

Peel board ready to Inspire Hope for hundreds of Syrian children

The Peel District School Board is where the world comes to learn.

To plan for the arrival of large numbers of refugee families who arrive in Brampton, Caledon and Mississauga, and to ensure supports are focused and schools are prepared, the Peel board has created an Inspire Hope Action Team.

At this point, there has been no confirmation of the number of refugee families who will settle in Peel, but we do know that our community is a major destination for many newcomers, observed Brian Woodland, director of communications and community relations, and chair of the Inspire Hope Action Team.

This year alone, the Peel board's three We Welcome the World Centres (WWTWC) have assessed and registered more than 5,300 newcoming students.

Our schools have vibrant English as a Second Language (ESL) programming, staff experienced in receiving newcomers, and a wide variety of supports and services provided by social workers, psychologists and Multicultural Settlement in Education Partnership (MSEP) workers, Woodland commented. Our schools and support staff have always done an amazing job to support refugee families. We know they'll continue to offer a warm welcome and inspire hope.

The Peel board's Inspire Hope Action Team will:

- inventory existing supports and services,
- identify potential needs/areas that require provincial funding,
- ensure coordination of services to support refugee families,
- identify how staff can provide arriving refugees with a warm welcome and successful school experience and
- connect with community agencies serving refugees.

To date, the Peel board has supported refugees through the WWTWCs.

Generally, they've come to us from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria, Director of Education Tony Pontes said. Though it's hard to generalize, it's fair to say that many have far higher needs than other welcome centre families. Through our work in the community, we have strong connections with agencies serving the newcomer community, and know the services we provide and those offered by our partners will ensure refugee families are well-supported during their transition to life in Canada.

The following immediate actions are being taken by the Peel board in preparation for the arrival of Syrian refugees in the region:

Staff in curriculum and instructional support services are working on new resources and supports for schools specifically to assist English Language Development (ELD) students.

Tip sheets for administrators and school staff are being developed by the special education department to provide strategies for supporting students and families, whose needs may include referral to professional services and/or special education supports.

Beyond these supports, the team identifies a key need to coordinate support for schools for ESL and ELD students. Based on volume, and on the levels of language proficiency, schools may need advice and assistance in fully serving refugee students. A central resource teacher will be assigned this work until the end of the school year. The role will help schools assess need, provide guidance and support, and serve as a clearinghouse for requests from schools. This role will be funded from within the curriculum department.

WWTWCs have negotiated a formal agreement with the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. They will offer one to two days a week of free counselling services at the Elm Drive location to support those who have experienced trauma from war and conflict.

Staff are connecting with the board's child care partners to explore possible supports and subsidies for before and after-school care for refugee families.

WWTWC staff have been collecting clothing and bedding for refugee families and schools and the community have been generous in their giving.

Staff are working with the board's technology equity of access partners to identify free or low-cost technology options for refugee families.

Staff are working with Peel Public Health to ensure needed supports, e.g. dental screening, are available to refugee families at the WWTWCs.

WWTWCs offer parent sessions in Arabic, such as Understanding the School System, Getting Ready for Kindergarten, the ESL Advantage and Making My Way, to help newcomer families familiarize themselves with the education system.

MSEP workers who are Arabic-speaking will be deployed to schools with higher numbers of refugees from Syria.

The Ministry of Education recognizes that these newcomer students may require additional supports from schools to address language proficiency needs and a wide range of other needs in areas such as extraordinary special education costs, social work,

mental health and translation/interpreters.

“While the size and scale of the need isn't fully known, what's clear is the requirement for additional funding to support schools to ensure a warm welcome and successful school experience for refugee students,” Woodland observed.

Additional funds would support the following:

“The Peel board has offered Ashgrove and Lakeview Park schools to the Region of Peel as potential sites to house refugee families. There will be significant funding required for the retrofit of these schools, and for operational costs, to ensure that the refugee families are comfortable and have an appropriate standard of living.

“If large numbers of refugees arrive with limited foundational first language skills, there will be a need to deploy additional supports and potentially to create clusters of students for four to six weeks of intensive ESL/ELD support.

“There will be a need, in general, for additional teaching staff, teaching assistants, resource staff, in-school support personnel and more.

“The special education needs will mean the addition of social work, psychologist and speech language supports.

“Federally co-funded programs, such as the WWTWCs and MSEP, will need additional staffing, including more Arabic MSEP workers.

“The Inspire Hope Action Team will meet to identify how best to support schools to warmly welcome refugee families,” Woodland said. “The team will work to coordinate services, collect information and identify funding gaps.”

“Our goal is simple – to inspire hope in our refugee students and families,” he added. “We want to ensure that they are warmly welcomed, and have a successful school experience. In other words, we want them to experience the same success, confidence and hope we provide each day to our students.”