



**RECLAIMING AT-RISK CHILDREN AND YOUTH:  
A Review of Nova Scotia's *SchoolsPlus* (ISD) Initiative**

**Dr. Paul W. Bennett**

**June 2013**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul W. Bennett, Ed.D. (OISE/Toronto) is Founding Director of Schoolhouse Consulting and Adjunct Professor of Education at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Dr. Bennett is a widely recognized leader in Canadian education. From 1997 until 2009, Paul served as Headmaster of two of Canada's leading independent coeducational day schools, Halifax Grammar School and Lower Canada College. He is also the author of three nationally recognized history textbooks, including ***Canada: A North American Nation*** (1998 and 1995).

Over a career spanning three decades in three different provinces, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, Paul has served, at various times, as a leading Canadian history teacher, a senior administrator, an elected school board trustee, and a passionate school reformer. He has been honoured for his leadership in establishing the York Region Joint Board Consortium on Shared Services (1994-97) and twice (1996 and 1999) been a top ten finalist for the Governor General's Award for Teaching Excellence in Canadian History. From 2000 until 2003, Paul initiated and guided the Historica Foundation Summer Institute for Secondary School Canadian History Teachers.

Dr. Bennett has written or co-authored eight books. His three most recent books are ***The Grammar School: Striving for Excellence in a Public School World*** (2009), and ***Vanishing Schools, Threatened Communities; The Contested Schoolhouse in Maritime Canada, 1850-2010*** (2011), and ***The Last Stand: Schools, Communities and the Future of Rural Nova Scotia*** (2013).

As a Nova Scotia education reformer, he is best known as a Co-Founder of Students First Nova Scotia (March 2011) and Co-Founder of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative (May 2012). He authored the 2012 NSSSI brief, ***Schools at the Centre: A Revitalization Strategy for Rural Communities***, calling for a moratorium on school closures.

Today Paul is primarily an education policy analyst and commentator, producing regular columns and book reviews for ***The Chronicle Herald*** and articles for ***Progress Magazine*** and a variety of publications. His most recent academic articles have appeared in ***Historical Studies in Education*** and ***the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society Journal***.

Over the past three years, he has produced major policy papers for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, the Society for Quality Education, and the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools Association. He specializes in K-12 educational policy, education history, educational standards, school governance, teacher education, and special education services.

Currently, Paul serves as President of the Canadian International Council, Halifax Branch, a Director of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative, and a Member of the Board of both the Halifax Regional Library Board and Churchill Academy, a Dartmouth school for students with learning challenges.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *SchoolsPlus* program found its origins in a key recommendation of Nova Scotia Justice Merlin Nunn's landmark 2006 report, *Spiralling Out of Control* which then found its way into *Our Kids Are Worth It*, the much heralded 2007 strategy to close the gaps in front-line support services.

Social service providers tend to focus their energies on rescuing and supporting children and youth described as "falling through the cracks." Justice Nunn surprised many by reaching the opposite conclusion: "*From a young age,*" Nunn wrote, "*AB and his family had substantial involvement with government social service agencies and personnel, education supports, and health facilities. Whether that was enough is another question.*"

This comprehensive research report demonstrates that, while *SchoolsPlus* (SP) is a worthwhile provincial integrated services delivery (ISD) initiative, it is in need of a 'mid-term correction' to ensure its ultimate success and reach its target population, the 5 to 10 per cent of children and youth at risk of going off-the rails.

Much of the focus of SP is clearly on better coordinating existing public social services rather than the expected core mission – building "communities of care," fostering resilience from an early age, and reclaiming "at risk" children, youth and families.

Over the past three years, inter-departmental service cooperation has increased, particularly in established *SchoolsPlus* hub sites. Mental health services are now being introduced, largely as a result of the efforts of Dalhousie psychiatrist Dr. Stan Kutcher.

Making a wider range of services and supports available is a laudable achievement, but limiting public access to regular school hours, and enforcing restrictive Community Use of Schools regulations, (i.e. \$2 million in liability insurance), only serves to maintain the entrenched "boundaries" that stand in the way of genuine two-way community interaction in the schools.

Engaging with new, less familiar community development partners, like Pathways to Education, would produce far better results, as evidenced by the amazing success of Pathways Spryfield. With a more flexible, adaptable approach, *SchoolsPlus* could well become a far more effective presence in Dartmouth North and other inner city high dropout zones.

The true vision of "wraparound" services and supports will not be realized until *SchoolsPlus* is re-engineered and begins to draw far more on the strengths and talents of local communities, working *with parents and families*, and tapping into services closest to where people live and work.

The *SchoolsPlus* initiative has achieved the goal of provincial coverage – with eight boards and 95 current sites. Yet expanding the number of sites and supports is only half the battle. Let's keep our sights on the core mission -- improving the quality and intensity of frontline services to struggling children and youth – and their families.

# INTRODUCTION

## Developing Resilience – Breaking the Cycle for Children, Youth and Families at Risk

*“The vision is that schools would become centres of service. 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.”*

- Scott Milner, Supervisor, Chignecto Family of Schools, CCRSB, *Amherst Daily News*, January 28, 2010

*“Resilience is the capacity of young people to navigate their way to the resources they need during crises, and their ability to negotiate for these resources to be provided in meaningful ways.....more services do not contribute to reductions in risk, increased resilience or better functional outcomes. Instead, the quality of the services provided matters most.”*

- Michael Ungar and Linda Liebenberg, “Patterns of service use, individual and contextual risk factors, and resilience among adolescents using multiple psychosocial services,” *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 20 December 2012

Introducing *SchoolsPlus* in Nova Scotia’s public schools raised the expectations of many parents and families, particularly in troubled communities and neighbourhoods. One of the biggest supporters of the new form of social service delivery was Roseanna Cleveland, an active parent at Harbour View School in North Dartmouth. *“In our school,”* she told *The Chronicle Herald* in April 2011, *“there are lots of special needs...so who needs it the most gets taken first and the ones that don’t need it so much kind of get left at the back.. but with SchoolsPlus, it was actually done quicker. It really breaks down the barrier between the teachers and the parents.”* (Brown, 2011)

Cleveland, one of three North End Dartmouth mothers recently dubbed “Moms on a Mission,” is a very determined, street-wise community activist. After her two children, Blaise and Sheena, started school in 2009, she became concerned about a lack of respect, moral values, and common sense among her children’s peers. Instead of simply looking the other way, Roseanna and her friend Lyssa Peters got organized and founded the “Take Action Society.” The grassroots parent group is dedicated to cleaning up the neighbourhood and to instilling self-reliance in the children and their parents. Meeting regularly in the Holy Trinity Anglican Church across from the school, Cleveland and the group talk openly about serious issues affecting children and they collaborated with HRM and the Rotary Club last summer to establish a Community Garden in an abandoned tennis court behind the school. *“I never thought I would get this far with Taking Action,”* she now says. *“I learned I can speak up for myself.”* (Rent, *Our Children*, 2013)



Cleveland and the “Take Action Society” welcomed *SchoolsPlus* to Harbour View School. They were pleasantly surprised to see Halifax Regional School Board *SchoolsPlus* Coordinator Marlene Ruck-Simmonds stationed there and saw it as a great advantage to their often neglected community. Since then, relations have cooled. The *SchoolsPlus* office initially operated with an open door and provided regular ongoing help to children under stress and parents in dire need. A new after-school tutoring program, authorized by *SchoolsPlus*, proved popular with the school’s mostly working class parents.

The honeymoon period is now over. With a recent change in principals, the *SchoolsPlus* office is now locked and off-limits and concerns regularly voiced at the School Advisory Council go unanswered. The *SchoolsPlus* tutoring program, strongly supported by the parents, is strictly limited by the school’s hours of operation. The Taking Action Society group continues to meet, right across the street, but is accorded no status within the school. When the group collaborated with the North Dartmouth Association in exploring the prospects for becoming a *Pathways to Education* program site, they did so without the support of their local school or its administration. Today, three years after *SchoolsPlus* arrived at Harbour View, most of the genuine community-led engagement still occurs off school grounds, before school, during lunch, and after school hours.

The Dartmouth North “Taking Action Society” actively promotes self-reliance and taking responsibility for improving your life and that of others in the community. Listening to members of the Association talking freely and openly on January 24, 2013 about chronic student misbehaviour, drug use, vandalism, and criminal activity, it is clear that there remains a major disconnect (DNA Meeting Notes, 2013). Bringing publicly-funded social services into the HRSB’s flagship *SchoolsPlus* site may have positive residual effects, but some privately mutter that it further contributes to social dependency. Giving hungry children lunch money, paying for their summer camps or driving parents to the local food bank do meet those immediate crying needs, but they also do little to help break the cycle of poverty and social service dependency.

The *SchoolsPlus* program at Harbour View is not exactly what the province envisioned in its visionary but somewhat nebulous plans. The program found its origins in a key recommendation of Nova Scotia Justice Merlin Nunn’s landmark 2006 report, *Spiralling Out of Control*, investigating the tragic events leading to the 2004 death of Halifax mother Teresa McEvoy in a car crash caused by a troubled 16-year old youth, Archie Billard. It then found its way into *Our Kids Are Worth It*, the province’s much heralded 2007 strategy for children and youth. It was designed, at the outset, to close the gaps in support services, to facilitate the coordination of services, and to promote partnerships in the delivery of child, youth, and family services.

Social service providers have a way of looking at the world and tend to focus their daily energies on rescuing and supporting children and youth who “fall through the cracks.” In the case of Archie Billard and most “high-risk” children and youth, it is often assumed that they have simply eluded the available services and supports. In his 2006 report, Justice Nunn dealt with that problem head-on. There were reports, according to Nunn, that Archie had “*somehow ‘slipped through the cracks’ of services and supports.... The opposite is true. From a young age, AB and his family had substantial involvement with government social service agencies and personnel, education supports, and health facilities. Whether that was enough is another question.*” (Nunn 2006, 51)

Five years after the appearance of Nova Scotia's Child and Youth Strategy, and three years into the implementation of the *SchoolsPlus* program, this AIMS research report takes a closer, fair-minded, and independent look at the principal policy initiative aimed at integrating services and preventing hundreds more high risk children and youth from going off the rails. Much of the provincial policy framework and current programming, it is abundantly clear, focuses heavily on better coordinating existing public social services rather than the expected core mission – building “communities of care,” fostering resilience from an early age, and altering the life chances of neglected children or delinquent youth. It is a most worthy venture, but – so far— the *SchoolsPlus* initiative has relatively little to ‘show’ in terms of real impact. Inter-departmental service cooperation has increased, particularly in established *SchoolsPlus* hub sites. The very real, fundamental gap in front-line services identified by Justice Nunn persist for more than 6,000 children and youth estimated to be currently at-risk in Nova Scotia.

## THE SCHOOLSPLUS (ISD) MODEL AND ITS LIMITATIONS

*“SchoolsPlus will work towards a comprehensive, collaborative, seamless delivery of service.... The services provided at each SchoolsPlus site will respect and address the unique needs of the community.”*

- Statement of Purpose, *School Plus*, [www.schoolplus.ednet.ns.ca](http://www.schoolplus.ednet.ns.ca), October 31, 2012.

*“The vision of SchoolsPlus is that schools become a convenient place for government and other services to be served to families.”*

- Revised Statement of Purpose, *SchoolsPlus*, [www.schoolplus.ednet.ns.ca](http://www.schoolplus.ednet.ns.ca), Feb. 2, 2013.

Speaking at the Ontario People for Education Conference in November 2010, Tara Moore, the Provincial Coordinator of *SchoolsPlus*, described the new Nova Scotia initiative as a “collaborative interagency approach to supporting the whole child and family” where “schools become centers of service delivery enabling enhanced collaboration by bringing professionals and programs together to help children, youth and families in a welcoming place.” In addition, she noted that the vision was to become “the hub of the community and (a place where) services are co-located.” (Moore, P4E, 2010) That was certainly a tall order for the Nova Scotia program still in its infancy. At the time *SchoolsPlus* was, in its initial stage, running in four school boards with 24 different school sites.

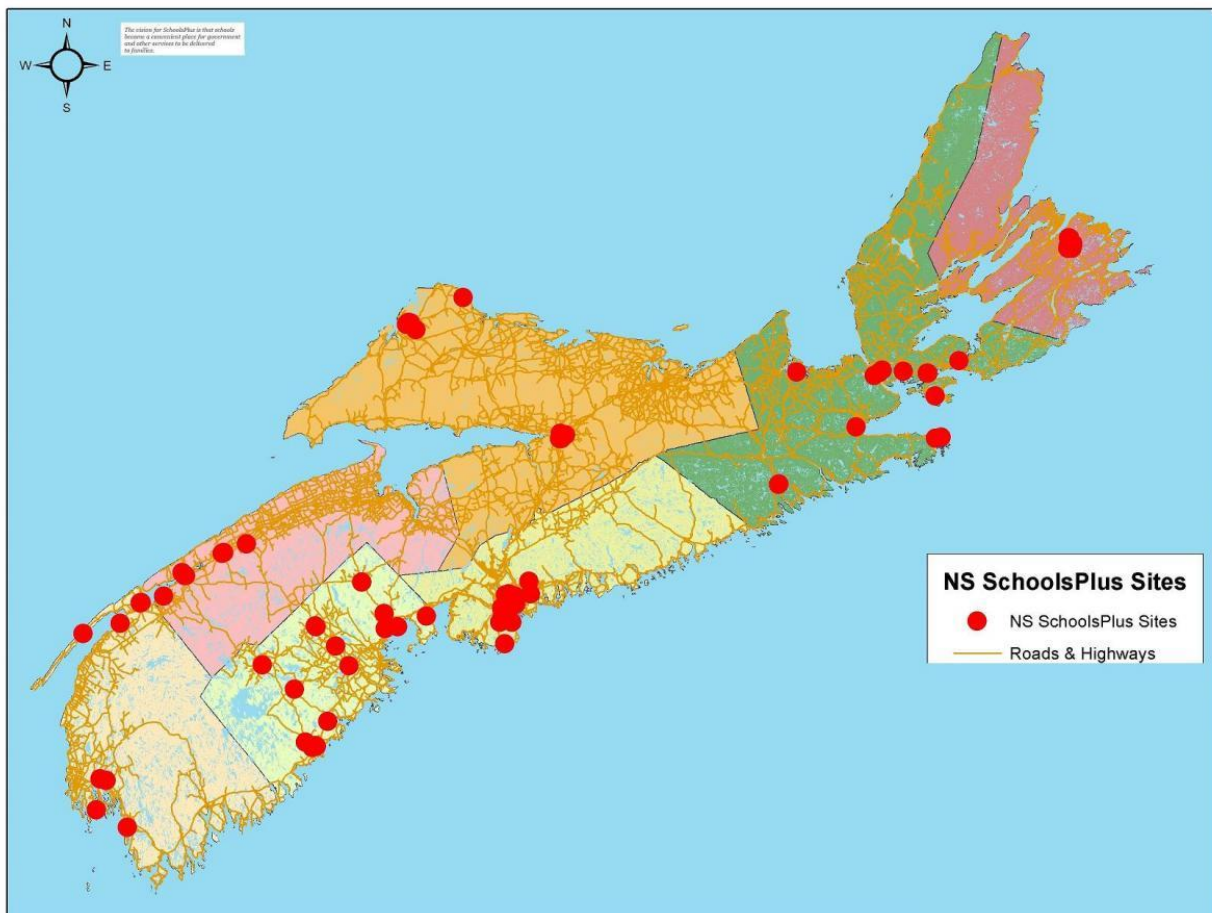
The Nova Scotia *SchoolsPlus* model was initiated with a lofty but rather nebulous vision. Judging from Moore’s choice of words, it was abundantly clear that *SchoolsPlus* had been adopted and adapted from an earlier venture in Saskatchewan known as *SchoolPLUS TM* (Saskatchewan, DOE, 2001; *Working Together Handbook*, 2002). Furthermore, earlier that year, in May 2010, the champion of the Saskatchewan project, Dr. Michael Tymchak, an Education professor at the University of Regina, had lent his support in a May 2010 speech to the Association of Nova Scotia Educational Administrators (ANSEA). Although the Nova Scotia model was patterned after Saskatchewan’s, it was also remarkably similar to the Ontario version termed “Integrated Service Delivery” (ISD) (Ontario, MOET, 2010). It actually fell somewhere in-between as a peculiar, chameleon-like hybrid of the two approaches.

The Nova Scotia initiative was actually sparked by Justice Merlin Nunn’s 2006 report entitled *Spiralling Out of Control*, a landmark investigation into the sources and impact of youth crime (Nunn, 2006). Justice Nunn was charged with investigating the circumstances surrounding the death of Halifax mother Teresa McEvoy in a 2004 accident caused by an unsupervised, reckless 16 year-old-boy, Archie Billard, driving a stolen car. Instead of conducting a limited inquiry, Nunn dug deeply into the factors which caused Archie to go off the rails and into a downward spiral. The inquiry revealed that Archie had moved five times before he was 16 years-of-age, attending public schools in Prince Edward Island, Canso, Newfoundland, Bridgewater, and two different junior highs in Dartmouth. While diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), his reading disabilities went unattended and, by junior high, he was regularly sent home on suspension without any parental supervision (Nunn 2006, 52-67).

Social service providers and school officials reported that Archie Billard and others like him simply found ways to elude the available help. Justice Nunn was told that “AB had somehow ‘slipped through the cracks.’” He flatly rejected that explanation: “*The opposite is true. From a young age, AB and his family had substantial involvement with the government social service agencies and personnel, education supports, and health facilities. Whether that was enough is another question.*” (Nunn 2006, 51) The Nova Scotia government announced the creation of *SchoolsPlus* in December 2007, in direct response to *Our Kids Are Worth It*, the provincial strategy for children and youth, itself an outgrowth of the Nunn Commission (Nova Scotia, *Our Kids Are Worth It*, 2007).

At its inception in October 2008, three school boards took the plunge establishing *SchoolsPlus* (SP) model programs, Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB), Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB), and South Shore Regional School Board (SSRSB), later to be joined by a fourth board, the Strait Regional School Board (SRSB). In September 2011, SP expanded to all eight boards, adding 21 more school sites. A major provincial announcement in late April 2011, five months before release of a *SchoolsPlus* final evaluation report, provided \$2.5 million over 3 years to expand the program, in symmetrical fashion, to 95 sites across the province (Crinean, Final Report, 2012).

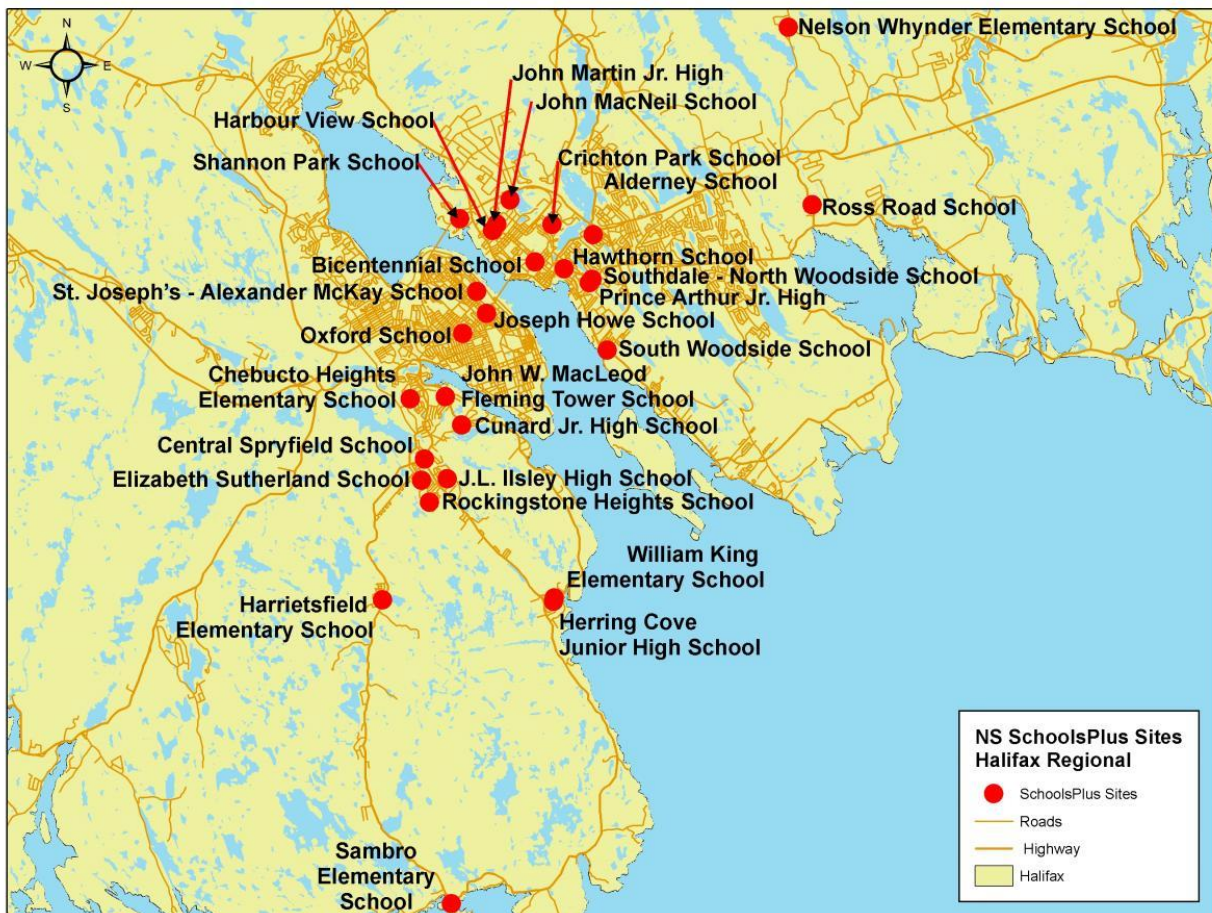
**Figure 1: *SchoolsPlus* Sites, Nova Scotia, 2012-13**





Two of the four school boards have taken the lead in actively promoting and shaping the evolving *SchoolsPlus* initiative. In the pilot phase, an ambitious senior administrator, Scott Milner, a CCRSB school supervisor in Amherst, emerged as its champion at the school level. “*The vision is that schools would become centres of service,*” he told the *Amherst Daily News*. “*Instead of a family or a student in crisis leaving the school to go to mental health services or public health, those services are at the school.*” (Cole, 2010) He saw the program mostly through the lens of Integrated Service Delivery (ISD), and seized the opportunity to bring public agencies such as Community Services, Justice, Mental Health, Addiction Services, Health and others. In a small town experiencing economic decline, Milner responded to the needs of troubled youth and hard-pressed families. His testimonials and success stories exerted a great influence, finding their way into a March 2010 Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA) brief, strongly endorsing the ISD model for Nova Scotia. Even Milner’s description of the vision as “a convenient place” for integrating government services eventually surfaced on the provincial *SchoolsPlus* website (NSSBA, 2010, 4-5). On the South Shore, *SchoolsPlus* Coordinator Shirley Burris forged ahead, partnering with Justice, establishing active hub and satellite program sites with a focus on crime prevention and promoting restorative justice practices (Burris, Small School Summit Notes, 2010; Brown, *Progress Bulletin*, 2012).

**Figure 2: *SchoolsPlus* Sites, Halifax Regional School Board, 2012-2013**



The *SchoolsPlus* initiative had a tougher time making inroads in the province's largest school board, the HRSB. In an urban region with a myriad of competing social agencies, Coordinator Marlene Ruck Simmonds was inundated with proposed partnerships and compelled to pick-and-choose, tending to favour established public sector partners (Brown, 2011). Within the HRSB, skeptical and overburdened school principals put up quiet, passive resistance, a situation calling out for more vocal, visible advocacy and leadership. In a major metropolitan school board, it proved to be a bigger challenge establishing the "boundaries" and choosing among competing needs. One Executive Director of a national not-for-profit youth agency flatly stated: "*The principals run the schools in the HRSB. It's hard to get your foot in the door.*" (Goddard Interview, 2013)

A series of three annual evaluations of the *SchoolsPlus* initiative, conducted by Halifax consultant Kay Crinean of Collective Wisdom Solutions, provides a better picture of the whole program because it attempts to assess the reach and impact of *SP* on the expected clients - children, youth and families. Across the four original sites, the first report in June 2010 found that from October 2008 until June 2010, case files had been opened for 327 clients, some 225 in the initial pilot year, and, over 24 different sites, staff claimed to have introduced some 85 new programs and services. Some rural school sites were found to be less active because they were situated in more isolated places underserved by social agencies. While *SP* staff were "overwhelmingly positive" about *SP* programs and services, some 70% of service providers expressed the need for further collaboration with other outside organizations. It remained mostly a school-level initiative and survey participants identified "major systemic barriers", including the absence of a coherent, compelling "integrated service delivery model," the lack of vertical information flow, and reticence to embrace "co-location" of services. The model, Crinean, concluded, would "*take several years to evolve fully*" and for the impact to be "*fully evident*" to staff, parents, and the public (Crinean, 2010, 6-9).

A critical decision, made early in the process, limited the Education Department's capacity to assess the direct impact of *the SchoolsPlus* program on children and youth. In the first phase, the Resilience Research Centre, co-headed by Dr. Michael Ungar and based at Dalhousie University's School of Social Work, was part of the project evaluation team. With the support of Kay Crinean, Ungar sought to include a research-tested survey assessment tool to measure the "resilience" of clients, at in-take, after six months, and at the end of a year in the process. He withdrew from the project in 2010 when the *SchoolsPlus* site coordinators and staff resisted the practice of administering client evaluation surveys (Ungar Interview 2013). The proposed client surveys, used by the Halifax Regional Municipality with high-risk youth in the Youth Advocacy Program (YAP), tend to yield far more detailed feedback on the effectiveness of advising, interventions, and programs (HRM, YAP Highlights, 2012).

Systemic resistance stiffened as the *SchoolsPlus* initiative rolled out to more schools in 2010-11. By May of 2011, the second annual report noted that the total number of clients on file reached 570, an increase of 198, fewer than the year before in spite of an increase in new sites. Some five new programs and services were added to the mix, bringing the total to 90 for the whole province. Training and mentorship of staff still consumed much of the activity time, but staff reported that youth in crisis or need were "getting quicker access" to help through service providers. Cracks were emerging in the implementation as little progress was made in securing co-location of services, securing "extended hours," or in closing the "systemic gaps" between public service agencies. Although *SP* staff were still reportedly "overwhelmingly positive," the systemic barriers moving up the administrative hierarchy were beginning to resemble brick walls. Coordinating the services of four different departments, through *SchoolsPlus*, was sapping the energy of its band of school-based advocates. Consultant Kay Crinean was

uncharacteristically blunt in her assessment of the systemic impediments. “*Progress toward a truly collaborative or integrated service delivery model is glacial*,” she stated in bold for emphasis. “*Leadership and champions at the senior level are required*.” (Crinean 2011, 8-12)

Announcement of the province-wide expansion of *SchoolsPlus* on April 14, 2011 was driven more by political timing than by strategic program planning. Confronted with mounting public protest stirred by the 2010-11 NSTU *Kids Not Cuts* campaign, Education Minister Ramona Jennex responded by announcing that \$2.5 million over three years would be spent to expand *SP* from Yarmouth to Cape Breton (Brown 2011, A8). No one, at the time, knew that Jennex had announced the go forward before reviewing and releasing the second year evaluation report identifying significant cracks and obstacles to its successful implementation. That tends to suggest that education bureaucrats were willing to proceed, on schedule, with the intention to “fix it later.”

Nova Scotia’s *SchoolsPlus* promoters and service providers were buoyed by the fresh infusing of funding, especially amidst a wave of education cuts that totalled some \$65 million over the same three years. The final *SP* evaluation report on September 24, 2012 reflected a surprising change in attitude and level of commitment, including some signs of movement at the system level. The top-down message from the Minister and Superintendents was, in Kay Crinean’s words, “*beginning to ripple through the system*.” Upon closer examination, two of the three reported major advances were strictly functional: reaching agreement, among the four key departments, on “an information-sharing” guideline, and improving the alignment in services between Education and Community Services. The only real frontline impact flowed from the announcement in the Mental Health and Addictions Strategy, championed by Dalhousie psychiatrist Dr. Stan Kutcher, that mental health clinicians would be placed in every family of schools in all provincial school boards (Crinean 2012, 73).

Provincial plans for the *SchoolsPlus* were ambitious, especially given the financial commitment in terms of targeted provincial funding. Investing some \$2.5 million in expansion over three years, amounted to about \$833,000 per year, divided among eight school boards. For the HRSB, it increased grant support from \$387,969.00 in 2011-12 to \$643,676.00 in 2012-13 (Hadley, HRSB, 2013). Spread out over 24 HRSB *SchoolsPlus* sites, that amounted to about \$26,800.00 per school. After hiring *SchoolsPlus* staff and community outreach workers, it left little for frontline, school-level programs and services. The final report issued a warning to the government. Continuing to invest in the program, as it expanded, would be “*repaid in effectiveness and results for children, youth, and families. Dilution is a false economy*.” (Crinean 2012, 82) It remained to be seen whether the Department would heed Crinean’s sound advice or simply try to stretch the limited dollars.



## CHALLENGES OF SYSTEM CHANGE & TRANSFORMATION

*“....system change takes time and there is a long way to go to implement fully the change to collaborative service delivery...The danger of not implementing system change and supporting the cultural shift...is that SP could simply be in effect an additional layer, cobbling together as best it can the separate and silo-based services of government and community groups around the needs of families.”*

- Kay Crinean, *Final Report, Evaluation of the SchoolsPlus Model*, 24 September 2012.

*“There’s a tremendous problem in public education. Importing programs and services was the beginning of the cycle of decline in the system. You are dealing with bureaucracy and everybody has rules.”*

- Justice Merlin Nunn, Personal Interview, January 25, 2012, Halifax.

Initiating and advancing systemic change in Nova Scotia's public schools has proven to be a formidable challenge, defeating a succession of previous efforts. Systemic change does not come easily in a state bureaucracy and school system with its established hierarchy, routes of promotion, organizational values, established boundaries, and ingrained protocols. (Weber 1919; Drainian 2012) Initially, the Nova Scotia *SchoolsPlus* model was driven by early adopters, based in outlying school boards, and deeply troubled by the growing numbers of children and youth falling by the wayside, dropping-out of school, totally lacking in functional literacy, and drifting into a life on the margins of Nova Scotian society. Determined local advocates for *SchoolsPlus* found themselves working in relative isolation and confronted by a quiet, passive upper-level wall of resistance (Crinean 2011, 9-10, 12).

Whatever success *SchoolsPlus* was to achieve was most likely to be based upon relationship-building, information-sharing, and goodwill in many, if not most, of its 95 school sites. Losing sight of *the SchoolsPlus* mission might lead to a duplication of charitable efforts, diverting staff from the core function of facilitating change, and consuming scarce human and financial resources. *“Without system change,”* Kay Crinean warned in September 2012, *“the potential savings to be gained from efficiencies and the benefits of early intervention and integrated service delivery will elude Nova Scotia.”* (Crinean 2012, 74)

Six years after the 2006 Nunn Commission report called for a preventative approach to curtaining youth crime, and four years after the 2007 launch of the Child and Youth Strategy, the core education reform program remains, at best, a work-in-progress. The Report Card on the Nunn Commission produced a year after its appearance by David Rodenheiser in December 2007, and encompassing the emerging provincial youth strategy, needs to be updated to reflect progress made to date (Rodenheiser 2007, 8-9).

Where does implementation of the Education component of the Child and Youth Strategy stand today? His call to develop “an interdepartmental strategy” to coordinate programs and supports for “children and youth at risk and their families” is a few steps closer, but it's difficult to demonstrate that the *SchoolsPlus* initiative itself has contributed to “the prevention of youth crime.” In spite of Nunn's deep concerns about the Community Services excessive focus on



“child protection”, there is little evidence of a cultural shift in the direction of protecting “the integrity of the family.” The Education Department, to its credit, did invest \$1.5 million in 2007-2008 in the hiring of 12 new guidance counsellors, and introduced teacher training modules to increase the number of teachers with Special Education specialties, including the capability of identifying students with ADHD and other learning disabilities. Renewed efforts have been expended in an attempt to reduce truancy, albeit without many staff designated as attendance officers. Skipping school and chronic absenteeism has remained a stubborn problem, documented by Howard Windsor in his 2010 report on School Climate in ten different high schools (Windsor 2010). The high incidence of out-of-school suspensions, a critical factor in Archie Billard’s downward spiral, has been reduced through “in-school suspensions” driven by a new “credit recovery” program, giving students multiple chances to pass on a test or assignment. Most importantly, the Department has attempted to address the critical need to combat youth alienation and encourage “school attachment” for youth at risk. The first of these programs, Opportunities and Options (O2), targeted Grade 9 students with some success, but it remains hard to see and difficult to show the direct benefits to children and youth from *SP*, the second and somewhat overlapping initiative (Nunn, 2006, 290-296; Rodenheiser 2007, 9).

### ***Structural Impediments – at the School System Level***

Initiating Nova Scotia’s *SchoolsPlus* model, like the whole Child and Youth Strategy, faces formidable structural impediments. A large organization, like the Department of Education and its school board outposts, means taking on an entrenched bureaucracy steeped in what is now aptly termed “anti-innovation DNA.” Organizational change specialists, like Clayton Christiansen and Tim Draimin, have clearly identified the main blockages standing in the way of social innovation: hierarchical structure, established rules, norms and protocols, legal directives, risk-averse accountabilities, departmental silos, and limited, institution-bound networks to name a few (Christiansen, 1997; Draimin 2012). Even when the top leadership weighs in, as in the case of *SchoolsPlus*, it is difficult to force feed social innovation. Innovation projects like this one can flounder, Tim Draimin of Social Innovation Generation (SIG), recently stated, even when austerity is driving changes pushing the public sector to “*re-think how government services can be provided of even how.*” Most significantly, implementing new initiatives like *SchoolsPlus* can run aground when pressures arise to shift from strict “service delivery” to “tackling the root causes that have given rise to the demand for support.” (Draimin, 2012; Hughes, Elliott and Hansen, 2011, 7-11)

In the Nova Scotia education sector, the successful implementation of a Department initiative like *SchoolsPlus* is heavily dependent upon the eight school boards. While *SP* is top-down and driven from the centre, it attempts to respond to regional and local demands and needs for services and supports for children, youth, and families. Its chief advocates in the Department likely see it as an opportunity to unlock more productive and responsive public services, but school and board-level supporters tend to see it as reflecting and addressing the unique needs of their own communities (*SchoolsPlus* Website, 2013). Decentralizers at the school board level, particularly in the Chignecto-Central school board, far removed from the centre, embraced it as a means of differentiation and an opportunity to innovate outside the span of control. The rather formulaic *SchoolsPlus* ISD model, however, is being rolled-out in symmetrical fashion and comes packaged in such a way as to limit local options and the range of services and supports. Built, as it is, around the integration of public sector agencies from four provincial departments *SP* also tends to establish boundaries, further limiting the participation of small, locally-based groups and not-for-profit agencies. This effectively limits the capacity of outlying *SchoolsPlus* sites to reduce costs, improve efficiencies, and reduce service delivery time (Duckworth, SERCO 2012, 2-3; Duckworth, *The Guardian*, 2012).

## ***Local Constraints – at the Community and School Level***

Social and economic problems among children and youth run much deeper in certain pockets of urban and rural Nova Scotia. The scale of youth crime and the school-drop-out rates ran high in lower income urban neighbourhoods like North End Dartmouth and decaying dormitory suburbs like Spryfield, as well as in poor rural communities in far-flung regions of the province. In Dartmouth North, the social, economic and educational problems threaten to overwhelm social service agencies and impact heavily upon children and youth in the northern half of the Dartmouth High School attendance zone. The state of crisis was well documented in a recent report, prepared by Dartmouth consultant Dennis Pilkey for the North Dartmouth Association (Pilkey, Pathways Report, 2012). In a district with 19,000 residents in 2006, average household income was \$50,468 (2005), or 65% of the HRM average; some 43% of households were inhabited by people living alone, and only 31% were reported as occupied by married couples. Almost 53% of people aged 15 to 24, living in Dartmouth North, were not attending school compared to 31% for HRM (Pilkey, Pathways, 2012, iii-iv).

The schools were clearly failing to ‘connect’ with too many students and families. Students at Harbour View School, the home base for HRSB’s *SchoolsPlus* program, and at neighboring schools were and still are performing far below that of students across HRM. Students originating at Harbour View have shown dropout rates hovering around 43% to 44% from 2003-4 onward and only one out of every two students (50%) secures a high school diploma, compared with 80 to 84% across Nova Scotia. At nearby John Martin Junior High School dropout rates have hovered around 50%, double that of Bicentennial JHS. Students at John Martin JHS have a higher than normal proportion of overage students and at neighboring John Martin School, only 30 to 32% of the graduates intended to go on to university (Pilkey, Education Outcomes, 2012, 6-7). Simply integrating services in these schools would not be enough to turn the situation around.

Public schools with closed door policies and strictly limited school hours constitute another blocker at the local level. Where groups like the “Taking Action Society” take the initiative and propose community-led ventures and services, the walls still go up, even in some *SchoolsPlus* designated sites. Student needs and parent requests for extended school hours or support for community holiday activities still go unheeded and the standard Community of Use of Schools policy requiring \$2 million in liability insurance coverage has a way of discouraging volunteer groups from using the school after hours. Private, not-for-profit social agencies like Big Brothers and Big Sisters and the Boys and Girls Clubs, each with nationally recognized mentoring and sports programs do not enjoy the same access with the exception of publicly funded social justice groups like the Community Justice Society (Brown, *Progress Bulletin*, 2012). Despite assurances that school principals and teachers do support community-based projects, the only programs and services authorized are “separate initiatives which do not threaten the existing order.” (Winnipeg Health Authority, 2001, 10; Meeting Notes, NDA, 2013)

## THE SOCIAL BALANCE SHEET: COSTS AND BENEFITS OF SCHOOLSPLUS

*“Increasing services for kids and families in our schools is an important part of the Kids & Learning First education plan. This expansion will bring the province closer to the goal of eventually having SchoolsPlus available in every county.”*

- Hon. Ramona Jennex, Minister of Education, Media Release, March 13, 2012.

*“Schools Plus... continues to risk being drawn-in to fill gaps, in effect potentially becoming another service provider, diverting scarce human and financial resources away from its true role as coordinator and facilitator (in integrating services and supports).”*

- Kay Crinean, *Final Report, Evaluation of the SchoolsPlus Model*, 24 September 2012.

Expanding public access to services and supports for children and youth at risk has now become the *raison d'être* of the *SchoolsPlus* initiative. In March of 2012, Education Minister Ramona Jennex announced yet another staged expansion of the provincial program. School boards were “invited” to apply for one of the four “hub sites” to be established in the 2012-13 school year. Each of these hub sites was described as “a network centre for *SchoolsPlus*,” serving “a family of schools.” The provincial government’s goal, the Minister announced, was to have 28 *SchoolsPlus* hub sites established across the province by 2017-18 (Nova Scotia, MoE, 2012).

The public announcement contained a ‘sweetener’ for school boards. Successful applications for the new “hub sites” would receive \$125,000 to support “leadership and community outreach.” The criteria for selecting sites attempted to address some of the project’s initial weaknesses and to essentially resuscitate the flagging community engagement efforts. New *SchoolsPlus* “hub sites” were expected to: model making school facilities “available outside of regular school hours,” demonstrate potential for developing “community partners,” fill “gaps in services,” provide dedicated community space, and show an “ability to reach as many schools as possible.” The Department was also pleased to announce that the number of *SchoolsPlus*-related services and activities had swelled from 90 to 100 across the province (Nova Scotia, DoE, 2012; Lee, 2012, A9). It was becoming increasingly clear that the Department was looking to create regionalized service hubs, with an added advantage – they could be more effectively monitored and supervised by provincial authorities.

Ascertaining the actual cost of the *SchoolsPlus* initiative province-wide or by school board is a challenge because the grants are not broken-out in Nova Scotia’s annual Public Accounts. In the case of the Halifax Regional School Board, the cost of *SchoolsPlus* (financed by targeted provincial grants) has risen from \$314,566.00 in 2009-10 to \$643,676.00 in 2012-13 ((Hadley, HRSB, 2013). The estimated cost per SP school site was \$104,850 in 2009-10, \$57,010 in 2010-11, \$55,425 in 2011-12, and \$26,820 in 2012-13. If we assume that the target group represents 5-10% of the age 10 to 14 year olds, the services and supports are mostly aimed at some 1,100 to 2,200 of HRM’s youth likely to be vulnerable and needing some kind of “intervention” to keep them on track. How many are actually being reached is hard to determine because it is, in some cases, a floating population and (as this researcher discovered) school

boards are not inclined to disclose or share that information with the public (Martin Interview, 2013).

Adding *SchoolsPlus* sites and cobbling-together more services and supports gave the impression that the goal was really to expand operations in a rather symmetrical, geographically-based roll-out plan. The actual impacts of *SchoolsPlus* were assumed to be derived mainly from the extension of services to all parts of the province. What was surprising was how little was reported on the actual impacts on the prevention of youth crime or meeting the needs of troubled children and youth. It was mostly left to the service providers themselves to make the case that *SchoolsPlus* was making any real difference in the troubled lives of children, youth, or families.

The case made for the *SchoolsPlus* initiative was recently delivered in far more persuasive fashion by Scott Milner, Schools Supervisor and champion of *SP* in the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board. Speaking at the January 9, 2013 regular CCRSB meeting, he was much clearer and more coherent in explaining what *SchoolsPlus* was designed to achieve for children, youth, and families. The Amherst *SchoolsPlus* program and the newly created Truro *SchoolsPlus* project were moving the board in “five key directions”: Build a Strong Foundation; Identify Problems, Help Early; Co-ordinate Programs, Services; Improve Access, Close Gaps; and Engage Youth, Promote Shared Accountability.” To buttress his claims, he used two narratives, “Brittany’s Story” and “Hayden’s Story,” to argue, quite effectively, that *SchoolsPlus* was already beginning to have an impact, if only on a limited number of troubled kids. (Milner, CCRSB, 2013, S5).

In the *SchoolsPlus* evaluation phase, the key service providers did make a number of claims that bear repeating. Introducing *SchoolsPlus*, they contended, would do the following: reduce the demand for serious social service “interventions;” reduce the incidence of school discipline problems, bullying, and suspensions; improve students’ school attendance; curtail the duplication of services; reduce wasted time and resources; and result in better, locally-based financial resource allocation decisions. Much of the impact of *SP* was expected to come from bringing-in programs like *Restorative Practices*, *Friends for Life*, and *Options to Anger*. In the absence of any hard evidence to support these claims, their case rested upon a rather contorted, generalized argument that “*the costs of not addressing the systemic barriers to integrated service are huge.*” (Crinean, 2012, 74)

What programs and services are actually being offered at *SchoolsPlus* sites? That’s difficult to assess because the Department “protects” clients served by the initiative and strictly limits access to such programs. After six weeks of trying to secure access, going through official channels, this researcher opted to conduct unofficial visits and to do a careful analysis of the programs posted on the reconstructed *SchoolsPlus* website. For a province the size of Nova Scotia, it’s telling that the Provincial Coordinator now posts all programs on a website-based schedule covering all eight school board jurisdictions. An analysis of the posted *SchoolsPlus* programs for February 2013 confirms that most of the activity seems to be occurring in high schools in outlying boards. Six self-standing programs are in operation in the South Shore Regional Board, driven mostly by the rural high schools and the SSRSB alternative school. The SSRSB has found a champion in Shirley Burris and lists six different programs: Primary Class Care, Youth Committee, a babysitter course, anger management, fitness @lunch, and after school recreation. The Annapolis Valley Board has only two consistent programs, Youth Workx and Parent Time. For a huge board with over 40 per cent of the province’s students, the Halifax Regional School Board is incredibly thin on scheduled programming. In a board spanning 137 different schools with more than 49,200 students, only five individual programs are listed on the

master schedule, including a parenting course, *Voices*, and *Friends for Life* (Nova Scotia, *SP Website*, 11/02/13) The HRSB *SchoolsPlus* program has also been doling out funds to selected school projects, such as the John Martin JHS youth health centre (Rent, *Dartmouth Echo*, 2011).

The *SchoolsPlus* initiative is definitely on the frontline promoting Restorative Justice practices in and around the schools. The Nunn Commission clearly succeeded in breathing fresh life into Restorative Justice programs aimed at rehabilitating delinquent youth and young offenders. The Community Justice Society, based in Halifax, is a beneficiary of the *SchoolsPlus* initiative because one of its prime goals is to reduce the incidence of student misbehaviour and out-of-school suspensions (Community Justice Society, 2013). Promoters of that approach have made significant inroads in the South Shore Board, the Strait Region (Guysborough), and in the HRM (Strait RSB Website, Event, May 6, 2011). The South Shore Board's *SchoolsPlus* program, based at Forest Heights Community School, has even ventured into fighting gay prejudice and bullying (Colwell, *southshorenow*, 2010). Manager of Volunteer Engagement for the Community Justice Society, Kaylene Mellor, is very sensitive to the charge that restorative justice tends to mean giving young offenders "a slap on the wrist." Parents in Dartmouth's North End complain that "*no youth get help until they have been charged or convicted of a criminal offense.*" Recently, speaking to the Dartmouth North Association, she stated: "*it's not about blame. It's about resolving matters.*" That left several local parents shaking their heads and prompted this terse reply: "*Students who act up in our school are told to change, then rewarded with treats. That's not right.*" (Notes, DNA Meeting, 2013)

Youth crime remains a chronic problem, especially in HRM's so-called policing "hot spots." For all of Nova Scotia, however, it has actually been dropping and the trend began before the *SchoolsPlus* initiative was off-the drawing board. The Third Year report of the *Strategy for Children and Youth*, released in October 2010, provided the hard data. From 2006 until 2009, overall rates of youth accused of crime had declined by 14 per cent, youth violent crime had dropped by 10 per cent, and rates of youth accused of other Criminal Code offenses had declined by 22 per cent. As youth crime in Canada only declined by 5 per cent over that period, the trends favoured Nova Scotia. Having said that, none of that decline could really be attributed to *SchoolsPlus*, since it came on stream later in the period (Nova Scotia, *Our Kids Report*, 2010, 28).

*SchoolsPlus* is, after all, only one of a number of initiatives being pursued under the aegis of the Nova Scotia *Strategy for Children and Youth*. In 2010-11, the provincial Departments of Community Service, Justice, and health and Wellness were also actively promoting their own youth engagement and collaborative service delivery projects. The "Leaders of Today Weekend Summit," a Gay-Straight Alliance Symposium, a Youth Nominee Luncheon, and a Mentoring Teen Boys' Learning Circle were all held and the Health Department's "Well Child System" seemed to run in tandem with *SchoolsPlus*. The Fourth Year report on the Strategy was heavy on process and remarkably thin on measurable results. All four provincial departments, for example, were reported to be "working at the community level" to "improve collaborative practices." This work, the report added, was also being done through the *SchoolsPlus* initiative as well as other Strategy pilots. (Nova Scotia, *Our Kids*, 2011, 3) With so much going on, questions were bound to be raised about the likelihood of duplication and redundant efforts.



## PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY: MAPPING AND MEASURING PROGRESS

*“...most children and youth are healthy, safe, and supported in nurturing families and communities....Yet some (about 5-10 per cent) grow up in troubled families, in struggling communities, or are living with physical or mental health illnesses. These children and youth require help at different ages and stages in their lives to stay, or get back, on track.”*

- *Our Kids Are Worth It: Strategy for Children and Youth* (Nova Scotia, 2007), p. 12.

*“Outcomes are difficult to define and measure, especially for children and youth who are dealing with complex, multiple challenges. Positive outcomes may be measured in small steps.... With many factors influencing a child’s development and behaviour, it is also difficult to attribute an improvement to a specific cause.”*

- Kay Crinean, *Final Report, Evaluation of the SchoolsPlus Model*, 24 September 2012, p. 60.

The *SchoolsPlus* initiative was initially aimed at achieving a rather wide and ambitious range of outcomes. Foremost among those goals were improving access to, and coordination of, direct services to children, youth and families experiencing multiple challenges and providing programs to improve their lives and future prospects. Measuring progress can be rather dicey when it is measured in small steps, such as reducing the incidence of skipping class, stopping a teen from dropping out of school, helping students to stay on task, or getting them to hand-in assignments on time. In the case of this Department of Education program, the departure of Dr. Michael Ungar from the *SchoolsPlus* evaluation team meant that the *SP* project did not include specific assessment tools designed to measure educational outcomes, and particularly the impact on developing resilience in troubled children and youth. (Ungar Interview, 2013). Instead, the Department and its contracted evaluation consultant were left to make-do with “*some simple school-related measures covering academic achievement, attendance, disciplinary referrals, and school attachment.*” (Crinean, 2012, 60) Collecting that progress measurement data was made more challenging by confirmed reports of *SchoolsPlus* staff resistance to close monitoring and managing the completion of client surveys. Utilizing the new student information system, TIENET, introduced in 2011-12, may help somewhat to circumvent the stubborn school-level resistance to the extra work and the possible risks involved in carrying out client service surveys.

**Figure 3: Pyramid of Needs and Supports – for Children and Youth**



The “Pyramid of Needs and Supports,” embraced by architects of the Child and Youth Strategy, was derived from the Nova Scotia-sanctioned Positive Behavioural Intervention and Supports (PBIS) approach, so it was familiar to the vast majority of *SchoolsPlus* staff and system partners. Within the pyramid, *SchoolsPlus* was essentially designed to respond to the needs of the so-called “high-flyers,” the 5 -10 per cent of children and youth considered to be at “high-risk “ of delinquency or, put more delicately, in danger of “going off track.” (Nova Scotia, *Our Kids*, 2007, 13) Serious and repeat young offenders, according to this model, constitute the top 1 to 2 per cent of the pyramid and were primarily the responsibility of police and judicial authorities. They are estimated to number from 200 to 450 in HRM and were to be addressed by crime deterrent and prevention programs like the Youth Advocacy Program (YAP), founded in 2006 in HRM and operated through municipal and police services (Martin Interview, 2013). Children and youth most likely to benefit from the *SchoolsPlus* initiative were thought to come from that next 5 to 10 per cent growing up “in troubled families, in struggling communities, or living with physical and mental illnesses.” It is estimated that they number some 1,100 to 2,200 among 10 to 14 year olds. Most of these children and youth have been identified, by child and youth advocates, as the most likely to respond to *SchoolsPlus*-related programs designed as “interventions” intended to help them to “stay, or get back, on track.” (Nova Scotia, *Our Kids*, 2007, 13; Martin Interview, 2013)

The fundamental problem with *SchoolsPlus*, right from the beginning, was the nature of the venture and the relative absence of specific markers to assess progress at the client service, school and community level. Projects of social services integration, like *SP*, can *evolve* into invisible facilitators or *devolve* into “gap fillers” in the many-layered network of public services and supports. Without a clear strategy for assessing the impact of direct services on its clients or “referrals,” Kay Crinean’s consulting group was left with the task of piecing together disparate sets of data that purported to show impacts on school attendance, student discipline,

learning outcomes, student engagement, and parental involvement. Existing school-based student surveys were also used to try to measure changes in “school attachment,” responding to one of Justice Nunn’s key recommendations. (Crinean, Final Report, 2012, 60-66).

The baseline data used to assess the effectiveness of *SchoolsPlus* direct services was, for the reasons outlined, drawn from very small data sets. Some 459 clients were identified in the *SchoolsPlus* report on School Attachment, but only 172 clients with cases still open completed baseline data forms, including 172 (72%) who had received services for less than a year, 26 clients (15%) for 1-2 years, and only 22 (13%) receiving services for more than 2 years. The results, presented in the Final Report, issued September 24, 2012, do suggest some improvement, but represent a small fraction of those actually touched by interactions with some 90 different social service “partners” and their services. Student clients whose cases were closed were not evaluated, based upon the assumption that they had “improved” sufficiently to no longer warrant individual service. This explanation is, by all accounts, highly problematic, given the experience of other service providers in the child, youth, and family services sector. (Ungar Interview, 2013).

What did the fragmentary progress mapping evidence show? Some 30 to 45% of the 172 student clients showed some improvement in all measures, except parental involvement. A substantial majority of all student clients (84%) actually reported that parental involvement either declined or remained unchanged as a result of their involvement with *SchoolsPlus*. (Crinean, Final Report, 2012, 62-64). In short, modest progress for the small sample of student clients did **not** translate into better relations with parents and, in many cases, made matters worse in school-parent relations. This finding echoes that of Justice Nunn’s 2006 report and bears further study. “*The first response of Social Services*,” Nunn discovered, “*is to investigate, looking for abuse, and then to take them (the children) away. That’s why parents refrain from going to Social Services.*” (Nunn Interview, 2013). Parents in groups like the Dartmouth North Association do not mince any words: “*Whenever you hear from the school, it’s usually bad news.*” (Notes, DNA Meeting, 2013).

On one measure of progress, found in the 2012 Final Report on *SchoolsPlus*, and used in Scott Milner’s inspirational presentations, there are some encouraging signs. With the increase in school-related activities, at lunchtime and after school, there are indications that school is gaining in importance in the students’ lives. Of the 459 students who were identified as SP clients from Grades 6 to 12 in 2011-12, the proportion reporting that school is “very or quite important” to their lives has grown from 52% to 62%, marginally better than the shift among the larger school population (Crinean, *Final Report*, 2012, 65; Milner, CCRSB, 2013, S16).

**Figure 4: Student Survey Results - Importance of School in My Life, Nova Scotia, 2011-12**

	SP clients (459)		Rest of students (750)		Total no. of responses
	Very or quite important a year ago	Very or quite important now	Very or quite important a year ago	Very or quite important now	
Grades 9-12 Established sites	45%	64%	46%	57%	380
Grades 9-12 New sites	56%	69%	50%	60%	227
Grades 6-8 Established sites	59%	69%	45%	58%	392
Grades 6-8 New sites	52%	66%	49%	59%	210
<b>All students</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>1209</b>

Social life looks to have improved for the *SchoolsPlus* students, but any advances in other areas were much more modest, by comparison. Students in the critical years, grades 6 to 8, reported some marginal improvement in their “frequency of ‘getting in trouble’ at school.”



SP Grade 6 to 8 clients in established students closed the gap with the rest of the students, particularly in established *SP* sites, moving from 74% to 77% self-reporting improvement. Over the year, *SP* clients in new sites improved much less, with the proportion reporting improvement increasing modestly from 56% to 59%, trailing significantly the rest of the students. Student surveys in Grades 6 to 8 on improvement in school work showed little positive change, and in Grades 9-12, *SP* students reported declines with the proportion improving sliding from 60% to 54%, again lagging behind regular students. Student self-evaluation of their attendance was quite revealing because 20% to 33% of Grade 6 to 8 *SP* students reported that their attendance was poor or fair and there was little change year-to-year, from 2010 to 2012. High school students in *SP* reported declines in their attendance, with numbers reporting poor to fair attendance rising from 35% to 38% over the period. (Crinean, *Final Report*, 2012, 65-66). All of this must have been disappointing to those championing the expansion of *SchoolsPlus* to every corner of the province.

Taking a closer look at a Junior High School without *SchoolsPlus* might provide a meaningful point of comparison. In the case of Sir Robert Borden Junior High, the Dartmouth school where Archie Billard went “off track,” there has actually been a greater improvement in student behaviour, attendance, and numbers of suspensions. From 2007-08 until the end of 2010-11, the troubled Grade 7 to 9 school has experienced a remarkable turn-around without the benefit of the *SchoolsPlus* site branding. With inspired school leadership and following the Canadian Education Association’s *What Did You Do in School Today?* agenda for school improvement agenda. (Bennett, *OpenFile*, 2012)

Student improvement at SRB Junior High far exceeded the reported direct impact of *SchoolsPlus* services and supports. In 2007-08, three years after Archie Billard’s departure, the number of student suspensions had dropped from 173 in 2003-04 to 56 a year, but 277 students had been sent to the office 590 times for disciplinary reasons. With only 270 students in the school, those numbers of disciplinary incidents still set off alarm bells. Under a new principal, student suspensions were cut, from 2007-08 until 2009-10, from 56 to 44 to 20, as of May 1, 2010. The number of office referrals declined from 590 to 118. Most importantly, student truancy was cut from 31% to 14% in three years (HRSB, SRBJH, PSI Reports, 2007-2010). The Sir Robert Borden turnaround demonstrated that school leadership can be of paramount importance in driving school improvement. A focused, well-resourced “Student Engagement” program, including Grade 9 student leadership skills development played a significant role in the transformation. So did changes in school student discipline and homework policies. Following Justice Nunn’s report, Sir Robert Borden cleaned up its act, abandoning the former practice of revolving door out-of-school suspensions and adopted a lunchtime “course recovery” study program. Instead of sending students routinely to the office for regular disciplinary offenses, teachers were asked to deal with it on their own. Developing a visible, active student leadership team helped to set a better tone and teachers worked harder to challenge students in class, resulting in higher intellectual engagement. While academic results and standards, particularly in Mathematics, were slower to respond, the overall performance levels were moving in the right direction (HRSB, SRBJH, PSI, 20010-11). More recently, Sir Robert Borden Junior High took another, more draconian step to reduce incidence of student misbehaviour by moving to reduce the 15 minute recess to a 5 minute in-class “nutrition and announcement period.” (HRSB, *SRBJH School Report*, October 2012). At Archie Billard’s last school before the tragic crash, all of this was accomplished *without* the *SchoolsPlus* program in place.

## BREAKING DOWN THE BOUNDARIES: PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS

*“Decentralisation has been identified as an important key to unlock more productive and responsive public services. The closer the services are to service users, the more accountable they are for addressing users’ diverse and individual needs. As such, increasing the impact of public services means devolving control and providing more choice.”*

- Stephen Duckworth and Alex Sotiriopoulos, Integrated Commissioning of Open Public Services, Serco Institute Report, June 2012, p. 2.

*“Outcome mapping...(provides) a more graduated and realistic set of outcomes than can be expressed in the logic model developed for SchoolsPlus.... It defines the process outcomes as changes in the behaviour of the ‘boundary partners’ – those organizations which SP attempts to influence and through whose actions and behaviour the outcomes will be achieved.”*

- Kay Crinean, *Final Report, Evaluation of the SchoolsPlus Model*, 24 September 2012.

Children and youth at risk in Nova Scotia continue to face significant obstacles inside and outside the publicly-funded education system. Those at greatest risk, according to Dr. Michael Ungar and the Resilience Research Centre, are the “high flyers” and high school dropouts who tend to fall by the wayside and occupy the margins of urban and rural society. Failing to complete a high school education is a critical marker affecting their life chances and employment prospects. Wrapped –up in the complex of problems affecting troubled youth are family and housing stressors, poverty and food insecurity, substance abuse, early pregnancy and parenting, negative self-perceptions, low self-esteem, and alienation from their schools. (*Pathways to Youth Resilience: Education*, 2011, 2) Faced with such hurdles, community-based programs, when accessed through *SchoolsPlus*, can have potential benefits for at risk children and youth, including improved academic achievement, better interpersonal skills, more supportive relationships, enhanced self-confidence, and improved life and problem-solving skills. (*Pathways to Youth Resilience: Labrador and Nova Scotia*, 2011, 2)

The *SchoolsPlus* initiative is becoming more fully evolved with a presence in all parts of Nova Scotia. Promoters of *SchoolsPlus* claim to have connected with some 100 different public and not-for-profit social service agencies. In addition, the Department of Education supports an array of other Child and Youth Strategy interventions and services. Options and Opportunities (O2), one of the first, aims to help high school students in transitioning to the workforce or post-secondary education. In 2010-11, O2 operated in 47 different high schools and served some 1,600 students. In HRM, students at risk who are young offenders, up to a maximum of twenty, are supported by the Halifax Youth Attendance Centre (HYAC), and struggling students have the option of attending an Alternative School (Youth Pathways and Transitions) or three different Flexible Learning and Education Centres (FLECs), including a night school at Citadel High School. Youth serving time in the Waterville Youth Facility, are enrolled in Centre 24-7, an alternative program operated by the Annapolis Valley Board of Education (*Pathways to Youth Resilience: Education*, 2011, 6-8).

Significant gaps do exist in the Nova Scotia system, gaps only partially filled by the expansion of ISD in the form of *SchoolsPlus*. Rural communities located away from HRM and other urban centres have far fewer programs and get much less funding for at-risk youth programming. Rural youth are in dire need of more services and supports to help them stay in school. From 2007 to 2010, 15.5% of rural youth dropped out of high school compared with 7.9% for urban youth, province-wide (Gilmore, Stats Canada, 2010). Students at risk living in and around Halifax are far better served and few services exist outside of HRM except for programs for youth offenders inside the youth correctional facilities. At-risk youth in rural communities are often left with tough choices – leaving home in order to get help, or stay at home and struggle on with little or no outside support. (*Pathways to Youth Resilience: Education*, 2011, 17-18). Filling this child and youth at risk service gap may well be the reason that the Education Department is moving to expand *SchoolsPlus* into the farthest corners of the province. With few child and youth services in those outlying districts, it is likely that *SchoolsPlus* itself may devolve into a social service provider and “gap-filling” child welfare agency.

The longest established *SchoolsPlus* sites are at a stage when they can be evaluated for their effectiveness in breaking down the existing “boundaries” – integrating social services, delivering better client services, and fostering community-based service partnerships. The Final *StudentsPlus* Evaluation Report, issued in September 2012, attempted to assess and “grade” the initiative in terms of its success at bridging or breaking down the traditional “boundaries” in the field of child, youth, and family services (Crinean, *Final Report*, 2012, 75-77). In focusing mostly on moving the “boundaries,” it also provided far less evidence of the direct impact on youth clients than found in the much more detailed Final Report on the HRM Youth Advocate Program (YAP), a comparable initiative responding to city youth at risk of gang activity and criminal behaviour (YAP Evaluation Report, 2012).

The Final Report Card on *SchoolsPlus* awarded “grades” for progress in meeting progress markers that did not inspire much confidence in the overall project. On the first level of service, compliance with *SchoolsPlus* mandates, the “established sites” were given above average grades in all categories except for communicating SP’s core mission *within the department*. At the second, and higher level of service, building capacity and fostering partnerships, *SchoolsPlus* was given middling grades, and marked down for falling short in realigning with regional needs and the relative absence of “co-located services. “Great progress” noted in one board, likely Chignecto-Central or South Shore, was clearly not being duplicated in other boards and their sites. Moving to the highest level of service, transforming service delivery, the grades were shockingly low in all categories. In every category, except for following an “information sharing protocol,” the *SchoolsPlus* sites were given “E” grades indicating “no evidence of behaviour aligned with the SP Project Charter.” (Crinean, *Final Report*, 2012, 77-79).

**Figure 5A: Report Card on Outcome Progress Markers, Established Sites, *SchoolsPlus*, 2012**

Expect to see [Early positive responses]

Progress marker	Bound-ary partners	NS Progress Year 1 A-E	NS Progress Year 2 A-E	NS Progress Year 3 A-E	Comments
Attending SP Advisory Committee meetings	All	B	B+	B+	
Attending case-specific meetings for Comprehensive Service Plans	All	C	B	B	
Identifying gaps in services	All	A	A	A+	
Communicating SP objectives and information to own department, organization	All	D	C	B	Progress at site and top levels.
Sharing service/resource information	All	A	A	A	
Conferencing innovative service solutions	All	C	B	B+	
Collaborating around cost sharing/accessing alternative funding sources	4 Depts.	B	A	A	
Providing joint training opportunities	All	A	A+	A+	
Signing off on Policy/Project Charter (systemic)	DoE/D CS	A	A	A	
Discussing Pre Primary program supports (Early Years)	DCS/ DoE/ H&W/ other	C	C	B-	
School administrators demonstrating flexibility in expectations around use of schools, policies and programming for youth	Schools / school boards	B	A	A	Changes are happening more in some schools than others
Accountability for school administrators in contextualizing a youth's situation	School boards, Dept of Education	B	B	B	Progress is being made in some schools

**Figure 5B: Report Card on Outcome Progress Markers, Established Sites, *SchoolsPlus*, 2012**

Like to see [Active engagement]

Progress marker	Bound-ary partners	NS Progress Year 1 A-E	NS Progress Year 2 A-E	NS Progress Year 3 A-E	Comments
Being flexible in their mandates and resource allocation in response to gaps	4 Depts	C	C	B -	
Increasing shared resources; planning for this in budgets	4 Depts	C	C	B -	It is taking place piecemeal, at site level
Providing programs beyond the school day (resource allocation issue)	4 Depts	C	B	A -	
Expanding services	All	D	C	B	In some areas
Offering services in schools	All	C	B	A -	In some schools, based upon relationships rather than organizational policy
Co-locating in schools for flexible service delivery	4 Depts	D	D	C+	E.g. Mental Health clinicians to be located in SP hub schools
Agreeing upon interdepartmental information sharing	4 Depts	C	B	A	Significant progress made in year three.
Forming an inter-departmental policy working committee	4 Depts	C	C	C+	Can apply at both system and site levels
Sharing training, professional development and capacity building	All	A	A	A	
Realigning goals, priorities and working procedures at the regional level in response to gaps	4 Depts	D	C	C +	Great progress in one region
SP in business plans/ statements of mandate	All	D	C	B	
Existing pre-primary programs to be taken on by one or more boundary partners and be sustainably delivered in schools	DCS/ DoE/ H&W/ other	C	C	C+	Sustained funding for STEP
Policy/Project Charter signed by more Depts. (systemic)	4 Depts	E	E	C+	Expansion of SP
Incorporating SP design requirements into all planned and anticipated new school construction	DoE/ school boards	E	D	B	Happening in several school boards



**Figure 5C: Report Card on Outcome Progress Markers, Established Sites, *SchoolsPlus*, 2012**

Love to see [Deep transformation]

Progress marker	Bound-ary partners	NS Progress Year 1 A-E	NS Progress Year 2 A-E	NS Progress Year 3 A-E	Comments
Transforming policies to support integrated service delivery in a real and sustainable way	4 Depts.		E	E	
The information-sharing protocol is being followed	4 Depts.		E	B	Major progress made during year three and is almost completed.
Changing policies and principles re. prevention and protection	4 Depts.		E	E	
Collaborative co-location is a daily ongoing process	All		E	E	
Providing holistic, seamless service delivery	All		E	E	
Building space into each department budget for interdepartmental collaboration, and resource reallocation	4 Depts.		E	E	
Community and agencies working seamlessly together on Policy/ Project Charter items (systemic)	All		E	E	
All communities have at least one school that offers a pre-primary program	All		E	E	

The *SchoolsPlus* initiative, launched and expanded by the Education Department with great fanfare, had drifted away from its Charter mandate and was falling far short in its ultimate aspirational goal of transforming child, youth, and family services through the schools. The multi-headed vision and ambitious objectives were not sustainable because there was a huge hole in the middle of that vision. From the beginning, the *SchoolsPlus* model was a flawed vehicle for the purpose of transforming or improving service delivery for the clients of that service. The Nova Scotia version of Saskatchewan's *SchoolPLUS*, upon closer examination, appropriated the visionary image without the substance. Out in Saskatchewan, the model was more explicitly based upon a "community school" concept and more driven by a provincial mandate aimed at "empowering high schools" and transforming them into broader "communities of learning." Somewhere between conception and implementation, Nova Scotia's *SchoolsPlus* morphed into something else –much more like the Ontario "Integrated Service Delivery" model emerging at roughly the same time period (NSHRF, *Collaborative Service Delivery*, 2012, 15-20). In the relative absence of strong articulate leadership, provided by Dr. Tymchak in Saskatchewan, the project was re-shaped by the Education Department and ultimately "captured" by the other siloed-departments and their preferred public sector service providers.

The hidden, coded message of Kay Crinean's *Final Report* was that *SchoolsPlus* promoters, in the Department and the regional boards, had settled for something far less than a transformative change. Developing the overall framework, staging the roll-out, and building

upon the core of program champions, essentially, the operational processes took precedence over monitoring whether the project was fully aligned with the Nova Scotia Child and Youth Strategy responsible for the venture's birth. (Crinean, *Final Report*, 2012, 75-79). The "fire in the belly" demonstrated by Justice Merlin Nunn had cooled in the inner sanctum of the Department and, except for *SchoolsPlus* warriors Milburn and Burris, no one was out there articulating the vision and fighting to see the worthwhile venture translate into direct impacts for children and youth at risk ( Nunn Interview, 2013; Ungar Interview, 2013).

Leading social change and public sector services reform calls for three critical capacities – clear vision, inspired leadership and a disciplined focus on the core objectives. In the case of the *SchoolsPlus* initiative, the provincial initiative would have achieved much greater success if its champions and advocates had embraced a "community school" philosophy and demonstrated more of what Donna Graves of the University of Regina has termed "*an understanding of community*." (Graves, 2011, 7). That would require a grasp of the emerging Canadian movement spearheaded by Dr. David Clandfield to transform schools themselves into "community hubs" fully imbedded in the locality and reflecting its needs. It's an elusive concept to public sector service providers and accountability-driven bureaucrats, but well-articulated by Clandfield. "*A school might be thought of as a two-way hub,*" Clandfield aptly observes, "*when children's learning activities within the school contribute to community development and when community activities contribute to and enrich children's learning within the school.*" (Clandfield, *Our Schools, Our Selves*, 2010, 20)

Building a sustainable centre of "integrated service delivery" is, Nova Scotia social policy makers are learning, next to impossible without engaging community-led parent and voluntary, not-for-profit service groups. Bringing public sector services into the schools is only half the battle and can end up being all that is achieved through brokering of local service arrangements. The Final Report on the *SchoolsPlus* initiative, released in September 2012 after the decision to expand the program province-wide, suggests that what began as a transformative initiative has now run aground in the thicket of integrated service delivery in Nova Scotia. Transforming the school into a genuine 'community hub' of services and supports would have meant undertaking major structural changes, not simply attempting to make the schools "convenient places" for the provision of child and youth services. A worthy venture, originally conceived as a transformative initiative, has run aground and, much to the disappointment of its champions and advocates is now at serious risk of going the way of other such social policy initiatives.

Ground level observers have a completely different perception of *SchoolsPlus*, its mandate and school-centred services and supports. In the struggling community of Dartmouth North, *SchoolsPlus* is a welcome new program, but not one seen as capable of truly transforming the lives of children, youth, or families. A small group of parents, led by Allana Loh and Roseanna Cleveland have sized-up *SchoolsPlus* at Harbour View Elementary School and are searching for a better, more intensive program to turn around the fortunes of the children and youth in their own community (Ravina, 2012). They stumbled upon Pathways to Education, a national Stay-in-School initiative, initiated by a Toronto not-for-profit, social enterprise, and currently offering a community-based tutoring program in the Spryfield area of Halifax (Bennett, *Progress*, 2010).

For the past 18 months, the "Taking Action Society" has been collaborating with the North Dartmouth Association in an independent community-based effort to bring Pathways to Education to the North End of Dartmouth. Their Pathways Eligibility study, conducted by Dartmouth consultant Dennis Pilkey, establishes that Harbour View and John Martin JHS have dropout rates far exceeding 40% of their graduates, and 8 times the dropout rate in HRM

(Pilkey, *Pathways Report*, 2012, 16-17). While the HRSB *SchoolsPlus* site is “nice to have” in their school, it falls far short of Pathways in providing consistent adult mentoring, after school homework supervision, academic and social counselling, and appealing sports and cultural activities outside of school hours. While the HRSB *SchoolsPlus* coordinator periodically inquires about their progress, there is no sign of embracing what amounts to a genuine, community-led school improvement project. “*We are trying to get the school to open its doors,*” Allana Loh reported back on February 21, 2013 to the Dartmouth North Association. “*They think they are connected. We have parents and programs that can help the kids. It’s a challenge getting your voice heard.*” (Notes, DNA Meeting, 2013).

The Director of Britain’s Serco Institute, Stephen Duckworth, might well have been assessing Nova Scotia’s *SchoolsPlus* when he commented on the potential pitfalls of pursuing “integrated service delivery” without a clear conception of where the initiative is heading. “*First, the integrating organization,*” in this case Nova Scotia Education, “*adds extra layers of management and monitoring costs. Second, that it will always be tempted to exploit its position, skimming off the easy and most profitable work for itself while leaving the harder and lower value delivery for smaller, more vulnerable organizations.*” (Duckworth, *The Guardian*, 2012). In the case of North End Dartmouth, *SchoolsPlus* now represents a well-intentioned “blocker” drawing scarce resources and presenting an obstacle to acquiring a second HRM Pathways to Education project site.

The *SchoolsPlus* initiative will soon be established in all eight school boards with 95 different school sites. If the Final Report on *SchoolsPlus*, produced by Kay Crinean, is any indication, the whole project is “a long way” from achieving its original objectives (Crinean, *Final Report*, 2012, 75-79). So far, *SchoolsPlus* sites show no evidence of being transformed into true “community hubs” and centres of care for troubled children and youth. Pushing at the “boundaries” is not likely to break down those boundaries to improve the access to, and responsiveness of, child, youth, and family services. Better and more effective alternatives deserve to be integrated into the provincial Child and Youth Strategy. The core philosophy and purpose of Pathways to Education is more in keeping with the best research on what works in transforming the lives of troubled and neglected children and youth (Pathways, *The Results*, 2013). By re-thinking the core philosophy of *SchoolsPlus* and incorporating community-led projects, the initiative can still be turned around. What follows is a viable, research-based plan to re-purpose and reform the province-wide initiative so it better serves the several thousand children, youth and families struggling to “stay on track,” day after day, in the province.



## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introducing and then expanding an Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) model like Nova Scotia's *SchoolsPlus* has generated more scheduled student and parent support programs and activities, especially in rural and small town communities. Cyberbullying and teen suicides have helped to significantly raise public awareness of the need more in-school guidance and mental health services. It is most encouraging to see mental health services are now being introduced, largely as a result of the herculean and inspired efforts of Dalhousie psychiatrist Dr. Stan Kutcher. (Colley, 2013).

Having acknowledged that, this AIMS research report demonstrates that the *SchoolsPlus* initiative is in need of a mid-term correction. Making a much wider array of services available is a laudable achievement, but *SchoolsPlus*, in its current form and beneath the veneer, shows little promise for significantly closing the education gap in frontline services for children and youth at risk, and for families under stress.

Champions of *SchoolsPlus* are hard to find, especially in the Halifax Regional School Board, and provincial education authorities are extremely vigilant in shielding *SP* staff and student clients from inquiring researchers and go to considerable lengths to prevent the release of any and all unauthorized data or information about the whole venture. That information protection mentality permeates the Department and trickles down through the board offices and into the schools. It simply reinforced the consistent ground-level, research-based findings of this report. A full review of *SchoolsPlus*, from its inception to implementation and impact, reveals that, three years after its introduction, aside from an expanding site location map and a growing "stable" of service providers, there is relatively little to "show and tell" for the recent provincial investment of \$2.5 million over 3 years in up to 95 school sites spanning all eight Nova Scotia school boards.

Challenged by Justice Merlin Nunn and the Nova Scotia Child and Youth Strategy to produce a transformative approach to the prevention of youth crime and to putting troubled children and youth "back on track," the Nova Scotia Department of Education (DoE) chose to adopt an "Integrated Service Delivery" model, relying heavily upon brokering arrangements to place more publicly-funded services and DoE authorized programs in the schools. Making a wider range of services and supports available is a laudable achievement, but limiting public access to regular school hours, and enforcing restrictive Community Use of Schools regulations, (i.e. \$2 million in liability insurance), only serves to maintain the entrenched "boundaries" that stand in the way of genuine two-way community interaction in the schools.

So far, *SchoolsPlus* has stayed safely within the ISD model and is missing real opportunities to engage with innovative, community-based, volunteer-led services. The *SP* initiative can, and should, be more committed to breaking the cycle of poverty and dependence in pockets of urban and rural Nova Scotia. Broadening the mandate and engaging with new, less familiar community development partners, like Pathways to Education, will produce better frontline services focused on rescuing and turning around the lives of troubled and marginalized children and youth. With a more flexible, adaptable approach, the *SchoolsPlus* could explore innovative community reconstruction partnership ventures, including the Harlem Zone School model focusing on inner city high dropout zones.

The true vision of Community Schools with “wraparound” services and supports will not be realized until *SchoolsPlus* is re-engineered and becomes a more robust vehicle for transforming public schools into true “community hubs” less focused on coordinating existing province-wide public services and drawing far more on the strengths and talents of local communities. The best, most responsive and personalized services, by most accounts, are those provided closest to where people live and work. The *SchoolsPlus* initiative has achieved its goal of provincial coverage – with eight boards and 95 current sites. Expanding the number of services and supports is – as this AIMS research report shows, only half the battle because the real challenge is to close the persistent education gap by improving the quality and intensity of frontline services to struggling children and youth – and their families.

The *SchoolsPlus* initiative is a vitally important provincial venture that deserves to succeed and is well worth saving. To clarify the core vision, broaden the reach, strengthen public accountability, and ensure success for *SchoolsPlus*, the Government of Nova Scotia should consider acting upon the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1: Broaden the Vision, Sharpen the Focus**

Broaden the narrowly circumscribed “Integrated Service Delivery” model being implemented through the *SchoolsPlus* initiative to achieve a greater *direct impact and benefit* for children, youth, and families ‘at risk’ inside and outside Nova Scotia’s public schools;

**Recommendation 2: Conduct a Best Practice Review**

Suspend the further expansion of Nova Scotia *SchoolsPlus* until the 2012 Final Report Card concerns are addressed and the project is reviewed for its ultimate effectiveness, alignment with the *Child and Youth Strategy*, and more consistent with best practice in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

**Recommendation 3: Conduct a Provincial Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Review the total costs of *SchoolsPlus*, including supervision, coordination, and administration, in relation to the numbers of students served by the program and its supports. Provide a full, public accounting of all *SchoolsPlus* initiative costs, from 2008 to the present, including *SP* costs province-wide, per board, per site, and per student client.

**Recommendation 4: Utilize the Resilience Research Centre Assessment Surveys**

Introduce a more comprehensive, research-based assessment tool designed to measure and track student/client progress, developed with the Resilience Research Centre and comparable to that currently used by the Youth Advocacy Program (YAP) in HRM;

**Recommendation 5: Refocus the Mandate on Local High School Dropout Zones**

Reassess the current *SchoolsPlus* regional “hub site” expansion plan and refocus the mandate to facilitate more local neighbourhood partnerships with community-based, not-for-profit programs and groups, starting with *Pathways to Education* and the *Big Brothers, Big Sisters* organization;

**Recommendation 6: Embrace Flexible, Adaptable Alternative Programs**

Support local initiatives by embracing ventures like *Pathways to Education*, removing current obstacles and lending assistance as communities mobilize to seek accreditation as *Pathways to Education* or Alternative Model School program sites;

**Recommendation 7: Assess the “School Attachment” Levels of Student Clients**

Conduct a more comprehensive, targeted survey of student clients to assess their progress in terms of degree of school attachment, as recommended by the 2006 Nunn Commission;

**Recommendation 8: Adopt a Family-Centred Approach to Care**

Take the lead in seeking improved relations with the parents of children and youth at risk and re-affirm the *SchoolsPlus* commitment to strengthening “the integrity of the family” as recommended by Justice Nunn;

**Recommendation 9: Seek a Transformation of Schooling**

Address the major shortfalls identified in the 2012 Final Report on *SchoolsPlus* to set specific target goals aimed at ensuring sustainable, longer-term changes. More specifically, take the lead in establishing designated interdepartmental budgets for *SchoolsPlus*; expanding the number of “co-located” programs and services; and fully embracing the potential of holistic, seamless service delivery and “wraparound” communities of care.

**Recommendation 10: Communicate the Vision and Mission**

Foster the development of *SchoolsPlus* champions capable of articulating the vision and purpose of the whole project. Establish a clearer, coherent and more open communications strategy to inform and engage the public. Transforming *SchoolsPlus* schools into genuine community-based “centres of care” will require more visible transformative leadership.

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#### ***A Provincial Lifeline – Expanding the Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program***

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