

## **Pilot program makes difference for troubled youth, families**

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Schools Plus is only a year old, but it is making a difference in the lives of students and families in the Amherst area.

“There have been both challenges and successes and it has been a great learning experience for everyone,” Amherst Schools Plus project facilitator Kim Wood said after speaking to members of the Amherst Rotary Club last week.

“We have had a lot of success stories.”

Schools Plus is part of the province’s child and youth strategy and responds to the recommendations of the Nunn Report, which was commissioned after a teenager driving a stolen car hit and killed a Halifax teacher’s assistant in 2004.

Amherst is one of four pilot sites in operation across the province with Wood acting as the liaison between the school and the community. Her job is to advocate, co-ordinate and expand services for students and families, and to help both navigate the system and get the services they need.

The vision for the program is to have the schools become a convenient place for government and other services to be delivered to families. The approach is designed to make it easier for professionals to collaborate with each other on behalf of children, youth and families.

Chignecto Family of Schools supervisor Scott Milner said the program is not only designed to increase collaboration and co-operation. It’s also set up to make all service providers more accountable in responding to the needs of their clients.

Schools were asked to take the lead in the program because it’s usually the education system that is first to see family problems manifest themselves in student behaviour or absenteeism.

“The vision is that schools would become centres of service,” he said.

“Instead of a family or student in crisis leaving school to go to mental health services or public health, those services are at the school.”

Ideally, he said, as a supervisor of schools he could down the hall of the school and talk to another service provider to best help a student in need of help.

“It’s a switch for us and a challenge even as we plan new schools because schools are not designed for outside agencies,” he said. “It’s a whole new shift in approaching the issues we deal with.”

Though the program is still in its relative infancy, Milner said it's producing results.

"There are several situations that would have gone terribly wrong if it were not for Kim co-ordinating the community agencies," Milner said.

"We're seeing systemic changes and we're beginning to adjust practices within community services, justice, health and education. We're starting to work differently as adults to better service the youth, children and families."

If there is one area where improvement is needed, it's in providing those adult mentors to young people through programs like Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

"As we get referred cases and collaborate with other agencies it becomes very clear there are areas where there are gaps and one of those areas is mentors for our youth," said Wood, adding that every agency has identified mentorship as a weak link.