

Ministry of Education

Deputy Minister

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Sous-ministre

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Memorandum To: Directors of Education

CC: Council of Ontario Directors of Education,
Children's Services Leads, Consolidated Municipal
Service Managers and District Social Services
Administration Boards

From: George Zegarac
Deputy Minister

Date: December 4, 2015

Subject: Syrian Refugee Settlement in Ontario

The purpose of this memo is to continue to provide you with information around the Syrian refugee settlement in Ontario, as well as the children and youth that will attend schools across our province. As you know, Ontario is home to one of the most diverse populations in the world, where generations have come to build new homes.

The revised federal government plan specifies that 25,000 Syrian refugees (a mix of privately-sponsored and government-assisted) will be identified by December 31, 2015, with a target of 10,000 arriving at this time, and the remainder by the end of February 2016. Approximately 10,000 Syrian refugees are expected to come to Ontario — with a large majority of them expected to arrive in Toronto or the GTA, as well as London, Kitchener-Waterloo, Ottawa, Windsor and Hamilton (<http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?nid=1022439>).

This is a great opportunity to show we are a welcoming and inclusive society. We also know that newcomers to Canada bring a wide range of experiences, languages and cultural backgrounds that enrich our communities.

During this past month, we have been working with boards and CODE to gather information to ensure that responsive supports will be put in place in boards and communities. It has been exciting to hear from boards about the planning and connections already being made with community members and agencies to support our newcomers in their integration in the community. There has been an overwhelming sense of optimism as board staff and community members have prepared for this opportunity.

It is important to note that we will continue to work with boards and CODE to consistently:

- provide current information about settlement plans (e.g., destination points for refugees);
- ensure, in partnership with the federal government, that school boards have the resources and support required (e.g., financial, language, mental health, community) to successfully integrate Syrian refugees into our education system; and
- work together to problem-solve situations as they arise.

I would also like to provide you with further information on four key topics: 1) funding and extraordinary expenses; 2) language supports; 3) mental health supports and 4) community supports.

1) Funding and Extraordinary Expenses:

Syrian refugees are being admitted to Canada with the status of “permanent resident”, as defined by Canada’s Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Ontario’s Education Act (subsection 49. (7)) includes a provision that such pupils are exempt from paying any fee. These pupils will be identified in OnSIS as permanent residents.

Funding through the 2015-16 GSN will therefore adjust, to some extent, to any increase in the number of students resulting from the resettlement of Syrian refugees, depending on the timing of when the students enter the boards.

At the same time, the ministry 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. In particular, the ministry recognizes that school boards may incur additional expenses and face cost pressures in providing appropriate programs and services that go beyond current planned programming and service levels.

Boards are encouraged to track these one-time extraordinary expenses. The ministry, in partnership with the federal government, will ensure that school boards have the resources and support required to successfully integrate Syrian refugees into our education system. The Financial Policy and Business Division of the ministry will provide a template to guide the collection of data in the near future.

2) Language Supports:

Based on current demographics, boards have varying levels of support for English Language Learners and French Language Learners, including programs in English literacy development (ELD), English as a Second Language (ESL), Programme d'appui aux nouveaux arrivants (PANA), and Actualisation linguistique en français (ALF), as well as access to community resources to support integration of newcomer students. Some boards have noted a potential additional need to access teachers trained to conduct initial literacy and numeracy assessments as students arrive and to support teachers in planning and implementing programs based on ministry resources such as STEP – Steps to English Proficiency and TACLEF – Trousse d'acquisition de compétences langagières en français. The ministry is finalizing plans to provide additional training to support initial assessments in December, if required, and professional learning opportunities linked to resources for teachers and support staff and will be providing further information around these in the coming days.

Many boards also offer Adult and Continuing Education programs, including both credit and non-credit learning opportunities outside the regular day school program and during the summer. This includes credit courses for adult learners, as well as non-credit English or French as a second language programs for adults offered by the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade (MCIIT).

3) Mental Health Supports:

Refugees often come with significant health challenges, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gives priorities to "medical cases" and "special-needs". School board support staff (e.g., social workers and mental health supports) may experience additional pressures. Boards have been connecting with community services that may support both families and students during this transition period (e.g., walk-in clinics, tele-psychiatry referrals, referrals to mental health and addiction nurses). School Mental Health ASSIST is working with Mental Health Leaders and Superintendents with responsibility for mental health, to form a Refugee Resource Group with the intention of supporting schools with the mental health needs of Syrian refugee students and their families. This Refugee Resource Group will assist the ministry by providing observations as to the needs in the system, from a school mental health lens. It will collate resources that can inform decisions about support locally and serve as a vehicle for sharing of materials across boards. New resources will be developed for school leaders, educators and board Mental Health Leadership Teams as needed in the weeks ahead. Resources may include webinars to build stakeholder capacity and communication tools. Additionally, in conjunction with School Mental Health ASSIST, the Refugee Resource Group will work alongside teams in other sectors to support a seamless provincial response.

4) Community Supports:

Many staff and community members are already supporting Syrian refugee efforts or are asking how they can volunteer to help. The following links provide information that can be helpful in understanding how Ontarians can welcome our newcomers, and how we can help.

#WelcomeRefugees

- <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/index.asp>

Syrian Refugees: how you can help

- <http://www.ontario.ca/page/syrian-refugees-how-you-can-help>

Welcoming Syrian Refugees

- <http://www.findmyspark.ca/warmwelcome>

The ministry funds a number of family support programs across all regions of the province, such as Ontario Early Years Centres and Parenting and Family Literacy Centres. These programs are poised to provide critical supports to refugee families upon arrival and as they settle into the community. These supports may include access to information about local programs and services, supporting children's transition to kindergarten, identifying child care options and connecting families with other parents and children in the community. I would encourage you to continue to work with your local municipal partners (CMSMs/DSSABs), agencies and planning tables (e.g. Best Start Networks) as we build local approaches to support refugee families.

There is also a resource, *Population Profile: Syrian Refugees*, that provides background information such as demographics, health characteristics, and cultural considerations: <http://lifelinesyria.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/EN-Syrian-Population-Profile.pdf>. I know that our collective efforts will provide for a wonderful welcome to our Syrian refugees. Citizenship and Immigration Canada created this resource to assist boards and communities to prepare for the arrival of refugees.

Please note that this is the first in ongoing communications on this topic. As further information is actively gathered, we will communicate with boards as to next steps. It is important to note that Ontario has a strong track record of successfully integrating and educating newcomers to Canada. This record is due to the tremendous support provided by you and your staff over the years.

If you have any comments or questions, please contact your CODE representative:

- Kathi Wallace, kwallace@scdsb.on.ca, PCODE
- Angela Gauthier, angela.gauthier@tcdsb.org, ECCODE
- Réjean Sirois, siroir@ecolecatholique.ca, CODELF

Or, contact the regional manager of the Field Services Branch in your area. In addition, we will have an opportunity to discuss this further at the CODE meeting on Tuesday, December 8.

Thank you for your ongoing support,



George Zegarac
Deputy Minister

c. CODE

Children's Services Leads

CMSMs and DSSABs