

Anti-bullying program to expand

Federal grant of \$2.6 million helps local initiative grow

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With almost one in five kids in Canada reporting they've been the victims of bullying, local educators are welcoming a \$2.6-million funding boost to try and correct the problem.

On Thursday, the Public Health Agency of Canada announced the four-year grant for WITS (Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out and Seek help), a program developed in Victoria and aimed at building conflict resolution skills and minimizing peer-victimization in elementary-aged students.

"Canada has a very poor reputation in terms of (kids facing) bullying."

— Bonnie Leadbeater

"Canada has a very poor reputation internationally in terms of bullying," said Bonnie Leadbeater, professor of psychology at the University of Victoria and co-creator of WITS. "We're basically at the bottom of the list of developed countries in terms of children's reports of interpersonal aggression and bullying."

The infusion of funds will go toward researching the program's effectiveness, developing online resources and increasing accessibility for educators.

For Leadbeater, who began developing WITS shortly after the 1997 murder of 14-year-old Saanich student Reena Virk, the local results are clear.

Using your WITS

- The WITS program was sparked by Lampson elementary principal Judi Stevenson in 1993.
- School police liaison Tom Woods adopted the conflict resolution strategy aimed at kindergarten through Grade 3 students, and from it launched the Rock Solid Foundation in 1997.
- The following year University of Victoria psychology professor Bonnie Leadbeater came on board.
- The Rock Solid Foundation and UVic later collaborated with Frank Hobbs and Lake Hill elementary schools to create the WITS LEADS program for Grades 4-6. LEADS is an acronym for: Look and listen, Explore points of view, Act, Did it work and Seek help.
- The program became widely available across Greater Victoria in 2006 and has since spread to more than 100 schools in B.C., Alberta and Ontario.
- Check it out at www.witsprogram.ca.

"In a well-functioning (WITS)-programmed school, kids are doing the 'Seek help' part quite well, then we really start to see (bullying) drop off," she added.

The grant money came via a \$27-million federal funding initiative to promote and strengthen mental health. The Canadian Mental Health Association, B.C. Division also received \$2.9 million for a program aimed at improving the mental health of youth and families.

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