



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Giant Steps Montreal Partners with Loblaw to Launch Groundbreaking  
Autism-Inclusive Adult Employment Initiative**

*Polaris Enterprise to Empower Adults with Autism Looking for Employment*

**Montreal, November 18, 2020** - Giant Steps Montreal announced today the launch of an industry-based, autism-inclusive adult education and employment initiative.

The Polaris Enterprise initiative will increase the employment preparedness and success of adults with autism and/or intellectual disabilities through a multi-faceted project developed via key partnerships between Giant Steps Montreal, George Weston Limited (Loblaw Companies Ltd), Wagar Adult Education Centre (English Montreal School Board), the Transforming Autism Care Consortium (TACC) and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Fully bilingual employment readiness and vocational programs will prepare individuals with autism both for general employment as well as for job-specific employment within the grocery industry at Loblaw Companies Limited (Maxi and Provigo in Quebec), or a similar industry-setting. The initiative will focus on both individuals' strengths and needs as well as multiple other factors impacting employment readiness and success, including education, employer roles, training, accommodations and supports, and family. A network of autistic mentors has been set up to inspire and share their personal life and employment experiences with the participants.

The goal of a successful pilot project is to launch an autism-inclusive employment initiative at Loblaw, leading to the paid employment of autistic adults in mission-critical positions at their Quebec distribution centres and retail environments. The model will be scalable nationwide and replicable across industry settings.

The multi-sector and multi-faceted project will engage partners from industry and employment, education, adult education, research and health sectors. The project seeks to provide a validated and measurable applied model for vocational preparation and employment that will

serve to directly and concretely advance employment success, quality of life, and good outcomes for adults on the spectrum.

In addition to creating employment resources for both employers looking to hire autistic adults and autistic adults looking for employment, a nine-part Polaris Enterprise Leadership Series, featuring interviews with business leaders from large and small organizations who are actively recruiting individuals on the Spectrum, will shine a light on best practices and experiences from other industries.

The project draws inspiration from one initiated by retired Senior Vice-President of Logistics and Distribution at Walgreens in the United States. Mr. Lewis, who has a son on the autism spectrum, presented an inclusive business model to the company's board, outlining the importance and benefits of hiring not only those with autism, but other types of disabilities as well. Since the initiative launched over a decade ago, thousands of individuals with disabilities have been hired by Walgreens, with nearly 20 percent of employees at the company's distribution centres currently self-identifying as having a disability. It remains the gold standard of disability employment.

## **Quotes**

“The transition from school to work, employment readiness, and employment support programs have all been identified as primary concerns for both autistic Canadians and caregivers. This program directly responds to these identified needs and service/support gaps, resulting in real competitive and meaningful employment opportunities across the lifespan.”

*Thomas Henderson  
Director General, Giant Steps*

“We have been on a culture journey over the past several years, deepening our CORE values and ensuring a collaborative and inclusive workplace. We are proud to support this forward-thinking project for which we will provide the industry setting (distribution centre and retail environment) for the strength-based, bilingual, vocational/educational program and fieldwork placements. We know and have worked with Giant Steps in the past and appreciate their innovative and inclusive work focused on responding to the lifelong needs of people on the autism spectrum.”

*Richard Dufresne  
President and Chief Financial Officer, George Weston Limited*

“At Maxi, our social mission is to Feed Everyone, and this partnership with Giant Steps is a perfect match. We want to help these young people and adults gain experience and be job-ready so they can find work and provide for their own needs. After recreating a mini Maxi

market at Giant Steps, we look forward to welcoming the first cohort to our stores, whom we will train and mentor to make this experience a success.”

*Patrick Blanchette*

*Vice-President, Core Operations, Maxi*

“Wagar Adult Education Centre of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) is thrilled to participate in this innovative pilot project that will benefit autistic students. We are grateful to Maxi for transforming a section of our cafeteria into a mini-market training centre where participants will be able to hone their skills before beginning their work placements. This and many more programs are needed to lower the high unemployment rate of autistic adults.”

*Nick Katalifos*

*Centre Principal, Wagar Adult Education Centre*

“The Transforming Autism Care Consortium is proud to support this ground-breaking project that will improve employment outcomes for autistic individuals. Adults with autism excel in the workplace with the right support system, and the Polaris Enterprise Project bases its framework on the findings of state of the art research and invaluable stakeholder experience. We trust that this initiative will inspire others to help create an even brighter future for the autistic community.”

*Mayada Elsabbagh*

*Director, Transforming Autism Care Consortium (TACC)*

### **Quick Facts**

- Approximately 1 in 66 Canadian children and youth, aged 5 to 17 years, is diagnosed with autism. Boys are 4.5 times more likely to be diagnosed with ASD than girls.
- According to the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability, the employment rate for autistic adults is 14.3 percent, compared to 92.7 per cent for the general population.
- A growing number of prominent companies have reformed their HR processes and are looking at neurodiversity as a competitive advantage.

### **About Giant Steps Montreal**

Giant Steps School has been in operation since 1980 and is dedicated to the education and inclusion of autistic youth, aged 4 to 21 years of age, in English and French. Giant Steps also offers adult education programming and currently runs the national Ready, Willing and Able employment program for the province of Quebec. Giant Steps established itself as a world leader in the area of autism and education, leading to satellite programs being opened across Canada, the United States, and as far away as Australia and Tasmania. For 40 years, we have offered high-quality, innovative, educational and therapeutic services to our students and continue to support the Quebec autism community.

The Giant Steps Resource and Training Centre, launched nearly 15 years ago, offers a gamut of services and supports to individuals with autism, their families, and autism professionals across Quebec and beyond. The centre coordinates applied research initiatives and social innovation projects such as our Inclusive Cities initiative with the cities of Laval and Montreal, our ASD First Responders Training Program, and our recent online training program for school bus drivers.

### **About Loblaw Companies Limited**

Loblaw Companies Limited is Canada's food and pharmacy leader and the nation's largest retailer. Loblaw provides Canadians with grocery, pharmacy, health and beauty, apparel, general merchandise, financial services, and wireless mobile products and services. With more than 2,400 corporate, franchised and Associate-owned locations, Loblaw, its franchisees, and Associate-owners employ approximately 200,000 full- and part-time employees, making it one of Canada's largest private sector employers.

### **About the English Montreal School Board**

With a youth and adult sector population of more than 37, 000 students, the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) is the largest English public school board in Quebec. Established on July 1, 1998, when the province created new boards along linguistic lines. Our network consists of 77 schools and centres. For more details, visit the EMSB website at [www.emsb.qc.ca](http://www.emsb.qc.ca).

### **About Transforming Autism Care Consortium**

The Transforming Autism Care Consortium (TACC) is a research network that connects and mobilizes Quebec's strengths in autism research to improve the quality of life of people with autism and their families. We accomplish this by accelerating scientific discovery, building capacity, and integrating evidence into practice and policy.

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