

Global child rights activists bring program for at-risk students to their hometown

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International child rights activists Marc and Craig Kielburger are turning their attention to their own backyard.

The humanitarian brothers plan to launch programs in about 20 at-risk Toronto schools this fall. The initiative will build off the success of a similar program in the United States, which the brothers launched three years ago with Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network.

That program, O Ambassadors, is active in about 2,000 schools, the majority of which are in priority neighbourhoods.

In creating the program, the Angel Network and the Kielburgers' charity, Free the Children, hoped to engage the next generation in the fight against child poverty. Students would be empowered to take action in their own communities, gaining awareness about issues affecting children in other parts of the world, said Marc Kielburger.

The program has been such a success, the Kielburgers decided to bring it to their hometown.

"This would be customized to the Toronto school system," said Kielburger. "It's a leadership training program with core student leaders selected by the school. Students help create an action plan (about) a social issue or something their own school is facing, whether it's bullying or vandalism."

A facilitator guides the group, teaching the students about working with the media, fundraising and public speaking.

"As well as the leadership training, we'll be sending a speaker to the schools, (someone) who can really relate to the target audience," he said.

Michel Chikwanine, a former child soldier from the Congo, toured with the O Ambassadors program. The Kielburgers hope to bring him to Toronto in the fall.

Both the Toronto District School Board and the catholic board will be involved, and the list of schools will be hammered out in the next few weeks, Kielburger said.

Craig Kielburger appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1999 to talk about Free the Children, an organization he founded at 12 years old after reading the story of a Pakistani child labourer who was killed for his opinions on children's rights.

More than 1 million youth are involved in Free the Children programs in 45 countries.