

March 28, 2022

Good evening and welcome.

Although many in our school communities were able to have a bit of a break these last few weeks, it has also been an incredibly stressful and heartbreaking time, especially for those with family and friends in Ukraine.

Many have been reflecting on how to help, by financially supporting relief efforts in Europe, or by seeking ways to support efforts closer to home.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created Europe's largest refugee crisis since the Second World War. With the displacement of millions of Ukrainians, it is a good time to reflect on the systems the Burnaby School District currently has in place to support the families who may require settlement, cultural, and language support if they relocate to our community.

Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) in BC is a comprehensive school-based settlement program that maximizes the integration and settlement of immigrant and refugee students and their families through a seamless and systemic delivery model, recognizing that schools are natural community hubs and often a first contact for newcomers to Canada. Newcomers may require support in a number of areas such as housing, employment, and healthcare. SWIS workers connect families with resources in their schools and communities, and BC and Manitoba are the only two provinces that have settlement workers in schools.

Settlement services have increased significantly and mirror the complex needs of increasing numbers of refugee families requiring supports - many who have overcome great obstacles and adversity in their journey to Canada.

Burnaby has become one of the most robust SWIS programs in the country since its inception in 2007, covering all 49 Burnaby schools, over 18 languages in a model of wrap-around support. Burnaby also runs an extensive LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) program for many of the parents of students attending Burnaby Schools that started in the district in 1992. Federally funded, these two programs connect families to more than just services, they help families meaningfully connect to the community. SWIS workers have been instrumental in keeping families connected to our school communities during the pandemic. It has been inspiring to hear the work of SWIS workers across the metro region at the English Language Learners (ELL) Consortium meetings as ELL and settlement specialists have supported families through a trauma informed approach in areas such as:

- Helping parents be included in student home learning by providing language support
- Cultural interpreter support
- Connecting families to technical services and hardware required during the pandemic
- Providing online opportunities to connect to others.

It is with these examples in mind, that I am grateful and proud that when the Burnaby School District is called upon to support families relocating to Burnaby from the Ukraine, our staff – our teachers, SWIS workers, administrators, and support workers – will welcome them with the empathy and compassion they have demonstrated time and time again.

Jen Mezei, Chair
Burnaby Board of Education