

Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers

**STRATEGIES,
STRENGTHS,
BARRIERS &
PARTNERSHIPS**

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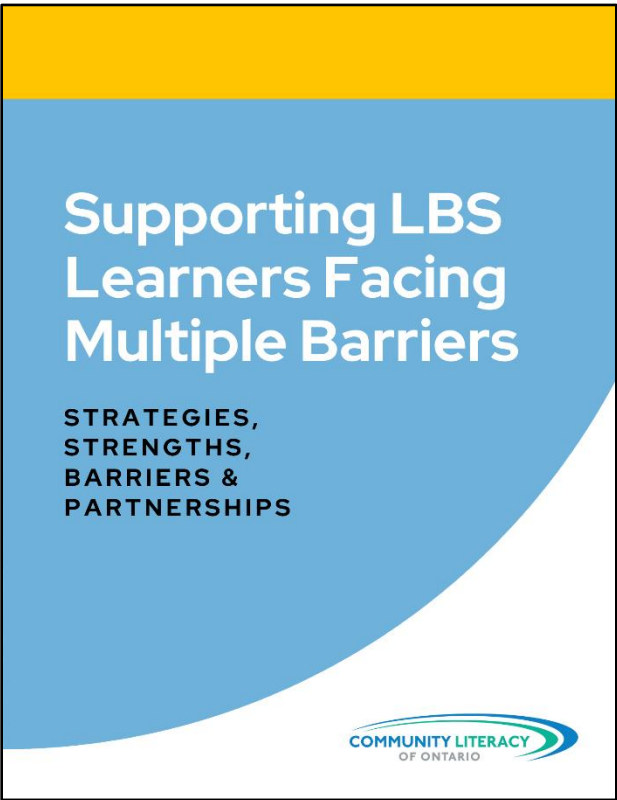
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Introduction

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies. We are located in Barrie, Ontario. You can learn more about our organization by visiting our [website](#) and by following us on [Facebook](#) and Twitter.

As part of our 2020/2021 business plan, Community Literacy of Ontario conducted research into how community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies support adult learners facing multiple barriers to learning.

CLO circulated a survey in October 2020 to learn more about strategies, strengths, barriers and partnerships used to support vulnerable learners. Supporting adult learners facing multiple barriers has long been a top priority and keen focus of literacy educators, and we were pleased to receive detailed responses from 30 different community-based LBS agencies.

In addition, in September 2020, Community Literacy of Ontario held an online focus group with 10 literacy educators to discuss the particular strengths of community-based agencies in serving vulnerable learners.

CLO compiled and analyzed the survey responses and focus group results, and wrote the following report on this critically important topic:

Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers Strategies, Strengths, Barriers & Partnerships

We want to thank the innovative, caring and passionate educators who participated in our research and who serve in LBS programs across Ontario! We hope that our report will support, showcase and celebrate the amazing work that literacy educators undertake to support vulnerable learners.



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What Does It Mean to Face Multiple Barriers to Learning?

Literacy and Basic Skills programs have long served people with multiple barriers and vulnerabilities. But what does it mean to have multiple barriers in the context of adult education? Barriers to learning identified in our Service Provider Guidelines are a key measure for LBS programs.

Barriers to Learning and Success – Literacy and Basic Skills Suitability Indicators

The [Service Provider Guidelines](#) for Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills Program identify the following as barriers to learning. In the Guidelines, these barriers are described as Indicators of Suitability. These indicators highlight issues that may result in additional barriers to learning and success in LBS programs.

- **Education:** Have less than a grade 12 level of education
- **Income:** Source of income is Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, no source of income, or who are a Crown Ward with extended care and maintenance
- **Time of out of school or training:** Have not participated in either education or training for six or more years
- **Age:** Are older than 45 years of age and under 64 years old
- **Interrupted education:** The individual has identified that he/she has had a history of interrupted primary and secondary education
- **Person with a disability:** The individual has self-identified that he/she has a physical, developmental, learning or mental disability (as defined by the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act)
- **Indigenous person:** Are of Indigenous ancestry
- **Deaf:** A person who has self-identified as Deaf
- **Francophone:** A person whose first language is French

Social Determinants of Health

Though not specifically related to education, another helpful resource that highlights socio-economic barriers are Canada's Social Determinants of Health.

The [Social Determinants of Health](#), as defined by the Government of Canada, are the broad range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors that determine socio-economic health. According to this assessment, the main social determinants of health include:

- Income and social status
- Employment and working conditions
- Education and literacy
- Childhood experiences
- Physical environments
- Social supports and coping skills
- Healthy behaviours
- Access to health services
- Biology and genetic endowment
- Gender
- Culture
- Race / Racism

Effective Strategies

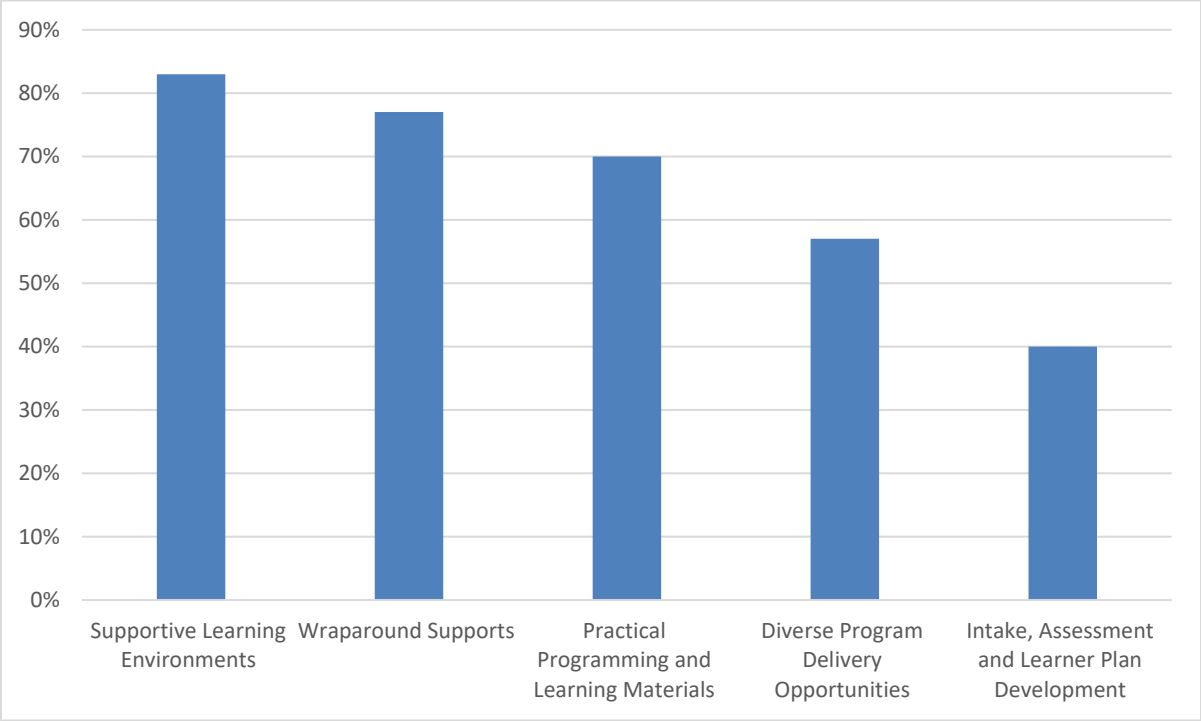
In Community Literacy of Ontario's survey, literacy educators identified a wide variety of effective strategies to support adult learners with multiple barriers in Literacy and Basic Skills programs. Educators from 30 Literacy and Basic programs responded to our survey, and the following strategies were most commonly mentioned:

- **Supportive Learning Environments**
 - *Mentioned as an effective strategy by 83% of respondents (25/30)*
- **Wraparound Supports**
 - *Mentioned as an effective strategy by 77% of respondents (23/30)*
- **Practical Programming and Learning Materials**
 - *Mentioned as an effective strategy by 70% of respondents (21/30)*
- **Diverse Program Delivery Opportunities**
 - *Mentioned as an effective strategy by 57% of respondents (17/30)*
- **Intake, Assessment and Learner Plan Development**
 - *Mentioned as an effective strategy by 40% of respondents (12/30)*

These strategies, such as providing or linking to wraparound supports available in the community, illustrate the importance and proven success of supporting multi-barriered learners with more than just literacy programming. A personalized approach that accounts for other areas of the learner's life, that includes creating a highly supportive learning environment and sharing information and making proactive referrals to other community supports, is also key to successfully supporting learners facing multiple barriers.

The following graph shows frequency of each type of support being mentioned by the 30 survey respondents. Many of the strategies link to activities, supports and programming that occur within Literacy and Basic Skills programs. These strategies are critical to effectively serving and retaining adult learners facing multiple barriers and helping them to meet their goals.

Most Effective Strategies Identified to Support Learners
with Multiple Barriers



Supportive Learning Environments

Creating highly supportive learning environments for adult learners facing multiple barriers was the most popular strategy identified and this issue was noted by 83% of survey respondents.

Strategies included:

- Ensuring that their literacy centre is a safe and welcoming space for all
- Having flexible, adaptable, learner-centred approach in everything we do
- Working at the learner's pace taking into account the learner's individual circumstances
- Providing positive reinforcement each day
- Offering diverse sorts of learning opportunities (in person, blended, digital) based on individual needs
- Developing effective partnerships and referrals to help meet the learning, work and individual support needs of learners
- Ensuring staff are well-trained, empathetic, excellent instructors, and are well-versed in adult learning principles
- Ensuring that the LBS classroom is an inclusive and respectful place for all, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, or ability
- Offering highly Individualized support via volunteer tutors
- Using engaging learning materials specifically geared to adult learners
- Offering continuous intake, so that a new learner can quickly begin their learning journey without delay
- Holding regular one-on-one meetings to discuss progress and adjust learner goals and ensure that methods of instruction are most beneficial
- Conducting regular check-ins to see if learners require additional supports for learning, health, individual issues and more
- Offering flexible hours based on the diverse needs of learners
- Providing programming that is relevant and engaging but that also builds confidence
- Offering a high degree of flexibility – life is complicated and flexibility is key to learner success and retention
- Providing learning opportunities that are related to the lives and goals of the learners
- Informally assessing and developing accommodations for learning disabilities
- Meeting learners where THEY are at, and not putting unrealistic demands on them

“We have a flexible, adaptable, learner-centred approach in all of our programs. We work at the learner's pace and very much take into account the learner's individual circumstances.”

Wraparound Supports

Linking adult learners facing multiple barriers with wraparound supports in the community was identified as an extremely important strategy by 77% of respondents. Strategies included:

- Conducting an in-depth assessment to learn about the various needs of each learner in order to provide meaningful support in the LBS program and to access relevant community programs and services supports
- Actively getting to know community organizations and services and how they can help our learners
- Building relationships with community organizations and services so that we truly understand their services AND they understand the needs of our learners
- Maintaining an up-to-date listing with the address, telephone number, email and website of local organizations for learners to contact as needed
- Attending inter-agency meetings to learn more about community services
- Training all staff and volunteers on available community services and online services such as Ontario 211 (and refreshing this training regularly)
- Holding regular check-in with learners to see if their needs are being met and finding out whether needs have changed
- Asking learners about the needs for additional community supports at BOTH entry and exit
- Inviting community partners to visit your literacy centre to share information about their programs and services
- Engaging in poverty reduction, health, disability and/or human rights initiatives in the community that would support learners
- Linking with employers and service clubs to provide in-program supports for learners (for examples, a free breakfast program)
- Especially during COVID, assisting learners to access laptops or computers and WIFI, both to access literacy programming and also community and government services and information

“We make the effort to know our community partners and how they can help our learners. And we take the time to meet with them and build relationships, so we truly understand their services and that they understand the needs of our learners.”

Practical Programming and Learning Materials

Literacy educators identified using practical programming and highly relevant learning materials as an effective strategy to support adult learners facing multiple barriers and this strategy was identified by 70% of survey respondents. Their ideas included:

- Engaging learners in digital literacy learning opportunities as this tends to increase their confidence
- Offering instruction using customized learning resources that cater to a variety of learning styles, goal paths and levels
- Running short, specific, targeted programs based on learner interests (sometimes called targeted training)
- Linking with partner organizations to offer certificates (customer service, safe food handling and more)
- Providing programming and resources that help to build skills and confidence
- Teaching using occupational curricula and other materials directly linked to the jobs learners are interested in
- Offering a variety of user-friendly learning materials that are highly relevant to adult learners with low level literacy skills (i.e., New Reader's Press, easy readers for adults, program-developed resources and digital resources)
- Linking with Ontario Works for a variety of programming options
- Providing technology and adaptations to meet learner needs (i.e., use talk to text technology, use large simplified fonts)
- Using videos and online tools and resources to provide learners with different ways of learning and to help keep them engaged
- Offering financial literacy training
- Using the resources and activities on the Task-based Activities Portal
- Offering training in the soft skills
- Linking to materials and websites related to the skilled trades and apprenticeship
- Linking learners to experiential learning opportunities where available, such as volunteering, placements, social enterprise, etc.
- Partnering with other government programs such as Youth Job Connect to address numeracy and literacy skills needed for work (i.e., reading your pay cheque, reading work schedules)
- Referring learners who wish to complete high school or attain their GED and assist with GED prep to appropriate educational providers

Diverse Program Delivery Opportunities

Offering diverse program delivery opportunities to adult learners facing multiple barriers was a strategy identified by 57% of survey respondents. Strategies included:

- Use a combination of face-to-face instruction, blended learning and digital learning opportunities, based on individual needs
- Offer face-to-face instruction in both small group and one-to-one learning environments
- Actively engage learners in a variety of digital learning opportunities to build the digital literacy skills of learners.
- Link with e-Channel providers for a variety of e-learning opportunities
- Provide a variety of digital learning opportunities via online learning platforms such as ZOOM, Google Classroom, Facebook Live and more
- Teach using a combination of learning materials including impactful educational materials, online videos and engaging learning websites such as GCF LearnFree, BBC SkillWise and many more
- Engage volunteers to provide Individualized tutoring for learners with low skill levels

Intake, Assessment and Learner Plan Development

Forty percent of literacy educators noted that conducting intake and needs assessments effectively for learners facing multiple barriers is an important strategy. This included:

- Conducting a relaxed but in-depth Initial Interview to discover goals, interests, needs and possible barriers
- Taking the time to get to know the learner and introducing them to your program
- Making referrals to supports and programs in the community to help address barriers and needs
- Engaging in broad goal setting and strengths discovery and creating realistic expectations of outcomes and timelines
- Connecting with any agencies already providing support to a learner (i.e., Ontario Works or Employment Services) in order to best serve the learner provide
- Developing highly individualized learning plans that are based on the specific needs, goals, barriers and life situation of each learner
- Working closely with the student to help them discover the goal path that is best for them and determining what is needed to get there

“We work closely with the student to help them discover the goal path that is best for them and determine what is needed to get there.”

Unique Strengths for Serving Learners with Multiple Barriers

In our survey and in a provincial focus group, Community Literacy of Ontario asked the question *“What are some of the unique strengths of community-based LBS agencies that allows you to effectively support learners facing multiple barriers?”*

Since this section combines the results of both our survey and a focus group, we have not allocated percentages to the data, but rather grouped the most commonly identified strengths.

The following are unique strengths of community-based LBS agencies for supporting learners facing multiple barriers:

- **Community Presence**

Community-based LBS programs have strong community connections, typically built over many years. Via partnerships developed, referrals made, fundraising activities, attendance at local events, involvement in local social service consultations and committees, participation in a variety and active promotion of literacy in their communities, programs are well-known and often serve as the “face of literacy” in their communities. This presence and connection is extremely valuable for adult learners who are unaware of the many services available in the community and enables agencies to help coordinate the often numerous wrap-around supports needed to support learners.

- **Continuous Intake**

Most community-based LBS programs operate on a continuous intake model so that learners are supported throughout the year. This benefits learners who can begin and maintain their learning journey at times that best suit their personal circumstances which often need to be flexed around work schedules, appointments, daycare, and other adult realities.

- **Diverse Delivery Options**

Community-based LBS programs typically offer a variety of program delivery options, geared to different goal paths and levels. This includes one-to-one delivery, small group instruction, blended learning (a combination of face-to-face and digital learning), and links to e-learning (via e-Channel).

- **Flexible and Adaptable**

Programs provide flexibility around time, learning styles, formats, teaching materials, all designed to work with individual learner needs. Flexibility results in a less stressful learning environment for learners, who are already facing many challenges. Learners are able to learn at their own pace and therefore do not have the feeling of having to keep up with others. As well, learning materials and instructional methods are geared to the pace of each learner.

- **Individualized Support**

Classes tend to be smaller, which enables more individualized support for learners. Instruction is offered based on the needs of the learner, and a variety of instructional materials are used, tailored to the unique needs, skills and goals of learners. Every learner has a different life situation and combination of barriers that must be considered. This personalized approach allows literacy practitioners to consider these barriers (e.g., poverty, health, mental health, housing, access to technology, etc.) when planning programming.

- **Learner-Centred Environment**

Programming is developed based on the unique the needs of individual learners. Staff and volunteers look at learners holistically, and consider their personal circumstances, goals and support needs first. Having an awareness of, and when possible, addressing a learner's barriers can play a key role in their progress and ultimate success. Programs are set up to make adult learners feel comfortable and welcome. Sound adult learning principles, instructional strategies and materials are used.

- **Literacy Levels**

Community-based LBS programs have extensive experience in working with learners with low levels of literacy. Intake, assessment, programming, learning materials and learning environments are all geared to people with basic literacy skills.

- **Volunteer Support**

In some programs, volunteer tutors provide individualized tutoring and support to learners. Because it is highly personalized, this method is often very effective with learners with very low levels literacy skills and confidence levels.

- **Welcoming Learning Environment**

Program staff seek to understand and support each learner and create an environment where all feel valued, heard and respected. Learning environments are very suited to adults who have been away from learning, who lack confidence, or might prefer a more relaxed learning environment; they are non-intimidating, but also efficient, so learners feel confident in the programs and services they will receive.

- **Wrap Around Support**

Learners facing multiple barriers require, or can benefit from, additional community supports. Community-based LBS program staff build relationships with, and refer learners to, other services that support the learner's life circumstances and learning needs. From childcare to transportation, food security to housing, many learners facing multiple barriers require additional support in conjunction with learning. Program staff actively engage with other service providers and establish creative partnerships and community collaborations to support to learners.

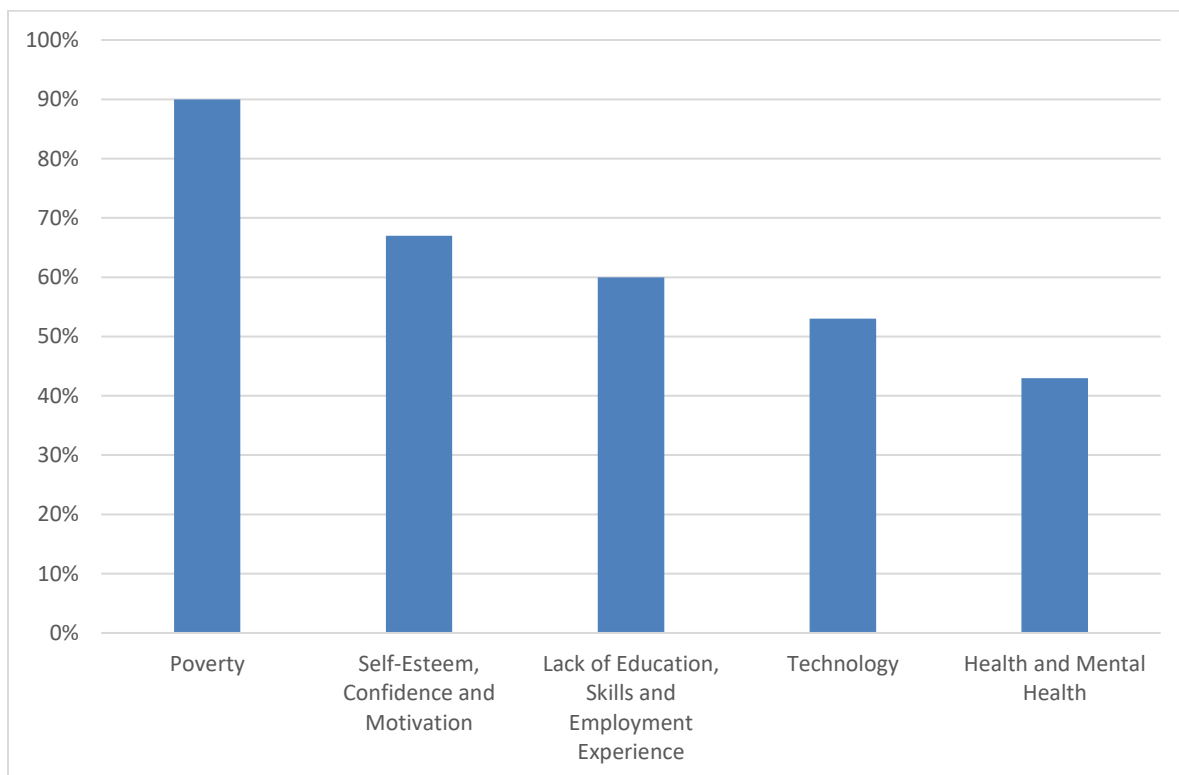
"We take a comprehensive, individualized approach with our clients. People first, students second. We build trust. We do much more than just deliver programs and provide opportunities to improve skills. We look at the learner as a whole person - consider all aspects of the person, not just learning -- e.g., self-esteem, personal circumstances, employment situation, family and individual situation."

Barriers

Adult learners face many challenges and barriers to learning in Literacy and Basic Skills programs. In CLO's survey, five main barriers were mentioned that most impacted the learning experience of adult learners with multi-barriers. These top barriers are:

- **Poverty** / Mentioned as a barrier by 90% of respondents (27/30)
- **Self-Esteem, Confidence and Motivation** / Mentioned as a barrier by 67% of respondents (20/30)
- **Lack of Education, Skills and Employment Experience** / Mentioned as a barrier by 60% of respondents (18/30)
- **Technology** / Mentioned as a barrier by 53% of respondents (16/30)
- **Health and Mental Health** / Mentioned as a barrier by 43% of respondents (13/30)

Most Commonly Identified Barriers to Learning in LBS Programs



Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers Strategies, Strengths, Barriers & Partnerships

Two quotes from respondents shed more light on the deep-rooted difficulties that many of these learners are coping with, such as:

- Generational poverty
- Limited access to technology
- Lack of access to community supports
- Limited support system

“Many of these learners have experienced generations of ongoing poverty, trauma, unmanaged mental health issues, food and housing insecurity, and other issues. As covered in Literacy Why It Matters, it is clear that these life outcomes are closely related to low literacy, especially generational low literacy. With multi-barriered learners, it is important to recognize the deeply ingrained beliefs that they may have about themselves, their worth, and their potential.”

“It is important to recognize and provide information and referrals that will aid in stabilizing other areas of the learner’s life: food, housing, child care, mental health, etc.”

Poverty

Overwhelmingly, the biggest barrier to learning impacting adult learners is poverty. This was identified by 90% of survey respondents.

The relationship between literacy skill level and the likelihood of living in poverty is strong. In Canada, 46% of adults at the lowest literacy levels (Levels 1 and 2) live in low income households. Comparatively, only 8% of adults at the highest literacy levels (Levels 4 and 5) live in low income households. (Source: *Literacy: Why It Matters*, CLO, 2018).

“A big barrier for many learners is the poverty and stress of providing for basic needs for their children. In other words, financial stress reduces a client’s ability to get involved in a program and to learn while in the program.”

Income

In our survey, literacy educators noted that many learners are on income support programs such as Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Between April 2019 and March 2020, 31% of learners across the province of Ontario relied on either OW or ODSP for income support (Source: *Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development*).

With the dramatic increase in housing costs that many communities are experiencing, these programs provide financial support that is well below the poverty line. Some learners are employed, but this may be in precarious work and entry-level positions.

Housing

Finding affordable housing is extremely difficult for many low-income Canadians, including adult learners. In the 2018 Canadian Housing Survey, 11.6% of Canadians were experiencing a core housing need, defined as living in an unsuitable, inadequate or unaffordable dwelling, and not able to afford alternative housing in their community ([Statistics Canada](#)). Waiting lists for subsidized or affordable housing are typically very long. Many cities are experiencing a real estate market boom, which has resulted in high priced housing and rental markets. Literacy educators noted that finding and keeping affordable housing is a struggle and a major source of stress for many adult learners. The 2018 Canadian Housing Survey also found that of those who were living in social and affordable housing, 61% have a high school diploma or less; 55% have not been employed in the last 12 months. Further, 16% have a long-term illness or disability. ([Statistics Canada](#)).

Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers

Strategies, Strengths, Barriers & Partnerships

Food Insecurity

Educators note that a lack of adequate food and nutrition has a very negative impact on learning. Food insecurity is a reality of most low-income Canadians. In 2019, over 60% of people who accessed food banks reported their primary source of income as EI, OW, ODSP or another social assistance or disability related support. ([HungerCount 2019, Food Banks Canada](#)).

Childcare and Transportation

Transportation and childcare costs were identified as significant barriers. Transportation challenges impacted the ability of some learners to attend programming, but it also impacted their ability to find and maintain employment and to access community services.

Lack of Support

A lack of support might come in various forms, including, in some cases, limited support from family or friends, lack of community, lack of role models, and the general lack of a support system. When combined with other circumstances such as being a single parent, living with a disability, living in poverty, and other situations that learners may face – a lack of support can be a difficult challenge.

Lack of Awareness of Community Supports

A lack of awareness and difficulty accessing community supports is a barrier reported by many of the survey respondents. Adult learners may have a difficult time identifying and applying for services, and they may not be aware of community supports that they are entitled to. A lack of digital literacy skills compounds these issues, when many services require learners to complete intake forms online, set up and utilize an email address, and other online requirements.

“Often learners do not know what resources are available to them or how to find them. They know they need to do something to improve their situation but do not have a clear path as to how or where to get what they need.”

Self-Esteem, Confidence and Motivation

LBS educators identified that for many LBS learners, a lack of self-esteem, confidence and motivation is an issue. This issue was noted by 67% of respondents to our survey.

Self-Esteem and Confidence

Low self-esteem can manifest in some learners having limiting beliefs about themselves or a lack of confidence in their abilities. Often, learners had negative learning experiences in the past which makes it difficult to approach new learning experiences optimistically. Limiting beliefs can also be related to a lack of familial support, poverty trauma from abusive relationships, and a lack of community connection.

“Some clients come to us believing that they will not succeed (self-fulfilling prophecy). They come to us with prior negative experiences with learning.”

Motivation

Continued motivation can be difficult for all learners to cultivate, and learners facing multiple barriers are no exception. Many learners struggle to balance several high priorities such as parenting duties, employment, and other basic needs. When basic needs like income, food and housing are unstable, they require more time and effort to maintain. This makes it difficult for learners facing multiple barriers to maintain focus and motivation on their education goals. Learners may have a changing shift work schedule that needs to be accommodated each week and they may be balancing more than one job. Combined with a lack of familial support, community support and mentors, it can be very difficult to maintain the motivation to continue with their learning goals. In addition to this, COVID-19 has created multiple changes that have been difficult for learners to cope with: learning from home, increased use of technology, and having to manage their own learning schedule at home rather than with an instructor.

“Despite their best efforts, some of our learners start out extremely motivated and then start to lose their motivation/discipline in our program because of home or work-based demands. While this has been an ongoing barrier to learning, it is particularly true of families with pre-school and school-aged children during this time of COVID-19. “

Lack of Education, Skills and Employment Experience

In CLO's survey, 60% of literacy educators mentioned that a lack of education, skills and employment experience were barriers to learning in LBS programs.

In the fiscal year ending March 2020, 37% of learners had achieved a Grade 11 education or less and 57% had a history of interrupted education. (*Source: Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development*).

Education

Adult learners facing multiple barriers have often faced challenges in their education, including interrupted learning, negative learning experiences, learning difficulties, language barriers, and more. These experiences often impact the learner's ability to complete their grade 12 high school diploma, and develop their essential skills.

Learning Disabilities

Learning Disabilities impact many adult learners and can become a substantial barrier to learning. In fact, a survey by Statistics Canada showed that of the Canadian adults with a learning disability who were not currently attending school, 33% did not complete high school; 31% completed high school; and only 36% achieved some level of post-secondary education. ([Statistics Canada](#)).

Skills

A low level or lack of basic skills, job skills, and other soft skills are barriers reported by many of CLO's survey respondents. Learners may have a lack of skills, or obsolete job skills that need to be upgraded before they can begin learning, upgrading or job searching. In addition to this, the need for low-skilled workers is declining (down 11% since 1998, according to Statistics Canada), while the demand for high-skilled workers is gone up 19% over the same time period ([Literacy Why it Matters 2018](#)).

Employment Experience

A lack of employment experience is a barrier reported by many of the survey respondents. Learners may have little or no work history or no employer references, which limits their chances of being interviewed or selected for a job. With high unemployment rates, even entry-level jobs are highly competitive. To learn more about this issue, read CLO's 2019 publication "[More Success Stories: Experiential Learning in LBS](#)" shares eight success stories of experiential learning in LBS.

Technology

Technology is a significant barrier to learning and to accessing community services and government information for many adult learners. It was mentioned as a barrier to learning by 53% of survey respondents. In fact, 39% of Ontarians with low incomes don't have an Internet connection at home ([AlphaPlus Digital Divide](#)). AlphaPlus's report "The impact of Ontario's digital divide" illustrates the snowball effect that a lack of home Internet can have on an average person's day.

The impact of COVID-19 has increased these effects substantially, as most people without home computers and/or internet depend on public computer and WiFi at libraries or other public spaces. COVID has made these support even less accessible.

Limited Access to Technology and WIFI

Home computers, tablets, laptops, smartphones and access to WIFI are often financially out of reach of many adult learners. In normal circumstances, they can access this equipment via their Literacy and Basic Skills program; however, with the advent of COVID, learning was often occurring at home.

Also, for learners accessing e-learning or blended learning, or who are trying to supplement their learning at home, lack of access to technology negatively impacts their learning experience. Both of these barriers make holding ZOOM sessions, Google classroom activities, Video chats, or other various digital learning activities a challenge.

Low Digital Literacy Skills

A second technology barrier is that many adult learners have low digital literacy skills. Literacy and Basic Skills programs seek to help learners improve these skills, in conjunction with other learning. Low digital literacy is a profound barrier that affects online learning, job skill requirements, social opportunities and it also significantly impacts confidence and the ability of learners to access information on important issues of relevance to them, such as income support programs, employment opportunities, and health information and supports. This is an issue of critical importance, and is especially problematic during COVID, where many of the programs and services that provide in person support to learners are closed.

Health and Mental Health

Health and mental health issues were mentioned as barriers to learning by 43% of LBS educators responding to CLO's survey. These issues include:

Physical Health and Disabilities

Literacy educators noted that some learners face physical health challenges and disabilities that impact their learning experience. The impact of low literacy levels on health is a serious issue. Canadians with the lowest levels of literacy are more than twice as likely to be in poor health compared to Canadians with higher literacy skills (*Literacy – Why it Matters, CLO, 2018*).

In the 2019-2020 fiscal year, nearly one quarter (24%) of adult learners enrolled in LBS programming indicated that they have a disability (*Source: Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development*).

Mental Health

Literacy educators noted that mental health issues are a barrier, and can make it difficult for learners to focus on their learning. These issues could include depression, anxiety, trauma, experiencing abuse and more. Poverty makes accessing counselling and other supports extremely difficult, and typically, publicly funded mental health services have long waiting lists. As well, addiction and substance abuse issues were identified as barriers to learning for some learners.

Naturally, COVID19 has greatly magnified mental health challenges for everyone.

In order to provide some support for mental health challenges, Community Literacy of Ontario, in partnership with several regional networks, compiled a list of online mental health supports, under our "[Reach Out of Mental Health](#)" initiative.

"With the current social climate (COVID) the biggest barrier for learners is mental health. Many are finding it difficult whether it's fear of going out in public or not being able to see their families as much as previous years, mentally they cannot focus on their learning at this time."

Partnerships and Connections

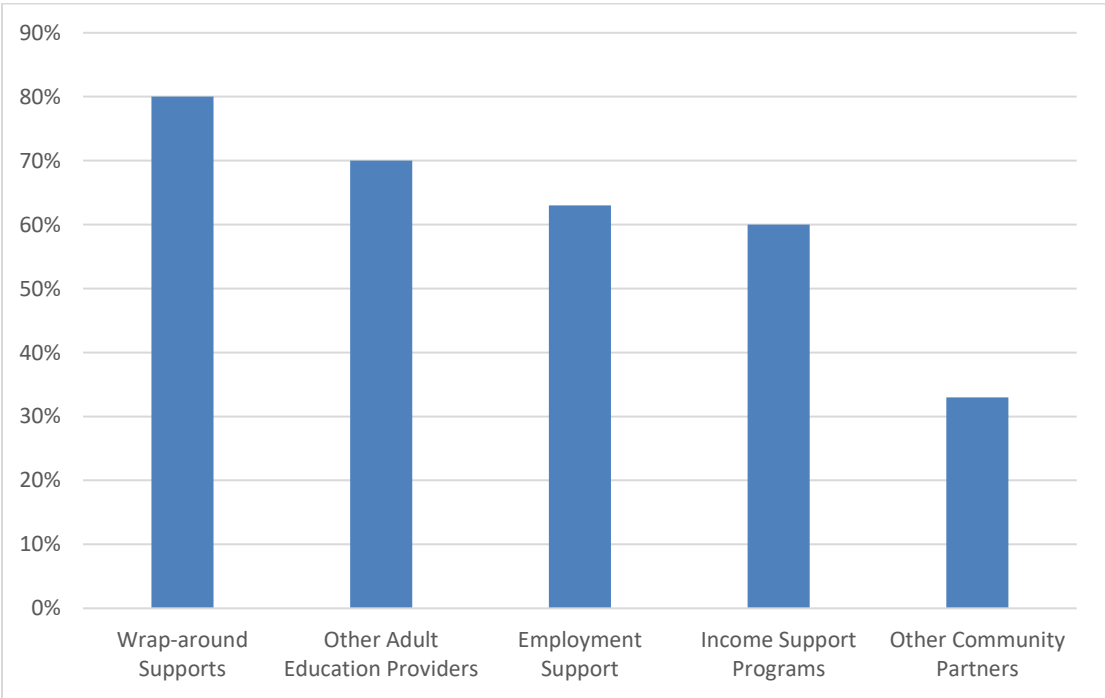
Community-based Literacy and Basic Skills organizations have consistently developed strong linkages and a variety of partnerships in their communities to best meet the needs of adult learners facing multiple barriers.

In CLO’s survey, five main types of partnerships and connections were identified that LBS agencies developed to support adult learners with multi-barriers.

- **Wrap-around Supports** / Mentioned by 80% of respondents (24/30)
- **Other Adult Education Providers** / Mentioned by 70% of respondents (21/30)
- **Employment Support** / Mentioned 63% of respondents (19/30)
- **Income Support Programs** / Mentioned by 60% of respondents (18/30)
- **Other Community Partners** /Mentioned by 33% of respondents (10/30)

The graph below shares the frequency of each type of partnership mentioned by the 30 survey respondents. Wrap-around care in this question includes basic needs such as mental and physical health, housing and food security and more.

Most Commonly Identified Partnerships and Connections Developed to Support Adult Learners with Multiple Barriers



Wrap-around Supports

Engaging in partnerships and establishing linkages to provide wrap-around support to adult learners was the most commonly identified partnership activity (80% of respondents).

Poverty impacts many adult learners and LBS educators are continually involved in a wide variety of programs to help vulnerable learners meet their basic needs. People cannot learn when they are facing foundational needs such as income support and housing.

- **Housing**

Due to low-income levels, literacy educators link with housing supports in their community. Often housing supports are complicated to understand and difficult to navigate. Accordingly, LBS organizations typically maintain current information and referral information on local housing supports for the benefit of learners. They will also link with housing support workers and share resources on critical province-wide services such as the Landlord Tenant Board, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO).

- **Food Relief**

LBS educators refer students to food banks, infant nutrition programs, Good Food Boxes, community gardens, and other local sources of temporary food relief. Some also link with service clubs or local employers to access snacks or lunches for adult learners.

- **Shelters**

Linkages and referral partnerships are established with shelter services, including shelters for women and children fleeing domestic violence, crisis centres for mental health, and homeless shelters for youth and adults.

- **Poverty Reduction Initiatives**

As mentioned previously, there is a strong link between poverty and low literacy skills. Accordingly, LBS agencies are quick to partner with diverse community organizations who are involved in local poverty reduction initiatives. This could include involvement with local, provincial or national advocacy initiatives, municipal programming, social planning councils, Good Food Boxes, Circles Out of Poverty, or programming offered by other non-profits, such as the United Way and the YMCA.

Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers

Strategies, Strengths, Barriers & Partnerships

- **Disability Services and Supports**

As mentioned under the “Barriers” section, nearly one quarter (24%) of adult learners enrolled in LBS programming indicated that they have a disability. This means that literacy educators must actively connect with organizations that provide support to people with disabilities. In addition to linking with the Ontario Disability Support Program (as mentioned under the Income Support section), literacy practitioners have forged partnerships with local service providers such as the March of Dimes, Brain Injury Services, Independent Living, Community Living, CNIB and more.

- **Legal Services**

In order to support adult learners who need access to legal services, literacy agencies link with local community legal clinics and legal aid, The John Howard Society, The Elizabeth Fry Society and online legal services, such as the Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO).

- **Health and Mental Health Services**

Mental Health

Respondents shared that many learners are facing mental health issues. Others may face addiction issues. Literacy agencies have therefore built strong partnerships with a variety of mental health supports and programs in their area, with a key partner often being their local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association. They also link with mental health outreach workers, counselling and addiction supports, and services.

Healthcare

The impact of low literacy levels on health is a very serious issue. Canadians with the lowest levels of literacy are more than twice as likely to be in poor health compared to Canadians with higher literacy skills ([Literacy – Why it Matters](#)). To support the healthcare needs of learners, literacy agencies connect with and refer learners to local health organizations such as their local Public Health Units, community clinics and other healthcare services and resources. During COVID19, these linkages have been of particular importance so that accurate information about safety measures related to the pandemic could be shared with adult learners.

Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers

Strategies, Strengths, Barriers & Partnerships

- **Childcare and Transportation**

Respondents noted that childcare and transportation are key issues for many adult learners. For the most part, adult literacy programs meet these needs through Training Support funding provided by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

- **Newcomer Supports**

LBS agencies maintain good referral relationships with the various newcomer support services available in their communities. Depending upon the community, this could include welcome centres, YMCA / YWCA programs, LINC and ESL programs, and Newcomer Women's Centres.

Other Adult Education Providers

The second most common type of partnership is with other providers of adult education (mentioned by 70% of respondents). Literacy and Basic Skills providers actively refer and develop partnerships with other local providers of adult education to support adult learners.

The most popular goal for learners enrolled in the Literacy and Basic Skills program is further education and training. In the 2019-2020 fiscal year, 49% of learners were on goal paths related to postsecondary education or secondary school credit.

Educational attainment is strongly related to employment. In 2016, only 55% of Canadians aged 25-64 who did not complete high school were employed. Research has also found that approximately 45% of Canadians in precarious or "no contract" work have not attained an educational credential beyond a high-school diploma. (Source: LWIM 2018). In the fiscal year ending March 2020, 64% of learners had achieved a Grade 12 education or less.

By a large majority, the most common partners are other LBS agencies from different streams (there are three streams: community-based, school board and colleges) and in other sectors (English language, Aboriginal, Francophone and Deaf). As well, they also partner with e-Channel, Ontario's e-learning providers. LBS agencies gather at Literacy Services Planning meetings and events held by their Regional Literacy Networks and often effective partnerships are developed there as well.

Supporting LBS Learners Facing Multiple Barriers

Strategies, Strengths, Barriers & Partnerships

Other education partners include:

- College programming
- TVO's Independent Learning Centre
- LINC / ESL
- Skills training programs
- Skilled trades and apprenticeship

Employment Support

Many adult learners have employment as their goal when enrolling in the LBS program. In the 2019-2020 fiscal year, 33% of learners were on the employment goal path. The majority of the remaining learners were engaged in goal paths that would lead to employment in the future.

Referrals, connections and partnerships are commonplace between LBS and organizations providing employment support. This is reflected by 63% of survey respondents identifying connecting with organizations who provide employment support.

In terms of employment support, overwhelmingly, the strongest partnerships and connections are established between LBS staff and Employment Ontario's Employment Services.

Other employment partners include:

- Employers
- Community organizations that provide free clothing for interviews/employment
- Organizations and employers involved in the skilled trades and apprenticeship
- Unions (in particular, LiUNA)
- Other Federal and Provincial Government programs (i.e., Youth Job Connect program)
- Workforce Planning Boards
- Chambers of Commerce

For more information on this important topic, read CLO's [Building Bridges for the Future Workforce. LBS: Connecting Multi-Barriered Learners to Employment](#)

Income Support Programs

Poverty is a reality for many people with low literacy skills, and adult learners in LBS agencies are no exception. This is reflected in our survey, where 60% of respondents identified creating partnerships and close working relationships with income support programs.

Literacy educators link closely with OW and ODSP staff to create partnerships to benefit adult learners; access services and information; share information about their organization; facilitate referrals to LBS programming; and build relationships with staff.

For some excellent examples of partnerships, read CLO's "[Partnership Success Stories: Literacy and Basic Skills Agencies and Ontario Works](#)".

Other income support organizations that LBS educators establish links with include emergency financial supports that may be available in the community, local poverty reduction initiatives, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) and Employment Insurance. More recently with the advent of COVID, programs share current information on the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB).

Other Community Partners

In addition to the community service providers listed under the Wrap-around Support section and other categories, there were additional non-profit organizations mentioned in CLO's survey. Thirty-three percent of survey respondents engaged in partnerships with other community organizations who provide support to learners with multiple barriers.

LBS educators mentioned the following additional community partners:

- Libraries
- Service Clubs
- Native Friendship Centres
- United Way
- Economic Development Associations

Conclusion

Community Literacy of Ontario's survey revealed many common issues facing adult learners with multiple barriers. The survey results highlight the profound impact of poverty, and the reality that many learners struggle to meet basic needs. Wrap-around support is key to effectively address the personal and learning needs of many adult learners. The survey also shared the importance of providing diverse learning opportunities, individualized learning plan development and instruction. The need for strong community connections and partnership development is another key theme.

CLO hopes that our report captures the effective strategies, unique strengths, and the partnerships and connections developed by Ontario's community-based Literacy and Basic Skills programs to support adult learners who face multiple barriers.

We are in awe of the courage and perseverance of adult learners who engage in learning despite the many barriers they face. We also salute the care, skill, creativity and diligence of adult educators in Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills Programs, and the last word is left to them:

"We think outside the box, persevere, make things happen. We're creative and compassionate. We do not try to do everything or be everything to everyone. We know our strengths and use them. We collaborate with other agencies with different strengths to provide the best of care for our learners."