

Getting the scoop on their new home

A school newspaper helps students who've recently arrived in Quebec get a better understanding of their community

KATE LUNAU, The Gazette

Published: Wednesday, January 03, 2007

Moving from one city to another is never easy. It involves leaving familiar territory, saying goodbye to relatives and friends, and getting to know a new environment.

But relocating can be twice as difficult for children who not only move to a new city, but to a new country.

Through a student newspaper, a new journalism project at a Sherbrooke elementary school aims to reach out to those children who have recently arrived in Canada.

Newspaper project organizers hope to help the newcomers improve their French-language skills, learn about the community in which they live and make new friends.

Manon Trottier is principal of Ecole Desjardins in Sherbrooke, about 150 kilometres east of Montreal.

"Our school is located in somewhat of a marginalized neighbourhood," she said.

"Children who live here may not have the opportunity to leave the area much."

According to Trottier, more than 20 per cent of the the 182 students enrolled at the school this year were born outside Quebec. Many of the students moved to Sherbrooke from countries in the Middle East, Latin America or Africa.

That's a relatively recent development, Trottier added: "Five years ago, there were almost no children born outside Quebec in the school."

Fanny Laroche and Valerie Poirier, both 20, were the two volunteers who oversaw the newspaper project. Both are involved with Frontier College, a cross-Canada literacy group with an office at the Universite de Sherbrooke.

"The main goal is to improve the kids' French-language skills," said Laroche, who is studying education at the Universite de Sherbrooke.

"But it isn't just that," she added. "It's a way for them to learn about the school and the community, too."

Starting in early November, Laroche and Poirier met every Thursday after school with the 15 students who signed up for the program.

"Children from Mexico, Afghanistan and Africa took part in the project," as well as youngsters who were born in Quebec, Poirier said.

The children, age 8 to 12, performed every step of producing the paper, titled L'Ecrivain de Desjardins. The youngsters brainstormed ideas, selected photos and graphics, proofread stories, and even helped with page design.

"They really turned into little journalists," Trottier said.

"You'd see them around with their notebooks and pencils."

The finished newspaper - which was distributed throughout the school on Dec. 14 - contains eight pages and features an interview with a teacher, fashion tips, a games page, and a country profile aimed at teaching others about the different countries students come from.

Isabelle Martinez-Gosselin, 12, is one of those who participated. Born in Mexico, Isabelle has lived in Sherbrooke for two years.

"I wrote an interview with a teacher for the paper," she said.

"It was fun, and I like how it turned out."

Although the young journalists' newsroom is on hiatus for the holidays, they plan to return to work on the next edition this month.

For more information on Frontier College, call 514-528-1001 or visit www.frontiercollege.ca

klunau@thegazette.canwest.com