

UNESCO designation opens international doors to local students



By Brock Weir

A school broadens the horizons of anyone eager to learn, but the horizons of local students at Pickering College are set to expand to a global perspective thanks to UNESCO.

The Newmarket-based private school, which is a popular destination for girls and boys in Aurora, was recently named a UNESCO candidate school.

Selected as a candidate within the Canadian Commission for UNESCO's Associated Schools Project Network, it is, so far, the only independent school in Ontario to secure a candidacy.

With the candidacy comes responsibility in order to achieve full membership, and Pickering College, a school well-known for its international student body, is looking forward to meeting that challenge.

‘We feel pretty validated,’ says student Montgomery Gole. ‘We have a lot of cultural diversity and not only are we a Quaker school, we also have a lot of boarders and it has been really cool for me to learn about other cultures.’

A key component of the school's philosophy is their Global Leadership Program, which tasks students with identifying worldwide issues and looking for ways to make a difference.

‘Our capstone project is trying to solve a major issue in the world, so it goes hand in hand with UNESCO,’ says student Hayden Spiers. ‘We get to learn a lot more and I think it will be a great step forward for the school.’

This is, of course, a view shared by the school's administration.

UNESCO is an acronym for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Comprised of 195 member states, it focuses on education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, communications and information sharing, as well as culture.

Through these prisms, the focus of UNESCO is very similar to those of Pickering College students who are seeking ways to have an impact on these global challenges.

‘[With our application] we have to provide evidence of the work that we're already doing, teaching, learning, and our values as a school,’ says Kim Bartlett, Director of Teaching and Learning. ‘Part of the excitement is we did submit all the work we have done on the Global Leadership Program and the things our students are doing are phenomenal. The UNESCO network asked us to join them because they were so impressed with everything that we're actually accomplishing.’

‘What also impressed them was between Kindergarten to Grade 12, our program has a scope, sequence and continuum of skills and values and knowledge. We're not just taking students one year and teaching them; we're teaching them from a very young age to become active, informed global citizens.’

While the goals of the United Nations aren't always being met, headmaster Peter Sturup says they are ‘incredibly worthy aspirations to have.’ Now, as they have always been, they are aspirations shared by Pickering College as well.

‘As Monty and Hayden have pointed out, we have students from all over the world, a mini-United Nations representation here. If we can take and learn from the United Nations things that are important, processes, and transfer that to what our students are doing and how they are learning, I think it becomes a really valuable educational opportunity for our students,’ he says.

?Conversely, I think that if our students are learning those ways of thinking and interacting with the global community and being global citizens and seeking goals, they can leave Pickering College and go out and accomplish what the United Nations is trying to accomplish, and maybe accomplish it to their own individual ways instead of relying on international bodies to do that. There is a really nice overlap.?

To gain full membership, Pickering College will have to retain its candidacy for approximately two years and be active participants within the network. They encourage candidate and member schools to recognize special international days, such as World Peace Day, and international days reflective of the international student body.

Each October 24, for instance, is United Nations Day and that occasion is recognized within the school. As such, each year the flags in the Pickering College dining hall, representing the nations embodied within the student community, are taken down and paraded by each country's respective students into assembly.

?It is a very powerful visual representation of the international nature of our school, but typically the students who speak [on the occasion] speak so passionately and articulately about the international community, about the United Nations and the value of being global citizens,? says Mr. Sturup. ?It is a powerful day.?