

Feeling at home

ESL teachers bring sense of comfort, belonging to new students



ESL teachers Patrizia Civitarese, left, and Amy Marion work with Grade 6 student Miray Mako on her English language skills at H.J. Lassaline Catholic Elementary School.

(Windsor, Ontario, Tuesday, Oct. 3, 2017) – Creating a sense of comfort and belonging for new Canadian students is a top priority for two teachers who have recently joined the English as a Second Language (ESL) team.

“Many of these children have been through a lot, so we want to provide an environment where they feel at home,” said Patrizia Civitarese, who has spent most of her 17-year career at H.J. Lassaline Catholic Elementary School. “We make sure their needs are being met so they can feel confident and successful. They just want to know that we care about them.”

With the addition of Civitarese and Amy Marion, that brings to 11 the number of ESL teachers helping new Canadian students acquire English language skills, with 30 of the WECDSB’s 35 elementary schools now offering ESL programming. Most of those teachers are responsible for groups of schools and travel to them regularly so that their students can remain in the familiar neighbourhood of their own schools, according to Emelda Byrne, Executive Superintendent of Student Achievement.

“As Canada has opened its doors to an increased number of newcomers, we’re seeing more and more English language learners in our schools,” Byrne said. “Many of those students have been moved around a great deal, so it’s always been important for us to help provide them with a greater sense of stability.”

An essential part of an ESL teacher’s role involves conducting initial assessments of new Canadian students to determine their language skills, as well as their level of education, to best determine where they should be situated. Those assessments are shared with the classroom teachers, so that they can structure their learning approach accordingly for each individual student.

Once that’s done, ESL teachers spend time working intensively with those students on improving their English language acquisition, either in their classrooms or in small group support situations in another part of the school, depending on the wishes of their teachers.

Marion, who until now has split the bulk of her 20-year teaching career between St. John Vianney and St. Rose Catholic Elementary Schools, says her role is almost like that of a counselor in the sense that she helps students with such socialization aspects as adaptation to their new culture.

“I know what it was like to be in a foreign place and not speak the language,” said Marion, who went to Germany for three months on an exchange when she was a high school student. “So we spend some time getting to know them, just talking with them about their lives.”

“I really like the cultural differences,” she added. “It’s exciting for me to get to know these students and learn more about their experiences. I really appreciate the fact that I have the time to get to know them.”

Most of them, Marion said, are quick studies.

“I’m in awe of these students,” she said. “They aren’t afraid to try. They’re excited to work with you and they really want to learn.”

Perhaps the most rewarding part of the job for Civitarese is seeing those students go on to great successes, finding careers in the community after they graduate.

“They inspire you,” she said. “I’ve seen a lot of these students go on to win many of our academic awards. They have a real desire to do well.”

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-Amy Marion