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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hamilton Aboriginal Stay-in-School Initiative Stemming National Trend
Canada's Vital Signs statistics show low high school completion rates among Aboriginals

HAMILTON (Oct. 6, 2009) A report released today from Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) finds that Aboriginal students attend and complete high school at a much lower rate than non-Aboriginals. But in Hamilton, the tables are turning, thanks to an initiative of Hamilton's Aboriginal leaders, its two school boards and Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF).

Canada's Vital Signs 2009, an annual quality of life report card published by CFC shows the national Aboriginal high-school completion rate at 56.3 per cent, compared to 76.9 per cent for non-Aboriginals. In Hamilton, a local stay-in-school initiative known as NYA:WEH – the Native Youth Advancement with Education Hamilton - is making inroads on this national concern. Among high-school-aged Aboriginals who are part of the program, there has been a 30 percent increase in credit accumulation, decreases in absenteeism and suspensions and, most important, more of Hamilton's Aboriginal students are graduating and pursuing post-secondary education.

"One of the strengths of the NYA:WEH program is that it is a true partnership between the Aboriginal community, the school system and the community foundation," said Sheree Meredith, HCF's vice-president of philanthropic services. "The Aboriginal community, its leaders and youth designed and implemented the program, supported by champions within the school system and by the resources of the Foundation."

NYA:WEH was launched in Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School and Cathedral High School both of which have significant Aboriginal populations. The program combines traditional and Western educational styles and provides culturally-relevant support to address the gaps that often prevent Aboriginal students from completing high school.

NYA:WEH's genesis came in 2002, when two Hamilton Community Foundation donors brought forward their concern for Hamilton's Aboriginal youth. The Foundation's research included gathering together Aboriginal leaders, who identified the alarming school dropout rate as the critical challenge. As a result the Foundation funded the creation of NYA:WEH. A three-year pilot program exceeded all expectations for success, and while HCF continues to provide support for NYA:WEH's expansion, Hamilton's two school boards are now covering much of the basic program cost. It recently expanded to Parkview Secondary School in east Hamilton.

Among the resources for students are a dedicated room where they can do homework, get tutoring, receive guidance and support and even get a healthy meal. Peer leadership, teachings from elders after-school activities and employment support are also an important part of the successful mix.

NYA:WEH founding co-ordinator Taunya Laslo described the blend of traditional and Western styles of education as critical to the program's success. "Students have really embraced the blend," she said. "They don't have to choose one or the other. It is re-connecting Aboriginal people – students and their families – to education."

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Hamilton Community Foundation was founded in 1954 as Ontario's first community foundation. Like all community foundations, HCF has three main roles: working with donors to build funds for the future of Hamilton, granting to the widest possible range of organizations and initiatives, and fostering community leadership. Since it was founded, Hamilton Community Foundation has made grants to our community totalling more than \$55 million, including approximately \$4.1 million last year.

Contact:

Sheree Meredith, Vice-President Philanthropic Services, 905-523-5600 x 246

Grace Diffey, Vice-President, Community Relations , 905-523-5600 x 260, cell: 905-518-4641