

Immaculate transformation

New Canadian students benefit from intensive pilot project



Lisa Mosca, right, a learning support service teacher at Immaculate Conception Catholic Elementary School works on an iPad literacy app with Grade 3 student Randa Saka.

(Windsor, Ontario, Nov. 24, 2014) – Gina Coccimiglio can now admit that she was a little nervous on the first day of school this year.

An English as a Second Language teacher at Immaculate Conception Catholic Elementary School in Windsor's inner core, she's part of a brand new pilot project aimed at helping new Canadian students who require more intensive literacy and numeracy instruction to help them succeed in a regular classroom.

Most of the students and their families have recently arrived in Windsor from war-torn places like Iraq and Syria. Many could barely speak English, and some had never held a pencil.

“They just seemed in need of a lot of additional support,” Coccimiglio said. “Many of them have limited or no prior schooling at all.”

However, in just a few short months, she has seen a dramatic turnaround in the 12 students currently enrolled in the program. During a classroom visit, students were happily conversing with one another in English, sounding out words, writing sentences on hand-held white boards and playing word games on iPads.

“It’s so rewarding just to see them happy and comfortable and making progress,” Coccimiglio said.

Open to students from Grades 2 to 6, the program sees students receive two hours of literacy instruction in the morning and an hour of numeracy training in the afternoon, all in a portable classroom just steps away from the main building.

ICS was chosen as the site to pilot the new program largely because of its higher than normal number of new Canadian students. Despite the academic challenges associated with that population, the school has seen a steady upswing in some EQAO categories. Although it’s still below board average, the school saw increases of as much as 42 per cent in Grade 3 writing and 39 per cent in Grade 3 reading last year.

The students enrolled in the program this fall were assessed earlier this year to determine their learning needs and eligibility. Thanks to the extra training, those needs are now being met, according to Lisa Mosca, a learning support service teacher who also works in the program.

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-Gina Coccimiglio
ESL teacher

“We’re supplying them with the things they need so they can be active participants in their classrooms,” she said.

The use of technology is a critical component, Mosca added. The classroom is well equipped with iPads, and students use an app called Bitsboard, a program designed to improve proficiency in spelling, pronunciation and grammar. The students especially love working on the devices, she said.

“No matter what language they speak, they catch on real fast,” she said. “They’re able to work independently with it, with minimal instruction.”

After 12 weeks, the students “graduate” and go back to their classrooms, but still get some support for about 25 per cent of their day, Mosca said. A major benefit of the program is the additional support it provides regular classroom teachers.

“There are already so many needs in the classroom,” said Coccimiglio. “When teachers get a student who has never held a pencil before, it’s very difficult for them to tend to those very basic needs and take care of all of their other students at the same time.”

Principal Anna Mancini said she’s already received plenty of feedback from home room teachers, many who say the students are much more scholastically confident when they come back to their classrooms.

“They’ve acquired the skills and the confidence they need to tackle some of those more challenging tasks,” she said.

Mancini also gets lots of positive feedback from parents who struggle with English and are unable to academically support their children at home. It helps that the teachers who are running the program are both dedicated and knowledgeable she added.

“They’re so passionate about what they’re doing,” she said.

Students are assessed every two weeks, and the board is collecting data to measure the program’s effectiveness.

“If it’s successful, which we think it is, it may be replicated at other schools that are facing the same challenges,” said WECDSDB associate director Cathy Geml.