

LiUNA and Skills Upgrading: Partnerships to Build the Future

A Case Study



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The partnerships that are highlighted in this case study reflect those of which we are aware. It's entirely possible, in fact, probable, that there are other partnerships between LiUNA and Literacy and Basic Skills programming in the province. If we missed anyone, we apologize. The oversight was unintended.

Tell us if we missed your partnership by contacting us at literacylink@llsc.on.ca.

Actually, don't just tell us. Tell everyone. We need to share these critical partnerships widely!

Introduction

Both apprenticeship and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programming are funded through the same Ministry—the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD). This co-funding arrangement alone seems to imply that apprenticeship and Literacy and Basic Skills are or should be related.

For decades, apprentices and those whose goal is to get into apprenticeship have sought out adult upgrading (or LBS) programs so they can gain the skills they need to be successful. In a few instances, local trade unions have reached out to adult upgrading programs if they noticed that their pre-apprentices/apprentices needed some skills development support.

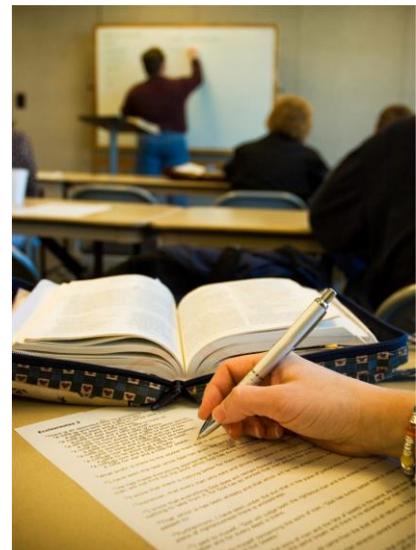
Such was the case between Literacy Link South Central (LLSC)—a regional adult literacy network—and LiUNA Local 1059. LiUNA stands for the Labourers' International Union of North America. LLSC and LiUNA Local 1059 struck up a formal relationship in 2021-2022—a relationship that saw 100 pre-apprentices go through one-on-one skills interviews and the creation of a Math Booster program.

Almost by accident, the Executive Director of LLSC came across partnerships that had been developed between other adult upgrading programs and LiUNA Locals in other parts of Ontario. It sounded like an opportunity to research and document why these partnerships had been developed and how they were being executed and to consider the question: What if formal connections could be developed between adult upgrading programs and apprenticeship at the provincial level?

And so, the concept of developing a case study of partnerships between LiUNA and LBS was born. Interestingly, what was intended to be a look into the past became a look towards partnerships that will lead Ontario into the future.

Skills upgrading for Apprenticeship is important because:

- Some would-be apprentices don't have the minimum level of academic achievement required – or they don't know how to get the education they have officially recognized
- Some apprentices struggle to pass their formal or classroom training
- The provincial pass rates for C of Q exams are just over 50% which means lots of apprentices are unable to progress to journeyperson status



What is Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Programming?

LBS programming is contained within the training branch of the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development—the same Ministry responsible for Skilled Trades Ontario.

LBS differs from regular school because it is focused on tangible skills and an individual's learning needs. LBS services are free, but do not mistake no-cost training for lower quality—the training is high-quality and tailored to meet the unique needs of each individual and their desired outcome.

Eligibility is simple. Individuals need to be Ontario residents, have skills lower than a grade 12, speak English or French, and have a goal to successfully transition to employment, secondary school, postsecondary school, apprenticeship, and/or increased independence. With over 300 locations throughout Ontario and the flexibility of using online platforms, pre-apprentices and apprentices may receive customized skills upgrading or supports to get into an apprenticeship, to successfully complete their in-class training, and/or to prepare for their Certificate of Qualification.



Where and how do LBS and Apprenticeship intersect?

Many Skilled Trades require an individual to possess a Grade 12 or its equivalent. On paper, this is a logical standard to require. It is natural to assume that the individual's skills are equal to a Grade 12 level. But this is not necessarily true. Over half of the individuals in Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs possess a Grade 12 Diploma or better and seek the services of skills upgrading to fill a skills gap to achieve their employment, apprenticeship, independence, or education goals. As the saying goes, *if you don't use it, you lose it*. Math and numeracy skills are among the skills that decline if not routinely used, and, at the same time, they are among the top skills necessary in the Construction Trades. Other important skills such as writing and digital literacy are also emerging as vital to an apprentice's success in the Skilled Trades. Evidence collected by adult training instructors suggests that apprentices assume that these skills will resurface with use in class or on the job or be re-taught during their in-class training. Many individuals try to go it alone, often struggling in silence until it is too late.

The discrepancy between someone's functional level of ability and the level of ability their credentials suggest they have means that a strength-based assessment is important to detect skills gaps in writing, reading, numeracy, and digital literacy skills. Early assessment and detection of skills gaps ensures an apprentice can receive customized training support to meet these skills gaps early and as needed throughout their apprenticeship journey. With greater skills, early apprenticeship withdrawal rates decrease, safety in the workplace increases, and more apprentices complete their Certificate of Qualification.

For some time now, LBS programs have believed that trade unions and local adult upgrading programs should have strong relationships given how important skills development and application is in apprenticeship. Yet LBS, as a system, is relatively unknown. LBS hopes to increase awareness of the local adult upgrading programs' ability to support pre-apprentices and apprentices through assessments and tailored skills training that compliments the LiUNA training programs. This is a win-win scenario for all, especially for the individuals with aspirations of achieving a career in the Construction Trades.



About LiUNA

Laborers'
International
Union of
North America

LiUNA!

The Labourers' International Union of North America (LiUNA) is the fastest growing union of construction, waste management, show service, and healthcare workers in Canada. The first LiUNA dates back to Philadelphia, USA in 1836, and the first LiUNA in Canada dates back to 1919. Across North America, LiUNA has one million members representing a wide range of industries with 100,000 members and retirees in Canada. [Ontario](#) has 10 LiUNA Locals.

LiUNA's number one goal is seeing that every worker returns home safely every day. Through an uncompromising commitment to Health & Safety training, LiUNA provides more training to its members than any other union. LiUNA offers members the most up-to-date training as well as apprenticeships in Brick and Stone Masonry (401A), Concrete Finishing (244G), Hazardous Material Worker (HMW 253H), and their very own Construction Craft Worker (450A) within their training centres throughout Canada.

([Source](#): Retrieved on March 8, 2022)

Building Construction

LiUNA members build office towers, apartment buildings, schools, sports facilities, shopping malls, parking garages, factories, and many other types of buildings, including houses.



Heavy Construction and Highway Construction

LiUNA members build roadways, bridges, dams, power plants, and other major construction projects.

Manufacturing & Commerce

Although LiUNA began in 1903 as a construction union, its members now work in many types of factories and processing plants. They also work in stores, offices, hotels, restaurants, and offices.



Public Sector

Government-funded services is one of the fastest-growing areas of LiUNA membership, from hospitals and nursing homes to school boards, municipal streets and parks departments, waste management and recreation, to name just a few.

[Click here](#) for a complete list of sectors LiUNA represents.

A Nod to the Past

Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) staff had learned that Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs and LiUNA had developed relationships in at least two other parts of Ontario: Sudbury and Hamilton. Eager to learn more about what initiated these partnerships, what the partnerships looked like, and what the results of their partnerships were, LLSC staff did some research.

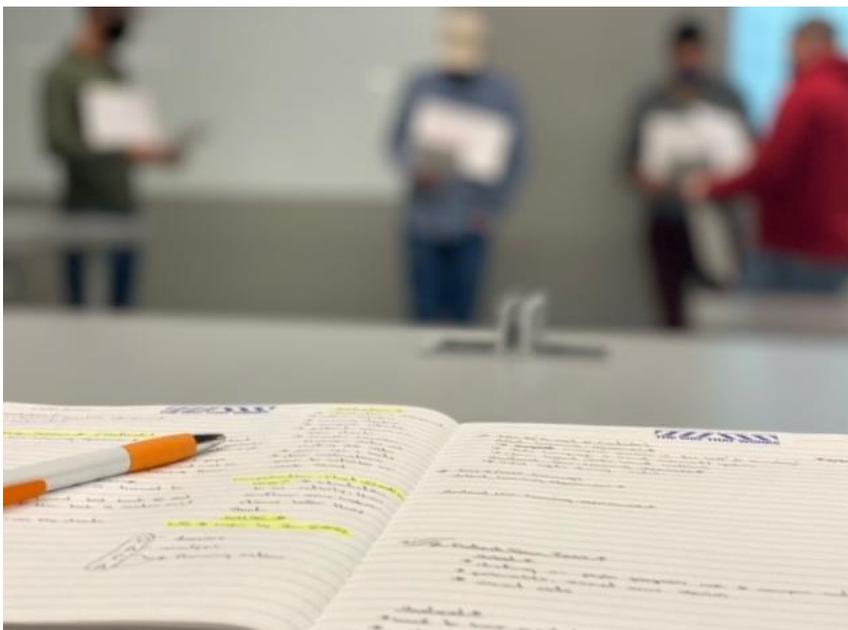
Again, it's certain that there are more than just these two examples of partnerships between LiUNA and LBS. But these are the ones we're aware of, so we will highlight them here.

LiUNA Local 493 and Spark Employment Services

In Sudbury Ontario, [LiUNA Local 493](#) had noted some gaps in math skills among their apprentices/pre-apprentices and they reached out to the local LBS program provided by [Spark Employment Services](#).

While the original need was math, Spark Employment Services also integrated some training in soft skills, particularly around appropriate language and attitude on the job site. According to the instructor for this program, participants were very receptive to learning these soft skills and appreciated the opportunity to be brought up to speed on changes within the workplace and how employees should conduct themselves.

The math/soft skills program was a targeted, short-term program of only a week, but it supported the LiUNA participants in refreshing their math skills and learning new skills that would facilitate enhanced communication on the job.



LiUNA Local 837 and St. Charles Adult and Continuing Education

Student Quote:

“You guys changed my life. This is the best thing I’ve ever done.”



[LiUNA Local 837](#) struck up a relationship with [St. Charles Adult and Continuing Education](#) in Hamilton, Ontario. It’s interesting that the primary focus of this relationship was on promotion—not exclusively the provision of adult upgrading.

LiUNA Local 837 had been successful in a pre-apprenticeship proposal and needed to find participants. In a partnership between St. Charles, LiUNA, and the City of Hamilton, a concerted effort was made to attract youth. Most of the youth didn’t have their high school diplomas and were struggling to get them. Getting into an apprenticeship as a Construction Craft Worker requires a Grade 10 (although a Grade 12 is desirable), making this a viable option for many youths. St. Charles provided academic support, and local employment services provided soft skills support.

This first pre-apprenticeship program had 10 seats and these seats were difficult to fill. But the combined efforts of St. Charles, the City of Hamilton, and LiUNA were successful. In fact, at the graduation for this program, one of the best students (a woman) said, “You guys changed my life. This is the best thing I’ve ever done.” This was in 2018 and it was the first cohort.

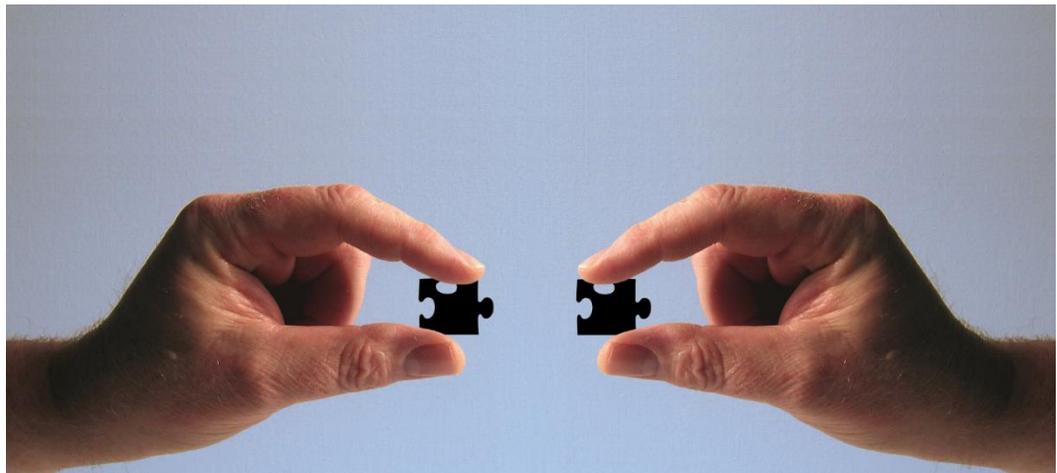
The second cohort was late in 2019. With just three days to recruit, 76 people came forward and demonstrated interest. Advertising was primarily through word of mouth and social media.

And while this is a case study about LiUNA and Literacy and Basic Skills programming, it’s notable that St. Charles Adult and Continuing Education has also offered support for electricians (a virtual math program) and for truck drivers (a math booster). In all cases, the relationships between St. Charles and the trades have been highly successful and effective.

A New Partnership Begins

While it is widely acknowledged that being an apprentice requires a high level of skill, to many people this means hands-on skills. It is much rarer for other types of skills (reading, writing, problem-solving, teamwork) to be linked with apprenticeship, yet these skills are critical.

Adult literacy programs have been trying to forge stronger connections with Ontario's apprenticeship system for decades. Perhaps because of all the media and government attention related to the shortage of skilled tradespeople, it has historically been challenging to create time and space to talk about the importance of other foundational skills in relation to apprenticeship. However, the conversation around skills and apprenticeship is beginning to change thanks to the vision and work of progressive locals like LiUNA Local 1059.



LiUNA Local 1059 and Literacy Link South Central

[Literacy Link South Central](#) (LLSC) first became aware of [LiUNA Local 1059](#) because LLSC was looking for a large and reasonably priced (free) community room that it could access to provide workshops. After availing themselves of LiUNA's free community room on numerous occasions and having informal conversations with LiUNA staff, LLSC approached LiUNA 1059's Training Director to be on the LLSC Board of Directors. The goal was to have adult literacy and apprenticeship conversations in a more strategic and deliberate manner. It still took several years for LLSC and LiUNA Local 1059 to figure out a tangible way to work together. What was the prompt?

In December 2020, the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) issued a Call for Proposals for Pre-Apprenticeship. MLTSD specifically encouraged applicants to partner with local adult literacy programs/organizations. LiUNA Local 1059 reached out to LLSC to partner on the 2020-2021 Pre-Apprenticeship application.

Review intake process

The first step in the new Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) and LiUNA Local 1059 partnership was for LLSC staff to provide feedback on LiUNA's intake process for pre-apprenticeship. LiUNA 1059 already had a robust intake process which included a math screening test. However, as has already been discussed, the level of education that someone reports having can be very different from the level of skills that someone actually has.

As a result, LiUNA 1059 and LLSC worked together to add a reading comprehension task to the intake process which required pre-apprentices to review some text and answer questions in writing related to apprenticeship.

Through a review of the intake process, and based on past experiences, LLSC and Local 1059 decided to increase the emphasis placed on providing evidence of education achieved. Again, historically, it has been noted that some pre-apprentices may need to gain some educational qualifications or have their existing qualifications assessed by a recognized third party. However, history has also shown that some pre-apprentices require more support in assessing their options for getting credentials and in making connections with local programs that can support them.



Conduct 1:1 interviews with pre-apprentices

Local 1059 and Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) decided to do 1:1 interviews with each pre-apprentice. We called the interviews “Skills Check-Ins for Apprenticeship.” While it would have been faster and less costly to talk to groups of pre-apprentices about the importance of skills in the trades, having 1:1 interviews provided the opportunity for each pre-apprentice to talk about their skills and their educational strengths and weaknesses in a confidential setting. Admitting to having lower skills than is desired can be difficult to do—and it is very unlikely that pre-apprentices (or anyone for that matter) would be candid and comfortable disclosing in a group of peers.

LiUNA Local 1059 recruited 100 pre-apprentices to attend its pre-apprenticeship training. The pre-apprentices were divided into five cohorts of approximately 20 individuals each. Each pre-apprentice spent 45 minutes to an hour with an adult educator to discuss educational and employment histories, as well as their skills and any past or potential learning challenges or barriers.

After each individual interview, LLSC created a written summary or report of the conversation and shared the summary with the pre-apprentice. In addition to recounting highlights from the one-on-one conversation, the reports provided details on how pre-apprentices could demonstrate that they have the minimum educational requirements or ways in which pre-apprentices could get their minimum educational requirements (Grade 10). Some of the pre-apprentices were educated outside of Ontario and needed help to get their educational credentials assessed for acceptance by MLTSD.

For each cohort, LLSC provided a summary of all interviews to LiUNA so that they knew who might struggle to demonstrate a Grade 10 level of education, who might have specific learning needs, and who might need to upgrade in certain skill categories.



Areas of skills assessed

The skills needed for today's workplaces are changing rapidly and the same is true of apprenticeship. In addition to the more traditional areas of learning, like reading, writing and math, the ability to use digital devices is becoming essential for almost every type of work. And many employers have soft skills on their radar, preferring to hire people who can demonstrate soft skills as well as technical skills. It was important to Local 1059 that soft skills (adaptability, problem solving, time management, etc.) be a topic of discussion in the 1:1 interviews and that pre-apprentices develop awareness of how important these skills are to employers.



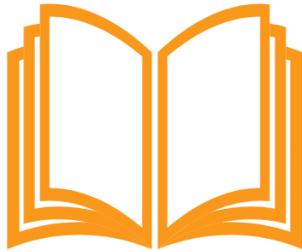
Documentation



The training component of the pre-apprenticeship programming finished in August 2021. Then pre-apprentices were placed with employers for several months. Now, the pre-apprentices are at the point where they can be officially signed as apprentices with LiUNA. To do so, they must be able to present proof of Grade 10 educational attainment.

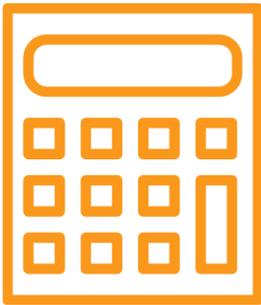
Approximately 10% of the pre-apprentices need support in gaining the necessary credentials or having the credentials they possess recognized and accredited. Getting such recognition and credit is not an easy task for individuals who are working full-time and who are trying to navigate their way through multiple educational systems and associated red tape. This is an area where LiUNA has really appreciated its connection with Literacy Link South Central—a single point of contact when it comes to figuring out the educational and credentialing systems.

Reading/Writing



As has been discussed, part of LiUNA's intake process for its pre-apprenticeship program asks pre-apprentices to read a document and answer (on paper) several questions. Adult educators can tell a lot from seeing a person's handwriting, not how messy their writing is, but the way they use language, words, and punctuation. The completed reading comprehension task is provided to Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) prior to the 1:1 conversations with pre-apprentices and is a valuable resource for discussions about educational history, strengths, and weaknesses.

Math/Numeracy



All pre-apprentices were asked to complete a 12-question math assessment that focused primarily on fractions, measurement (converting from one unit to another), and performing basic calculations. While these questions were relatively basic, about two-thirds of pre-apprentices failed this assessment. During the 1:1 interviews for the first cohort, it became clear that math was a challenge for many pre-apprentices.

After discussing these results with Local 1059, LLSC recruited the Literacy and Basic Skills Program at Fanshawe College to deliver a math program to the pre-apprentices. Fanshawe College also developed a math workbook that was specific to the math that LiUNA tradespeople would need to complete on the job. They called the program a "Math Booster", and it's been very successful. None of the pre-apprentices were forced to take the Math Booster, but they were strongly encouraged by Local 1059 to do so. It is clear that LiUNA's emphasis on skill development resonated with the pre-apprentices. Not only did pre-apprentices who failed the math assessment complete the program, but many pre-apprentices who scored quite competently on the math assessment took the program so they could be well prepared to be placed with an employer.

Soft Skills



In order to be prepared to discuss soft skills during the 1:1 interviews, pre-apprentices were asked to rate themselves on 24 statements related to soft skills. Each statement mapped back to a specific soft skill. This [assessment](#) had been developed by Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) for the manufacturing sector, but it was very applicable to the pre-apprentices.

Eight different soft skills were being assessed:

- Organization
- Adaptability
- Teamwork
- Problem solving
- Dependability
- Communication
- Detail Oriented
- Attitude

Some pre-apprentices rated themselves highly in all questions; some did not. LLSC staff scored the self-assessments prior to the 1:1 interviews and used the results to talk about what soft skills are (not everyone knows what they are or calls them soft skills), how important they are at work, what soft skills each pre-apprentice may have developed through previous work experience, and whether there are any soft skills that the pre-apprentice would like to work on. For many pre-apprentices, soft skills are a new area of skills identification.

Digital Literacy Skills



It is generally assumed that everyone has a computer (or three) at home and that everyone is competent at using technology. Of course, this is an assumption and so is not true in every instance. LLSC and Local 1059 were interested in assessing digital literacy skills for two reasons. First, digital skills are becoming increasingly important in today's workplaces and increasingly necessary for people to perform at work. Secondly, at the time of LLSC's work with Local 1059, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted what happens when someone is on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Fanshawe’s Math Booster had to be delivered online. Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) staff were able to discover through the administration of a digital literacy self-assessment that some of the pre-apprentices did not have a computer at home which would make their participation in the Math Booster challenging. LLSC staff shared this foreknowledge with LiUNA so that arrangements could be made to loan laptops out to those who might need them.

Other Learning Needs



The discussion of “Other Learning Needs” may sound like a very broad category, but it’s an important one. LLSC staff asked pre-apprentices if they had ever had an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) when they were in school. A surprising number of pre-apprentices had, although they could seldom recall what it was for. Many pre-apprentices identified that they have attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Some had been officially diagnosed and some had not. On more rare occasions, a pre-apprentice indicated that they had been

assigned an Educational Assistant when they were younger or that they had been given accommodations like extra time to write tests.

LLSC staff didn’t restrict conversations around other learning needs to learning. Many things can affect someone’s ability to learn. Staff always begin this part of the 1:1 interview in very general terms with “Do you think you have any other learning needs we should be aware of?” And the first answer is almost always “No.” But experienced adult educators know supplemental questions to ask and, in so doing, support pre-apprentices in thinking critically about things that could affect their learning and make recommendations for potential supports if needed.

Summary



The relationship between LiUNA Local 1059 and LLSC has been a win-win. LiUNA has received support from the adult literacy community to ensure pre-apprentices have the skills and documentation required to meet the eligibility requirements of apprenticeship. LLSC has finally been able to make a meaningful connection with apprenticeship. But perhaps best of all, the importance of developing all types of skills is reinforced for pre-apprentices at the very beginning of their apprenticeship journey.

Calling on LiUNA Training Directors across Ontario

So, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) staff looked at historical relationships between LiUNA and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs in Sudbury and Hamilton and LLSC had a developing relationship with Local 1059. Was that as far as the case study needed to go?

LLSC staff were interested in talking to LiUNA Training Directors from across Ontario. Fortunately, the Training Directors meet on a regular basis and staff from LLSC and from the Rideau Ottawa Valley Learning Network (ROVLN) made a presentation to them in November 2021. The presentation focused on:

- What is Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS)?
- How can LBS support apprenticeship?
- Examples of partnerships
- A Q and A period

The presentation ended with an offer. If any other LiUNA Local was interested in hearing more about the model with Local 1059 or in exploring their own model, they could contact LLSC.

And two LiUNA Locals did just that.

About LiUNA Local 625

Established in Windsor in 1945 and one of 10 LIUNA locals in Ontario, the dedication and loyalty of our 2,000 Members across southwest Ontario is unprecedented—a tradition that began in 1903 and has powered LIUNA into one of the strongest, most respected unions in Canada with Members and retirees growing to 180,000. In collaboration with all government partners, [LiUNA Local 625](#) has played a leading role on local world-class infrastructure projects like the Rt. Hon. Herb Grey Parkway, the new \$3 billion Gordie Howe International Bridge, scheduled for completion in 2024, plus an additional \$6-\$7 billion in building and infrastructure projects underway or slated for construction between 2021 and 2026 in our jurisdiction alone. LiUNA is a proud pioneer in establishing an inclusive barrier-free workplace for people who are construction-skilled and ready for union membership or pursuing a career path to achieve Construction Craft Worker certification at our state-of-the-art training centre.

About Tri-County Literacy Network

The [Tri-County Literacy Network](#) is a non-profit organization that promotes literacy as an important part of life-long learning. They provide support to adult literacy programs and develop community partnerships with other promoters of learning in Chatham-Kent, Sarnia-Lambton, and Windsor-Essex. They are one of sixteen Regional Literacy Networks in Ontario funded by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. Tri-County Literacy Network has managed a variety of impactful projects including their Learning to Earning videos project and Linking Adult Literacy to Poverty Reduction. The Network is an active member of the Learning Networks of Ontario.

What are LiUNA Local 625's needs?

LiUNA Local 625 has identified a need for math upgrading/refresher as math is essential in construction. Other areas identified were communication, soft skills, and digital learning.



About LiUNA Local 183

The [LiUNA Local 183 Training Centre](#) provides Apprenticeship, Construction Skill, and Health and Safety Training at 6 sites across Ontario.

They conduct three apprenticeship programs:

- Construction Craft Worker (LiUNA's signature program)
- Brick and Stone Masonry and
- Cement Finishing

Each apprenticeship program is 8 weeks in length and provides the apprentice with comprehensive simulated real job site experience. With each of the programs, the apprentice also receives all the necessary health and safety courses required to keep them safe on the job site.

About Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy

Established in 1978, the [Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy](#) (MTML) is a membership-based non-profit organization working to advance the issue of adult literacy. MTML is one of 16 regional networks in Ontario that supports and promotes the work of adult literacy and skills upgrading programs. With funding support through Employment Ontario and the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development MTML works with 33 Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies (from all sectors: community agencies, colleges and school boards and streams: Francophone, Indigenous, deaf, deaf/blind and anglophone) operating at over 100 locations in the City of Toronto and York Region. We collaborate with programs and people to share knowledge, build awareness, and promote the lifelong learning needed to fully participate in today's society.

What are LiUNA Local 183's needs?

LiUNA 183 has identified that some or most of their clients in the apprenticeship programs in the York Region have low numeracy skills and are unable to understand the program curriculum. The clients lack knowledge and understanding of basic Math concepts required for the completion of their apprenticeship. Therefore, LiUNA 183 is looking for Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs that may be able to conduct Math Booster sessions so that their clients can upgrade their skills and knowledge to fulfill the requirement for successful completion of the apprenticeship program. The LBS programs can provide and conduct such sessions as they are experienced in preparing individuals employed in or seeking to enter skilled trades, in the form of pre-apprenticeship programs.

What approach to meeting the needs are you taking/considering?

MTML has considered involving the colleges in York Region that run LBS pre-apprenticeship programs. The “Math Trade Booster” curriculum will be provided by Fanshawe College who have already tested the curriculum with successful results. Both colleges will conduct two mandatory sessions at LiUNA’s training location in York Region.

Partners

- Humber College
- Georgian College



Conclusion

We've highlighted relationships between LiUNA and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS): past, present, and future. It's clear that there are many reasons for LBS and LiUNA to work together to support apprentices and pre-apprentices, ranging from promotion to individual support to referrals to skills training. With so many needs, partners, and programs, it's quite remarkable that LiUNA and LBS have managed to connect as many times as they have. It would be strategic if these effective relationships didn't happen on an ad hoc basis, but rather by design at the provincial level.

In some ways, calling this the "conclusion" of the case study doesn't sound right. It sounds like an ending when the partnerships between LiUNA and LBS is really at the beginning, showing great promise for the future. LiUNA is blazing a trail to show how local relationships with LBS providers can support the success of pre-apprentices and apprentices and meet the needs of Ontario's employers and economy.

