What happens when a long-time funding collaborator says “it’s time to shake things up!”? To be honest, for members of H.A.N.D.S., it initially meant some discomfort. After all, for almost 20 years the Community Foundation’s youth philanthropy program had fulfilled its mission of empowering students to be thoughtful grant makers and instilling the skills they need to be effective leaders.

Since 1995, youth members recommended $200,000 in grants to education related projects in Whitley County. What could be better? Indeed, what could be better? That was the question H.A.N.D.S. members were challenged to examine by leaders at the Dekko Foundation, a longtime funding partner and champion of youth philanthropy. The students were urged to consider community needs and review all aspects of their organization; what were they doing well? What could they be doing better or differently? By-laws were tweaked, projects were reviewed and school administrators were surveyed.

Additional questions started to emerge. What if more youth had the opportunity to learn about community needs and local non-profit organizations? What if these same students were taught about grants – how to write them and how they are awarded? What if they had the ability to raise real money for real causes? In the end, the 15 high school students decided to cast a broader net. H.A.N.D.S. chose to expand.

Charitable Champions was introduced in the 2015-16 school year and over 250 8th grade students at Indian Springs Middle School participated in the year-long pilot program. With input from school educators, H.A.N.D.S. members produced the curriculum which launched through student
workbooks and ten video lessons. The videos feature the high school group covering topics such as community, philanthropy and grant making. Each week, educators guided the mini-lessons and discussion on philanthropic related material

In March, a non-profit fair took place at the Middle School. About twenty local organizations were on hand to teach 8th graders about their missions and the role their business plays in our community. Afterwards, students divided into teams and spent the next few weeks doing additional research on a specific charity. They identified needs, determined budgets and ultimately wrote grant requests on behalf of their nonprofits. Each team presented their proposal to their classmates and teachers. The top ten were selected to present their proposals to H.A.N.D.S. for real funding consideration.

ISMS Social Studies teacher Amy Shearer reflected on the value of Charitable Champions as it relates to project based learning. She noted that the initiative incorporates multiple subject areas: Social Studies (civic standards), Language Arts (writing) and Math (creating budget and finance). In addition, the program is meant to empower students in their ability to make a difference by getting involved. “We want the students to learn how to identify what needs exist in their community and develop real-life problem solving skills. Here’s a need or a problem, what can you do?” Shearer said.

Given the overwhelming success of the program, Charitable Champions will continue and hopefully expand to include students at Churubusco Middle School and Whitko Middle School in the future. What happens when a funding collaborator says “it’s time to shake things up!”? Quite a lot.