

YRDSB holds workshops to ease transition of Syrian students



By Jake Courtepatte

York Region's teachers and staff are looking for any way possible to ease the transition of incoming Syrian refugee students.

In a collaboration between the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO-YR) and the York Region District School Board, around twenty teachers and staff took part in a workshop in Aurora last Wednesday to learn more about how to handle a situation they have never before faced.

?We wanted to do something to help with the influx of Syrian refugees,? said ETFO-YR executive member Lynda Hockley. ?It's not something we've ever encountered before, it's a unique situation. Although some of them have already arrived, we wanted to make sure that we are as well prepared as possible.?

As of the last update, Hockley said that the school board is expecting a total of around 100 new Syrian refugee students. The board is looking to not only assist the students in their classroom needs, but socially, emotionally, and academically as well.

?In a situation like this, everybody is working together to assist everybody. We're assisting our teachers, and our teachers are assisting not only the incoming students, but the existing student body with acceptance, understanding, and integration.?

Among the topics covered in the first workshop is one that is outside of the school, in assisting families with integration into the Region.

?They've come through reception, or will have, but now they are going to be part of our school families,? said Hockley. ?We want to make sure that our teachers know where to direct them in any part of the community, because they will look to us for answers.?

?We know, as teachers, that we often do more than just the typical role of teaching the three Rs. We're looked to for guidance.?

The workshop was an open-minded approach with discussions on language barriers, differing educational requirements, and social differences. One teacher even brought up the situation as an opportunity for current students to learn Arabic, citing that a quick Google search brought her to a translation chart she could hang in her classroom.

?It's some really rich and productive development for the teachers, because it is so specific,? said Hockley. ?We've all had new students, and some I'm sure have had students come from war-torn countries. But we want to make sure that everyone is prepared.?

Hockley said the ETFO-YR is expecting and hoping that more workshops will be conducted to cover a broader range of teachers.

?Really what we focused on for the first workshop were the teachers who directly had students coming into their classrooms. We're hoping to reach a lot more students and staff after the success of this conference.?

The reception by the teachers has so far been a positive one.

?One teacher couldn't make it today, so she sent a replacement to take notes. They're happy to do it?they all want to be here and get this information. There's fabulous dialogue going on.?

Over four-million refugees have been driven out of Syria by the Syrian Civil War, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau meeting the first group to come to Canada at Toronto's Pearson Airport in early December. Premier Kathleen Wynne said Ontario is on track to receive 10,000 refugees by the end of this month.