Global citizens helping to Make Poverty History

By Rachel Urquhart and Susanna Fisher

What drives over two hundred 16–19 year olds to give up a day of post-exam freedom to stand in the rain for hours in aid of eliminating poverty and making trade fair?

Envision is an extra-curricular programme designed to engage 16–19 year olds in local and global issues. Set up to challenge the stereotype of apathetic youth, it provides young people with a forum to voice their concerns and take action. The unique idea behind Envision is that the young people themselves generate ideas on issues that they care about and are then responsible for the design and implementation of their own projects. In just five years the scheme has expanded from 5 to 80 schools in London and this September sees the launch of Envision Birmingham.

Envision provides the vehicle through which young people explore their own ideas and interests. Popular concerns are homelessness, recycling, multiculturalism and fair trade. Projects range considerably from campaigning on the state of school toilets to raising £10,000 for a school solar panel and holding a Christmas event for orphaned children in the local area. Within this framework teams also address global issues by joining Envision events and national campaigns. The Envision programme inspires active citizenship by providing the opportunity for young people to explore and come up with solutions to problems they see in the wider world around them.

In the summer of 2005, Envision teams from across the capital joined together to campaign on third world debt, aid and fair trade under the banner of the Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign. Two students from each school were selected as MPH reps and attended a workshop which explored the issues behind the campaign in more detail. Returning to their schools, they passed on their knowledge and the campaign inspired new projects and commitment to global issues.

Teams collected signatures and messages to send to the Prime Minister, sold white campaign wristbands, held assemblies and lessons for younger pupils, and set up information stalls and notice boards around their schools. The more ambitious even held events such as a ‘mini Live 8 concert’.

Trafalgar Square was the site of this year’s Envision Ceremony which coincided with the MPH day of action. Encircling Nelson’s Column with a giant white band provided a focus to the campaign and students spent the day approaching tourists and passers-by, spreading their message. Two student compères led the day’s activities by motivating the 300+ crowd and interviewing guest speakers including the government representatives Paul Boeteng and Lord Triesman.

With 13,000 postcards being dropped at Number 10 Downing Street, political interviews and an almighty postcard competition, the day certainly gave London’s young people something to think about.

New Envision teams are starting up this September and new ideas and projects will be developed by the teams over the next few school terms.

For more information about Envision please visit: www.envision.org.uk.