

## BEACH METRO: School hosts foreign students



By Phil Lameira • February 19, 2013

Exchange students are fairly common across school boards, but to have a large number from the same country in one is rare.

Neil McNeil Catholic Secondary had three international students last year. This year they have 35 Chinese students in the program. The number arises from the promotion of schools by the Toronto Catholic District School Board to agencies that recruit students from China and places them in secondary schools throughout Canada.

Youth receive a one-year student visa, which can be renewed so they can continue studying in Canada.

Neil McNeil received 23 Chinese students in September for their first semester. Another 12 arrived in late January just in time for the second semester.

Vice-principal Kathleen Wong has been instrumental in ensuring the students are integrated in the school programs and made to feel at home. Through an outreach program, students are given winter clothing, are taken to various sporting events, and get to celebrate Christmas in the Canadian tradition.

In February the new students were set up in a buddy program with those who arrived in September. They were grouped according to where they were from in China, or by common interests.

“We like to involve the students so that it turns into their project as well,” said Wong of the buddy system.

Miao Kenny, 17, is from the city of Xi’an and arrived in Canada in September of last year.

His first reaction was awe, as he noticed the diversity in cultures and nationalities.

His first days at school, although challenging, were filled with a sense of welcoming.

“When I first walked into my class, everybody said ‘hello’ to me in Chinese,” said Kenny. “And some of them asked me for their Chinese name. That made us have more conversations and improve our relationship.”

Kenny’s biggest surprise, as that of many others, was the ability to select his own courses. He explained that in China youth don’t have a choice in their curriculum and take classes assigned to them.

“That’s crazy for Chinese students,” joked Kenny. “You can have your own ideas [here].”

His biggest challenge so far has been communicating in English as he struggles to find the confidence to speak the new language.

This is a common trend, said Wong, with some of the students having no knowledge of the language at all. But as the year progresses so does their English.

“I definitely have seen an improvement in their English skills,” said Wong.

The Chinese students along with some local students celebrated Chinese New Year’s on Feb. 13. The party, attended by over 100 people, was organized by the Chinese students and allowed for everyone to learn about the Chinese culture.

“It made us feel at home,” said Kenny.

Kenny, whose parents would like him to take over the family business, is hoping to continue his education in Canada and eventually become a film director.

“The students have had a range of responses. Some of them are very excited about everything that is new and different,” said Wong.