



## Renfrew County Child Poverty Action Network

c/o The Phoenix Centre for Children and Families  
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### **Back Plus Program (Summary)**

The goal of the *Backpack Plus* is to ensure that all children in Renfrew County have opportunities to participate fully in school, recreational and community activities. It is through that feeling of inclusion that children have the best chance to succeed and reach their full academic and social potential in life.

#### **Backgrounder**

Backpack Plus program started in 2005 and has grown year on year. More referrals are made, more children are being helped and we never have to advertise as the support of all school boards, social agencies and organizations throughout Renfrew County, who often refer clients to this program. Many agencies and organizations have helped with distribution, and collaborate on a volunteer basis with many CPAN initiatives, *Backpack Plus* being one.

*Backpack Plus* has seen increased usage over the years. For example, during the 2006-07 school year over 1,000 children were assisted, this figure increased to over 1,400 during the 2007-08 school year, and for the last school year (2008-09) this program served over 1500 low income children. This increase is due to the fact that the program is easily accessible, and delivered in a dignified and respectful manner. This is extremely important as many individuals living in poverty are stigmatized and judged.

Being able to have this program available has made a big difference for children and families. Parents have phoned CPAN to thank us for allowing their child to be "just like the other children." One parent said that it was the first time her daughter had returned to school and had not been teased. The mom also said that her daughter was now enjoying school more and doing better.

In previous years Backpack Plus has been funded by Renfrew County National Child Benefit Reinvestment fund. This fund no longer exists, and despite our requests we have been unable to secure any funding from Renfrew County Social Services.

#### **Our Request for Donations**

CPAN is determined to help these children in need, who without our assistance will have to return to school unprepared to learn, and who will feel socially excluded. We know that children who are included do much better at school and are more likely to succeed, graduate and transition to post secondary education. We estimate that there will be a need of between 1500 to 2000 children who will need backpacks, supplies, and shoes.

Our network is asking for donations of new backpacks (all sizes); school supplies such as packets of paper, pens, pencils, erasures, binders, markers, highlighters, calculators, geometry sets, etc.; running shoes for gym/indoor (all sizes, to fit JK up to and including grade 12, who are in adult sizes) and/or the funding to purchase these items.

### **Why is there the need?**

Parents across Renfrew County are facing increasing financial need and challenges for their school-aged children. These challenges are evident on several fronts:

- 1) **School Board Restraint and Footwear Regulations:** School boards have been forced by financial necessity to download the cost of school supplies onto parents. School boards in Renfrew County also require students to have running shoes for classroom and gymnasium activities that have non-marking soles, and purely for indoor use. This means Renfrew County parents must purchase extra footwear for their children outside the necessary footwear required for school. **Back Pack Plus** has been operating for two years, and well received by low income parents, social service agencies, and schools. No advertising or marketing has been required for the **Back Pack Plus** program due to the overwhelming need and the support we received from all school boards, schools and social service agencies in Renfrew County.
  
- 2) **Cost of Living increases:** The past few years have seen spiraling costs for the basic necessities of life, namely heat hydro, and rent. Of particular concern for the coming year is the continuation of increased costs in electricity, home heating, rent and gas. These costs are being covered by everyone in Renfrew County but for those families who are on fixed incomes there is often a choice between the necessities of life (food, heat, rent, etc.) and adequate school supplies, appropriate footwear and winter clothing, also extracurricular activities. For families on low or fixed incomes these “necessities-of-life” dollars must be found somewhere.

Unfortunately, they all too often come from the backpacks of children, from necessary footwear or clothing purchases, and/or make the painful decision to deny children school or community related activities such as; hot lunches, field trips, and participation with extracurricular activities. Parents are too often forced to make the difficult choice between meeting their families basic needs (including food), and being able to involve their children fully and adequately in their schools and communities, and see to it that they have appropriate clothing for Canada’s extreme weather conditions.

We know that by removing the barriers to success we can give every child the opportunity to reach their full potential in life, regardless of their socio-economic background. It is for these reasons that CPAN is working hard to keep the *Backpack Plus* program running