

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

RAPTORS LAUNCH AUTISM CAMPAIGN AT TORONTO-AREA SCHOOL

Toronto, February 2 -- Toronto Raptors player Darrick Martin and former Raptors General Manager Rob Babcock will join the John Wanless Public School Boys Basketball Team Thursday to launch this year's Toonies for Autism Campaign.

The school's grade six students will donate a toonie to watch and cheer as Babcock and Martin provide valuable basketball tips and coaching to the John Wanless Dragons players.

Autism is a complex developmental disability resulting from a neurological disorder that affects brain function and typically appears during the first three years of life. Children with autism have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions and play activities. The disorder is four times more prevalent in boys than girls.

Both Martin and Babcock have personally been affected by autism. Martin has a brother with autism and Babcock's nephew also has the condition.

Raising awareness about autism is also a cause that remains close to the John Wanless Dragons as the team's 10-year-old assistant coach is affected by the condition.

"Autism is a challenging condition and I personally understand the stress and struggle families go through in dealing with it," said Babcock. "Over the past several years, there have been breakthroughs that give us hope. I'm proud to support this worthy initiative that helps bring us closer to solving the puzzle of autism."

One in 165 children in Canada is affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder. It's estimated that 18,000 Ontario children and more than 48,000 across Canada under the age of 20 are affected by the condition.

"This is a growing health and education challenge for all of us," said Ron Harrison, Co-Chair of the Campaign.

"As parents, we witness the immense stress and challenges children with autism face. We want to ensure that everyone they encounter — classmates, teachers, neighbours — understand the condition and support them," said Bonnie McPhail, Campaign Co-Chair, whose youngest daughter is affected by autism.

-MORE-

RAPTORS HELP LAUNCH AUTISM AWARENESS

Now in its fifth year, the Toonies for Autism Campaign is supported mainly by volunteers from Autism Society Ontario. The Campaign's mandate is to help raise awareness among schools and communities and to raise funds for research in Canada. To date, more than \$600,000 has been raised with hopes of reaching the \$1 million mark by the end of 2006.

Harrison added that a child with autism faces many challenges. However, having fellow students and adults misunderstand their condition presents the greatest challenge.

"Our school feels it is very important that our students learn about autism and be supportive friends for a classmate that is affected by the condition," said John Wanless School Principal Brent MacLeod.

Held the last week of April, schools participate by encouraging students to learn about autism and take part in learning activities designed to heighten awareness and sensitivity to the condition. More than 530 primary, secondary schools and post-secondary institutions across Ontario have participated, involving 220,000 students and staff. For more information, visit www.togetherforautism.ca.

Autism Society Ontario is the leading source of information and referral on autism and one of the largest collective voices representing the autism community. Members are connected through a volunteer network of 31 chapters throughout the province. More information about the Society is available at www.autismsociety.on.ca.

###

Media Contacts:

Toonies for Autism Campaign
Autism Society Ontario
Layne Verbeek at (416) 817-7107

Toronto Raptors
Rajani Kamath, Manager Corporate Communications
(416) 815-5790

John Wanless Public School
Brett MacLeod, Principal
(416) 393-9350