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Group led by Laurier professor explores potential entrepreneurial incubator system in Haiti

WATERLOO – A group of local educators, a business person and a technology leader will join Wilfrid Laurier University professor **Steve Sider** on a trip to Haiti **Oct. 14-19** to explore setting up an entrepreneurial incubator system reminiscent of those in Waterloo Region.

Sider, an assistant professor in Laurier's Faculty of Education, has been making regular trips to Haiti since 2003. On this trip, Sider's group will work with partners at Haitian universities, businesses and the Haitian Ministry of Education to investigate how an incubator can support social innovation in Haiti. The group will also be examining how technology can make education more accessible at the elementary, secondary and university level.

The group of education officials and business professionals includes: **Stephen Preece**, academic director of Laurier's Schlegel Centre for Entrepreneurship; a current graduate student in Laurier's new Master of Arts in Community Engagement and Social Justice; **Dawn Buzza**, associate dean of Laurier's Faculty of Education; **Jeremy Auger**, chief strategy officer at Desire2Learn; **Judy Staats**, a local business person; as well as officials from the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Waterloo Region District School Board and two of Sider's Haitian colleagues who work at universities in the United States.

Sider emphasizes that it is not a one-way street; the group is going to Haiti to learn as much as they are to provide input into issues such as an incubator and online education.

"Our work in Haiti has been built on authentic partnerships and this trip will bring these partners together to consider how we can work together going forward," said Sider. "In a sense, the trip itself will serve as an incubator as the various partners meet and ideas collide leading to new directions. We have seen this occur in the various incubators in the Waterloo Region; to see the potential for it in Haiti, and with international participants, is tremendously exciting."

Some of Sider's past projects include trips with Laurier Bachelor of Education students to teach in Haitian schools, and a project launched in 2011 called the Digital Mentoring Project, which provides school principals in Haiti with BlackBerry smartphones to facilitate communication with their local and international counterparts.

While Haiti is still the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, Sider says he has seen vast improvements in the country's education, infrastructure and technological capabilities, particularly since the catastrophic earthquake that hit the nation in 2010. The country also has a strong entrepreneurial culture. Of the 10 million people in Haiti, 6 million have access to cell phones, which means technology can help bring education to more people, and help give teachers a formal education.