

PIE program changing lives through education



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It wasn't too long ago that when Cathy Ismail applied for a job and was asked what level of education she'd reached, she cried.

After all, while growing up in Syria, Ismail had to quit school at age 10 to look after her siblings after her mother fell ill, she being the eldest daughter in a family of 11 children.

And while she always wanted to continue her schooling, after immigrating to Canada and settling in Burnaby eight years ago, she had three children and it was too expensive to put them in daycare while she took classes.

Until now.

Ismail is among 21 students in her lower-level English foundations class, which along with the higher-level class with 26 students, began as a pilot project this past January at Edmonds Community School.

It's an extension of the Partners in Education program (PIE), an initiative of the Canucks Family Education Centre (CFEC), which provides support to parents and meets weekly to discuss topics such as parenting skills.

"PIE Plus" is aimed at helping participants improve their English and assisting them on a path leading to a high school diploma, all while providing early-education classes, lunches and snacks for their preschool-aged children.

The school space, instructors and supplies are provided by Burnaby school district, while the CFEC covers everything else with funding from the Canucks for Kids Fund, the Vancouver Canucks, the Vancouver Sun Raise-a-Reader program and private donors including Burnaby boy and superstar crooner Michael Bublé who contributed \$30,000, said Jean Rasmussen, CFEC's executive director.

Rasmussen has a background in adult education and founded the centre after realizing in working with adults struggling to improve their literacy that "there was always this other piece missing."

If the adult students could find a program to further their education, daycare wasn't possible or vice versa. She

determined that the resources are available in the community and the CFEC was created to help coordinate them for its clients.

"We're investing in human potential," she said of the free programs.

At Edmonds school, where the program has been renewed for next year, the program is based on an existing one at Britannia secondary. There are 281 participants in the Burnaby PIE and PIE Plus programs, including the kids in the preschool program, all who arrived via word of mouth.

For Ismail, it's been a lifeline.

She recalled feeling very lonely before joining the program. She'd take her children, now aged three, two and 11 months, out to the mall or elsewhere but they'd rarely make connections in their community.

"Now we come to school, they're making friends, I'm making friends, they're learning, I'm learning."

And her classmates, many of them immigrants and refugees, can relate to her struggles, such as the fact she hasn't seen her parents back in Syria since she came here. It's obviously a constant worry for Ismail, who is near tears every time she speaks of family back home who are living amid civil unrest, and the fact her parents have never met her children.

But she cheers up considerably when talk returns to her schooling in Burnaby.

Her English is improving which will give her more independence, Ismail said. She recounted how she was forced to pack up her kids and make trips to immigrant services agencies, such as MOSAIC, for translation help every time she received an important-looking letter in the mail that she didn't understand.

And she's looking forward to being able to help her kids with their homework when they're old enough to start school. In the long run, she dreams of becoming a lawyer one day to help others who also struggle.

"I feel like I'm in my home," she said of the program. "Since I come to school my life has changed."

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