Students benefit from rural youth project

Students attending Chedabucto Education Centre/Guysborough Academy in Guysborough and East Antigonish Education Centre/Academy in Monastery continue to benefit from the Rural Youth Education Project.

The four-year project began in February 2002, sponsored by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and funded by Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, Crime Prevention Investment Fund.

The project implements a gender-based, violence prevention model which provides youth with skills to build and maintain healthy relationships. The project also enables teachers to work in collaboration with the adult/youth facilitators to deliver a core curriculum of 12 lessons designed to promote healthy and respectful relationships to students in Grades 7, 8, 9 and 11.

The main focus is to reflect the racial and cultural diversity of the African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq communities in Antigonish and Guysborough.

Jean Crosby, project co-ordinator, explains that one of the innovative features of the project is the use of teams of adult and youth facilitators.

"In each school a male/female team of adult facilitators deliver the classroom sessions and are responsible for providing leadership, information and support to a team of up to 10 youth facilitators. The youth facilitators assist with the delivery of the classroom sessions. The youth play an important mentoring and peer support role with other students both in and out of the classroom. The team presents role-modelling of healthy adult male/female relations as well as a co-operative youth/adult relationship."

For the students taking part in this project, either as peer facilitators or recipients of classroom sessions, the benefits are many.

She states the obvious advantages are those of raised awareness with issues relating to violence against women, enhanced skills in communications, assertiveness and problem solving, as well as increased self-esteem. For the youth who are active as facilitators, they experience working with adults in a collaborative manner which respects their knowledge and experiences. They will use the skills and knowledge gained from their involvement in their peer group activities and in their after-school experiences.

The project facilitators receive training and ongoing support regarding curriculum content and facilitation skills and are actively engaged in an ongoing evaluation and revision of the material and its delivery in the classroom.

This model also involves community partnerships. An advisory committee guides and oversees the project and provides essential community feedback. An extensive evaluation process is also an integral part of the process.

Paul Ash, principal of Chedabucto Education Centre/Guysborough Academy, believes that the project has empowered youth. "The students have taken on an active role in facilitating group discussions around issues that they often do not have a chance to discuss in a non-threatening environment. The project is an excellent example of how schools and community organizations can work together to benefit our youth."

At this point, approximately 700 students have received 12 classroom sessions of the 'Developing Healthy and Respectful Relationships' curriculum.

The initiative is helping to create school cultures which value mutual respect, equality, effective communication and diversity as integral parts of the process.