

The 'Gift'

French Immersion at Christ the King helps students and parents acquire new language skills



Jennifer Daley-Stewart, a French Immersion teacher at Christ the King Catholic Elementary School, answers a question from Grade 3 student Liliana Mottillo.

(Windsor, Ontario, Monday May 1, 2017) – Sabrina Mottillo likes to play word games at night with her daughter Liliana to find out what she is learning in the French Immersion program at Christ the King Catholic Elementary School.

She also learns something herself.

“I have them teach me French,” says Sabrina, whose family also speaks Italian in the home. “So we say it in French. (We ask) what is it in Italian and then what is it in English?”

Sabrina says her son Cristiano started Senior Kindergarten and is already learning two-, three- and four-letter words in both English and French.

“A lot of children at this level would be just sole English but he has that opportunity to know both,” she says.

Christ the King is transitioning to a full French Immersion school and the Mottillo children are among the new generation of students. School principal Geneviève Cano says the French Immersion program goes up to Grade 3 this year but will cover all the grades eventually.

French Immersion is booming across the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board, with enrolment almost doubling in the past several years. Christ the King is one of seven schools offering French Immersion to 1,188 students this school year; in 2012-13, there were only two schools with 678 French Immersion students.

For the Mottillos, enrolling their children in French Immersion brings many benefits including skills that are transferable to other areas, like the sciences.

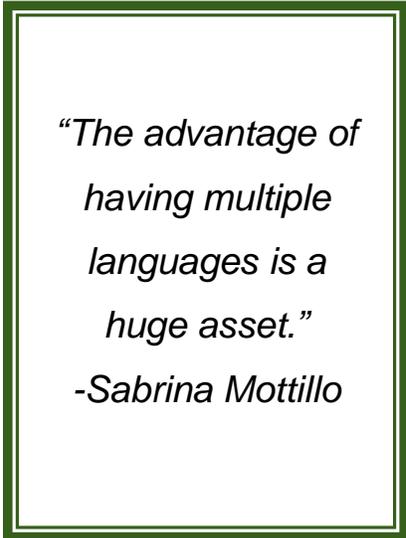
“We see it in our industry,” says Sabrina, who works in medical diagnostics for Johnson and Johnson, whose husband Emilio works at Wayne State University and has a PhD in the metabolic and pathology program. “The advantage of having multiple languages is a huge asset,” she says of the “interpersonal skills” and “worldview” that comes with knowing more than one language.

It’s something her children are discovering already.

“They’re always asking about how people live in other parts of the world and different cultures,” says Sabrina, who also sits on the school’s Parents Council.

Cano, who is in her first year as principal at Christ the King, says she finds similarities between her new school and St. Mary Catholic Elementary School in Maidstone, starting with the small size of the tight-knit schools: St. Mary has 260 students, Christ the King has 255. One of the differences is that St. Mary will be full French Immersion next year while her new school still offers both programs although, she points out, they “cohabitate very well.”

Jennifer Daley-Stewart, Liliana’s Grade 3 French Immersion teacher, is also in her first year but came from the much larger St. Anne French Immersion Catholic Elementary School where she taught for nine years. She finds the smaller Christ the King school “really refreshing” and the change has reinvigorated her career.



“The advantage of having multiple languages is a huge asset.”
-Sabrina Mottillo

“The students are just wonderful,” says Daley-Stewart who admits she was nervous at first. “I wasn’t sure what to expect but I was thrilled with what was here. The kids were very strong, very strong in their French, especially their oral communication was amazing.”

She is also the lead teacher in the math initiative at Christ the King and is noticing positive results. She says she “can’t wait” for this spring’s provincial assessment from the Education Quality and Accountability Office and is confident students will do well.

Liliana, who’s in her third year of French Immersion at the South Windsor school, says she enjoys the school’s fundraisers and how they help the poor.

“I love all the clubs, like chess, choir and dance,” the Grade 3 student adds. “I love the robots because I love coding...I want to work with robots one day. The robots help me with math.”

Cano acknowledges some parents who don’t know French may feel wary about enrolling their children in the program. She assures them that all communication from the school is done in

*“French Immersion
is a gift that parents
give to their children
- Geneviève Cano*

English. By the time they get to Grades 7 and 8, their subjects are split equally between French and English and maths and sciences in Grade 8 are in English.

Cano, who was born in France and speaks fluent Spanish as well as English and French, says French Immersion is a “gift” parents give their child. But it’s important to start them early in life because they will find it more difficult to learn the language as they grow up.

“Acquiring a second language takes time,” she says. “It’s not like a switch that you can turn on and off. Otherwise it would be really easy. It takes a lot of work and it takes commitment.”

But Cano says parents have nothing to fear about enrolling their children in French Immersion, adding language skills are transferable and help “get the brain working” to learn math, science, music or other subjects. She uses an example of growing up in a trilingual home to describe how natural it is for children to acquire languages.

“My father spoke Spanish to us, we answered in French. My mother spoke French to us, we answered in English,” she says.

“My little brother would start a sentence in French, go to Spanish and end up in English and the kids, when they were over, would say, ‘We don’t understand your little brother,’” Cano adds with a laugh. “We would say, ‘What do you mean? It’s clear. I understand what he’s saying.’”

At Christ the King, she reassures parents, there is the support of teachers and parents and with the willingness of students to learn “you have everything that you need in order to have a successful program. And I believe that’s what we have here at Christ the King.”

Parents interested in enrolling their children to the French Immersion program at Christ the King can attend an open house during Catholic Education Week the afternoon of Friday, May 5. Parents can also call the school at 519-969-2299 for more information or to set up a tour.