

By SCHENLEY BROWN  
Fri, Apr 15 - 4:54 AM

It's a jack of all trades. Schools-Plus helps everyone from students struggling with math to parents trying to exterminate mice in their homes.

What started in 2008 as a pilot project at four school boards in Nova Scotia will soon be available at boards across the province. Education Minister Ramona Jennex announced Thursday that SchoolsPlus will be extended to all school boards in September.

The program gives grade school students and their families access to health-care, justice, social work and mental health services through partnerships with organizations such as the RCMP, the IWK Health Centre, the Black Educators Association, government departments and community health boards.

"This is an example of using our schools for more than traditional schooling," Jennex said.

The partnerships have resulted in a course for girls teaching leadership and boosting self-confidence, a course for parents about dealing with misbehaving children and a program to help children cope with fear and anxiety.

"We have responded to more than 200 referrals," said Marlene Ruck Simmonds, SchoolsPlus leader for the Halifax regional school board, "facilitating access to health and mental services, community services programs, after-school child care and basic resources necessary for daily life."

"We had a parent with mice in her house," said Patricia Tupper, principal at Joseph Howe School in Halifax. "She didn't know what to do. She was beside herself.

"But the community outreach worker, she knows all the connections. We don't turn anybody away."

Each school has an outreach worker who acts as a liaison between the school and the community and co-ordinates services for students and families.

"It certainly opens doors, and parents sometimes don't know who to call," Tupper said. "But sometimes we talk to parents because of a situation with a child and we can offer services."

Roseanna Cleveland, a parent at Harbour View School in Dartmouth, said her son needed math help and SchoolsPlus was the first place he received it.

"In our school, there are a lot of special needs," she said, "so it kind of goes on the level that who needs the most gets taken first, and the ones that don't need it so much kind of get left at the back . . . but with Schools-Plus, it was actually done quicker.

"It really breaks down the barrier between the teachers and the parents."

The program will be extended to the Annapolis Valley, Cape Breton-Victoria, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial and Tri-County regional school boards.

These boards will establish a SchoolsPlus advisory committee to explore what services are available in their regions and start building partnerships with community agencies, government departments and other groups.

The province created Schools-Plus as part of Our Kids Are Worth It, the province's strategy for children and youth. The strategy was developed in response to government recommendations for better organization and partnerships in the delivery of programs and services for children, youth and families.

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