

# Regional Network Literacy Service Plan (2023-24)

Wellington Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs



# Table of Contents

- About the Literacy Service Plan **2**
- Current trends in the community **3**
- Impact of current trends for LBS programs **8**
- Service delivery gaps within the LSP community **13**
- Anticipated challenges and opportunities **14**
- Plans to support workplace/workforce literacy **15**
- Evaluating and updating LBS referral protocols **16**
- LBS program delivery for learners from underrepresented groups **17**
- Increased demand for remote LBS services **19**
- LBS trends with e-Channel referrals **20**

## About the Literacy Service Plan

The Literacy Service Plan is created annually by Project READ and the Literacy Service Planning Committee through Service Coordination and System Planning. Each Adult Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program in Waterloo-Wellington is represented on the committee. We work in collaboration to develop Literacy Service Plans to meet the literacy needs of our community.

This Literacy Service Plan represents the Regional Municipality of Waterloo communities, including:

- Cambridge
- Kitchener
- Waterloo
- North Dumfries
- Wilmot
- Wellesley
- Woolwich

College, School Board, and Community Based Agency streams from the Anglophone sector of Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) service providers are represented in this Literacy Service Plan.

The following LBS service providers and other community services were consulted in the Literacy Service Planning and Coordination process:

- Conestoga College Cambridge and Waterloo
- Essential Skills Upgrading - WRDSB
- Core Essentials - St. Louis (WCDSB)
- The Literacy Group of Waterloo Region (Cambridge)
- The Literacy Group of Waterloo Region (Kitchener)
- Region of Waterloo - Employment and Income Support Division and Community Development
- Community Employment Linkages Committee
- Anishnabeg Outreach
- Bridging Employment Supports
- Agilec
- Lutherwood
- John Howard Society - ES
- The Working Centre
- YWCA
- Workforce Planning Board Waterloo Wellington Dufferin
- Kitchener Public Library
- Waterloo Public Library
- Idea Exchange - Cambridge
- E-Channel
- MLTSD - ETCs
- St. Louis ESL/LINC
- KW Habilitation Services
- Well-being Waterloo Region
- Early Literacy Learning Alliance (ELLA) Waterloo Region
- March of Dimes
- Reception House
- Cambridge Career Connections
- Cambridge Self-Help Foodbank
- Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW)

## Current trends in the community

Reviewing the Employer One 2022 Report for Waterloo-Wellington-Dufferin we can see a variety of trends that occurred over 2021 and plans for 2022. It is important to note that the majority of employers completing the report were in Waterloo-Wellington (96.5%):

Almost 78% of employers reported they had hard-to-fill positions (up 16% from the previous report):

- Not enough applicants 69.6%
- Lack of qualifications 45.2%
- Lack of technical skills 38.4%
- Lack of motivation, attitude or interpersonal skills 37.4%

The hard to fill positions that could be supported by LBS programs providing basic skills development:

- Cooks and line cooks
- Counter and kitchen helpers
- Servers
- Lawncare technicians
- Agriculture technicians
- Equipment operators/farm labourers
- Administrative and office
- Truck drivers
- Production associate/machine operators
- Store and Sales associates
- Public works labour
- Maintenance associates
- Clerks
- Forklift operators
- Shippers
- Preparation for skilled trades

58% of employers said that retention was an issue in their company.

70% of employers have added new tech or intend to add new tech in the next 1-2 years

73.7% of employers had 8,179 separations in 2021.

The most separations happened in:

- Manufacturing (1,430 quits and 500 dismissals)
- Transportation and Warehousing (507 quits and 47 dismissals)
- Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (184 quits and 53 dismissals)

84.7% of employers were planning to hire in 2022.

The top 5 for most potential hires were:

- Motor vehicle and transit drivers
- Labourers in processing, mfg.
- Machining, metal
- Material handler
- Customer and info service reps

It's clear to see that LBS programs can provide skills training for the top 5 in-demand positions. It's important to note that when businesses are recruiting the majority of them use online job boards/postings (76.2%). Digital literacy is key. The work we did with the online job applications and the workforce planning board is still necessary and identifies all the skills individuals will need to be successful in navigating the job market virtually.

When it comes to competencies that employers are seeking, while computer literacy is only being chosen by 14.6%, most employers, as we read previously, expect people to apply for jobs digitally. The top 5 competencies that employers are seeking in our region are:

1. Work Ethic (51.6%)
2. Communication (47.1%)
3. Dependability (45.7%)
4. Self-Motivated/Ability to Work with Little or no Supervision (44.4%)
5. Teamwork/Interpersonal (43.2%)

All of these are skills provided by LBS programs. Many are learned within small group work through collaboration and expectations. It takes a strong work ethic to learn as an adult who didn't succeed at this as a youth.

According to the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development the metropolitan census areas of Kitchener-Waterloo and Guelph fall into the Central Region. The top 5 jobs currently in demand in this region in 2022 are:

1. Material handlers
2. Retail salespersons
3. Other customer and information services representatives. This unit group includes customer and information services representatives who answer enquiries and provide information regarding an establishment's goods, services and policies and who provide customer services such as receiving payments and processing requests for services. They are employed by retail establishments, contact centres, insurance, telecommunications and utility companies and other establishments throughout the private and public sectors.
4. Cooks
5. Food and beverage servers

This list differs from the Employer One Report for the Region. This list is based on the number of current job postings in the region while the Employer One is based on employers predicting how many hires they will have.

Currently many of our programs support these top 5 job listings providing modular programs in Material Handling, Retail Sales and Customer Service. A number of programs help learners to prepare for and work with Conestoga College to provide the Smart Serve certification. St. Louis provides upskilling to help learners enter the chef program as well.

The programs need more funding to continue to run and update these modular programs. It's difficult to keep instructors when you can't increase their wages or offer benefits. We are running into the same difficulty that many employers talked about in the Employer One report – lack of ability to compete in the labour market due to wages.

### **Waterloo Region:**

During COVID and even as we slowly come out of it, individuals with disabilities are just not returning to in-person programming and they haven't wanted to do online programming (or lack the comfort/skills with working online). We've dropped by 2.7% in this category from previous years. The only category of learner that saw an increase was for Newcomers.

We still have the largest majority of learners being youth at 49%. That's 9% higher than the province as a whole. EQAO tested their new online evaluations for schools, but no results were shared. Based on the research shared in last year's LSP Report and the lack of shared results from EQAO, we foresee this number continuing to be high.

We are seeing more people with a high school diploma than the rest of the province, proving our previous point. There is also a growing number of individuals with some college or post secondary education entering our programs. This is fairly on trend that when unemployment is low and it's hard for employers to fill job postings, that LBS programs will see more people struggling to find employment because they lack some critical skills.

38.6% of our learners are employed (both full and part time)...due to low unemployment rates in our region. However, 52.8% remain unemployed.

At least 45.8% of our learners live in poverty with no source of income or surviving on social assistance. We also know that with the employed individuals, a large number of them will also most likely be below the official poverty line in Canada.

In Waterloo Region it is evident that we work well with our Employment Service providers. Project READ has close ties to these individuals through the CELC group and it shows with 13.7% of referrals-in coming from ES providers....almost double what the provincial numbers show.

Waterloo Region learners are focussed on employment. Only 2.8% identify as being on the independence goal path. That is over 8% lower than the province (10.9%).

The more the unemployment rate remains low the more high-needs individuals that will be entering our programs.

According to the 2022 findings of the Workforce Planning Board “COVID-19 has shifted the local labour market in Waterloo, Wellington and Dufferin where we find an increase in the number of jobs which require specialized skills and education and a decrease in general labour roles”. An additional presentation by The Institute of Work & Health (Winter 2021) supports these findings by suggesting that the entry level position is being impacted by several factors such that the members of the workforce at this level may experience displacement due to increased automation, increased outsourcing, decreased long term stability or the increased need for digital competencies in all workplaces. The presentation by Arif Jethra (2021) also suggests that “approximately 1/3 of Canadian workers experience workplace vulnerability” but with the decreasing lack of opportunity, workers may be deciding to stay in unsafe or non-compliant working conditions due to increased financial needs. With this information in mind, one can infer that there is a growing necessity and urgency for those actively involved in the labour market (especially those that are actively involved in NOC C and D level) to upgrade skills just to keep up with the changing job market.

In addition to the labour market shifts, today’s LBS learner in Waterloo Region also faces increased barriers in multiple other areas such as:

- increased cost of living which is disproportionate to wage increases (Waterloo Chronicle – July 26, 2022)
- increased challenges in attaining and maintaining safe and stable housing (<https://www.engagewr.ca/affordable-housing-waterloo> )
- limited services for newcomers with strict admission requirements and/ or the waiting list for services (<https://www.cicnews.com/2022/07/waterloo-region-immigration-report-outlines-experiences-and-challenges-faced-by-new-arrivals-0729336.html#gs.dflqis> )
- continued failure to value transferable skills in the job market and the disproportionate focus on education and experience as the best predictors of employment success (<https://www.netacad.com/careers/career-advice/how-to-gain-experience/types-experiences-employers-find-valuable>)

ESU has reported that COVID is still a concern for some learners and are reluctant to return to the classroom. Due to increased use of technology during COVID, many of their learners and instructors are now more comfortable using technology and want to pursue online learning instead of in-class. While it is true that the lessons learned during COVID have increased learners and instructors

confidence with online learning, it is still the stronger preference from learners and encouraged by instructors that learners attend in class instruction. We are noticing that their learners are returning to jobs after being off work during COVID, either because of their businesses closing during this time or they needed to stay home during COVID due to child care issues. Also, there seems to be a high demand for workers especially in the hospitality industry and PSW jobs and learners who are working in those fields are working an increased number of hours and have less predictable time away from work for their learning at ESU. As a result of the large number of businesses that closed during COVID and did not re-open, many learners, who may have been laid off, want to upgrade instead of depending on entry-level jobs. ESU has learners who are employees that were working at home during COVID are now returning to the workplace, or they are workers who have now transitioned to working at home permanently instead of going into their workplace.

TLG has reported an increase of youth needing to access employment literacy programs, however ministry funding agreement prevents it. They are seeing a lot more demand for learners who are 16 and 17 trying to access their programs and services. Which means the range is wider and outside of the MLITSD definition of youth and making it difficult to serve this audience, even though we know this group is in need right now due to the impacts of COVID and they will struggle until they are eligible for our programs. At the other end of the scale of age suitability, we recognize the increasing aging population and aging working population which we are forecasting as an increased need for LBS support.

Cost of living and disruption and removal of community programs have altered many learner's ability to set a literacy goal over survival. There has been an increase in adults reporting living with mental health and identifying as seeking support programs. The ongoing housing crisis in our region has resulted in more adults living in vulnerable and unstable situations in the community. Programs such as YWCA-W Thrift store closed which had provided essential workplace experience, the Language assessment in Cambridge and the free mental health support from Cambridge Family Counseling Centre of Cambridge & North Dumfries have both reduced their hours.

There is also a noted increase in learners looking for short-term programming to solve immediate needs of literacy related barriers in their lives according to TLG. They are noticing an increased demand for "drop-in" or very short term programming (less than 5 hours), but that is not supported by current EO framework and metrics. Some people want shorter term support. Mostly as they lack digital literacy skills or consistent time availability. Learners need employment literacy program options available to them that are shorter and more intense. Homeless individuals trying to improve their situations need this support as they cannot dedicate long term due to the nature of their lives. The level of digital literacy skills is often much lower than the level of reading/writing or numeracy in many learners leading to greater disparities in access and employability for those who need LBS for digital skills only. Fluctuating unemployment levels, still higher than average in Ontario, also supports the need for short-term literacy programming. The general workforce shortage would support the



need for onsite literacy training to increase support and attainment of skills to maintain or improve employment status.

There is a lack of desire to return to in person learning and the need to maintain an online learning model with a live instructor. There has been and continues to be a decrease in volunteers able to provide longer term and in person support. Lowering of restrictions and increase of vaccinations has increased Word of Mouth referrals, but concerns that it will never be as it was. These disruptions/changes impact the learners and the LBS programs ability to serve them.

TLG also reports an increase in non-Canadian and newcomer adults into the community needing to access their programs.

As a direct result of labour market shifts and the accompanying increase in barriers that learners experience, St Louis LBS programs adapted to provide impactful programming with increased flexibility that can meet the needs of the learner and the changing needs of local employers in a time-sensitive way. Current Learner trends in our immediate community have led them to meet these varied needs of learners by offering different streams of programming. The niche for St Louis continues to be students looking for academic upgrade so that they may continue to pursue Secondary credits or Specialized Programming (PSW, Hairstyling and Culinary Certification). Although learner pathways are all individualized, they keep these long-term goals in mind when structuring overall practices. To respond to learner needs, they are now offering three streams of support – in-person, synchronous (online) and asynchronous (remote).

More learners accessing Conestoga LBS are in part-time positions or they are participating in the gig-economy (e.g. Skip, Uber) with unpredictable schedules, making scheduling time for learning and upgrading more difficult. There are many learners wanting to upgrade to improve their employment situation or apply for Post-secondary opportunities.

## **Impact of current trends for LBS programs**

Demand for services doesn't address the need for services. We can see from the various trends that LBS programming is needed to help our community and economy rebound after the pandemic, but it will be about getting these learners to our doors. It is important to note that COVID has caused and will continue to cause an increased cost per learner. Less learners can fit into a classroom when physical distancing is required. If there was space for 30 learners pre-COVID, that number is often reduced to 15 to maintain a 6-foot distance between learners. The costs for the classroom and the instructor don't get cut in half. Many of our local LBS programs no longer require the 6-foot distance between individuals, however, we still come across people interested in the programs but are not comfortable with group situations due to personal or health reasons making it an ongoing need to be monitored and managed within each program. There has also been additional time required for development of curriculum to either an online format or create curriculum due to the varying needs

that COVID has presented. Community-based programs have needed to have more paid staff as the number of volunteers decreased during COVID. The cost of living continues to increase faster than our funding which makes it difficult for programs to continue offering and improving programs to meet the needs of learners and the economy. Programs need MLITSD to continue providing flexibility around numbers to ensure that when people feel safe in our communities, our programs will have the capacity to serve them.

These trends we are noticing in the labour market, our learners and the community will impact the demand for services in several ways. The need for alternative hours for service delivery beyond Monday-Friday daytime class hours will be increasing as many seeking services are not able to leave work (lose income) to make the commitment to daytime studies. This can be mitigated with remote/hybrid and asynchronous/synchronous delivery methods, depending on the learners literacy level and comfort with technology. Flexible delivery hours, including evenings and/or weekend classes, are a potential solution to meet this need. However, it is important to note that many learners continue to need computer skills training before they can be successful with online/remote delivery methods. It will be important for programs to continue balancing the capacity of their staff & volunteers with the learning options they offer to meet learner needs.

Learners need a variety of supports such as – in-person, synchronous and asynchronous, online and remote. In addition, the scheduling limitations learners are experiencing also indicate a need for short term, online and in-person delivery methods as well. There is a need for “Drop-in” style programs to allow greater flexibility for learners in accessing services and creating referral pathways to further Literacy learning. More flexibility is needed to support under-skilled learners (including seniors and youth) needing to enter or return to the workforce due to increased costs of living and trying to juggle finances and employment.

At ESU, staff are finding that many potential learners are more comfortable using technology and look for remote classes. However, at the lower literacy levels, there is still a great demand for digital literacy ONLY programming, particularly for older learners or those struggling with mental health or other socio-economic barriers.

The increased demand for one to one tutoring in community-based programs is putting additional pressure on programs as there are not enough volunteers coming forward to support this work. Programs are working hard to attract and retain volunteers that can/will work both in-person and remotely to address this need.

The labour market situation and local housing crisis have caused an increase in the number of learners we are trying to serve that are impoverished and poorly housed and require additional support outside of training (ie: gas cards, grocery cards, SMART serve certification/registration for access to resources and assessment) to support their learning. We are also seeing many more ESL learners and youth with barriers entering our programs. These trends require that LBS programs put

additional time/consideration into serving these groups without any additional funding. Flexibility in the use of training support dollars would help to alleviate some of this.

We know that the trends we are noticing in the labour market, our learners and the community will impact the profile of learners accessing LBS services. We expect to the profile of our learners within each program to have:

- Majority of learners will have been out of education for more than 6 years
- Increased number of learners will have a disability/face barriers to learning such as mental health diagnosis, history of addiction etc
- Increased number of older age learners, 45-64
- More younger and older learners, not as per the Suitability indicator in the agreement.
- Growing increase in females accessing literacy programs over male.
- Continually higher need for Employment Literacy programs in region
- Increasing number of adults with education outside of Canada that need upgrading – almost equal to those with education in Canada.
- Increasing number of older adults with Gr 12 or higher education with lower than OALCF Level 3 skills
- Increased number of learners working, yet still living below the poverty line.
- Increased number of learners speaking languages other than English at home, soon it will likely be the same number as those speaking English.
- Increased number of learners who want in person programming and face to face interaction with immediate/live support from an instructor.
- Increased number of learners who attempt to build skills and upgrade as they juggle barriers such as a job or childcare needs. These learners are looking for more flexibility in terms of when they can focus on their LBS learning activities.
- Increased number of learners who are able to commit to learning but have other barriers that prevent them from attending in-person. These learners could be navigating needs at home (child/parent care); managing increased Mental Health concerns (ie. Situational anxiety, social anxiety, depression); experiencing transportation challenges or quarantining as they are part of a vulnerable population with increased COVID protection measures.
- Increased number of young adults looking for options to upgrade for post-secondary program acceptance

The trends we are noticing in the labour market, our learners and the community will continue to impact how all 5 LBS services will be delivered. In the interests of reducing the impact of barriers and offering flexibility to meet the needs of learners, LBS programs in Waterloo Region will offer both in person and online programs. Local LBS programs leverage the skills of excellent instructors to modify teaching style and resources according to learner needs. Learner Plan Development practices have been built into all streams of programming to ensure that learners are continuously setting and making progress toward goals and subgoals and that measurement of learning progress

is being captured through Milestones and Culminating Tasks. Programs will continue to connect and develop relationships with other literacy and employment agencies for referrals and information sharing.

The 5 LBS services will be delivered and improved upon to address the trends we are noticing as follows:

1. Information and referral:

- Marketing and promotions and shared learnings through LSP committee coordination and collaboration
- Sharing links on websites to book appointments for information and intake
- Contact info shared on all flyers to connect for information
- Referrals are made to relevant community services at any point during program to help learners access the support of other wrap-around services
- Connect regularly with ES providers (E.g. CELC) to ensure I&R processes are shared with other programs in the community

2. Assessment

- Initial, ongoing and exit assessments are completed with each learner
- Assessments are conducted by individual intake coordinators at each LBS program to confirm that they are the appropriate program (referring to other programs if needed)
- Conestoga offers online delivery of assessments to clients
- Assessments are ongoing through programming for learners including through informal procedures, standardized tests, task-based activities (Milestones) and culminating tasks.

3. Learner plan development

- Completed with each learner when starting to work with an LBS program that the learners help to formulate.

4. Training

- Hybrid, in-person, synchronous/asynchronous learning options are available to learners depending on their needs and will be continually monitored and assessed for improved delivery and learner outcomes

5. Follow-up

- Completed by program staff using forms.
- Follow up at 3 and 6 months with exited learners

The Literacy and Basic Skills service providers plan to address these demands in the following ways:

- Continue with distance learning/remote learning if requested to help new and existing learners
- Use a variety of teaching resources individualized for the learner's goal path
- Continue to alleviate as many barriers as possible (flexible schedule, after hours remote support, evening classes, individual instruction) in order to meet learner needs
- Continue to participate in Nutrition for Learning and provide granola bars, fruit, snacks etc to help with hunger/poverty issues
- Stay connected with other service agencies to collaborate on providing learning opportunities in the Region (after hours support, use of community resources such as community centres)
- Provide technology to those who do not have it available (Chromebooks) so that learning can take place outside of the classroom
- Keep technology up to date and research web based learning resources to assist learners
- Offering on site and online programs
- Offering programs for groups at locations where 6ft can be maintained
- Offering programs in house at employer sites for workplace literacy programs
- Offering programs suitable for youth, especially youth with barriers.
- Continue to respond to participant needs through curriculum development and pivoting to accessible learning modalities when needed

The Literacy and Basic Skills service providers will need various additional supports to support this work, such as:

- Increase funding for marketing and communications
- Increase funding to increase wages, offer benefits to meet the cost of living increases in our region
- Flexibility of Business Agreement, especially to deliver to eligible youth and shorter-term delivery.
- Flexibility of Training Support expense definition to meet the changing needs of the learners. More flexibility and ability to use training supports to help learners that are impoverished and poorly housed (ie: gas cards, grocery cards, SMART serve certification/registration for access to resources and assessment.)
- Financial supports to provide volunteers with technology or offset travel costs
- With the increase in computer dependence of the Synchronous and Asynchronous streams, there will be a need to respond to technological needs of Online or Remote learners which may lead to increased training supports issued to those that meet Market Basket Measures. Additional funding to purchase tools specific to online instruction may also impact budgeting but is necessary to ensure that the LBS programming offers the same value regardless of how the learner accesses programming.
- Increase in partnering in person programs for modular programs, sharing learners
- Re-establish or establish new space sharing opportunities

## **Service delivery gaps within the LSP community**

Currently many of our programs support the top 5 job listings providing modular programs in Material Handling, Retail Sales and Customer Service. A number of programs help learners to prepare for and work with Conestoga College to provide the Smart Serve certification. St. Louis provides upskilling to help learners enter the chef program as well.

The programs need more funding to continue to run and update these modular programs. It's difficult to keep instructors when you can't increase their wages or offer benefits. We are running into the same difficulty that many employers talked about in the Employer One report – lack of ability to compete in the labour market due to wages.

We could also increase the number of learners in our programs if we expand to more immigrants entering our programs. Local programs have reported having an increase in the number of learners who attend ESL classes and achieve Canadian Language Benchmark 4 or 5 but are unable to be served in LBS due to suitability factors. ESL and LINC are very important to immigrants but are still curriculum based on language acquirement. LBS is learner-centred with individualized learning plans. There are no transition programs or hybrid models within our regions. Hamilton did run a hybrid model with their school board a number of years ago with great success. However, without further funding to develop this kind of hybrid program it's not possible to be done. And so we miss out on helping immigrants to gain reasonable employment and we don't have enough people to fill the jobs.

LBS programs are also in a situation where they must work towards their SQS numbers, but most immigrants do not fit into those categories. It's important to work with the most vulnerable, absolutely, but we also need to match that with the employment needs in the community. The most vulnerable are usually the furthest from employment.

Many learners are still nervous about e-learning or do not have extensive experience using technology. Digital skills specific training/support for adults accessing other EO programs is definitely needed but once again, suitability factors are an issue for programs in serving these learners.

Feedback from many learners indicates that they would like to see more short-term programming for new language learners that could be accessed quickly. Learners who may have a month free to focus on upgrading a specific skill before school begins or while waiting for a work opportunity, often struggle to access services quickly as they usually need to start with an assessment to find CLB Benchmarks. Occasionally, when they have been assessed with us and then referred to another assessment, this has become a point of frustration as there is again a delay in accessing services.

Unfortunately, due to cost of inflation and complexities around space and in-person delivery, St. Louis has closed their location in Cambridge. This leaves a gap of in-person delivery in downtown

Cambridge from school-board LBS. It makes it difficult for learners in Cambridge to transition from TLG on their learning plan if/when they require in-person training from the school board to achieve their next steps.

## **Challenges and opportunities for LBS program delivery**

One challenge that is constant among all service providers is supporting the complex needs of learners that need more than one type of training or support. Local LBS programs coordinate and share learners when the opportunity/need arises and is best for the learner, in addition to referrals to other wrap-around services. Ongoing connection with other literacy and employment agencies is important to ensure that there is a good working knowledge of other services in order to support learners in referrals and resources. ESU has and will continue to set up “get to know you” meetings with other service providers to increase and strengthen community networks and program knowledge. PRLN supports all LBS programs by promoting them at various community tables and through the Directory of Programs and Services. PRLN supports the LBS programs' awareness of other local programs and services by managing email groups and sharing relevant information.

In some cases, shared learners are at risk of being lost between programs if not properly supported through their transition. Programs need to support the warm referral to partner programs for additional support when needed, but again this additional support requires intention and staff time and energy to coordinate which inevitably increases costs for delivery.

Frequent and ongoing changes in managers and staff creates communication challenges within a setting. Ongoing and scheduled information sharing is required in order to maintain ongoing awareness.

In order to address the need for flexible programming, additional staffing may be required or existing staff may need to adjust their schedules which is not always possible. It can be difficult to attract new instructors to work with learners outside of the Monday to Friday daytime hours in order to meet learners' schedules. Agencies need to find creative ways to attract talent without additional funding or benefits. If benefits could be offered, this would greatly increase agencies ability to attract talent.

LBS programs have been, and continue to be, challenged by re-establishing which in-person services will return and how they will be run with pandemic restrictions lowered while at the same time attempting to balance the ongoing need for virtual programming. Not all staff or learners are able or willing to work/learn in close proximity in-person due to ongoing concerns about COVID, despite the reduced restrictions. We have many learners, staff and volunteers who fall into categories of higher risk due to pre-existing health conditions. As noted by several programs, the number of volunteers available to support in-person programming is still quite low. Some learners and staff are more comfortable with virtual delivery methods, however there are still many who don't have those skills or they prefer the benefits of in-person programs. In-person can be better for those with lower digital

literacy skills or with learning disabilities, or when teaching math or digital skills. This complexity makes it challenging for programs to coordinate adjustments to programming. It is important for programs to continually monitor recommendations from Public Health and consult with learners and staff about their needs, comfort levels, and levels of individual risk. Programs will continue to update in-person & virtual program delivery methods and services while balancing learners/staff comfort levels, needs and taking into consideration the importance of providing safe & effective learning spaces for everyone.

With the SSM coming to our Region in the near future, LBS programs are keenly aware that the ES program system changes will cause disruption in referral to LBS programs. We are working to mitigate this by discussing challenges and opportunities around this at the LSP committee meetings, and by raising this at the local CELC committee. We are also taking the opportunity to meet and discuss and learn from other Networks and programs that have been part of a new SSM region. We are seeking to anchor our position of support to those involved with the system changes before they become too overwhelmed by it.

At this time, it is still necessary to maintain COVID restrictions indoors for in person delivery at many agencies. For some this is welcome, and yet other learners may find this to be a deterrent or barrier. Due to space and financial limitations, this is also a barrier to running group programs. Community based programs need access to larger spaces through community partners in order to share costs.

## **Plans to support workplace/workforce literacy**

Current work with ONA's should help to strengthen the workplace literacy work we do. Each ONA will receive one clear language review of an internal document as an extra bonus with their final report. Programs will gain the capacity to deliver more workplace/force literacy training with recommendations from the Phase 1 of Skills for Success funding that will lead to work in Phase 2.

Also our work with the Workforce Planning Board on mapping of employment supports and services and connecting how LBS programs fit will strengthen the quality of workplace and/or workforce Literacy and Basic Skills delivery in our region. Workforce development begins with Employment Services and we are ensuring they are kept aware of how LBS fits into this process.

In order to support learners in achieving employment, it is important for LBS programs to be aware of local labour market opportunities. We want to focus on jobs/training that have a good hiring potential (hospitality industry, support workers) and the specific skills required for those professions. The information provided by the Workforce Planning Board is helpful in identifying these. Bringing them into the LSP for targeted sessions and discussions is helpful for keeping up to date with what is happening in our Region and creating the opportunity for feedback to them in regards to skills retention and challenges that employers might be seeing. We can better support learners when we understand the market and what will be expected of them in the workplace.



Our continued work with Employment Services helps with service coordination and goal setting for their participants. ESU provides soft skills modules to help learners prepare for employment

TLG utilizes their marketing and delivery plan that has been developed. They will continue to reach out to local businesses to support connections to new employers and maintain communication with past partners such as Rotary. In addition to general employer outreach and networking, TLG continues to sit on the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce and be proactive members and offers regular information sessions with local union labour councils.

Currently, St. Louis is continuing to build close partnerships with their In-House Skills Training Programs (PSW, Hair and Styling and Culinary). LBS has become actively involved in presenting contextualized learning and skill development that are industry specific as well as offering increased support to individuals who struggled to meet the basic Literacy and Numeracy requirements to enroll in these programs. St. Louis Adult Learning and Continuing Education Centre is one of the first sites to be piloting this increased partnership between the LBS and PSW programs to increase retention and success in the workplace. The hope is that as more programming is developed that is Industry Specific, we will strengthen partnerships with Employment Service Providers and local employers that are struggling to find capable and responsible workers. LBS will also be able to assist learners to take advantage of in-house training and advancement opportunities at St Louis and support the development of effective self-advocacy skills in the workplace and collaborative partnerships.

Project READ is also working with a sub-committee of the LSP members to work on the area of Apprenticeship to strengthen LBS support of this goal path.

## **Evaluating and updating LBS referral protocols**

Internal protocols are reviewed annually and updated as needed. PRLN will continue to work on referral protocols and processes with OW in Waterloo Region. Referrals to programs can fluctuate in each program. Project READ's centralized assessments and continued marketing for those have kept OW referral numbers in Waterloo Region higher than the rest of the province.

We will also review our LSP meeting protocols to ensure we are building in opportunities to hear from or have representation from other groups such as Employment Services, Indigenous Services, and Developmental Services to better understand their needs and look for opportunities to collaborate or support each other's work. All agencies review and agree to the referral process on an annual basis. The terms of this agreement and the universal form can be found on a drive shared by all regional LBS providers. We need to meet, discuss, reflect, and learn from each other. We need to be sensitive to what's happening in other programs. We need to take partnership opportunities as a great opportunity to learn and grow together. From there we can tweak referral protocols as needed. It is

easier to work on these issues when there is a commitment to working together. We are fortunate to have this among the members of the LSP committee.

Additional strategies that LBS programs are using to ensure referral methods are accessible, up to date and easily maintained include: creating standard program email addresses that do not change with changing staff, annual updates of 211 information, and ensuring program information is updated in the PRLN Directory of Programs and Services which is promoted and shared across the community. In addition, TLG uses tools such as their Learner Satisfaction survey and feedback from EO network partners gathered quarterly. LBS program staff and managers continue to participate in ongoing professional development to keep on top of labour and education trends, marketing and program promotion and delivery strategies, etc.

### **LBS program delivery for learners from underrepresented groups**

We are currently working with a sub-committee of LSP members from Waterloo and Wellington Regions to identify the underrepresented groups that may need services here. We are also investigating what programs and services are currently provided for underrepresented groups in order to find any gaps in these service offerings. We will review our research findings in order to make recommendations and plan for new programs and outreach methods to address those gaps and ensure equitable access to LBS services for those in need. We plan to apply for the Skills for Success phase 2 funding in order to implement new plans and strategies to meet the needs of the underrepresented groups within our areas.

We know that learners with developmental disabilities are an underrepresented group that we can support. To this end, Project READ has developed the “LEG Up! To Retail” program in partnership with KW Habilitation (DS) and The Literacy Group (LBS) with funding from the Skills Development Fund. The program is designed for LBS and Developmental Services (DS) to deliver in partnership and we are pilot testing this currently in both regions. In Waterloo Region, the DS provider offers Employment Supports in house. In Guelph, we are bringing Employment Services into the partnership because the DS provider operates differently than in Waterloo Region and we are testing this type of partnership as well. Our goal is to have a fully integrated LBS-DS program that offers Employment Supports in tandem with LBS training to better meet the needs of the participants. According to local labour market information, we know that 2 of the top 5 hard to fill positions in our community are related to retail: retail salespersons and other customer and information services representatives (that often work in retail settings). “LEG Up! To Retail” is an in-person program that enables us to meet the need of individuals with disabilities to return to in-person programming and work towards employment in this high needs sector. Once the project is complete in April 2023, it will be available to local and provincial LBS agencies to deliver this program in the future and it will support LBS in reaching and supporting this underrepresented group.

Project READ's centralized assessments and continued marketing of this service to Employment Services and The Region have kept OW referral numbers in Waterloo Region higher than the rest of the province. Between April 2021 and March 2022, PRLN has supported the referral of 66 learners to LBS programs in Waterloo Region. This demonstrates how PRLN is a gateway for those living in poverty and/or receiving Ontario Works and/or experiencing precarious employment/unemployment to access LBS services and programs.

Recognizing that ESL learners are also an underrepresented group, Project READ is working with QUILL Network to map the ESL needs in rural communities this fiscal. More and more newcomers are settling in/relocating to rural areas of the province where there are limited or no formal language training programs available, or not enough immigrants/participants to meet required minimum ESL class sizes. As a result, rural LBS agencies are now reporting more language learners accessing training through LBS programs. The mapping of ESL learner populations and services available in rural areas will help us to fully understand the impact on LBS programs. Once the research is completed, we will create a list of recommendations that will propose some solutions/best practices to address the current situation and make it easier for LBS programs to fill the gap in training to newcomers when needed and ensure that we aren't duplicating services.

ESU is currently working with learners with learning disabilities as well as people with a developmental disability. They understand that successful completion of a milestone may take longer for someone who is from an underrepresented group. The WRDSB promotes inclusivity for all.

Programs complete research and access training to develop teaching materials that are relevant to learners and reflect the lives of learners to make it more relatable.

TLG is starting two new consortium program advisory groups: Re-established Learner Advisory Panel and 2SLGBTQIA+ Inclusion into Literacy group. In addition, programs with youth are evaluated after each time, and PD is being provided from Carizon and TLG will be joining their Youth Engagement Committee.

St Louis is committed to ensuring practices and programming are trauma informed and all classroom materials are regularly reviewed for inclusivity and to ensure that programming does not support stereotyping and classification. Learnings are shared with the LSP committee.

Land acknowledgements are completed every morning with their in-person classes and group discussions to increase cultural awareness are welcomed. Staff members will often guide students through assessments of their own beliefs, assumptions, internalizations and messaging. Missteps are treated as teachable moments. Our staff prioritizes physical and virtual environments that are inclusive and emotionally/spiritually safe for all participants. As staff members of WCDSB, team members regularly complete Professional Development on topics to strengthen interaction such as stereotyping, welcoming language/messaging, and unconscious bias. Team members also seek out

additional learning opportunities to increase their own knowledge of the challenges others face in our community and how to effectively support learners.

Opportunities for both identified and anonymous feedback are offered to all learners and feedback is constantly reviewed to ensure that all learners feel supported with programming and practices. Adjustments are made as needed to ensure programs are meeting the needs of all learners.

Finally, partnerships are built with other agencies and community groups/tables - LSP, CELC, CYPT, and other agencies that assist underrepresented populations. Warm referrals are often made to ensure that a learner is being supported by the agency(ies) that best matches their needs. The LSP committee is an excellent opportunity to bring challenges to the table and discuss programming needs to meet these challenges. By bringing programming ideas and changes to the table, we ensure that local LBS programs are working in partnership with one another which is essential to meeting the needs of the community.

## **Increased demand for remote LBS services**

Waterloo Region has continued to experience the increased demand for remote LBS service delivery as indicated by the following trends and challenges:

- Individuals with disabilities are just not returning to in-person programming and they haven't wanted to do online programming (or lack the comfort/skills with working online).
- The majority of businesses are recruiting using online job boards/postings (76.2%). Digital literacy is key.
- The work we did with the online job applications and the workforce planning board is still necessary and identifies all the skills individuals will need to be successful in navigating the job market virtually.
- Many learners and instructors are now more comfortable using technology and want to pursue online learning instead of in-class.
- Additional time required for development of curriculum to either an online format
- Learners who are employees that were working at home during COVID and are now returning to the workplace, or workers who have now transitioned to working at home permanently have less predictable time away from work for their learning, making remote learning more appealing
- There is a lack of desire to return to in person learning and a need to maintain an online learning model with a live instructor.
- There has been and continues to be a decrease in volunteers able to provide longer term and in person support.
- Labour market shifts and changing needs of local employers causing increased barriers that learners experience,
- Learners looking beyond Monday-Friday daytime class hours.
- There is an increased demand for evening and/or weekend classes

- Learners are more comfortable using technology and look for remote classes
- Learners need unique streams of support such as – in-person, synchronous (online) and asynchronous (remote).
- Short term, online delivery methods are needed to support learners
- Increase in computer dependence of the Synchronous and Asynchronous streams at St Louis
- There will be a need to respond to technological needs of Online or Remote learners which may lead to increased training supports issued to those that meet Market Basket Measures.
- Additional funding to purchase tools specific to support online instruction may also be needed to ensure that the LBS programming offers the same value regardless of how the learner accesses programming.

Project READ and the LBS programs in Waterloo Region will:

- Provide centralized assessment to OW clients and referrals to LBS programs and wrap-around services depending on learner goals, literacy level they are working at and learning needs. Online assessments will continue to be offered.
- Continue offering online programs and working to improve remote delivery tools, resources and methods to meet learner needs
- Apply the recommendations from the “[The “How To” of Hybrid Meetings](#)” report by PRLN, LiNDR, and LNW on best practices and recommended equipment for hybrid meetings to improve hybrid and virtual meetings/programs/classes  
(<https://projectread.ca/tools-and-resources/practitioner-resources/publications/>)
- Meet the varied needs of learners by offering different streams of online programming: synchronous and asynchronous

## **LBS trends with e-Channel referrals**

E-Channel programs listed in Directory for LBS, ES to support learner awareness of programs and referrals to their programs. We also share the E-Channel Newsletters with LBS programs to promote the course offerings.

Local LBS programs continue to see a need for blended delivery even with the current remote options. LBS programs do not want to duplicate what is already available for our learners when it is already available on e-channel. Their programs enhance what we can provide with our current capacity.

However, it can be hard to get learners engaged in e-channel programs when extra technical support is needed from agency staff to get learners in and through the programs - learners often have low digital skills or none at all. With COVID it's hard to find tutors to support learners in e-channel programs and the extra support isn't counted for the agency & ministry targets. Programs find that e-channel is best suited for level 2+ learners who are able to navigate digital technology independently.