



MOVING FORWARD

The Role of Adult Literacy in Supporting Provincial Initiatives

The Purpose of This Report:

The following report reflects on the essential role that Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs can play in supporting citizens as they build their resiliency and reach their potential. Ontario's adult literacy programs are well-positioned to strengthen existing provincial programming and to support the government in proposed initiatives moving forward. Outlined within this report are strategic opportunities for the provincial government to consider.

Report Highlights:

- What opportunities exist to strengthen services through system to system integration
- The necessary role of adult literacy programs in meeting the urgent need of people with low or nonexistent digital literacy skills
- How adult literacy programs can support learning needs that have occurred due to a disruption in education
- How adult literacy programs can help newcomers integrate into Canadian society
- The need to better integrate foundational skill building and soft skills programming into the Apprenticeship system to increase retention and completion rates
- The role of adult literacy programs in ongoing labour market initiatives

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Introduction

This year has posed unprecedented challenges as well as significant opportunities. Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies are more relevant than ever – thanks to Covid-19 and its associated spotlight on what happens to individuals, employees, employers and communities that are negatively impacted by the Digital Divide. Digital literacy and digital literacy programming are now priority issues in many communities, as they recognize the need for individuals to have access to technology and the skills to use technology productively.

While the pandemic caused people and organizations across the world to stop in their tracks and re-evaluate Health and Safety protocols, working arrangements, the labour market, and a myriad of other issues, the need for adult upgrading and employment services continued.

In this report, our goal is not only to describe the role of Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programming in our communities. LBS is not an island. Rather, it intersects with, supports and bridges to many other essential labour market and adult learning programs, not to mention that it reinforces and supports the goals of the Ontario government and their associated programs. To adequately demonstrate the relationships that LBS can, should, and, in some cases, does have with other training designed to build adults' skills and employment opportunities, this year's report provides context on LBS and:

- The Pandemic and the Resulting Rise in Interest in Digital Literacy
- Impact of COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario
- The Move of English as a Second Language Training to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
- Employment Services Transformation and Literacy and Basic Skills
- LBS and the Labour Market
- SkillsAdvance Ontario
- Proliferation of Micro-Credentials
- Marketing to Employers
- Apprenticeship/Pre-apprenticeship

Each of the areas mentioned above are places in which LBS programs can and should play a role – not an accidental role or a role that is dependent on circumstance, but a role that has been recognized and designed through policy and the responsible integration of government programs.

The Pandemic and the Resulting Rise in Interest in Digital Literacy

The coronavirus pandemic has shown firsthand the importance of digital literacy as millions of people found themselves relying on technology in new ways. The pandemic suddenly forced people to work, attend school, visit the doctor, shop and more, all online. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2021 online International Conference on 'Literacy for a human-centered recovery: Narrowing the digital divide' reflected on how literacy could contribute to building a solid foundation for a human-centered recovery and creating programs and policies for a more inclusive and relevant literacy promotion, which includes learning in an increasingly digitized society.

The rapid shift to an online lifestyle due to the pandemic has resulted in a steep rise in technology-enabled literacy learning, which has generated demands for digital skills. Not only are digital skills required to narrow the gap: we also need to improve infrastructure; the affordability of digital devices, applications and networks; as well as safety and security measures. There is a need to develop digital skills for managing different modes of teaching and learning that reflect people's needs, aspirations, circumstances and contexts. Digital literacy is far more than the ability to identify misinformation or avoid online scams; it means being able to participate meaningfully in online communities, to interpret the changing digital landscape and to unlock the power of the internet for good.

Nearly 45,000 Ontarians engage in some form of digital learning in one of 274 adult learning locations each year. Forty-two percent receive some sort of income assistance. Others are in low-wage and precarious jobs or are living in low-income families. About half of the participants in these programs are 25-44 years of age. The resulting digital divide due to the pandemic has three interrelated layers: differences in how people connect to the internet; differences in what kind of online activities they engage in; and differences in how they benefit from their interactions with services, resources and networks that are only available online. These differences are shaped by income and education.

Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs can help to narrow this digital divide by improving peoples' digital knowledge and skills for personal development in order to aspire to plan, learn and develop further and become a successful part of the workforce. This would, in turn, lead to economic productivity, demographic engagement and improved overall quality of life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed the importance of supporting Ontarians with limited digital access and shone a spotlight on the need for digital literacy skills.

Impact of COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario

Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) maintains a deep understanding of what's happening to and within adult literacy programs. We also look at factors that might influence the next generation of adult literacy learners.

Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) statistics have shown us over the past years that schools in low-income neighbourhoods have much higher rates of Grade 3 students **not** reaching the Reading and Math standards for Ontario compared to schools in other neighbourhoods. Research is now showing us that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased this gap. The school closures and pandemic hardships have more directly affected low-income families. These families represent a higher level of racialized, Indigenous groups, newcomers and people with disabilities.¹

Between March 14, 2020, to May 15, 2021, Ontario schools were closed for 20 weeks, which is longer than any other Canadian province or territory. These closures increased absenteeism and decreased or stopped access to specialized educational services. Research has shown:

- closures affected students' educational transitions, which affect students' later outcomes
- decreased enrollment in kindergarten
- reduced access to developmental services

Scholars Common @ Laurier state that this disruption in learning will have future economic costs. "Each month of skill loss is predicted to cause a 1% drop in lifetime earnings." This would decrease the national income by 0.5% per year which would lead to a GDP loss for Canada of 1.6 trillion dollars.

¹ COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts, Scholars Commons @ Laurier, Spring 2021

There are two ways that adult literacy programs can help to change these poor outcomes.

- Educational upgrading of parents – the more literate the parent, the better educational supports the child will receive at home
- **Preparing and offering more youth programming in Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs.** We will likely see an influx of youth into our programs in the coming years as young people seek skills development or upgrading in order to become employable. The impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations will see these youth numbers increase over the next 12 to 15 years

It is also important to note that research has shown that Grade 3 students who learned remotely were behind their in-person classmates (0.278 standard deviation loss in students learning remotely, 0.233 for blended learning and 0.182 loss for in-person instruction).²

Literacy and Basic Skills programs can provide a mix of blended learning, but it is obvious from this research that vulnerable populations still need in-person learning to move forward towards their goals efficiently.



² The COVID-19 pandemic and student achievement on Ohio's third-grade English Language Arts Assessment, Kogan V, Lavertu S., January 2021

The Move of English as a Second Language to the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development

Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs are part of the Employment Ontario (EO) system, funded by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD). In the spring of 2021 programs and services for newcomers, including English as a Second Language (ESL) training, were integrated into this ministry as well. This change was intended to improve coordination to better support immigrants by bringing settlement services and Employment Ontario training programs together under one mandate. With these two services funded by the same ministry, it is logical to promote more coordination between all EO service providers and ESL, more awareness of LBS within newcomer services, and more referrals to LBS programs as a result.

Approximately 80,000 clients are served by newcomer settlement services annually, with 70,000 language assessments and referrals made to programs that meet client needs. LBS could become one of those programs, particularly for language learners who assess higher than Canadian Benchmark Level 5, are seeking targeted, employment focused or digital skills training, or have barriers to access existing ESL training. And while adult language training to gain official language skills is needed for effective labour market and community integration of newcomers, as it stands, newcomers aren't always able to find English language training in their community. More language training opportunities currently exist in urban areas as opposed to rural and remote areas where an increasing number of newcomers are now locating – even during COVID. Where possible, LBS providers are already stepping in to fill the gap for all levels of learners, and it is likely LBS programs will see a rise in ESL learners until ESL training is more equitably distributed across Ontario.

From a cultural perspective, many male newcomers prioritize their need to find immediate employment ahead of their need for language training. Statistics support this finding, showing roughly two-thirds of language training participants are women. While working certainly compromises their ability to attend scheduled daytime training, many males are also unable or unwilling to attend evening training as well, citing the need to interact with family during that time.

Even with the COVID pivot to virtual instruction models in English as a Second Language (ESL), classroom programs still offer more synchronous (live, real-time) virtual training at pre-scheduled times than asynchronous (independent study) online training that can be accessed any time of day or night.

Unlike ESL, Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) offers a fully online, independent study option through its e-Channel programs that is attractive for all newcomers who need to be able to flex their schedule, or who prefer online learning.

Newcomers enter Canada at various stages in their educational journeys. Depending on their age, country of origin, and circumstances surrounding their departure from that country, they will have had varying learning experiences prior to their arrival. They bring experiences, good and bad, and can struggle with both everyday English proficiency and academic English proficiency.

Everyday skills are the basic interpersonal communication skills that help them relate to their daily surroundings and integrate into their new environment, whatever that is. They may only involve speaking and listening skills. For those looking beyond that, most will need to work specifically on reading and writing, math upgrading, computer instruction and targeted and goal-oriented learning that can be provided by Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs to help them integrate into Canadian society and feel part of the mainstream. All Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) programs and services should be aware of the role LBS can play in the lives of newcomers, and be sharing that information and making referrals.



Employment Services Transformation and Literacy and Basic Skills

The government is transforming Ontario's employment services to make them more efficient, more streamlined, and outcomes focused. As part of Employment Services Transformation, a new service delivery model will integrate social assistance employment services, as well as other government employment services, into Employment Ontario. This new system will be more responsive to the needs of job seekers, businesses and local communities."

<http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/programs/est.html>

The Employment Services Transformation has begun across the province, beginning in three prototype areas: the Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula (which includes the counties of Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk), Muskoka-Kawarthas and Peel Region. In each of these regions, a single organization has been selected to oversee the design and delivery of Employment Ontario employment services. These Service System Managers (SSMs) are:

- A consortium led by Fedcap for the Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula
- Fleming College for Muskoka-Kawarthas
- WCG, part of the APM Group for Peel Region

"In Ontario, Service System Managers play a central role in the planning, funding, administration and delivery of income support (Ontario Works) and employment services."

<https://omssa.com/docs/OMSSA - Income and Employment Services in Ontario.pdf>

"As of January 1, 2021, with the integration of Ontario Works-Employment Assistance (OW-EA), SSMs will be responsible for the planning, design and delivery of integrated employment services for Employment Ontario and Social Assistance clients."

<https://www.omssa.com/docs/Common Assessment Overview.pdf>

Impact on LBS

Employment Services (ES) and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs are both part of Employment Ontario, but LBS programs will not be overseen by these new SSMs. Between now and 2023 this model will be expanded across the province and is anticipated to have an effect on LBS programming. Based on feedback from LBS agencies and support organizations that are part of the prototype areas, we anticipate several impacts.

Assistance: LBS is not going through the same level of change as our partners, so we are able to extend our support. LBS can ask “How can we help you?”

Relationships: There will be changes to processes, the flow of referrals, the way information is accessed and in how Employment Ontario agencies stay informed of community resources. There will be changes to ES job descriptions, roles and staff. All this highlights that there will be a need to reach out and maintain existing relationships, build new relationships, and stay connected. It is these relationships that will allow us to support each other and stay informed about the training, services and supports available.

Case Management: Employment Services has a case management focus. LBS organizations can reach out to offer support with the case management process by offering to meet with each Employment Service organization to set up, customize and participate in a case management/communication system between ES & LBS.

Referral Systems: The referrals LBS receives from OW will likely be reduced significantly. LBS may also experience a decrease in the number of ES referrals to LBS. As Employment Services staff settle into new roles, systems, expectations, and client needs, we fully understand that it will take time to adapt and find a flow. LBS organizations will continue to monitor and explore referral sources and develop outreach strategies that involve all community partners.

Worker / Employer Support: In addition to assisting people in finding work, ES will have an increased focus on job retention. LBS can support retention by helping individuals gain the skills they need before starting a job. A lesser-known service is our ability to support people who are working and at risk of losing their jobs. We need to be able to highlight our existing workplace/workforce programs and resources to show that we are well positioned to strengthen the labour market through collaboration with community partners, employers and workers.

Client Needs: Increasingly Employment Services support individuals with complex needs. Under an SSM, they will use an assessment called the “Common Assessment”. This assessment determines whether a client needs Stream A, B or C support. Note: this assessment does not replace assessments offered by LBS organizations.

- Stream A: Low risk of long-term unemployment
- Stream B: Medium risk of long-term unemployment
- Stream C: High risk of long-term unemployment

LBS is well positioned to offer support to individuals in all Streams, but in particular Stream C clients. LBS can help by offering its experience providing support for vulnerable or marginalized populations and by applying our knowledge of wraparound services. We will look for ways to communicate that we can offer programs while a learner is also being supported by other community services.

LBS and the Labour Market

The Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program is a learning program. As such, it is sometimes regarded as an academic program that has few connections to the labour market. Nothing could be farther from the truth. A review of statistical data from LBS programs shows that significant numbers of LBS learners are employed upon entering LBS. These individuals seek out LBS programming to keep the job they have or to prepare for a higher-level position within their company. Some are working full-time and some are working part-time. But continued employment and hopefully better paying employment is their goal.

Working with job seekers and employed individuals is probably the most direct way that LBS programming impacts the labour market. But it's certainly not the only way. As part of Employment Ontario, LBS has five pathways. One pathway is employment, but the other four, arguably, are undertaken or could lead to employment:

- Apprenticeship
- Secondary School Credit
- Post-Secondary
- Independence

Over the past 20 years, LBS has done significant work to connect with the other parts of Employment Ontario (Employment Services and Apprenticeship). We have raised awareness of LBS with Employment Services Staff, talked to Job Developers about how and when to speak about adult literacy programming, reviewed statistical information, sought feedback on shorter-term curriculum topics that would benefit Employment Service clients, talked about the role of assessment and encouraged cross-referrals. All of this work has been undertaken with the belief that increased skills mean increased success at getting and keeping jobs.

We have also worked with Apprenticeship partners in our communities, and have promoted system-to-system linkages. In other words, we have researched and promoted the different points in a pre-apprentice/apprentice's journey at which skills challenges might be identified and remedied.

Apprenticeship/Pre-Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship and skills training is another Ministry Program that LBS can support, though historically and currently many Training Delivery Agents (TDAs) do not access these supports. In many cases, it seems they do not know about them. A recent report from the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum – Forum canadien sur l'apprentissage (CAF-FCA), [Apprentice Demand: A 2021 Labour Market Information Report Ontario](#), indicates that Ontario will need approximately 88,960 new certified journeypersons over the next decade to keep pace with economic growth and rising retirements, two-thirds of which will be concentrated in the top 15 Red Seal trades. It will be necessary to attract more than 296,350 new apprentices in the Red Seal trades alone. This does not factor in the number of apprentices that will be needed to maintain certification levels in the other trades.

One reason that so many apprentices will be needed is that many do not complete their apprenticeships. According to the report, the completion rate for total apprenticeships in Ontario averages less than 50% per year. This calculation does not filter out all the high school students registered in the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program who often do not continue on in apprenticeship, so the actual completion rate is likely higher. Regardless, even if the completion rate is closer to 70% or 75%, it still means a fairly large number of apprentices do not complete, representing a significant unrealized investment by both the apprentices and the employers.

Over the years, we have learned that two reasons apprentices drop out are:

- a lack of core math, communications and digital literacy skills, on which to build higher-level technical skills
- poor understanding of the technical and “soft” or employability skills they need to succeed in the trades

Pre-apprenticeship programs offer an excellent chance to become acquainted with and gain some experience in the trade/s of interest, so future tradespeople know what to expect. If a candidate in a pre-apprenticeship program lacks the core or essential skills to deal with the content of the program, they might struggle with the program content, drop out of the program or have difficulty succeeding in future training.

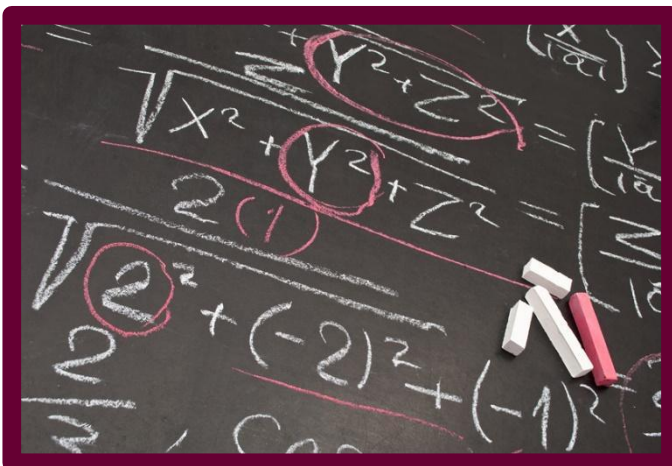
Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) adult upgrading programs are uniquely suited to help potential apprentices address their core and essential skills needs. Including a literacy upgrading component in the pre-apprenticeship program ensures participants get the help they need at the beginning, so they are better able to succeed in the rest of the program.

Likewise, as apprentices approach the start of their in-school sessions, they might be unaware of the levels of essential and “soft” skills they need to be able to handle the demands of the courses. LBS providers are trained in skills assessment and can help address skills gaps to support the apprentices’ success.

While it is gratifying to see that the Ministry’s Call for Proposals for pre-apprenticeship programs gives priority to proponents who partner with LBS providers, we would like to see a better integration of LBS into the entire system, so that it becomes automatic for both apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship TDAs to include upgrading opportunities in their programming.

Working with LiUNA 1059

This past fiscal, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) had the opportunity to work with Labourers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 1059 to provide “Apprenticeship Skills Check-Ins” for almost 100 pre-apprentices.



Through the Skills Check-Ins we learned that the majority of pre-apprentices had challenges with basic math. We reached out to our LBS partners and they were able to respond by developing a customized math program (a Math Booster). Of the 97 pre-apprentices, 80 went on to take the Math Booster which is a great demonstration of how LBS can support apprenticeship.

SkillsAdvance Ontario

Another way that Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs can have a strong connection to, and can play a significant role in, the development of the labour market are through SkillsAdvance Ontario (SAO) projects. These sector-specific training programs have been funded through the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) over the past 4-5 years, and LBS should factor significantly in the development and implementation of these projects.

"As part of work by the Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development (MLTSD) to modernize and transform Ontario's employment and training services, the SkillsAdvance Ontario (SAO) Pilot was launched in November 2016 with the intention of supporting workforce development in identified key growth sectors. The pilot funds sector-specific projects to develop partnerships that connect employers with the employment and training services required to recruit and advance workers with the right essential, technical, and employability skills."

SkillsAdvance Ontario (SAO): Pilot Evaluation 2016-2018

Literacy and Basic Skills agencies are particularly interested in how SAO projects are designed to build "essential skills" since that is the reason that LBS agencies exist and have been funded for the past 30+ years. LBS agencies have developed significant expertise in assessment, training delivery, and working with individuals who are distant from the labour market.

SAO projects represent a unique approach to providing sector-specific training to individuals who have a desire to work in a sector that is in high demand. And it makes sense to provide such individuals with foundational or essential skills training, coupled with soft skills training and sector-specific training.



In some communities, it was quickly seen that partnering with existing LBS agencies that have a mandate to build essential skills was a logical step for these projects. In other communities, LBS agencies were not considered as a potential partner – a scenario that has become increasingly problematic as the number of SAO projects continues to skyrocket. As of the fall of 2021, there were approximately 80+ such projects throughout Ontario.

The Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program would benefit from increased visibility. Many LBS programs have limited or no budget lines for marketing, so it's possible that other community organizations are unaware of the presence of LBS when they are building a SAO proposal.

It would be ideal if LBS were to be integrated into SAO planning and execution by design, especially since LBS and SAO are both funded through the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD). Through the deliberate integration of LBS as a system, SAO projects could leverage existing assessment tools, curriculum, knowledge and expertise and build a Community of Practice among and between SAOs to increase SAO program effectiveness.

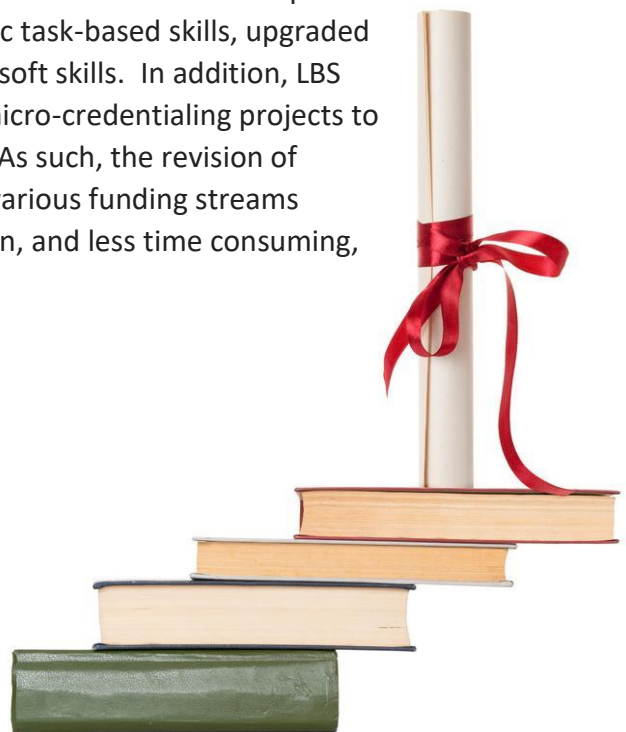


The Proliferation of Micro-credentials

Compact skill-based projects, referred to as micro-credentialing which are possible through MLTSD funding, have rapidly emerged as an excellent opportunity to address local labour market issues and Ontario's economic recovery post-pandemic.

Funding streams such as Local Labour Market Partnerships (LLMP), Pre-apprenticeship Training Delivery Agents, the Skills Development Fund and Rapid Skills pose both a challenge and an opportunity for LBS. The current rapid proliferation of micro-credentialing lacks a provincial framework and clear guidelines that make use of the curricula and resources developed by LBS for skills-based training programs. At present, inclusion of LBS in short courses that are being designed and developed by various Employment Services, Training Development Boards, and other client-serving organizations is arbitrary. These programs may offer essential and soft skills training, issue certificates and/or sector-specific professional certifications, and provide health and safety training. Within this context, the diversity of skills-based short programs that has emerged from multiple service providers has led to some confusion in communities about the role and purpose of Literacy and Basic Skills.

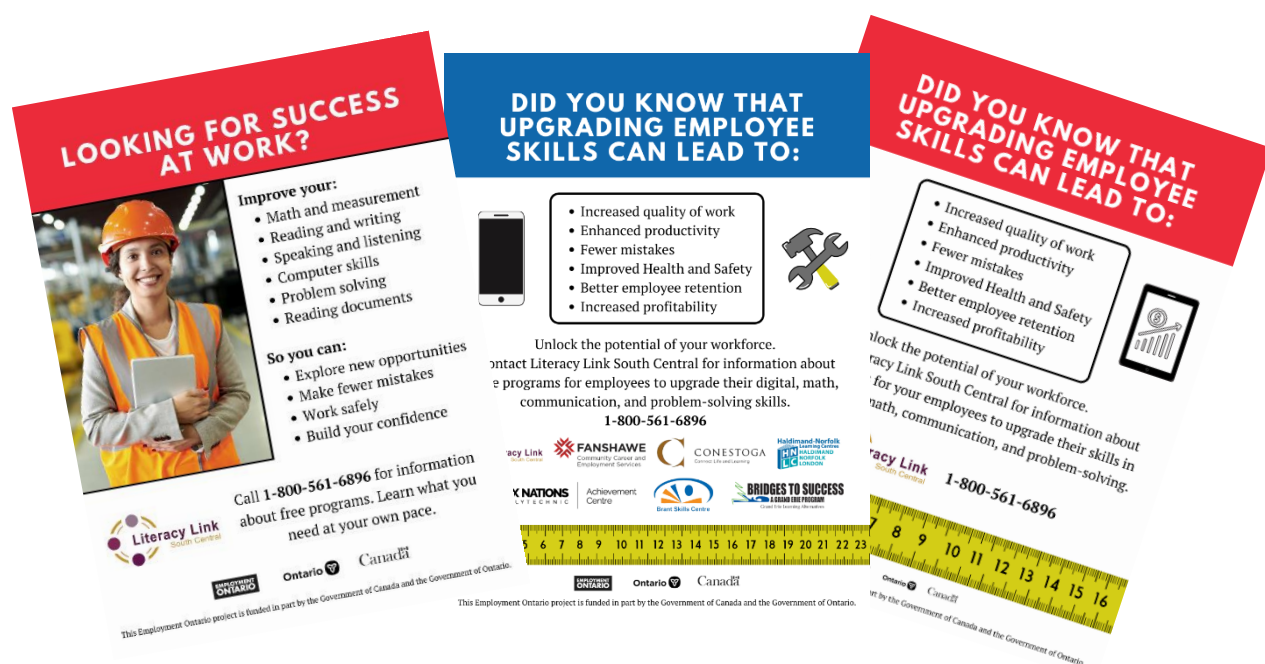
With the impacts of the pandemic and wide-spread layoffs, there is a growing skills chasm. LBS has a long history of responding to labour market needs through annual Literacy Service Planning and other business planning initiatives. LBS programs are well situated to respond to micro-credentialing projects with modifiable curricula and access to adaptable resources, sector-specific digital literacy, authentic task-based skills, upgraded reading and numeracy skills as well as sharpened soft skills. In addition, LBS offers expertise in adult education pedagogy to micro-credentialing projects to ensure participants learn at an appropriate pace. As such, the revision of funding guidelines to formally include LBS in the various funding streams would not only be cost-effective, workplace-driven, and less time consuming, but also pedagogically appropriate.



Outreach to Employers

Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) works closely with Workforce Planning and Development Boards to reach out to employers. In 2020, we followed up with employers from across our service area whose responses in the annual Workforce Planning Board's EmployerOne survey indicated they were interested in finding out about adult upgrading services. We invited 150 employers to participate in a skills discussion. About 18 employers accepted our invitation and we quickly came to realize that most employers have no idea that Literacy and Basic Skills programs exist. As a result, we created some posters in collaboration with our LBS programs.

Here are some examples of what we developed:



The posters were sent to employers who had indicated an interest in knowing where and how to refer employees to upgrading programs. Literacy Link South Central would like to express its appreciation to those LBS practitioners who collaborated on the development of these posters. Their feedback and suggestions made each version better.

Conclusion

To conclude, 2021-2022 was a challenging year for everyone. In spite of the challenges created by the pandemic, Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs showed remarkable resilience. In a time of great need, they turned on a dime to create processes, learn software, and market so they could deliver online. Other LBS programs went to great lengths to safely deliver materials and pick up completed activities from their learners' residences.

Meanwhile, employment and training programs proliferated, many of which had a foundational skill component. As a regional literacy network, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) has done what we can to support our programs by trying to raise the profile of LBS with Service System Managers, with SkillsAdvance Ontario projects, with apprenticeship, and the list goes on...

Whether it's referred to as literacy and numeracy, Essential Skills or foundational skills, the need for LBS has never been stronger. Ontario's adult literacy programs are ready to support Ontarians and strengthen existing provincial programming. Talk to us today about how we can support the government in achieving their goals in 2022 and beyond.



Visit Literacy Link South Central online at www.llsc.on.ca