



HAMILTON  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION

*For Hamilton, For Ever*

**NYA:WEH**

**Hamilton's Aboriginal Stay-in-School Program:  
A Story Worth Telling**

*November, 2008*

# Hamilton's Aboriginal Stay-in-School Program: A Story Worth Telling

Hamilton's Aboriginal stay-in-school initiative now has five years of proven success. It launched in two high schools in September 2003 and January 2004, overseen by the Hamilton Executive Directors Aboriginal Coalition (HEDAC) and sponsored by the Niwasa Aboriginal Head Start Preschool agency. But the involvement of Hamilton Community Foundation began much earlier – in February 2002 – with research, convening, and technical assistance. We played a crucial and delicate “backroom” role of support, in addition to providing financial resources, and our involvement continues today. But it has been the Aboriginal community, its leaders, and its youth – supported by champions within the mainstream system – who have designed the successful program, implemented it, adjusted it for greater impact, leveraged its size and scope, and tended its partnerships.

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“When a student comes to me on the day of her graduation and says to me ‘I couldn’t have done it without you,’ it tells me that our program made a big difference in her life.

This student first came to us in grade nine, and she had been serving suspension after suspension in middle school. She got into a fight on her third day of high school.

Now she is a private in the military and she is going to Mohawk College in the fall to attend the Nursing program.”

*NYA:WEH champion and Principal of Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, Mike Rehill*

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Hamilton Community Foundation's three-stage project development model (research and knowledge sharing; convening; support and capacity building), our commitment to consumer-driven program design, and our attention to process have proven effective in this case as in others, and we describe that model here. But the relationship between the Foundation and the Aboriginal community has been an equally critical factor in the successful development of this outstanding program. That relationship, and the learning we have gained through it, is at the centre of this case story; it informs every step in the model we describe and it enriches our work both within and outside the Aboriginal community.

## **THE NYA:WEH PROGRAM – IN A NUTSHELL<sup>1</sup>**

The Native Youth Advancement With Education Hamilton (NYA:WEH) program was started in 2003 by Aboriginal leaders in response to the alarmingly high drop out rate of Aboriginal youth in Hamilton's schools. NYA:WEH (a name chosen by students, which also means "thank you" in Mohawk) takes place at Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School (public board) and Cathedral High School (Catholic board), which both have significant Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) student populations. Each school now has a dedicated resource room where Aboriginal students can do homework and class assignments, seek tutoring, use computers, receive cultural support and guidance, resolve conflicts, get a healthy meal, and at SJAM, even do laundry. Peer leadership, teachings from elders, and culturally specific after-school activities are also part of NYA:WEH. The program employs three Youth Advisors and a Cultural Outreach Worker, all of whom are Aboriginal.

Every participant said in a survey that the program made it easier to attend school, stay in school, and get better grades. Many have graduated and some are pursuing post-secondary education or training programs. They are learning about their Aboriginal traditions, too, and the student drumming and dance group is in demand for performances across Hamilton.

Founding Coordinator Taunya Laslo says "students have really embraced the combination of traditional and Western educational styles – they don't have to choose one or the other. It is re-connecting Aboriginal people – both students and their families – to education."

The second phase of support from HCF's Young Response Fund is directed to continued growth and development of the NYA:WEH concept, and to other initiatives that help Aboriginal youth fulfill their potential.

### **Some NYA:WEH Outcomes: Individual Success**

- More than 400 students have participated to date
- School attendance has improved dramatically
- Suspensions have dropped
- Peer and teacher conflicts are fewer
- Students are accumulating more credits (a 20% increase in the first year, and an additional 25% in year two at SJAM, for example)
- Students are graduating high school
- Students are pursuing post-secondary training and education

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<sup>1</sup> For more information: [www.hwdsb.on.ca/sjam/nyaweh](http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/sjam/nyaweh)

### **Some NYA:WEH Outcomes: Systems-Level**

- The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board has taken over complete responsibility for funding the Aboriginal Youth Advisor positions and the Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board has assumed 50% of the costs, increasing the likelihood of sustainability
- The HWDSB has received provincial funding for an Aboriginal Resource Library and development of an Aboriginal Resources manual for all HWDSB teachers
- Over \$100,000 in other funding has been leveraged
- The Ministry of Education selected Hamilton as the site for their newest Aboriginal Alternative Education School. Hosted by the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre, the SHAE program is directed by one of NYA:WEH's founders and champions, the Principal of Sir John A. Macdonald (SJAM) school
- Two Native Arts credit courses and two Aboriginal Contemporary Issues courses have been added to the offerings at SJAM
- NYA:WEH has partnered with Mohawk College to give students an opportunity to earn a college level credit for completing the Contemporary Aboriginal Issues course
- The Hamilton Aboriginal Education Council was formed, to support the governance of NYA:WEH, SHAE, and other Aboriginal education issues. It is the Aboriginal community's advisory board to the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board
- NYA:WEH is receiving recognition as a program model that could be replicated in other schools and jurisdictions

### **THE HAMILTON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION ROLE IN NYA:WEH's DEVELOPMENT**

In 2002, one of HCF's most generous donor couples approached the Foundation with concern about Hamilton's Aboriginal youth. Neither the Foundation nor the donors had a clear idea of how they might best respond to such a complex set of needs and opportunities. Based on this interest, the Foundation began its exploration.

#### **Stage One: Research and Knowledge Sharing**

HCF made a substantial commitment to research the issues and opportunities facing Aboriginal youth in Hamilton, in order to help the Foundation understand how it might best help. Betty Muggah, a consultant who had been working with the Foundation on a number of initiatives, was asked to conduct an initial inquiry and assessment. The objectives included gathering information and engaging the Aboriginal community (particularly youth) in the assessment process.

The subsequent report, "Aboriginal Youth in Hamilton: Toward Whole Health – A Vision for the Future", covered a lot of ground:

- A demographic profile of Hamilton's young Aboriginal community, the realities and trends facing them (health, economic, education, social, spiritual and cultural)
- A review of current programs and services in the city related to Aboriginal youth

- A review of gaps and priorities identified by Aboriginal youth, agencies and leaders
- A review of innovative initiatives from outside Hamilton
- Presentation of a range of options for Hamilton Community Foundation's consideration

Both the content and the process of gathering it were crucial to the success of the initiative. The consultant:

- Reviewed dozens of documents
- Interviewed 20 stakeholders and key informants, including school boards, Aboriginal leaders, and service providers with experience in Aboriginal youth issues
- Held two focus groups with Aboriginal young people (age 12-35)
- Hosted a roundtable consultation with Aboriginal leadership and youth

The content of the report, and an annotated bibliography that accompanied it, is a rich mine of information that informed every step in the development of the NYA:WEH program. It represented the first comprehensive analysis of the trends, issues and needs facing Aboriginal young people in Hamilton and was widely disseminated throughout the community. Equally as important as the content were the tone of the report and the flavour of the process: Aboriginal voices and traditions were highlighted throughout.

### **Stage Two: Convening**

The research consultation process had begun to deepen relationships between the Foundation and the Aboriginal community's agencies, leaders, and youth and the convening process begun during the research phase continued. Based on the review of the report and its findings, the recommendation was to proceed with detailed planning for a three to five year program that would "provide appropriate supports and assistance to encourage Aboriginal youth in the Hamilton area to remain in and complete high school and to make the successful transition required for further education and/or employment."

The Foundation prepared a detailed Request for Proposals and invited the Hamilton Executive Directors Aboriginal Coalition (HEDAC) to assume the lead role in developing a program proposal. HEDAC is a coalition that brings together the leadership of Hamilton's Aboriginal service agencies and is well respected within the Aboriginal community. HEDAC is also the advisory council to the Mayor and City Council.

We also convened meetings with senior administrators from the two school boards and the Aboriginal leaders to help forge an effective partnership. This "brokering" role was critical to moving the project forward.

### Stage Three: Support and Capacity-Building Toward a Solution

Over the course of 12 months beginning in June 2002, HCF worked closely with the HEDAC planning team to help them shape the proposal. The Foundation's Community Initiatives consultant, who had prepared the initial research report, was invited to join the HEDAC planning team and met regularly with the chair.

#### *The HCF Approach<sup>2</sup>*

- ▶ *Research and knowledge sharing*
- ▶ *Convening*
- ▶ *Support and capacity building*

In 2003, we approved a grant to HEDAC to cover the expense of an external consultant (Stevenato & Associates) to work with HEDAC and the Aboriginal community in developing the plan for the Stay-in-School Initiative. The process included the opportunity for an Aboriginal young person to "shadow" the consultant throughout and to learn some of the skills involved in running focus groups, compiling data, and preparing reports.

With the consultant's help, HEDAC prepared a set of options based on best practices and recommended one approach. The 60-page comprehensive report (April 2003) formed the basis of the funding application to the Foundation that HEDAC submitted in June 2003.

The Foundation provided additional technical support to help develop the formal partnership agreement between the school boards and HEDAC for the NYA:WEH program. This included, for example, helping to draft an organizational structure for decision-making and preparing a partnership template for approval by the boards of the three partners.

HEDAC applied to the Foundation in 2003 for a three-year grant of more than \$220,000. An additional, approximately equal amount was being contributed by the three partners and other sources in financial and in-kind contributions. HCF approved that three year commitment and the program was announced publicly on Aboriginal Day, June 13, 2003 at a large pow wow hosted by HEDAC in the plaza in front of City Hall.

The first phase of NYA:WEH was completed in 2006 and funding was approved for a further three years by the Foundation's Young Response Fund. The current HCF funding is \$219,846 (over three years) covering the costs of the cultural worker, a portion of one youth worker and some program expenses. Two and a half youth worker positions are now funded directly by the School Boards.

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<sup>2</sup> In another example, the development of Hamilton Community Foundation's broad approach to poverty reduction was documented in the Community Foundations of Canada case study: "Tackling Poverty in Hamilton" by Nancy F. Johnson, May 2006. Available on both the CFC and HCF websites.

### ***The Foundation's Approach***

*"We've begun to see that we have a successful model developing through many Foundation initiatives," says CEO Carolyn Milne. "We first gather the information we need to help us understand the issue. That allows us to share good factual background with our Board, donors and community partners before deciding to move ahead. Then we bring together the key stakeholders – a wide group including those most affected by the issue, those living with the issue on a daily basis. We present them with the information we've collected and we say 'Is this accurate? Is this what you experience? Are these the real issues?' The Foundation then makes a commitment to provide the resources to make it possible for the group to meet and discuss the issue over the long-term. We provide funding for the research phase, a secretariat function for the meetings, ongoing support with convening and logistics. But the stakeholders explore options for action – we listen and learn and facilitate the discussion."*

### **A Critical Success Factor**

The Foundation's approach, described earlier, was solid and effective. However, an additional factor made a huge contribution to the successful development of the NYA:WEH program – the personal commitment of a number of "champions" throughout the development years of the project.

The commitment of the Principal of Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School, Mike Rehill, cannot be overstated. Having this passionate advocate for Aboriginal students within the school system was critical to the success of the program. As well, the Aboriginal Director of the sponsoring agency for the NYA:WEH program, Taunya Laslo, has made an enormous contribution of time and skill to the program that has ensured the program's survival and growth. Other champions, including Foundation staff and the Youngs as donors, have been crucial to the success of the program.

### **Conclusion**

The community development approach used throughout the consultation and planning process built both consensus for the approach and capacity within the Aboriginal community. From the beginning, the emphasis was to support the Aboriginal community in assuming the lead role in defining priorities, building consensus, and determining the directions for the new initiative. Additional resources, advice, and guidance were provided throughout the twelve months of planning, to support the development of skills and additional knowledge among the Aboriginal leaders. A sense of pride and accomplishment grew as the plan neared completion and the successful implementation of the program has solidified that.

The Foundation was able to provide leadership, to invest in the development and dissemination of the data and background information needed to understand and address the issues, and to bring together and support Aboriginal leaders, youth and their families, and the two school boards to develop a practical, targeted strategy for Hamilton's Aboriginal young people.

After almost six years of successful operation, the NYA:WEH program has had a profound impact both on our community and on our Foundation. Further, it has become a model for other communities across the country. It is a story worth telling.

## SOME LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FOUNDATION

- Who defines the problem is important. How the problem is defined determines the solutions and strategies for change that are proposed
- The partnership was formalized with a written contract. This was useful to help focus partners on their commitments and to ensure continuity of support despite staff changes within the partner organizations
- Leadership and champions are essential. People with vision, skills, and willingness to take calculated risks must champion this kind of initiative
- Individuals are key to the development of an initiative, but for sustainability, the initiative must be rolled into the system
- Capacity issues must be constantly recognized in working with partners
- Relationships are critical; expect a long-term commitment
- Participate in the cultural traditions of your partners – go to the important ceremonies, take part in rituals with respect
- Recognize that knowledge is a strategic asset. The Foundation has a role to play in gathering, interpreting and disseminating knowledge on community issues. It is always learning
- Provide comprehensive background information to donors, the Board and other participants. Research papers can be the centerpiece for convening efforts; stakeholders see their issues, concerns, contributions, learning and best practices reflected in the discussion papers
- Involve donors and Board every step of the way
- Work collaboratively with key leaders in the community – find allies and partners
- Use existing resources: CFC (principles, social justice framework etc.) and Vibrant Communities for example and take advantage of other learning opportunities
- Convening has become a regular part of the Foundation’s way of working and has brought new relationships in the community. The convening role has been a starting point for many of its strongest initiatives, providing a forum for honest, respectful dialogue and innovation
- Change is gradual (“evolution not revolution”), and it comes from building on strengths and successes

“This program took off like wildfire in Hamilton and we’d like to see that fire spread across Canada.”

*Hamilton Community Foundation donor, Mrs. Joyce Young*

## SOME LESSONS LEARNED FROM NYA:WEH ORGANIZERS

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“When a student can come into school and have a constant positive space and role model, it is a good thing.

When a student is hungry and can come into our rooms and get something to eat, it is a good thing.

When a student can come in and learn about their culture and earn credits at the same time, it is a good thing.

When there is always someone to talk to no matter what you have done, it is a good thing.

All of these different day-to-day strategies that our program has implemented have made a more successful student.”

*NYA:WEH champion and  
Principal of Sir John A.  
Macdonald Secondary School,  
Mike Rehill*

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There must be:

- Champions within the school, the school system, and the community
- A common community vision
- Dedicated program space
- An environment where diversity already flourishes
- Constant advocacy for the youth and the program
- A professional learning community within the school that can connect students to needed supports
- Public education about issues facing urban Aboriginal people
- Mentors within the project to motivate and educate the front-line staff
- Realistic timelines to meet objectives while building capacity
- Willingness for stakeholders to take healthy risks and think creatively
- A strong reporting and communication strategy
- A comprehensive data tracking and analysis system
- Opportunities to celebrate student and program success
- Relevance of all aspects of the program to urban Aboriginal youth
- A large budget for the necessities of life for program participants. Nutrition, transportation, extra-curricular trips, etc. must be included in project costs

It is essential that the significance of Aboriginal social environment stress (poverty, equity, health, and wellness) factors be considered in the planning and delivery of this type of program. As a community and a culture recovering from crisis, the demands made upon our leaders are numerous and the supports limited. This often has an impact on the level of support a student is able to receive. Resources for this program were often strained because Aboriginal partners do not have the financial and/or human capacity to meet the demand.



HAMILTON  
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For Hamilton, For Ever

## **VISION**

Providing Philanthropic Leadership Forever

## **MISSION**

To strengthen Hamilton's quality of life as an inclusive and sustainable community by acting as a catalyst and by connecting people, ideas and resources through community philanthropy.

## **CORE VALUES**

### ***Inclusiveness***

By actively seeking to represent and engage our community in its diversity in all aspects of our work, we will enhance social cohesion and community well being.

### ***Collaboration***

By working together, new ideas and solutions will be created to improve the common good.

### ***Accountability***

By pursuing excellence, we continue to develop new and better ways of monitoring, reporting on and improving our performance.

### ***Responsiveness***

By responding with a proactive, innovative approach, we will produce actions that meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

### ***Empowerment***

By increasing the capabilities and resilience of individuals, groups and organizations, we will strengthen our community.

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## **To contact us:**

Hamilton Community Foundation  
700 – 120 King Street West  
Hamilton, ON L8P 4V2  
(905) 523-5600 – phone  
(905) 523-0741 – fax  
[www.hcf.on.ca](http://www.hcf.on.ca) - website  
[information@hcf.on.ca](mailto:information@hcf.on.ca) – e-mail