

Finding their way

Orientation program at CCH helps new Canadians acclimatize



Sarah Al-Shaikhli, left, and Feven Mussie sport their Newcomer Orientation Week t-shirts in the lobby of Catholic Central High School, which is adorned with flags of all the various countries represented in the school's student body.

(Windsor, Ontario, Oct. 23, 2014) – Transferring to a new high school can be difficult enough for any student. Arriving from another country and trying to settle into a new academic setting is quite another story, and can be downright terrifying for some kids.

“The first day was very scary,” said Sarah Al-Shaikhli, a Grade 12 student who came to Catholic Central High School from Iraq in 2011. “I got lost three times, and I went to the wrong class.”

An innovative program at the school, however, makes it a whole lot easier for students like Al-Shaikhli to become familiar with their new territory. Now in its seventh year, Newcomer Orientation Week is a program funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada that relies on peer mentors to help new Canadians acclimatize to their school.

“The most important part is that it’s peer to peer,” said Tina Chen, a settlement worker at the New Canadians Centre of Excellence who helps oversee the program in the school. “The students make new friends and they feel included.”

During the second last week of August, peer mentors spend a week learning how to be a mentor. The next week, they are paired up and spend several days helping their new friends get ready for the school year, teaching them about such matters as uniforms and the school’s code of conduct. A scavenger hunt helps them become familiar with the school’s physical layout.

All of the leaders wear t-shirts during the first week of school so that new students know who to approach if they need help.

Al-Shaikhli said on the first day of school, she was struggling to get her locker open and approached another NOW student who helped her by explaining the instruction in Arabic.

“Everyone was really nice to me,” she said. “I didn’t know there would be people who could speak to me in my language.”

After having gone through the program, Al-Shaikhli signed on to be a leader, which is an expectation according to Natalia Uros, the school’s English as a Second Language department head and newcomer assessment teacher for the secondary panel.

“It’s based on a pay-it-forward model,” she said. “You were given a handout when you came so you’re expected to provide a handout once you’re settled.”

With students from 73 different countries, who speak 48 different languages, it makes good sense to run a program like NOW at CCH, Uros said.

“It gives them confidence and sense of security,” she said. “It alleviates a lot of student anxiety about what teachers are like in Canada. It also alleviates concerns of parents. Their hearts become settled. The whole school really works together to make these students feel welcome.”

This year, Al-Shaikhli was paired up with Feven Mussie, a Grade 11 student from Eritrea. She said her parents came to Canada from the east African country to find a better life, a better education for their children, and a better future. She said she’s benefitted greatly from the program, and is looking forward to participating as a leader next year.

“I’m making lots of new friends now,” she said.

Both students said one of their greatest worries about coming to a new school, and a new country, was about how they would fare academically. However, both say the program helped relieve their anxieties about school and they’ve been able to better focus on their studies. Al-Shaikhli said her average is above 80, and her goal is to become a doctor, while Mussie wants to apply to study engineering at the University of Windsor after she finishes high school.

That’s music to the ears of Vivian Revin-Kubik, an ESL teacher who helps guide the program.

“The confidence that they gain is unbelievable,” she said. “It’s like watching a flower blooming.”

