

Young immigrant asks for more English classes

Iranian-born teenager's request will be sent to education minister

[Final Edition]

The Record - Kitchener, Ont.

Author: LIZ MONTEIRO

Date: Jun 8, 2006

Section: LOCAL

Text Word Count: 541

Document Text

Sina Kheirkhan, a 14-year-old student at Eastwood Collegiate Institute, is full of praise for English-as-a-second language teachers.

He just wishes he could spend more time in their classes.

The Iranian-born teenager called last night for more English instruction at local high schools -- during school hours and after.

Kheirkhan's request was read to about 150 people at a forum on the experiences of immigrant youth in Waterloo Region. Kheirkhan, who has been in Canada almost two years, wasn't at the forum at Kitchener City Hall.

He is shy and felt his English wasn't good enough for public speaking, said Joanna Ochocka, executive director of the Kitchener-based Centre for Research and Education and Human Services.

But Kheirkhan's thoughts made such an impression with forum organizers they decided to send his letter to Sandra Pupatello, the minister of education .

In his statement, Kheirkhan described how difficult Grade 8 was because he didn't speak English. His peers gave him the most trouble.

"Youths who are not immigrants are very racist to the people who are and don't know English," he wrote. "They make fun of them because of their clothing, talking and appearance."

In addition to more language classes, Kheirkhan suggested putting computers in language classrooms so students can access online dictionaries.

He also called for more programs where students can practise their language skills.

Forum organizers echoed some of his suggestions.

During a year-long study by the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services and Wilfrid Laurier University, researchers found immigrant youths wanted more English-language instruction.

The youth also spoke of their social isolation at school, which they blamed on their poor English skills.

Brian Sandbeck, a master's student in community psychology at Wilfrid Laurier, said some students said they couldn't integrate into school life because the environment wasn't welcoming. Some felt bullied, he said.

One Afghan student felt forced to quit school to help his parents find jobs. They didn't speak English, Sandbeck said.

Interviews were done with 75 students, 16 to 20 years old. All had lived in Canada at least five years and came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Latin America, the former Yugoslavia or north or eastern Africa. Researchers also talked to parents and teachers.

Sandbeck said coping mechanisms for immigrant youth included befriending English-speaking people and getting involved in school activities.

Research director Rich Janzen said statistics on immigrant dropout rates are not kept by Waterloo Region boards, but conversations with local students and studies elsewhere indicate immigrant students are struggling.

In 2004, half the Ontario students in English-as-a-second-language who wrote a literacy test failed. Locally, the failure rate was higher, with 61 per cent of Catholic students failing the test and 63 per cent of public school students.

Other recommendations included hiring more teachers who reflect the immigrant student population and appointing a diversity relations officer at both school boards.

Public school superintendent David Spence said the ministry formula regulations doesn't allow for such a position.

Imonteiro@therecord.com

[Illustration]

Photo: DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF / Asima Ameen (left) and Noopur Paul, both 16-year-old students at Jacob Hespeler Secondary School, are part of a group called SWEET - Solutions With Education Every Time. Here they perform with drums at a community forum last night.

Credit: RECORD STAFF

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.