

Take Action

Nathan Gage, a music teacher at James Lyng High School (EMSB) is no stranger to thinking outside the box to get his students to fully engage in his lessons, an approach to teaching that proved to be very useful when he incorporated the 'I Belong!' Take Action option into his classes. For the past six years, Gage and his students have been creating a 'mixtape,' a digital album that allows his music students to tap into songwriting, lyric writing, instrument playing, beat making, and recording.

When Gage heard about the 'Take Action' option, he decided to have his 50 music students make the focus of this year's album be on their sense of belonging. "We wanted to use the 'I Belong!' project to focus the content of the lyrics and get the kids thinking about where they stand in the world," Gage said.

James Lyng was one out of five schools from across the Community Learning Centre (CLC) network to participate in this option. Using a Community Service Learning (CSL) project framework, the 242 students across Quebec who participated in the *Take Action* option were asked to take a critical look at their communities and build their sense of belonging by becoming active citizens and learners.

With the help of James Lyng's Community Development Agent, Sam Karimi, Gage applied for the 'Take Action' option, which included funding from LEARN of up to \$1,500 per project. Funding could be used to purchase any supplies needed to complete the project and to hire a local organization or community member to support student learning and engagement. Gage enlisted the support of local producer and rapper Jason Newcomen to help work with the students on their album.



Gage started the project by introducing the 'I Belong!' theme to his different classes, ranging from secondary one to secondary five. "We're a really small school so this project was for all our music students," said Gage. "When I spoke to them about the idea of 'I Belong!' at the beginning of the year, some groups latched on right away, especially when we got into the thought-provoking questions. It got them thinking about why they're here and how they can make their situations better."

Some of the thought-provoking questions incorporated by Gage from LEARN's discussion guide centered around what it means to belong to a place or group of people as well as where students might feel they belong the most and the least. His secondary one students identified strongly with their lives and their sense of belonging being disrupted by Covid-19 and chose to write, perform, and record a song about it for the album. "These students were in grade five when Covid-19 and the quarantine hit," Gage said, as he reflected on the different song themes chosen by his students. "It's [Covid-19] really changed their lives and impacted some meaningful years for them. That topic led to great conversations and excited them to explore their sense of belonging during those difficult years."

Gage explained how the music program at James Lyng often inspires students, who might otherwise struggle to come to school, to attend their classes every day. The

school's in-house recording studio is a big draw for students, as is the making of music. While students mostly engaged with the process of making and recording music, Gage said he saw some struggle when it came to lyric writing. His instinct to once again think outside the box kicked in and in order to engage the struggling students, he made this CSL project cross-curricular, involving the school's English Language Arts teacher. "There are some students who dragged their feet a little bit when it came to lyric writing," he said. "They are actually quite talented musically, but they just don't like writing the lyrics. So, I connected with their English teacher, and she is going to grade them on their lyrics for the songs they write. This will give them the motivation they need to get their lyrics done."

The *Take Action* option not only inspired the students involved but is expected to have positive ramifications throughout the James Lyng community. Once the album is released to the community, Gage explained that it will get many listens and those who listen will be moved by the messages in the music created by his students. "This project had a strong impact on everyone involved and those who listened to the album," said Gage. "It's not just the act of talking and thinking about where and how they [the students] belong in society but also the act of creating music, creating rhymes and getting into the recording booth. They feel heard. They've started conversations and now they are keeping them going through their music."



Gage strongly encourages any teacher looking to affect a positive change, be it in the classroom or with the school community, to apply for the 'I Belong!' *Take Action* project and offered some sage advice to anyone who might be interested in bringing the option to their students. "The conversations on belonging are really important and as the project goes on, the conversations can get more specific which is great," he said. "We need to keep those conversations going. Teachers need to keep the process of doing a project like this one malleable. Don't define the process before you get in there. Have the students help you to find the process and the results will be amazing."

Gage is looking forward to continuing to produce yearly albums with his music students. The 20-song album entitled 'Rolls Royce Choices' will be released on SoundCloud in June.