

The Ontario Literacy and Skills Report: 2025

Why Literacy Matters



Community
Literacy of
Ontario

Community Literacy of Ontario proudly presents *The Ontario Literacy and Skills Report: 2025* — an updated edition of the 2018 resource *Literacy: Why It Matters*. This report underscores the vital role of literacy in Ontario and examines its strong links to key issues that shape the lives of Ontarians and the health of our communities, including health, poverty, employment, and the economy.



www.communityliteracyofontario.ca



(705) 733-2312



info@communityliteracyofontario.ca



@CommunityLitOn

Ontario Literacy Skills

- Literacy is an essential skill in Ontario, yet many residents lack the literacy levels required for home, work, and daily life. 19% of Canadians aged 16 to 65 scored at or below Literacy Level 1, meaning they struggle with reading basic text.¹
- The percentage of Canadians scoring at or below Level 1 increased to 19% in 2023, rising from 17% in 2014.²
- An additional 30% of Canadians scored at Literacy Level 2, down from 32% in 2014. While they can read simple text, they often struggle with everyday tasks such as filling out forms, following rental agreements, or understanding medication instructions.³

Ontario Numeracy Skills

- One in five Canadians (21%) demonstrated numeracy skills at Level 1 or lower. At this level, individuals can do simple calculations with whole numbers and locate single pieces of information in a chart. However, they often struggle when tasks require multiple steps. Those who score below Level 1 are limited to basic operations such as adding or subtracting small numbers.⁴
- 30% of Canadians scored at Level 2, where they may have difficulties with commonly needed numeracy tasks such as budgeting for food, housing, and other daily necessities.⁵
- Overall, half of Ontarians have numeracy skills below Level 3, which is the minimum that is required to function effectively in Canadian society.⁶

OSSLT & PISA Results

- Passing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is one of the requirements for earning an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The OSSLT measures whether high school students meet the minimum literacy standard.⁷
- Of the 132,172 first-time eligible Grade 10 students who wrote the OSSLT in 2023/24, 85% passed and 15% did not. Over the past three years, success rates for this group have improved.⁸
- In 2023/24, 24,109 students wrote the OSSLT for the first time despite being eligible in earlier years. This group included students who had deferred the test through an IEP, transferred from outside Ontario, or were mature students. Just over half (52%) passed, while nearly half (48%) did not. Success rates for this group have declined over the past three years.⁹
- Success rates also vary significantly by course type. Ninety per cent of students taking academic-level English passed the OSSLT, compared to 58% of those enrolled in applied-level English.¹⁰

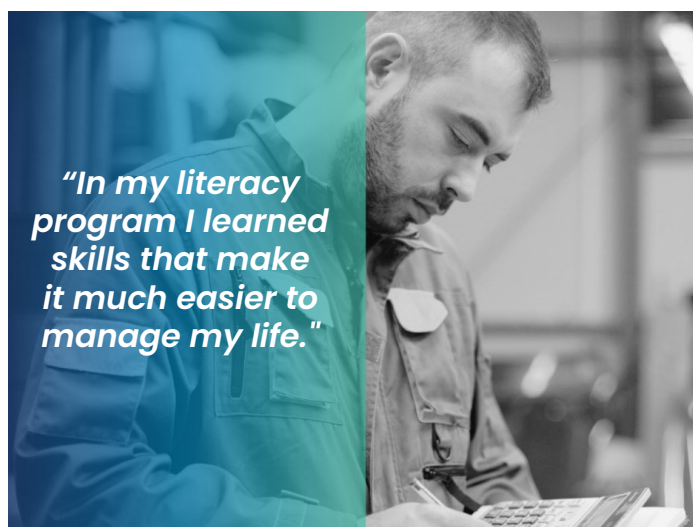
"Now that I am more confident in my ability to read and write, I no longer feel like I need to hide from the world."



- Large-scale provincial assessments, including the OSSLT, were paused in 2019–20 and 2020–21 during the pandemic, and resumed in 2021–22. Since then, OSSLT pass rates for first-time writers have remained high with 82% in 2021–22 and 85% in 2022–23. For previously eligible writers, the pass rate increased to 63% in 2022–23, up from 50% in 2018–19.¹¹
- The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures the skills of 15-year-olds every three years and was also paused due to the pandemic from 2021–2022. Results from 2022 found that reading scores declined between 2018 and 2022, with 18% of students not meeting Level 2. Additionally, in mathematics, 22% of students scored below Level 2, which is the baseline level needed to pursue further learning and participate fully in modern society. Canada’s mathematics scores steadily decreased between 2003–2022.¹²

High School Graduation Rates in Ontario

- As of August 31, 2023, 84.3% of students who began Grade 9 in 2019–20 graduated within four years, while 89.5% of students who began Grade 9 in 2018–19 graduated within five years.¹³
- Provincewide, graduation rates in 2023 for both four and five-year cohorts increased by 0.5 percentage points compared to 2021.¹⁴
- Census data from 2021 shows that 8.8% of Ontarians aged 25–64 did not attain a high school diploma, and 23.4% have completed high school without further education.¹⁵



Literacy and Health

- Low literacy has a significant impact on health. Canadians with the lowest literacy levels are more than twice as likely to report poor health compared to those with stronger literacy skills.¹⁶
- In Canada, adults who score at the highest numeracy levels are far more likely to report good health than those at or below Level 1. This link between numeracy and health remains strong even after accounting for individual differences.¹⁷
- Adults with low literacy often struggle to navigate the health system and afford preventive care. As a result, minor health issues may go untreated until they become serious and require emergency services.¹⁸

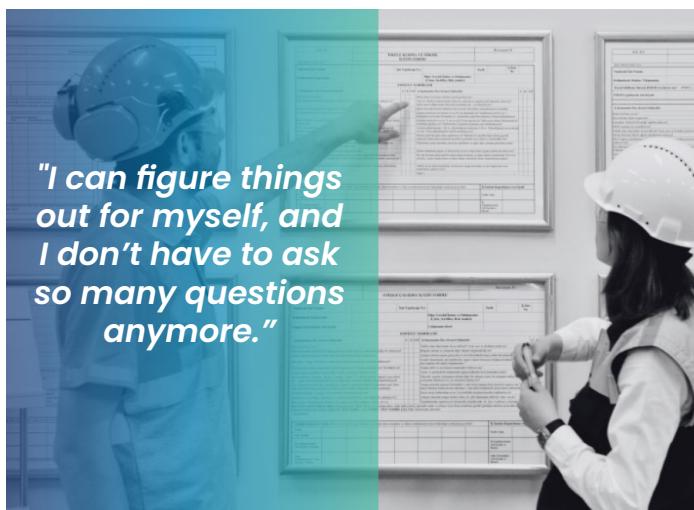
Literacy and Employment

- Adults with numeracy skills at Level 1 or below participate in the labour force at a rate of 67%, compared to 94% among those who score at Level 4.¹⁹

- One year after literacy and essential skills training, 31% of participants found a new job, 16% obtained a better job, and 57% said the training helped them keep their job.²⁰
- Adults with lower literacy skills are more likely to work in occupations associated with lower pay and less stability while those with higher literacy skills experience better wages, job quality, and economic security. Increasing lower literacy skills by just one level could generate more than 800,000 new jobs and reduce Canada's unemployment rate by over one percentage point.²¹

Literacy and the Economy

- In 2018, researchers found that raising adult literacy levels by just one percent could boost Canada's economy by \$67 billion. In today's economy, that benefit would be closer to \$95 billion, or roughly \$2,300 per Canadian annually.²²
- Workplaces benefit from increased literacy skills of adults through higher productivity, greater profitability, stronger retention, and better health and safety outcomes.²³



Literacy and Poverty

- Low literacy and limited basic skills increase the risk of poverty.²⁴
- People in poverty focus on surviving day to day rather than on long-term goals such as upgrading education. However, improving literacy skills supports financial stability, builds confidence, strengthens resilience, and helps people handle everyday challenges.²⁵
- Improving a parent's literacy has a direct, positive effect on their child's educational success and helps break the cycle of poverty across generations.²⁶
- Building literacy skills improves job performance, strengthens job security, and supports higher wages and long-term stability.²⁷

Digital Literacy

- Rapid advances in technology, data, and digital tools are reshaping the daily lives of Canadians, changing how people access services, find information, work, and connect with others.²⁸
- Only 78.2% of rural Canadians have access to high-speed broadband, compared to 95.4% nationwide. Limited access restricts education, employment, and social inclusion.²⁹
- Groups such as seniors, low-income families, rural residents, and people with disabilities rely on digital literacy programs to access devices, learn online safety, and build the skills needed to participate fully in today's society.³⁰

- Expanding digital literacy education ensures that all Canadians are equipped to adapt and thrive in a rapidly evolving digital world.³¹

Soft Skills

- Research shows that social and emotional skills are closely connected to literacy and numeracy, employment outcomes, income, lifelong learning, and educational background. Evidence shows that soft skills are as important for success and earnings as reading, writing, and math, and their value has continued to grow in recent years.³²
- The Skills for Success model is a helpful way to organize soft skills training and set clear goals for adult learners. However, not every learner needs the same level of support in every soft skill. Emerging research suggests that, like personality traits, soft skills differ from person to person.³³
- Demand for social and emotional skills such as leadership, communication, and adaptability has increased significantly. Once seen as secondary, these skills are now considered essential alongside technical expertise.³⁴

Jobs of the Future

- In recent years, the economic value of social and emotional skills has grown faster than cognitive skills, a trend expected to continue as AI is used to handle complex cognitive tasks.³⁵
- Nearly half of Canadian adults have low literacy skills, even as workplaces demand stronger digital and literacy competencies. This puts many at risk of being left behind as job requirements evolve.³⁶
- Improving literacy directly increases workforce productivity. A one percent rise in literacy can raise productivity by up to five percent.³⁷

Skill Gaps

- A 2022 Statistics Canada report found that over 50% of Canadian businesses have employees who are not fully proficient in their jobs, with the largest gaps in technical and problem-solving skills. Nearly 45% of businesses also faced recruitment difficulties, especially in accommodation, food services, manufacturing, and construction.³⁸
- A 2024 Conference Board of Canada report warns that skill shortages could leave almost 917,000 jobs unfilled by 2040, costing Canada over \$11 billion in lost economic activity. The largest gaps are expected in knowledge-based services and technical and manual jobs, where employers will require soft skills such as communication and teamwork.³⁹

"Thanks to my newfound skills I am capable of going out and finding a great job that I am worthy of."



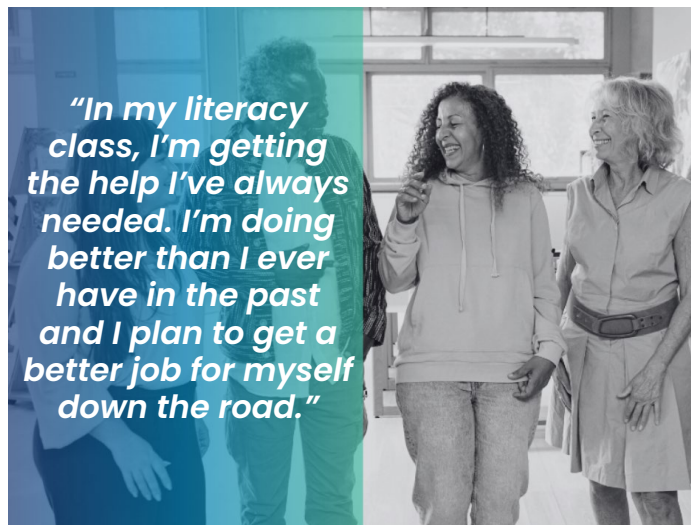
Literacy and Civic Engagement

- Skills are strongly linked to civic engagement. Many adults with low skill levels feel disconnected from political life and find it difficult to engage with complex digital information, which is an increasing concern for modern democracies.⁴⁰
- Literacy helps people understand how the systems and institutions around them work. This supports social inclusion and enables full participation in society through social, civic, and political activities that contribute to the well-being of all Canadians.⁴¹
- When people have good media literacy skills, they can recognize disinformation and media influence, avoid manipulation, and use digital spaces safely, which supports civic engagement.⁴²

Literacy and Justice

- Correctional Service Canada (CSC) offers literacy, academic, and personal development programs to support reintegration. In 2024, 84% of offenders with education needs received a referral within 120 days of admission (up from 78% the year before), and 77% upgraded their education before first release (up from 69%).⁴³
- People in prisons are three times as likely to have low literacy compared with the rest of the population, and 79% of those entering prison do not have a high school diploma.⁴⁴

Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills Program



The evidence is clear: there is a strong need to increase literacy and numeracy levels in Ontario. In response, Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD), through Employment Ontario, funds the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program. This program serves adults who want to improve their literacy and numeracy skills to achieve goals such as post-secondary education and training, employment, apprenticeship, secondary school credit, or greater independence.

The LBS program is delivered across three sectors: community-based agencies, school boards, and colleges. It supports literacy upgrading through four streams: English, Aboriginal, Francophone, and Deaf. Each sector and stream brings unique strengths, working together to meet the diverse needs of adult learners in Ontario. Literacy instruction is provided free of charge and offered in a variety of formats including one-to-one tutoring, small groups, classroom instruction, and [online learning through e-Channel](#).

To help learners achieve their goals, Ontario's literacy agencies collaborate with a wide range of community stakeholders including Ontario Works, social services, Employment Services, other education providers, employers, and community organizations. Currently, LBS educators are working in partnership with MLITSD to strengthen Ontario's adult education system. This collaborative process is designed to address issues raised in the LBS evaluation report including funding, performance management, curriculum design, and strategies for rebranding, marketing, and awareness. For more information about the LBS program:

- Read MLITSD's "Overview of Literacy and Basic Skills" at www.eopg.labour.gov.on.ca/en/programs/literacy-and-basic-skills/
- Visit the "Adult Learning" section of MLITSD's website to find your local LBS agency and learn more about the Literacy and Basic Skills program www.ontario.ca/page/adult-learning

Conclusion

In 2024, nearly 1 in 5 working-age Canadians struggle with literacy, up from 1 in 6 in 2014. This growing challenge affects jobs, health, and family life. **The Ontario Literacy and Skills Report: 2025** is freely available on Community Literacy of Ontario's website at www.communityliteracyofontario.ca. Our website includes full sources, links to cited research, and much more. This report shares the ways that literacy is connected with employment, health, poverty, the economy, and civic engagement. Community Literacy of Ontario encourages readers to share this resource to raise awareness and promote understanding of this critical issue.

This Employment Ontario service is funded in part by the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario. The opinions expressed in this document are those of Community Literacy of Ontario and do not necessarily reflect those of our funders.



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