

Newcomer Orientation Week in Ontario High Schools

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It is nearing the end of August and, across Ontario, school hallways are quiet as custodians make their final preparations for the new school year – except for 60 high schools where special arrangements have been made to open schools early for the Newcomer Orientation Week (NOW), a four-day program funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to welcome and orient high school students who have recently moved to Canada. NOW is designed to help newcomer students succeed academically and socially in the Ontario school system so they can achieve their full potential. It is part of the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) Program currently operating in Ottawa, York Region, Toronto, Peel Region, Hamilton, Niagara Region, Waterloo Region, and Windsor. This year represented the third year in which the program has been offered in Ontario schools. And, this year alone, over 1,500 newly arrived students participated.

NOW is part of the CIC response to the settlement needs of newly arrived youth. It was inspired by the success of the SWIS Program and the CIC-funded DVD, *New Moves*, which describes the transition of newly arrived students to high school in Canada. The program is built upon the recognition that a student's educational success is directly related to his/her sense of welcome in the school. At the heart of the SWIS Program is a commitment to enhancing the capacity of local schools to welcome newcomers. NOW is a key part of that strategy.

Newly arrived high school students come from a variety of circumstances. Some are excited about coming to Canada while others come reluctantly. Some struggle to make friends and feel positive about their new home. All of them have one thing in common, however: School in Canada is different from the school they came from. So the NOW Program was designed intentionally to be a peer-led experience that provides students the foundation for a successful educational experience in Canada. Students learn from other students, make friends, and are empowered to begin the school year from a position of strength.

Students who have themselves experienced the transition to life in Canada apply to become peer leaders in the spring. SWIS settlement workers collaborate with schools' staff in the selection of these students, seeking a team that is diverse in culture, gender, and personality. Settlement workers follow up with the peer leaders throughout the summer in preparation for the NOW week. In mid-August, these students experience a four-day intensive training program to prepare them for their role in NOW.

This summer, 13 different sites were identified to train more than 600 peer leaders from Windsor to Ottawa. Professional facilitators experienced in training youth are recruited to conduct the training with the support of SWIS settlement workers. As one teacher in the York Region observed, "The NOW Program is one of the few opportunities newcomer youth have to receive leadership training and experience." Indeed, many of the peer leaders are themselves former NOW participants.

The NOW Program activities last for four days. The first day is all about breaking the ice and establishing the context for the program. Students are invited to fill in self-profiles, share a lunch provided by the program, learn about bringing lunch to school (which they do for days two and three), and then view and discuss the *New Moves* DVD. The second day includes a very popular scavenger hunt around the school making use of a passport-like document that students fill in as they find different locations around the school. Peer leaders share skits about starting in a new school and then guide newcomers in developing their own skits about what to expect the first few days of school. They are also introduced to combination locks and experience opening their lock with the help of peer leaders. By this time, friendships are building and trust is forming. The third day involves a field trip to a local library and, in some cases, a community centre. Students also learn about graduation requirements. Finally, on the final day of the program, students and peer leaders have bonded. They participate in an interactive game about the various support personnel in school and then celebrate their experience with a graduation ceremony and party. There is a strong sense of anticipation in the air as the newcomer students and peer leaders make plans to meet up when classes begin the following week.

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Some have asked: “Why four days?” The answer is in the outcomes: NOW seeks to prepare newly arrived students to begin the Canadian school experience on a positive note. Students who have gone through the program know their way around the school. They can find their locker and open the lock with confidence. They recognize some faces and are able to better utilize the extra-curricular opportunities that are offered by the school. They better understand school expectations and are equipped to engage the school as a whole.

Others have asked: “Why not run NOW in September after more students have arrived?” Again, we point to the outcomes. NOW is a school-readiness program. If we waited until school has started, then much of what the program seeks to accomplish would be lost. But the fact that the program is part of SWIS means that the resources are readily available and trained staff are on site to support newcomers throughout the year. And there is the recognition that innovations around using the program materials during the year and looking at other windows to offer the program are important ways to build on the success of NOW.

In most NOW schools, the peer leaders and NOW participants form the nucleus of a team that is ready to support all newcomers as they arrive throughout the year. These students also frequently engage with Youth HOST programs. As one teacher observed:

The peer leaders are amazing. ... I can say this about every single peer leader that we had: Not one of them stopped being a peer leader after the orientation. So what I found, even at the onset of the second semester, [is that] you still had the relationship of the newcomer with the peer leader.

So how do students get connected to NOW?

Outreach for the program is multifaceted. It begins, as does the whole NOW Program, with the peer leaders. These students share about the program with newcomers they meet over the summer months. During June, settlement workers also canvas feeder schools to identify students who have arrived late in school year. Each NOW school puts up a large banner advertising the program and outreach by settlement workers throughout the summer targets newly arrived families. Many school boards have reception and assessment centres. SWIS settlement workers meet the students and their families at the centre, explain about the NOW program, sign them up, and ensure that the connections to the new school is established. The settlement workers at the NOW school then follow up to remind the newcomer students of the program and to assure wary parents.

Three years into the NOW experience, interest in the program is constantly growing. More and more schools are requesting the program, thus stretching program resources. CIC and SWIS agencies are looking into ways to respond to these needs. There is also interest growing around the country – from Alberta and Saskatchewan to the Maritimes. This November, an orientation and training session will be held in Calgary for the Prairie Region SWIS programs to learn more about the way NOW is implemented in Ontario and to begin making plans for a program built to suit their needs.

With the success of NOW, a program called WIN (Welcome and Information for Newcomers) was piloted in 2008 to help newcomer teens entering middle school. The pilot was so well received that, this year, WIN was expanded to 16 schools across the province (including Ottawa, Peel Region, Toronto, and Windsor) with the participation of 450 newcomer students and their families.

One thing is certain: When CIC, agencies, and school boards work together, great things happen.