

## **The Maple Leaf Becomes an Olive Branch**

**Toronto District School Board welcomes Syrian newcomer students and families**

**By Paula Markus**

Canadians had already been aware of the dire situation for Syrians fleeing their war-torn country for some time when the heartbreaking photo of the lifeless drowned body of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi shocked the world on Sept. 2, 2015. All over our country, people began organizing and lobbying for Canada to offer a new home to Syrian refugees without delay. This grassroots movement coincided with the federal election campaign of October 2015. The Liberal Party Leader of Canada, Justin Trudeau, had promised that, if elected, Canada would act immediately to bring 25,000 refugees to its shores. Trudeau's Liberal Party swept in with a majority government, and speedily set about the task of interviewing and selecting Syrian families to come to Canada. The careful work of security screening and arranging transportation for these many thousands of people saw most of these 25,000 government-sponsored refugees arrive between mid-December 2015 and the end of February 2016. In addition, thousands more refugees sponsored by private community action and faith groups continue to arrive in cities and towns across Canada, more than 33,700 in total as of the end of October 2016.

Welcoming and supporting newcomer immigrant and refugee students and families from all over the world is our core mission in the Toronto District School Board ESL/ELD Department. Working together with a large committee of professionals from all departments of the school board, we quickly got up to speed in preparing to welcome hundreds of new students and their families. When the families began arriving in large numbers in January 2016, many were temporarily housed in hotels across the city, and the TDSB created temporary welcome classes for children of various ages where students were bussed each morning to acclimatize to the Canadian school environment and start to learn basic English. As the families found permanent accommodations, ESL teachers in their local schools welcomed the students and carried out assessments of their English and mathematics skills, often also requesting support from our first language assessment service to determine students' level of literacy and prior schooling in their home language. Students of grade 4 and above with limited or interrupted formal schooling are directed to our special *LEAP* classes (Literacy Enrichment Academic Program) to help those with limited prior schooling catch up to their peers. Currently, the Toronto District School Board has LEAP classes in 17 elementary and 13 secondary schools, with at least half a dozen having been added

since the Syrian newcomers began to arrive. For more information about the TDSB's LEAP classes, please contact [paula.markus@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:paula.markus@tdsb.on.ca)

## Resources

In the past 10 months, approximately 850 Syrian children in Kindergarten through Grade 12 have been welcomed into Toronto District School Board schools. We look forward to continuing to support them and the many other students who arrive at our schools on their path to becoming integral and productive members of Canadian society.

The following are some Canadian resources specifically focused on the needs of the Syrian newcomers.

1. *Citizenship and Immigration Canada Population Profile: Syrian Refugees*

<http://lifelinesyria.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/EN-Syrian-Population-Profile.pdf>

2. *School Mental Health-Assist Info-Sheet: Welcoming Syrian Newcomer Students and Families to School*

<http://smh-assist.ca/blog/2016/01/21/welcoming-syrian-newcomer-students-families-to-school-info-sheet/>

3. *Promoting Success with Arab Immigrant Students: Teacher Resources*

<https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/For-Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity,%20Equity%20and%20Human%20Rights/AR-CMEF-4%20Arab%20Resource.pdf>

4. *Caring for Syrian Refugee Children: A Program Guide for Welcoming Young Children and their Families*

[http://cmascanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Supporting\\_Refugees/Caring%20for%20Syrian%20Refugee%20Children-final.pdf](http://cmascanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Supporting_Refugees/Caring%20for%20Syrian%20Refugee%20Children-final.pdf)

The following are some of the resources available to newcomer students and families in the TDSB, which are helpful in supporting students and families from all language backgrounds.

Ontario Ministry of Education – Resource and support documents for teachers of ELLs at both the elementary and secondary level, including *Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling*, *Supporting English Language*

*Learners in Kindergarten*, and *Many Roots, Many Voices*, a resource for classroom teachers of English language learners. [www.edugains.ca/newsite/index.html](http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/index.html)

The Ministry of Education also maintains a website for parents with information in many different languages, including booklets about prevention of bullying, mental health issues, supporting children in developing literacy skills and more. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/multiLanguages.html>

Settlement Workers in Schools – A government program which provides settlement assistance for new Canadians. Information on every aspect of the newcomer's adjustment to Canadian life is available in multiple languages. [www.settlement.org](http://www.settlement.org)

Sources for dual language materials in a wide variety of languages include: [www.uniteforliteracy.com](http://www.uniteforliteracy.com) which provides access to hundreds of books for children with Multilanguage online narration; [www.mantralingua.com](http://www.mantralingua.com), one of the largest publishers of high quality dual language children's books; <http://thornwood.peelschools.org/dual/index.htm> Thornwood Public School's Dual Language Showcase, a project in Mississauga, Ontario under the leadership of Dr. Jim Cummins, where children collaborated with their parents to create dual language readers; and <http://homepages.ucalgary.ca/~hroessin/> "Family Treasures and Grandma's Soup", a dual language book project led by Dr. Hetty Roessingh of the University of Calgary. In addition, the website MyLanguage.ca – Hold On to Your Home Language at [www.ryerson.ca/mylanguage/](http://www.ryerson.ca/mylanguage/) provides information for parents and community members on the benefits of maintaining children's home languages. Brochures are available to download at no cost in a number of different languages. This site is maintained by Dr. Roma Chumak-Horbatsch of Ryerson University in Toronto.

The ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario (ERGO) provides a set of free-downloadable readers for English language learners on a range of financial literacy topics of relevance to newly arrived adolescents. The booklets were all co-created by English language learners and ESL educators at Ontario high schools. Audiobook versions of each reader are also accessible, as are reading and mathematics lessons to accompany each topic. Go to [www.ergo-on.ca](http://www.ergo-on.ca) and click on the *Making Good Choices* icon. Also available from ERGO is a new set of beginning readers that focus on health and wellness topics for newly-arrived students who may be undergoing adjustment challenges. Click on the *Live Well*

*Series* on the ERGO website to access these free materials for elementary and secondary ELLs.

Additional Resources for Identity Texts

***Identity Texts: The Collaborative Creation of Power in Multilingual Schools.***  
Jim Cummins and Margaret Early, editors. Trentham Books, 2011.

***Identity Texts and Academic Achievement: Connecting the Dots in Multilingual School Contexts.*** Jim Cummins, Shirley Hu, Paula Markus and M. Kristiina Montero. TESOL Quarterly Vol 49, No. 3., Sept 2015.

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