

# Anti-bullying program to be tested nationwide

BY LINDSAY KINES, [TIMESCOLONIST.COM](http://www.timescolonist.com) DECEMBER 16, 2011

An anti-bullying program developed in Victoria has been picked up by the RCMP for testing in elementary schools across the country.

Canada's national police force is giving the WITS program a try in six rural communities from Alberta to New Brunswick — with an eye to further expansion.

It represents a major breakthrough for a program that has proved successful at preventing bullying in Victoria-area schools, but was having difficulty gaining traction on the national stage. The WITS program is currently offered in 130 schools in Canada and the United States. However, all but 20 of those are in B.C.

"It's a really great thing for us," said University of Victoria psychology professor Bonnie Leadbeater, who got involved in developing and evaluating the program in the late 1990s.

Programs that promote better mental health for children often stall even when there is strong evidence of their worth, Leadbeater said.

"I think we were stuck here," she said. "We were doing a great job in the Greater Victoria area and we were looking for partners to disseminate it more widely."

The RCMP's involvement could result in dramatic expansion. The force provides youth officer services to 5,000 schools across the country, many in rural and aboriginal communities.

"The fact that our national police body has looked at it and said, 'You know what, we can use this and it's going to work for us in the way we interact with children,' that's the biggest breakthrough we could ever have," said Tom Woods, an Esquimalt firefighter and former police school liaison officer who helped develop the WITS program.

Woods and Leadbeater were in Ottawa this month to help train RCMP officers who will take the program to Morris, Man.; Campbellton, N.B.; Bonavista, Nfld.; St. Peter's, N.S.; Cut Knife, Sask.; and Consort, Alta.

Woods said he is confident that, once the RCMP sees the program in action, it will get picked up by other detachments.

"If you ask any police officer, it's the best way, with the smallest amount of resources, to have the largest amount of impact on children and to get them to make the right decisions," he said.

WITS stands for "Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out, and Seek help." Lampson Elementary School principal Judi Stevenson began using the simple message in 1993 to help students resolve conflicts.

She later joined forces with Woods to create the WITS program and broaden its reach. Teachers, counsellors and other police officers also assisted, and Leadbeater came on board in 1998 as a

consultant.

Leadbeater said studies have shown that students in schools where WITS is taught report being victimized less than students in non-WITS schools. They also experience less anxiety and higher levels of social responsibility, she said.

Researchers believe the program works because it encourages a "community response" to conflict, Leadbeater said.

"It's really trying to say to all kids, 'If someone's hurting you, you really can get help.' . . . but also to tell parents and teachers and the police how to respond when kids are asking for help."

Woods said the program's value extends beyond the playground. He recalled a Grade 1 student who sought help for his suicidal mother because he knew what to do when he could not handle a situation on his own.

The child later told an adult, " 'I knew that I had to use my WITS here, and I did,' " Woods said.

He said many of the program's biggest successes, however, may never be known.

"A lot of times kids will be able to use skills they've learned from this program and then we'll never hear about anything, because it worked, and there wasn't an incident."

[lkines@timescolonist.com](mailto:lkines@timescolonist.com)

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist