SUCCESS STORY: Youth Fusion media projects help high school students discover their voice.

The Need
At present, many young people in Eeyou Istchee are not graduating from high school with the essential skills that would qualify them to get a job or to go on to college. In fact, a Cree School Board report found that only 9% of CSB students graduated high school within 5 years, compared to 60% in the rest of Quebec\(^1\). The Cree School board has identified reducing absenteeism and promoting literacy as 2 main priorities.

The Challenge
The Canadian Education Association recently published a study called “What did you do in school today,” which reveals that, all across the country, only 37% of youth feel intellectually engaged in learning. These findings raise an important challenge: how can we make school more meaningful and relevant in the lives of today’s youth and help them develop the skills they need to succeed in life? And how can we reach out to parents, and create strong links between schools and communities, in order to involve everyone educating tomorrow’s leaders.

A Viable Solution
Youth Fusion is an award-winning charity organization that creates partnerships between high schools and universities in order to engage youth in hands-on, real-world learning projects.

After consulting with the school principals in Waswanipi and Waskaganish, Youth Fusion hired two recent McGill graduates with expertise in the field of communications to lead media projects at both Wiinibekuu and Willie J Happyjack Memorial schools. Each project coordinator lived in the community and worked at the school on a daily basis, 25 hours per week, to lead different hands-on activities: newspaper club, radio club, photo club and yearbook club.

Youth Fusion partnered with CHRD, McGill University, Concordia University and Réunir Réussir in order to create a long-term program that would work with high school students throughout the school year, from September until June.

Implementation
Youth Fusion's media project coordinators began with a survey to ask high school students what activities would motivate them to get involved at school. Many teens were enthusiastic to try photography, to make a yearbook, and to work on their own school newspaper.

\(^1\) Cree School Board. 2008 CAFSI Report. Figures are for the 2006-07 school year.
The school newspaper made writing more fun and more relevant for teens: students submitted comic-strips, recipes, interviews, illustrations, sports reports, jokes, and short stories. It also served as a platform for students to express their opinions and critique school policies.

Teachers got on board by incorporating media projects into their Language Arts curriculum and their students were motivated by the opportunity to see their essays and stories in print. Secondary 5 students were able to get credit for their integrative project by joining the newspaper or yearbook team. The student newspaper was sent home to parents with the report cards and distributed in local businesses and institutions.

With the support of the radio station in each community, the high school media teams also began to host a show on the local radio station. The weekly show literally gave students a voice in their community. Radio is a great medium for teenagers because it offers many different ways to get involved: some students preferred to work behind the scenes on creating the playlist, those with a bit more confidence tried out the role of radio announcer and still others developed technical skills such as DJ-ing and using the sound board. With each passing week the students gained confidence, while enjoying the thrill of trying out new skills in a safe environment.

Both the student newspaper and radio show helped the school to reach out to parents and community members with a positive message and show what young people are capable of achieving.

**Conclusion**

The Media program along with Youth Fusion’s programs in Leadership, Performing Arts, Sports and Outdoor Education, contribute to making school more welcoming and more engaging for Cree students. The links between coursework and real-world projects help young people discover how the activities they enjoy and the new skills they hone can translate into careers in journalism, photography, layout and design, radio animation or sound technician.

Randy Martin, guidance counsellor at Willie J Happyjack Memorial School says that Youth Fusion’s media program is “an excellent way for youth to express to the community what their most pressing concerns are, and to get used to speaking out, getting their voices heard and feeling comfortable in doing so.”

Check out Youth Fusion’s student media projects online!  
[www.artistsofwaswanipi.blogspot.com](http://www.artistsofwaswanipi.blogspot.com)  
[http://wiinibekuu.wordpress.com/](http://wiinibekuu.wordpress.com/)

For more information visit: [www.youthfusionquebec.org](http://www.youthfusionquebec.org)