

ESEE Pilot

The

Community-based Perspective

Report from Community Literacy of Ontario

to

The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development

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*Report to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills
Development*

December 8, 2016

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As the final phase of piloting the Essential Skills for Employment and Education (ESEE) Assessment draws to a close, Community Literacy of Ontario would like to provide informed advice regarding this potential tool for measuring learner gains.

It is important that the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development hear about the experience of administering ESEE from the perspective of community-based practitioners and learners. We recommend that the success of ESEE not be determined solely from the results obtained from the completed assessments. We respectfully suggest that practitioners who piloted the assessment should have an opportunity to provide their feedback based on their experience of the ESEE pilot.

CLO has gathered feedback from 12 of the 14 **community-based LBS agencies** that participated in this phase of piloting the ESEE assessment. These agencies have been asked about successes, challenges/issues and any questions that they still had at the end of the piloting process.

While considering this report, it cannot be stressed enough that community-based agencies primarily deal with the most vulnerable and hard-to-serve clients in the Literacy and Basic Skills Program and that these clients historically have the lowest level of literacy skills and the highest barriers to learning. And while, ESEE now provides a quick survey tool that screens out the very lowest skilled learners, it cannot take into account the many other challenges that a significant portion of learners in community-based programs face.

Challenges/Issues

The following challenges and issues associated with implementing the ESEE assessment were commonly identified by the community-based pilot sites. It is of paramount importance that these observations about the ESEE pilot are considered before final decisions are made about using a common standardized assessment to measure learner gains.

- Language used in questions is too complex / dense text / too technical
- Test takes a very long time to complete
- Appears to be a college focus in material used in test examples
- Assessment is producing test-anxiety
- Digital skills are necessary to take this test
- Not entirely sure that some of the question levels are accurate
- In some cases it's the questions that are too complex, not the task itself
- Acronyms in examples can be challenging for learners
- Need a designated quiet space to take the assessment – isn't always possible
- In some agencies' the computers are old / internet isn't reliable
- Learners don't understand the scores
- Need an incentive to complete exit assessment
- In several agencies, there were instances when the learner's exit results were lower than the entry assessment
- The focus / effort on the exit assessment isn't necessarily as strong so the results don't necessarily reflect the true progress

- Some questions assume a prior knowledge that learners may not necessarily have
- The material used in the questions was repetitive (e.g., graph of different colleges)
- Samples in questions couldn't be enlarged (e.g., graph of different colleges)
- Questions were not related to goal paths – lack of relevancy – not learner centred
- The complexity of the tasks and formats didn't change if a person was unable to answer a question at a certain level (example – graph format was difficult and never changed – there are less complex graphs which may have made have been more familiar to the learner taking the assessment)
- Many learners were discouraged with results
- Should not have to scroll to get information needed to answer questions
- Standard information about controls required to administer the assessment would be helpful (e.g., use of a calculator, length of time per section)
- The level of questions jump around a bit so the testing isn't linear – to build a learner's confidence and comfort level it would be helpful to have the questions move from easy to difficult

Successes

The pilot sites that CLO consulted agreed that were some positive aspects to the ESEE assessment. In particular, most felt that the building/resources component was helpful. The following positive aspects were noted by most pilots:

- Good for students with higher level skills
- Good to have validation of progress
- The “Building Skills” component is very useful
- Like immediacy of results

Quotes from Practitioners

It is concerning that the majority of feedback is not positive. The following are some practitioner quotes reflecting what seems to be typical reactions to the ESEE pilot:

“Minimum completion time was around three hours. Some required upwards around fifteen hours to complete.”

“One individual promptly left the program because their test-taking anxiety became too much.”

“Those at lower levels were quite shocked to see the questions and said it made them feel stupid.”

“One student told a co-worker that it made her feel stupid and she basically stopped attending.”

“The difficulty level and the length make this assessment inappropriate for our use in my opinion.”

“While I agree with the need for learner gains assessment, we strive very hard at our centre to provide a welcoming, supportive environment. This particular assessment, at this level, works against that.”

“I want our learners to be built up not torn down because they can’t do a computer assessment when they first walk in the door. I can see this assessment working in the colleges but not with low level community based.”

“We had a hard time getting students to complete the exit test. Once they had completed their work, Milestones and Culminating Task, they had no interest in doing the final test. Some just skipped out, some just said they didn’t want to do it. Obviously it was not a great experience for them in some way.”

Questions from Practitioners

CLO would also like to share common questions raised by practitioners about the potential implementation of the ESEE assessment. It will be important for MAESD to provide responses to these questions prior to any final implementation of this measure.

- Once a learner is exempted through the quick screen, are they exempt forever?

- Due to a high number of learners in community-based programs with very low literacy skills, there may be a high number of exemptions – will this affect program funding? SQS Results? What is being measured/and how?
- What happens if learners don't complete exit assessments? Will this affect program funding? SQS Results?
- Is it necessary to complete all three sections of the assessment, if they don't line up with learner's goals (e.g., only need to upgrade math skills so why would they need to do a reading or document use assessment? If yes, why?
- Often the time required to make progress takes a long time for students with very low skill levels – how will this be reflected in CaMS?
- Would this assessment replace other initial assessments (e.g., CAMERA, etc.)?

Pilot Site Feedback – Next Steps

Pilot sites strongly relayed a wish to share their observations and feedback with MAESD. Practitioners indicated that they would be happy to participate in a focus group or debriefing session with the ministry to provide background and details to clarify their issues and concerns. If the ministry is interested, CLO would be willing to assist with arranging this forum.

Based on the results of our consultation with the ESEE pilot sites, CLO has strong reservations about its suitability for community-based agencies, given the low skills level of learners typically served by our sector. As MAESD navigates the tricky road to implementing a learner gains measure, CLO asks that special consideration be given to the needs and challenges faced by multi-barriered learners in community-based agencies. Assessment or the measure of progress for learners in community-based agencies cannot take a one size, fits all approach.

It is our sincere hope that this report is useful to you and we would be happy to answer any questions on its contents.

Warmly,

Jette Cosburn and Joanne Kaattari