially launched late last week, he added. That's because everything from food preparation to the hiring of motivational speakers and event security was the responsibility of students, he said.

Student delegates also took home a ton of learning from the weekend. Communication, risk, trust, self-awareness, time and stress management as well as conflict resolution were on the agenda.

The goal was to take Canada's future leaders to the top just a little bit faster. And have a blast while they're doing it, said Mr. Thomson.

"It's nice for them," he said. "It's so much fun for them, I think it's not until later that they realize how much they've learned."

To attend, the kids had to play a leadership role of some sort at their school and pay a \$85 fee.

As it happens, OSSSA was student-driven right from the start. It began as a grassroots grouping of London area students outraged at the suggestion that the school year be extended throughout the summer months. Their dedication to the cause soon caught the eye of the provincial government of the day.

It responded by giving the students a small grant to host their own conference, and from that, the OSSSA was born.

Now the group is a provincial organization with 12 divisions throughout Ontario. It's thought to be the largest student-run body in the world. And it still has the ear of the Province through the Ministry of Education, said president of OSSSA's Niagara district Aaron Van Borek, 18.

"We hope to really be the voice of students," he said. "Our slo-

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ROSS THOMSON

gan is 'Your Voice, Only Louder.'"

The goal is to catch the gist of teen talk on current issues and present it to the Province. So while the conference is primarily aimed at boosting leadership qualities in teens, it will also be used as a fact-finding mission. Specifically, understanding how students view their own generation (tagged the 'echo' or 'y' genera-

tion) was explored at the event. Also on the agenda were student views on teachers, principals, and ideal learning environments.

"We'll use it to find out what students think and what students feel," said the OSSSA's minister of provincial affairs Devlin Fernandes. "This is the first step in understanding how we see ourselves."

Though not in the mandate of the recent conference, student reaction to the new grade 9 curriculum and the issue of potential school closings will be on the OSSSA agenda later in the year.

But more light-hearted learning was on the roster for the weekend affair, said Mr. Van Borek.

"You learn so much about yourself. You discuss everything," he said. "There are a lot of things you wouldn't talk about maybe even to your best friend but you talk about it here."

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