

News London

En francais? No problem

SPELLING BEE: A London lad gets so good at his second language, he wins against Francophones

By JENNIFER O'BRIEN, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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He may aspire to be a "gardien de but," but if his soccer dreams fall through, 10-year-old French language scholar Bill Wild is sure to have a back-up plan.

The Grade 5 student is heading to Montreal after winning a prestigious regional spelling contest for francophone students.

"The hardest word was predecesseur," says Wild, who is among a minority of students at London's Academie de la Tamise who don't speak French at home. "But I was so nervous, I did two or three very obvious mistakes.

"Like one sentence I put a lower-case c instead of a capital one to start the first word."

Still, Wild found out a couple of days later he was first place among hundreds of Southwest Ontario students who participated in La Dicterie P.G.L. -- a type of spelling bee that requires students to write sentences being dictated to them.

Not bad for a kid whose parents didn't speak French before enrolling him at a French-first language school.

"We grew up in the era of Pierre Trudeau, and we believe in the vision that he had, that as a bilingual nation, French (language) is part of our culture," says June Wild. "We wanted that for our kids . . . to understand their culture."

They started their children at a French immersion school in Kingston. Bill did so well that when the family moved to London his parents wanted to send him somewhere that would present more of a challenge.

They figured a French-first language school would be a challenge.

French immersion schools are designed for English-speaking families who want their children to learn French. Much of the parent-teacher correspondence is done in English.

Francophone schools are designed for French-speaking families, and everything comes home in French.

After a lengthy process, during which the family applied to and was then interviewed by the French school board, the Wilds agreed to learn French as a family and registered.

"We had to commit to learning it, but at first we used to stand outside the school and decide who had to go in and talk to the teachers," June Wild says.

Three years later, their eldest child is headed to an international contest against mostly francophone children from Canada, the U.S., France and Africa.

"By participating in the dictee PGL we open their horizons and make them realize that as French-speaking children they are not alone in the world, they are connected by language to many other regions of our planet," la Tamise principal Marie Josee Corrigan said in an e-mail.

"We are thrilled to have a child from our school represent French-as-a-first-language schools from the South Western Ontario region. Even more impressive is the fact that Bill is from a family that we like to call 'Francophile' or French loving."

Bill Wild is the third student in consecutive years to make the international final in Montreal from the school, she said.

Jennifer O'Brien is a Free Press education reporter.