

Towards an Effective Adult Learning System: Report on the Toronto Roundtable

Prepared for the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre
of the Canadian Council on Learning

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Introduction

There is a lot of talk in policy circles about “lifelong” learning. In an economy where technologies and skill needs are constantly changing, Canadians must have access to learning opportunities throughout their lives. This is reinforced by concerns about the ageing of the workforce: with declining labour force growth, it is important that everyone, including older Canadians, has a chance to fully contribute to the economy and to their communities.

It is particularly important that those with lower levels of educational attainment have the opportunity to improve their skills, in light of concerns about the polarization of earnings and income and disturbing evidence (from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey) about adult literacy levels: nine million Canadians aged 16 to 65 years have literacy skills below the level considered necessary to live and work in today’s society.

But how well do we “walk the talk” about lifelong learning in Canada? To answer this question, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) undertook a study to document the availability of learning opportunities for adults, identify factors that influence the participation of less-educated/less-skilled adults, and assess the effectiveness of our adult learning systems. The resulting report, *Too Many Left Behind: Canada’s Adult Education and Training System*, by Karen Myers and Patrice de Broucker, finds that access to learning opportunities, whether through second chances in the formal education system, through government-funded programs in the community, or through employer-sponsored training, is generally poor for less-educated adults in Canada.¹ The report puts forward a set of principles for reform, and recommends some steps towards a more coherent, navigable and effective adult learning system.

The Adult Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC) of the Canadian Council on Learning is sponsoring a series of regional roundtables to discuss the findings of *Too Many Left Behind*, develop a vision for a more effective learning system, and identify actions that could be taken to move towards that vision. The roundtables involve government officials, educators, representatives of the business and labour communities, and researchers.

The first of these roundtables was held in Halifax on November 13, 2006; the second in Toronto on January 12, 2007. This document reports on the highlights of the discussion at the Toronto roundtable.

¹ Neither *Too Many Left Behind* nor the roundtable participants set out an explicit definition of “less educated.” Those without a high school diploma or equivalent would clearly fall in this category. Those with a high school diploma and no further credentials (whether a degree, diploma, trades certificate, or certificate from an essential skills program) would also be seen as “less educated.” Those with low literacy skills (levels 1 or 2 of the scale used in the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey) would be seen as “less skilled.”

Too Many Left Behind: Key Conclusions

At the Atlantic roundtable in Halifax, Patrice de Broucker, one of the authors of *Too Many Left Behind*, provided an overview of the conclusions and recommendations of that report. A key finding is that, although most provinces have launched recent initiatives in support of learning opportunities for adults, adult learning systems remain complex, fragmented, and incomplete and employer support for training remains concentrated on the higher skilled.

The **vision for adult learning** systems set out in *Too Many Left Behind* is as follows:

- No one will leave school without a minimum set of employability skills.
- All adults will have access to learning opportunities to:
 - enhance their basic skills, and
 - maintain, enhance or transform advanced skills.
- All adults will have access to easy-to-follow information about learning opportunities.
- Counselling will be readily available; supports will be coordinated, and the system will be easy to navigate.
- The skills development of all workers will be considered important and worthwhile investments.

Too Many Left Behind recommends the following steps to move towards this vision:

- Implement a public policy **framework** that acknowledges the “**right to learn**.”
- Develop **financial support** programs appropriate to the needs of adult learners.
- Provide **incentives for employers** to support training of their less-skilled employees.
- Increase governments’ **investment in basic skills** training.
- Develop a **coordinated approach** to respond to adult learners’ needs.

Outcomes of the Halifax Roundtable

Ron Saunders briefly reviewed key outcomes of the Halifax roundtable held in November 2006. (For more detail on this, see the report on the Halifax roundtable, which is available on the CPRN and CCL Web sites.)

In Halifax, a consensus emerged on a vision for an adult learning system with the following characteristics: learner-centered; coordinated/seamless; collaborative; affordable; equitable; accountable; flexible; sustainable; and visible. Ideas for action towards realizing this vision were as follows:

Proposed Actions for Governments

- Develop a policy framework for adult learning that includes recognition of the right to learn.
- Increase investment in learning programs. Provide stable, long-term funding, including financial assistance to those who participate as individuals as well as financial incentives to employers.
- Promote a culture of lifelong learning.
- Foster collaboration among service providers.

Proposed Actions for Schools, Colleges, and Universities

- Offer more courses on evenings and weekends.
- Offer more flexibility around course load and time to complete programs.
- Use prior learning assessment and recognition more actively.
- Establish satellite operations in rural areas.
- Customize skills assessment tools and curriculum to meet the needs of particular industries.

Proposed Actions for Employers and Employer Associations

- Increase investment in structured learning for employees.
- Offer learning opportunities as an attraction/retention tool.
- Share success stories; act as champions.

Refining the Vision

Participants in the Toronto roundtable were asked to comment on the vision that emerged in Halifax, taking into account the Ontario context. While the vision articulated in Halifax was seen as generally sound, there were several suggestions to add to it, namely:

- Supplement “learner-centered” with “goal-directed” to emphasize that adult learning should be designed to achieve specific goals. Adult learners should have access to assistance in articulating goals that are appropriate for them.
- Add “transparent.” This would go beyond “visible” in that it implies not only that people are aware of program possibilities but also that evidence on the impact of programs is accessible.
- Add “relevant” in the sense that the skills that are acquired are valued by employers.
- Add “aligned”: the activities of different programs complement (and do not impede) the objectives of each.

With these changes, the key characteristics of the desired adult learning system would be as follows:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Learner-centered</i> | <i>Transparent</i> |
| <i>Goal-directed</i> | <i>Accountable</i> |
| <i>Coordinated/seamless</i> | <i>Relevant</i> |
| <i>Aligned</i> | <i>Flexible</i> |
| <i>Collaborative</i> | <i>Sustainable</i> |
| <i>Affordable</i> | <i>Visible</i> |
| <i>Equitable</i> | |

Barriers to Participation

In the course of discussing the vision, participants in the Toronto roundtable described barriers to participation in adult learning that they saw as particularly important in the Ontario context. These included:

- Difficulties that employed workers face in finding income support if they participate in programs that would require them to take leave from their job;
- Relatively low levels of literacy among the Aboriginal population;²
- Lack of funding for assistive devices for adult learners with disabilities;
- Web-based information that is presented in needlessly complex ways; and
- Difficulties that immigrants face in finding English or French as a Second Language programs (ESL or FSL) that are suitable for their learning needs

Regarding the latter point, some immigrant learners are highly educated and are looking for language training that relates to particular skill areas or workplace contexts. They may choose to participate in a skills upgrading program rather than first taking ESL, which can pose a challenge for service providers.

It was noted that some people with literacy problems resulting in limited participation in the labour market and within their communities, may also have many other problems, such as poverty and housing issues. Piecemeal responses to multiple problems tend to be ineffective. There is a need for holistic programs with the ability to be flexible and innovative.

² It was pointed out that the Aboriginal population in Ontario is about 20 percent of the total for Canada, a larger share than any other province (though lower as a percentage of the provincial population than is the case in the western provinces).

Recent/New Initiatives in Ontario

Several participants provided brief outlines of recent policy or program initiatives designed to improve access to or quality of adult learning opportunities.

- The implementation of the Labour Market Development Agreement in Ontario provides an opportunity to improve the coherence of the adult education and training system.
- The Ontario government has been increasing its investment in language training for immigrants and is developing new tools for the assessment of language proficiency (to be used in such programs as Ontario Works and Job Connect).
- The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has been working in partnership with service providers to develop and implement the Continuous Improvement Performance Management System (CIPMS). CIPMS involves measures of program efficiency, effectiveness, and customer satisfaction. Recent work on the CIPMS has included the development of measures of learner skill attainment, based on the “essential skills” framework, with a focus on skills relating to reading text, use of documents, and numeracy.

Examples of Promising Initiatives in Other Jurisdictions

Karen Myers, one of the authors of *Too Many Left Behind*, presented a selection of examples of recent initiatives in other provinces or US states to improve learning opportunities for adults or to better connect learning programs to what employers are looking for in the labour market. The examples outlined by Myers were as follows:

Dual Crediting – Manitoba

- Dual credit programs allow learners who are completing high school credit courses to also obtain a college or university credit at the same time.
- Manitoba is developing one of the most comprehensive dual credit initiatives in Canada. The program is open to both regular high school students and adult learners.
- Manitoba recently collected feedback from both high school students and adult learners participating in dual credit programs. While both groups were positive in their appraisal of dual credit courses, adult learners identified the greatest benefits. In addition, about 50 percent of adult learners stated that having a dual credit influenced their decision to pursue a post-secondary program.

Articulation – British Columbia

- British Columbia has well established articulation processes in adult basic education (ABE) that facilitate the transfer of course work and credits between participating institutions. In 1985, the ABE Articulation Steering Committee was established to oversee the implementation and administration of articulation across the post-secondary system. The articulation handbook is updated every year and the process has been reviewed several times in the last 20 years.

Adult Learning Centres – Manitoba

- In Manitoba, Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) provide one-stop access to adult learning opportunities. All ALCs are partnered with either a high school or post-secondary institute. They offer:
 - the Mature Student Diploma;
 - Employment Readiness programs;
 - pathways to workplace training, post-secondary education, or trades; and
 - Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition services.

Formal Referral Programs – Nova Scotia and Quebec

- The Nova Scotia School of Adult Learning recently introduced a formal referral protocol for all service providers. The purpose is to ensure that learners, at any entry point, receive information and advice to help them decide what program option would work best for them.
- In Quebec, the Literacy Foundation (Fondation pour l’alphabétisation) provides referral through a 1-800 number. This can lead to face-to-face counselling with follow-up to ensure satisfactory service and outcomes.

Career Ladders and Pathways – United States Community Colleges

- In the United States, an increasing number of skills partnerships are producing sector specific *career ladders* and *career pathways*.
- A *career ladder* is a map that outlines the range of jobs and linked educational opportunities within a specific industry or industry sector. A *career pathway* is a set of courses that enables students to combine school and work and advance over time to better jobs and higher levels of education and training.
- These initiatives address business needs by providing employers with a skilled workforce and address worker needs by increasing the access to high quality training that is linked to career opportunities.

Ideas for Action

Participants in the Toronto roundtable were asked to identify, through small group discussions, ideas for actions (whether by government or other stakeholders) regarding adult learning in Ontario that would help realize the vision outlined above.

The ideas put forward fell into four themes.

1. Facilitate learner pathways

- Concern was expressed that “Ontario has a fragmented adult education system based on competition among sectors,” which means that clients are not always directed to the deliverer that is most suitable for them. That is, programs are provided by adult educators

based in school boards, community colleges, and community-based organizations, and these deliverers see themselves to some extent as competitors seeking clients. The sectors need to work together more collaboratively.

- Government has a role to play in facilitating collaboration. Ontario needs a long-term strategy for adult learning that promotes partnerships in the delivery of adult education and clearly identifies the options available to adult learners. It may also be necessary to establish an umbrella organization to oversee adult learning in Ontario.
- Dual credit programs involving partnerships among schools, colleges, and employers, have focused so far in Ontario on pilot initiatives for youth. They could be expanded to adults (as in Manitoba).
- It is important to look at adult learning as providing an opportunity for personal growth rather than as a means to correcting deficits. Service providers need to respect what learners bring to the table and the fact that they are motivated to learn.
- It should be recognized that adult learning may/should involve multiple objectives: student success, family success, community success, economic prosperity, and social cohesion.
- Schools and colleges need to offer individualized timetabling, flexibility on course loads, and continuous intake, to make it easier for adults to participate in their courses. (However, individualized timetabling can be quite costly to provide, so some assessment of costs and benefits may be necessary before it could be adopted on a wide scale.)
- Current efforts in Ontario to map learner pathways should do so from the *perspective of the adult learner*: written in plain language to help learners understand their options given their specific goals, needs, current circumstances, credentials, and past learning experiences. The pathway should identify how learners can move from one program to another and what credentials are recognized by employers and post-secondary institutions.

2. Foster employer investment in learning

- Employers should support learning by their employees.
- Greater employer investment requires: knowledge exchange among employers regarding initiatives that have worked for them and the bottom-line returns they have experienced; unions taking an active role in collective bargaining to promote greater investment in learning activities; and the targeting of government supports to groups that have been under-represented in workplace-based training (such as less-educated employees).
- People should not have to become unemployed to be eligible for support for participating in learning programs. (More generally, we need to avoid the excessive compartmentalization of clients.)

3. Enable community-led initiatives

- It is difficult for community organizations to find adequate, long-term funding to support initiatives at the community level.
- All three levels of government should work together to support community initiatives and to give community groups a voice in the discussion of policy issues.

4. Take advantage of pilots that have worked

- Adult educators collectively possess a great deal of information about what works, but they often lack the resources to sustain promising initiatives, share knowledge about them, and/or develop successful pilots into larger scale programs.

Suggested Next Steps in the Four Action Areas

For each of the action areas outlined above, a small group developed ideas for next steps. The key steps proposed were as follows:

Facilitating learner pathways

- Participants from a cross-section of providers of adult education and training agreed that representatives of the college, school board, and community training sectors should come together to develop a plan for a more collaborative system, focused on finding the best way to meet adult learner goals and needs. This will likely involve the development of a provincial referral protocol.
- Once a tentative plan is developed, it could then be taken to government for discussion and to identify how best to implement the final plan.
- Front-line staff will require training on new protocols.

Fostering employer investment

- Key employer associations (e.g. Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters (CME), Chamber of Commerce) should play an active role in promoting employer investment in learning, such as through knowledge exchange forums centered on examples of promising practices. The new joint leadership of the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre by the CME and the Canadian Labour Congress may help this happen. Sector Councils are also important in this regard, especially as vehicles for reaching out to small- and medium-sized businesses.
- Other stakeholders, when engaging employers, need to be sensitive to their need to focus on investments that generate returns for the organization. In particular, regarding private sector employers, it is important to use language that resonates with business concerns. Evidence about productivity effects and improvements in workplace safety can be important in this regard.

- Governments (federal and provincial) should consider financial incentives for employer investment in learning initiatives. (An example would be a reduction in Employment Insurance premiums for employers who engage in training.) Award programs for best practice can also have an impact.
- Stakeholders should encourage unions to put workplace training on their bargaining agenda.

Enabling community-led initiatives

- Community organizations should establish/support mechanisms to bring key stakeholders together at the community level. In some communities, local training boards have been able to play this role.
- Governments should collectively provide funding in a way that can be tailored to community needs.
- Accountability requirements for government funding should focus on results, not rules.

Taking advantage of successful pilots

- All pilot projects should have funded knowledge exchange activities built into the project plan. Funders should foster a culture of knowledge exchange.
- An organization should be mandated with the responsibility to collect information on promising/best practices and make this available in a repository (similar to the National Adult Literacy Database, but broader in scope).
- Educational institutions need to build into job descriptions for researchers/program officers the time to examine and assess literature on best practices. In addition, institutions should consider the importance of professional development for program staff to assist them in gaining the skills necessary to research and evaluate best practices.
- Pilot projects should be funded on a multi-year basis. Funders should build room into their plans for sustained funding for successful pilots.

So Now What?

The Toronto roundtable was the second of four to discuss how to move towards a more effective adult learning system. The next will be held in Montreal in February, followed by one in Alberta. Each will provide an opportunity to build on the ideas developed in the earlier discussions. An overall report will be prepared at the conclusion of the series, which will identify areas of strong consensus for action.

Appendix A – Roundtable Agenda

Agenda for the Toronto Roundtable January 12, 2007

- 8:00 am Continental Breakfast
- 8:30 am Welcome and Introductions:
- Adult Learning Knowledge Centre
 - Canadian Policy Research Networks
- 9:00 am Brief overview by the authors of *Too Many Left Behind*
- Key conclusions and recommendations
 - Outcomes of the Halifax roundtable including vision, ideas, actions
 - Purpose of the Ontario roundtable and anticipated outcomes
 - Q and A by participants to clarify the goal and their role
- 9:30 am Discussion of the vision for the adult learning system (as mapped from the Halifax roundtable outcomes)
- 9:45 am Brief update on policy/program developments
- 10:15 am BREAK
- 10:30 am Outline of purpose of small group discussions: to identify steps that will make a difference in Ontario
- 10:40 am *A Menu of Options* – specific initiatives from other provinces to be considered
- 11:00 am Small Group Discussions
- 12:30 pm LUNCH
- 1:30 pm Small groups report back to the plenary
- 2:15 pm Plenary Discussion
- Setting priorities
- 3:00 pm BREAK
- 3:15 pm Plenary discussion continues
- Concrete steps towards realizing the priorities
- 3:45 pm Final comments and wrap-up
- 4:00 pm Adjourn

Appendix B – Roundtable Participants

Jane Barber

Consultant, Literacy Education and Training Services

Jeanette Barrett

Dean, Schools of Career Development & Continuing Education, Durham College

Bernadette Beaupré

Executive Director, ONESTEP

Marcello (Mars) Bottiglia

Superintendent of Schools
Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board

Leslie Brown

A/Executive Director
Ontario Literacy Coalition

Jonathan Brown (observer)

Education Officer, Adult Education Policy Unit
Ontario Ministry of Education

Felicity Burr (observer)

Senior Policy Advisor, Adult Education
Ontario Ministry of Education

Tony da Silva – in the afternoon

Trustee
Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board

Barbara Glass

Coordinator, Academic Upgrading and Pre-Apprenticeship Programs
Canadore College of Applied Arts and Technology

Debbie Grier

Manager, Special Projects & Basic Skills
Collège Boréal

Rebecca Howse

Principal, Adult & Continuing Education
Thames Valley District School Board

Sarah Irwin

Managing Director
Independent Learning Centre (ILC)

Joanne Kaattari

Co-Executive Director
Community Literacy of Ontario

Sara Katz

Consultant (ACAATO)

Bonnie Kennedy

Executive Director
Canadian Assoc. for Prior Learning Assessment

Andrea Leis

Director, School of Career & Academic Access
Conestoga College

Tamara Levine

Literacy Coordinator
Canadian Labour Congress

Carol Maingot

Coordinator, Community Education Services
District School Board of Niagara

Margaret Maynard

Adult Learning & Resource Centres
Niagara West

Kathy Mills

CAO
The Centre for Skills Development & Training

Eleanor Newman
Director of Education
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Sheila Nicholas
ESL Coordinator
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Ellen Paterson
Executive Director
Ontario Native Literacy Coalition

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Stan Talesnick
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