



Community  
Literacy of  
Ontario

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# Adult Learners in a Post-Pandemic World

Examining the Adult Learner Landscape in  
Ontario's Get SET programs



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# Acknowledgements

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## Purpose

This project aims to examine how recent systemic and societal shifts have reshaped the adult learner landscape in Ontario's Get SET (Skills, Education and Training) programs, formerly Literacy and Basic Skills, since the pandemic.

## Methods

For the purpose of this report the following were utilized as sources of information:

- A provincial survey with Get SET agencies
- Four focus groups with Get SET agencies
- Informal discussions with Get SET practitioners

In addition, information was cited from the following:

- [Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario \(2020-2025\)](#)
- Get SET Learner/Profile Data
- [Ontario Learning Since the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Updated Look at Student Experiences and Outcomes in 2021-22. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.](#)
- [2025-2026 Strategic Plan for the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development](#)
- [Roadmap to wellness: a plan to build Ontario's mental health and addictions system | ontario.ca](#)
- [Adult education: The missing piece to bridging the digital divide. IRPP Insight No. 55. Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy.](#)

- [Essential Skills for Learning and Working, Perspectives from Education and Employment, Leaders Across Canada, Impact Paper](#)

## Research Methodology

CLO conducted a provincial survey, focus groups and one-to-one meetings with Get SET agencies to assess the impact of the post-pandemic world and related service changes.

The survey asked agencies to report on the following information:

- The effects of the pandemic on learners and agencies
- The changes agencies have seen in the needs of learners since April 2023
- Suitability indicators based on agency experience
- The effects of the Employment Service Transformation on learners and agencies
- The effects of recent and ongoing shifts in the labour market expectations of employers on learners and agencies

Lastly, we asked agencies to share outstanding successes in addressing the challenges that were identified throughout the survey.



The survey was utilized as the initial method of data collection. It was followed up with focus groups and one-to-one meetings. These focus groups and one-to-one meetings addressed five areas:

- Demographic shifts
- Rising complexity of learner needs – especially mental health and social supports
- Increasing number of learners with employment and credit goals
- Access barriers in rural underserved areas
- Staffing, funding, burnout and system design/equity

## Limitations

Our research relied on a limited number of interviewees with reporting from 83 agencies within the province of Ontario. Not all Get SET agencies were interviewed for the survey, and some agencies that could have been included were not represented.

Not all agencies participated in focus groups as the process was voluntary.



# Understanding the Province of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy

To understand the impact on learner demographics within Get SET, we must first look at the overall strategy of the provincial government including the provincial government's five-year plan to reduce poverty: Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario (2020-2025). The government reports on the overall progress of this strategy annually.

The strategy is organized around the following 4 pillars:

**Pillar #1** – Encouraging job creation and connecting people to employment

**Pillar #2** – Connecting people with the right supports and services

**Pillar #3** – Making life more affordable and building financial resiliency

**Pillar #4** – Accelerating action and driving progress

For the purposes of this report, we address Pillars 1, 2 and 4.

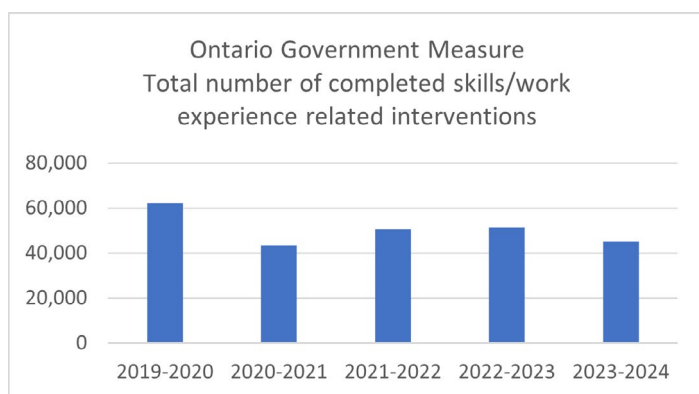
## Pillar #1: Encouraging Job Creation and Connecting People to Employment

**Pillar #1** states that the strategy will help people adapt to the changing job market in order to achieve long-term job success and be better able to withstand economic challenges. Ontario's workforce development and training system will play a key role in equipping job seekers to support the province's economic recovery.<sup>1</sup>

Within the initiatives of this pillar is the transformation of employment services, which includes annual performance measures. One of these measures is the number of completed skills or work experience related interventions by EO program participants. Get SET is included among the interventions captured in this measure.

However, in the government’s annual reporting, which outlines funding initiatives supporting the pillars of its poverty reduction strategy, many interventions are identified as supporting Pillar #1, but Get SET is notably absent. There were many projects funded through the Skills Development Fund as well as funding for high priority groups.

One could argue that the individuals seeking help at Get SET programs are a high priority group and are furthest from employment. Get SET is an existing program that could reduce duplication of skills development and should be considered the foundation of interventions.<sup>2</sup>



This measure shows a decrease in the last reported year, and an overall decrease in the past five years. The decrease may be an indication that the emphasis is only on employment as an outcome rather than including interventions as successful outcomes.

When addressing the Poverty Reduction Strategy for Ontario, the provincial government needs to recognize that this strategy has a significant impact on the learner demographics of the Get SET agencies. Several key questions need to be considered:

- Is it possible that Get SET can play a larger role in helping individuals in this part of their journey?
- Is this an opportunity for Get SET to assist individuals in gaining skills leading to sustainable employment retention?
- How can employment services and Get SET improve coordination to ensure the best possible outcomes?
- How can the provincial government support better outcomes?

## The Changed World of Work

We must also look at the current landscape of the world of work and how it has changed. The pandemic sped up the use of technology across nearly all aspects of daily life including how services are delivered, education, and access to government services and medical services.

In Get SET, advances in and increased focus on technology also had a profound impact on how services are delivered to learners. Although digital technology skills are vital, the Impact Paper released by the Future Skills Centre suggests this presents challenges.

The Future Skills Centre is an organization dedicated to strengthening Canada’s skills development ecosystem so that Canadians can look to a future of meaningful and relevant lifelong learning opportunities. They have conducted research across Canada and hosted a Virtual Regional Sounding Tour that gathered Canadian leaders to discuss skills,

education, and training. The tour examined key challenges in skills systems. One of the key points identified was the need to start with people.

*“Education, skills, and employment leaders across Canada agreed that the skills most in demand and essential for learners to master were not technical. According to the (V)RST participants, although technical skills are important, it is the personal, interpersonal, and professionalism skills—and the ability to use them in a digital context—that are considered the most useful in the most positions, and the most in need of prioritization. Based on what we heard, we have broken down these skills into three categories: foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy; social and emotional skills (SES); and employment readiness skills.”<sup>3</sup>*

As the above quote exemplifies, although technology is a driving force in the working world, it is not the only criterion employers are looking for.

## Pillar #4: Accelerating Action and Driving Progress

Another pillar of the Poverty Reduction Strategy in Ontario<sup>4</sup> is the need to address technology with the intent being to connect people and communities across this vast province. If successful, it will open opportunities to the learners of Get SET by improving their access to digital services, learning, and employment supports.

**Digital and Data Strategy:** Developing a provincial strategy that will put people first by helping Ontarians and businesses benefit directly from the data economy, while ensuring their personal privacy is protected.

## Broadband and Cellular Action Plan:

Expanding broadband and cellular access to rural, remote, northern, and Indigenous communities so that people have access to the connectivity they need in an increasingly digital world.<sup>5</sup>

If successful, this strategy has the potential to positively shape and impact learner outcomes. These skills have always been important but are now being identified as even more critical in navigating the post-pandemic world. This makes it imperative that Get SET plays a role in addressing this pillar in the province’s poverty reduction strategy.

Should digital skills/technology be part of the suitability indicators? Possibly. The many individuals entering Get SET lack those skills or have little to no access to technology. They are coming to Get SET to gain those skills for employment. Eligibility criteria for digital skills is a place to begin addressing Pillar #4 of the province’s Poverty Reduction Strategy.

## Suitability and Eligibility in Get SET

To understand the importance of eligibility and suitability, it is important to distinguish the difference between the two for the purpose of this report. To be eligible for attendance within the Get SET program, a learner must be:

- An Ontario resident.
- An adult whose literacy and basic skills are assessed at intake as being less than the end of Level 3 in one or more of the following OALCF competencies (operating in either a print-based or using digital technology format): Find and Use Information, Communicate Ideas and Information, and Understand and Use Numbers.

- At least 18 years old. On an exception-only basis, Get SET service providers may serve young adults between ages 16 and 17 who demonstrate the maturity to benefit from adult education. However, returning to the regular school system should be the priority for these learners. Get SET service providers may allow age exceptions, not exceeding 10 percent of learners enrolled in a fiscal year. In all individual cases, there must be a documented rationale in the learner's file.
- Sufficiently proficient in speaking and listening to benefit fully from the language of Get SET instruction (English or French). This eligibility requirement does not apply to Deaf learners.

Suitability of the eligible clients is based on identified barriers to learning. This is determined during intake into the program. Service providers serve learners who, on average, are experiencing at least 30% of identified suitability indicators. This is an average and does not mean that every learner must have exactly 30% of the identified indicators. The Indicators of Suitability include:

- Education level attained - < grade 12
- Source of Income – OW, ODSP, No source of income, Crown Ward (Extended Care)
- Time out of school – out of school for 6 years or more
- Time out of training – out of training for 6 years or more
- Age – Older than 45 years and under 64 years of age
- History of interrupted education – primary or secondary
- Person with disability – defined under the AODA and the Ontario Human Rights Code

- Indigenous person
- Deaf
- Francophone

It must be noted that nowhere on the public facing website for Get SET does it indicate that suitability is required for Get SET service. This may be confusing for people seeking the services of Get SET programs.

## Findings and Results

The following are the results of the survey undertaken with Get SET agencies across Ontario. The survey included Anglophone, Francophone, Community-based, School Board and College Sector agencies.

### Learner Demographics

When surveying Get SET agencies, we looked at several areas of learner demographics including suitability indicators, learners' goal paths and learner outcomes, labour force attachment and the first language of learners. The questions regarding demographics were:

1. Has your agency seen any changes in learner demographics?
2. Has your agency seen any changes in the needs of learners?

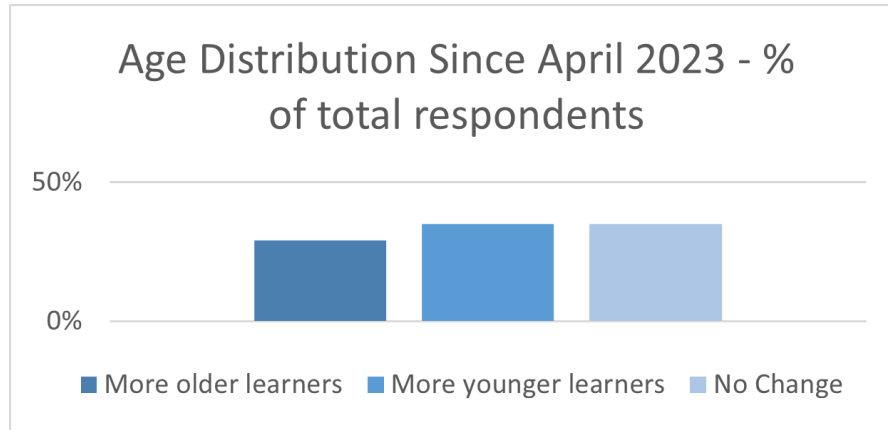
Agencies were asked to refer to their ministry reports to identify any changes as well as provide anecdotal information.

Combined data and anecdotal information demonstrate there are differences across the province, and there has been an impact on agencies that are now delivering ESL to learners.

This section examines the effects of the pandemic on the learners served and agencies.

## Main Age Range

The overall provincial numbers for age distribution shows that, although agencies individually may be experiencing a degree of change, there has been little to no change in the age ranges of learners.

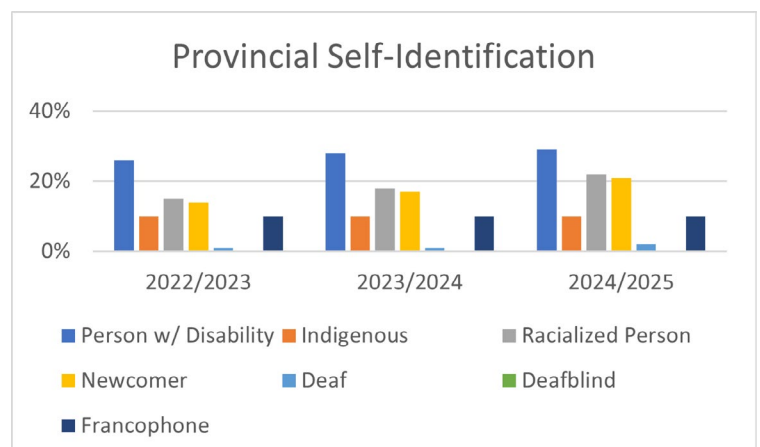
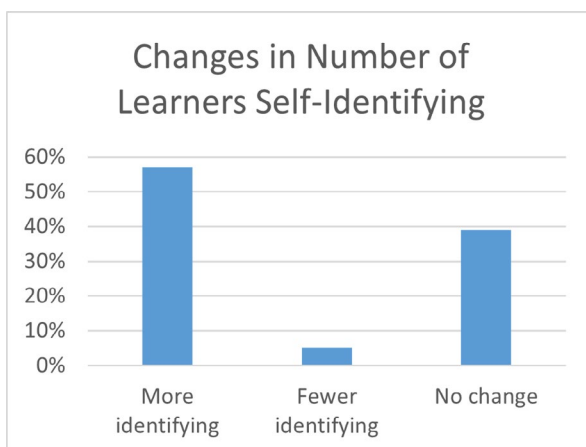


## Learner Self-Identification

The question about learners' self-identification included Persons with Disabilities, Indigenous person, Visible Minority, Newcomer, Deaf, Deaf/Blind, and Francophone. It must be noted that self-identification is not to be confused with suitability indicators. The suitability indicators in self-identification are limited to Persons with disabilities, Indigenous person, Deaf and Francophone.

The survey indicated that 57% more learners are self-identifying. This is in line with the overall provincial numbers; however, the number of Francophone, Deaf, and Deaf/Blind have had no change over several years. This may indicate that these particular indicators in self-identification are not relevant and should not be included because we can see from the provincial statistics that Persons with Disabilities is increasing annually, as is Newcomer self-identification.

Through anecdotal information, agencies are also indicating that these groups are putting a strain on resources at Get SET agencies because funding has not increased to meet the increasing numbers of self-identified learners in these groups.



Source: Literacy and Basic Skills All Data – Learner/Profile - #60BR  
2022 to 2025 Provincial Roll-up Reports

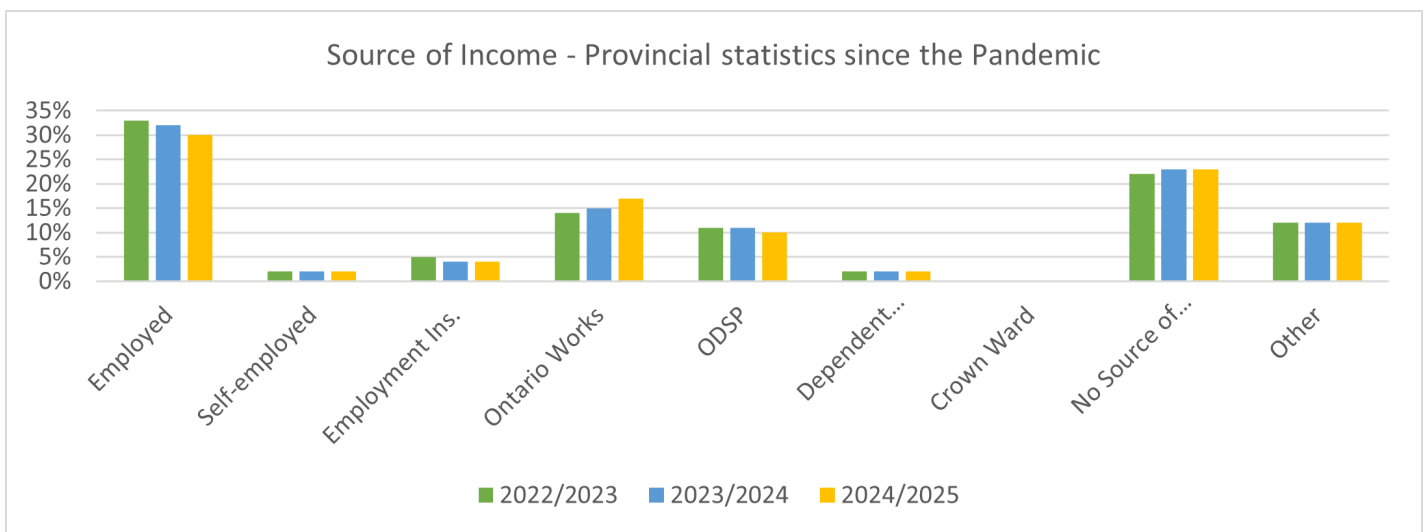
## Level of Education Completed

- 40% of survey respondents indicate more learners with higher education
- 27% of survey respondents indicate more learners with less education
- 33% of survey respondents indicate no change in education levels

The provincial numbers, however, indicate that there has been little change over the past 3 years. This may mean that since not all agencies responded to the survey, it will not be representative of the province.

## Source of Income

- 46% of survey respondents indicate more learners having income support or with no income
- 8% of survey respondents indicate fewer learners having income support or with no income
- 46% of survey respondents indicate no change



Source: Literacy and Basic Skills All Data – Learner/Profile - #60BR 2022 to 2025 Provincial Roll-up Reports

## First Language of Learners

Since April 2023, there has been little change in the overall distribution of LSQ, Indigenous, French, English and ASL as learner first languages.

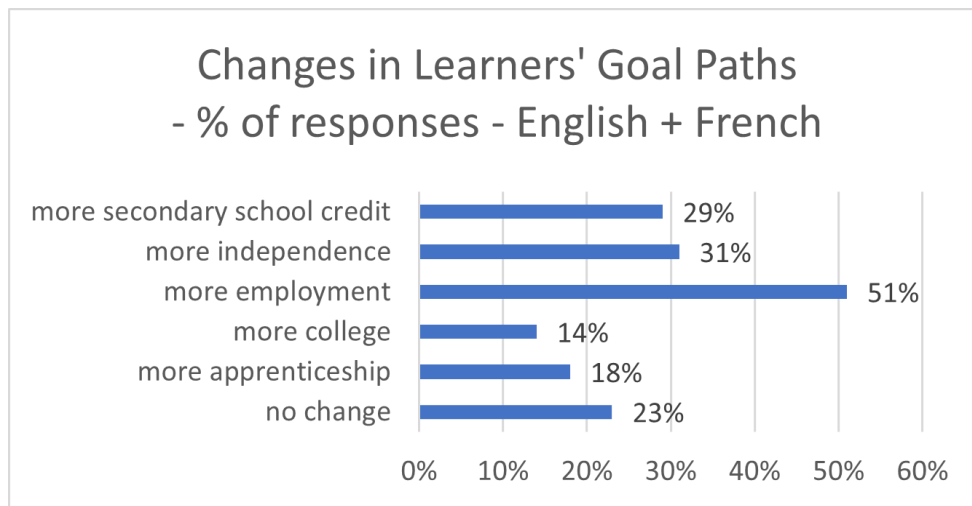
- 10% of agencies reported an increase in learners with English as first language while 12% reported fewer
- 12% reported an increase in learners with French as their first language. This was not limited to the Francophone agencies.

There were more significant changes in the “other” category with 29% of agencies noting an increase. This corresponds to the greater number of newcomers in Ontario, many of whom are not being served by limited ESL programming.

## Goal Paths

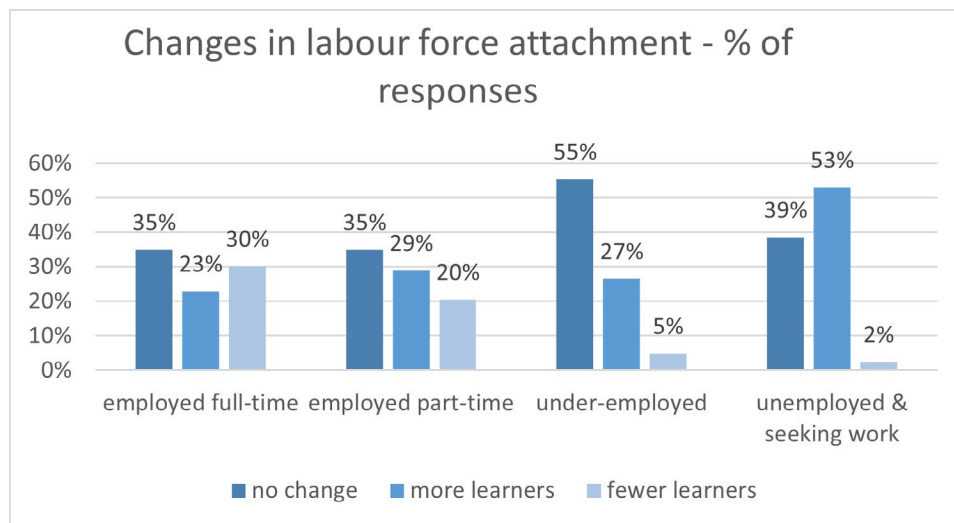
Survey respondents indicate that there are more learners on each goal path. Agencies primarily serving secondary school or post-secondary bound learners showed no change in learners' goal paths. The "less" responses for goal paths were added to the survey at time of publication and were NOT included in the French version. As a result, these results were excluded from the analysis. Provincial data related to goal paths show that there was a significant drop in post-secondary at the end of 2022/2023 and increases in employment year-over-year.

As the chart indicates, employment is the most significant goal path for most agencies with more post-secondary being the least significant.



## Labour Force Attachment

Over half (53% of survey respondents) indicated an increase in learners who are unemployed and seeking work. This aligns with the provincial 60B Roll-up report, which shows that the numbers indicated by the respondents are in line with the overall provincial numbers.



## Time Out of Education

Time out of education is counted as a suitability indicator if the learner has been out of education for more than six years.

- 55% of survey respondents indicate no change
- 30% of survey respondents indicate more time out of education
- 11% of survey respondents indicate less time out of education

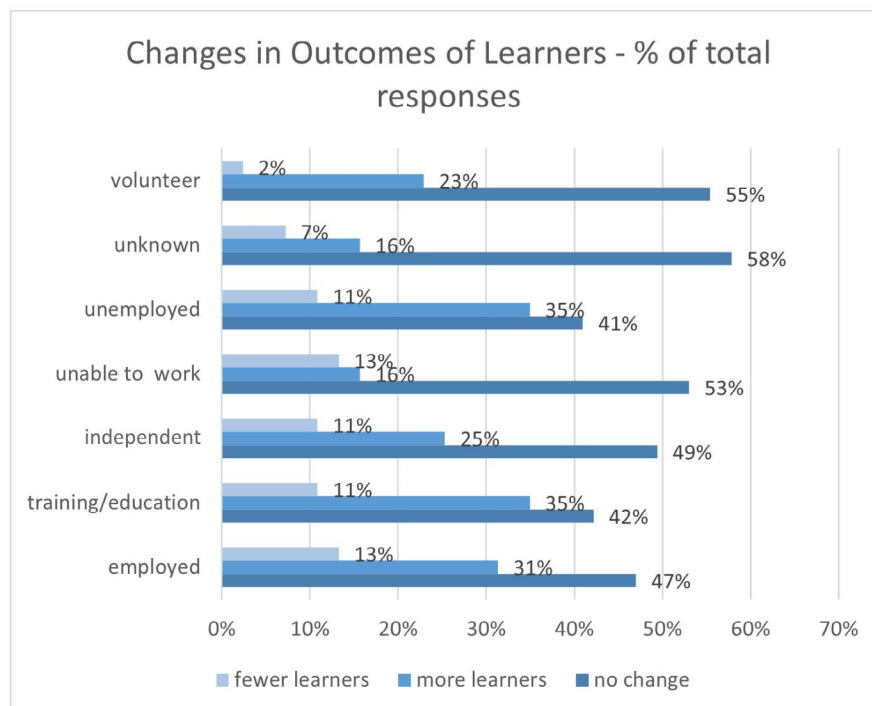
## Time Out of Work

Time out of work is not counted as a suitability indicator.

- 49% of survey respondents indicate no change
- 38% of survey respondents indicate more learners with time out of work
- 12% of survey respondents indicate less learners with time out of work

## Outcomes of Learners

Overall, respondents reported there has been minimal change in the outcomes of learners since April 2023. The provincial roll-up numbers from the 60B Roll-up report support that the numbers have not fluctuated from year to year.



## Emerging Trends

In addition to the above findings, survey participants identified several emerging trends within their agencies:

- An overall increase in the number of learners with disabilities
- A younger demographic
- A significant increase in newcomers with a variety of first languages
- A number of learners wanting to attend post-secondary education but facing barriers preventing that option
- A decrease in the goal path of independence which is most likely a shift to the employment goal path as the province pushes more people through employment services
- A greater number of younger learners who stopped attending school during COVID-19 (or made little or no progress with online schooling). They are now coming to us to get their high school degree. We have more learners looking to “get the GED” but stalling when they realize that is not an option. A lack of resources for the CAEC is a challenge for them.
- Younger adults with language barriers and higher levels of education that may not be well-suited for the training; therefore, adjustments are needed to improve suitability in the above-mentioned areas.
- After the pandemic clientele became older but also more diverse, including Indigenous individuals and people with disabilities.

## Focus Groups

CLO conducted four focus groups related to the survey with the intention to gain a deeper understanding of the issues addressed in the survey. The following information was gleaned from those groups.

Learner demographic changes observed since April 2023 include:

- Language barriers faced by clients with open work permits that hinder their participation in workshops
- Many elderly learners are seeking training due to economic pressures in the north necessitating reskilling for local jobs
- A decline in the population was indicated in the north
- Participants struggle with emotional barriers and mental health issues
- There has been an influx of newcomers
- Agencies expressed concern about the readiness of younger learners with diplomas who lack essential skills for employment or further education, particularly those who struggled during the pandemic.
- Labour force attachment has declined post-pandemic and is attributed to rising mental health issues and an increase in clients with disabilities.



## Comparing Survey Results to Provincial Roll-Up Statistics

The Provincial Roll-up statistics show relatively stable trends within the Get SET program. The exception is the number of persons with disabilities which has risen year-over-year from 24% prior to the pandemic to 29% post-pandemic. This aligns with survey findings as 58% of respondents reported an increase.

The number of people who have employment as a goal declined during the pandemic. However, since the pandemic, that number has increased year-over-year. Over 30% of learners are on the employment and post-secondary goal path with independence having a slight decline at 13%. The apprenticeship goal path remained stagnant at 7% - 8% during and after the pandemic. The survey respondents indicate that learners seeking employment has increased by 51%.

The trend for newcomers seeking assistance from Get SET agencies has seen a significant increase overall. The total number of newcomers has risen from 14% at the end of the pandemic to 21% at the end of the 2024/2025 year. This increase is putting a strain on the agencies to deliver ESL and Get SET to the community. Respondents indicated a 10% increase in English speaking learners and 12% with an increase of French as their first language.

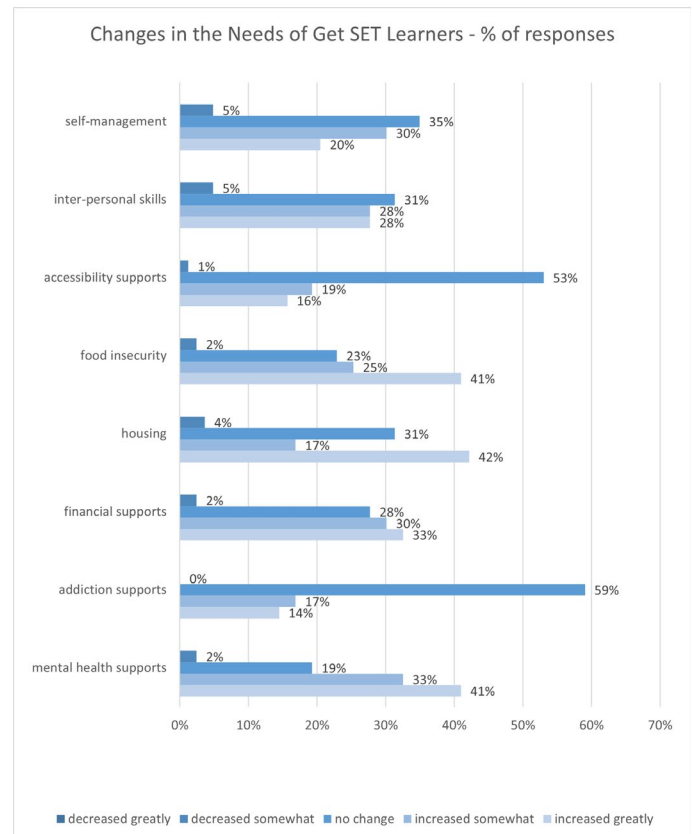
The number of learners who are at a grade 11 or less has dropped slightly and makes up approximately 30% while the number of learners who have a grade 12 or equivalency sits at approximately 27%. This is an insignificant post-pandemic increase. The survey respondents have seen a 40% increase in learners with a higher education.

## Learner Needs

This section examines the changes agencies have seen in the needs of learners. The importance of this information is directly related to how referrals are determined. However, because many agencies make referrals to other organizations within their communities not listed on the “Referrals to other community resources,” the provincial data captured underrepresents the extent of the need.

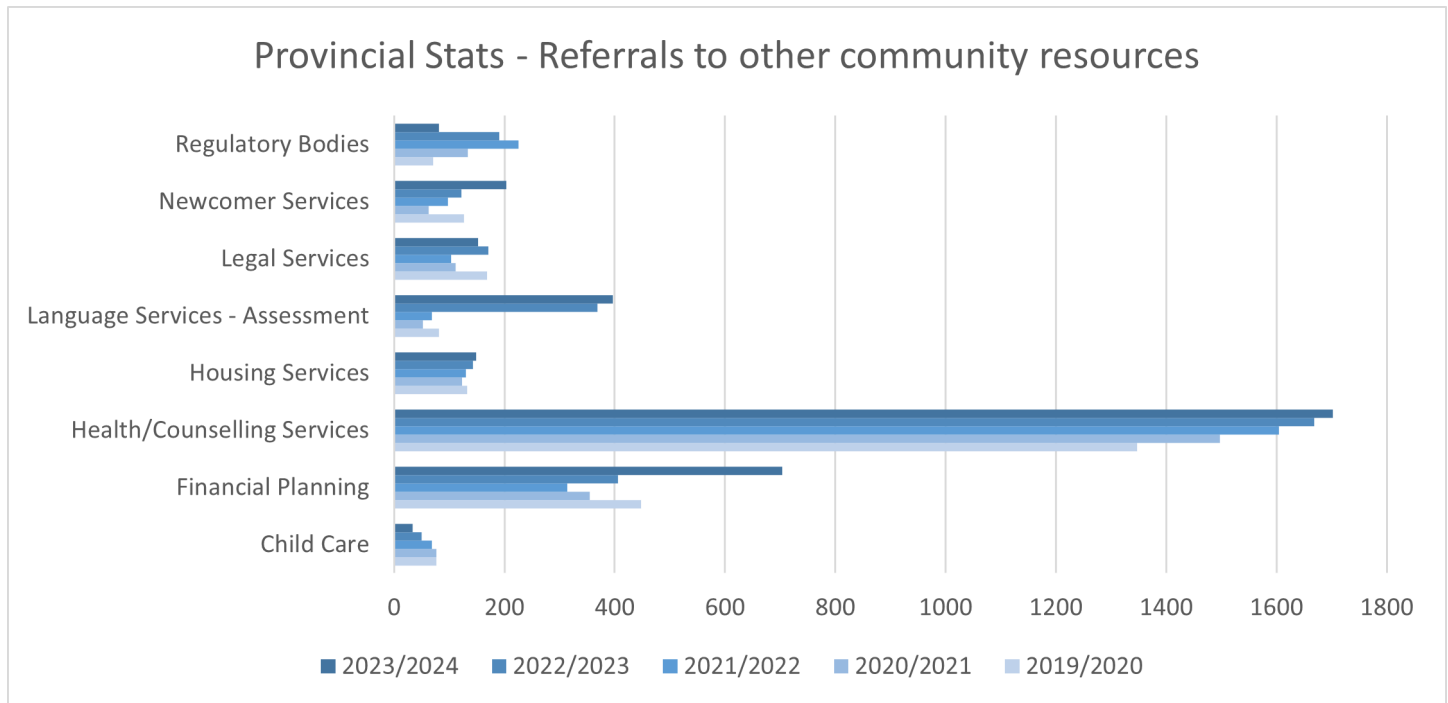
The chart below identifies the needs of learners. Responses are not restricted to a list of “other community resources” within the CaMS system.

The most significant increases reported were the need for housing (42%), food (41%), and mental health (41%).



Needs for interpersonal and self-management skills also increased. There has been discussion that this can be related to moving online for school and often work during COVID, as well as to the increasing number of newcomers who may be unfamiliar with Canadian systems, expectations and practices.

The chart below illustrates that the need has grown over several years. The problem agencies are facing is the lack of recognition from the provincial government that the need is growing and yet there are no additional resources to assist with these growing needs. Educational/Academic Services was intentionally not included in this chart to illustrate the most significant needs.



*Source: Literacy and Basic Skills All Data – Learner/Profile - #60BR 2022 to 2025 Provincial Roll-up Reports*

Agencies were asked if their referrals to other community resources have changed. The agencies indicated that there has been no change, but clearly the need is growing as discussed in the section of learner needs overall. In addition, agencies were asked if learners remain in the program while accessing these other community resources. 59% of agencies reported that learners do not remain. 64% of agencies responded that these community resources and services, identified as concerns below, should be considered suitability indicators.

Agencies identified several recurring and growing concerns, including:

- adding food banks and refugees to the suitability indicators
- difficulty accessing services because they are not located in the community
- transportation to services that learners are referred to
- cost of services, such as psycho-educational assessments
- newcomers stretching the capacity of community resources to serve everyone in need
- more complex needs

- lack of healthcare and mental health workers who can communicate in ASL
- learners who may be on the autism spectrum
- learners with low literacy and digital skills “lean” on service providers for support

The focus groups indicated there are competing priorities that learners encounter affecting their commitment to Get SET.

One such issue is housing instability that often forces learners to switch organizations while others indicated that there are challenges balancing work and education.

Another discussion included the need to have in-person instruction because not all learners are suited to online learning. In addition, collaboration with community partners was emphasized as a means to provide comprehensive support for learners.

These are needs throughout the province, not just in remote areas of the province. It speaks to the lack of capacity which in turn speaks to the lack of resources that the province provides.

## Mental Health

There is a direct correlation between Get SET and Pillar #2 (Connecting people with the right supports and services of the province’s Poverty Reduction Strategy). Evidence from agencies and service providers indicates clients in Get SET who need mental health supports are not receiving them.

Get SET serves those who may be seeking employment in their community and have found that small and medium employers are expressing the same concerns related to unmet mental health needs of individuals.

## Pillar #2 – Connecting people with the right supports and services

*This strategy will help people access supports that improve health and well-being and enable them to move forward on the pathway to education, training, employment and participation in their community. The government is committed to creating a more coordinated, integrated and digitally-enabled system of supports and services that help people better address their needs, from housing to mental health. By working together with its partners, especially those in the non-profit sector, the government can help people build a strong foundation for success in the future.<sup>6</sup>*

Moreover, the impact is felt in the economic sector as indicated in the Mind the Gap report from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce:

*With the impacts of the “echo pandemic” lingering, and some of these more pronounced than anticipated on small business, the cost of inaction for Ontario’s economic resilience, workforce and communities is clear. Mental health and addictions need to be an essential element of Ontario’s legacy of post-pandemic economic investment. Partnership among SMEs, community organizations, and all levels of government is required to improve the level of care and service for those who most need it.<sup>7</sup>*

Despite these commitments by the provincial government, which were published in 2020, in 2025 agencies are still facing the same challenges with their learners. Learners need access to mental health services to create stability so they can engage in education and training.

As the Canadian Mental Health Association states on their website, access to economic resources may be a contributing factor in mental health conditions. It is also something the government has outlined in their Poverty Reduction Strategy.

However, the survey responses from Get SET Programs carried out for this report show that learners are not receiving adequate supports, and thus, the CMHA and the Poverty Reduction Strategy are not meeting this goal.

## Access to Economic Resources

Access to economic resources, such as housing, education, work and income, is strongly correlated with mental health because it impacts social connectedness and personal sense of competence and control, as well as socio-economic status.

These factors are known to both protect and promote mental health (Mulvihill, Mailoux & Atkin, 2001).

Economic participation is enhanced by strategies that support life skills and social inclusion, and address systemic inequities. Lack of access to economic resources can result in poverty and material deprivation, sustained hardship and poorer mental health.

Investing in strategies and supports that improve access to economic resources and remedy the inequalities experienced by disadvantaged or marginalized populations can significantly increase economic participation and promote positive mental health.<sup>8</sup>



## Reducing Poverty

Poverty also creates barriers to accessing resources that people with mental illness need for recovery. For people who are predisposed to mental illness, losing stabilizing resources, such as income, employment, and housing, for an extended period of time can increase the risk factors for mental illness or relapse. Experiencing a mental illness can interrupt a person's education or career path and result in diminished opportunities for employment. A lack of secure employment, in turn, affects one's ability to earn an adequate income. As a result, people with a mental illness can remain in chronic poverty.<sup>9</sup>

"Our agency is facing increasing pressure to adapt to shifting demographics and evolving learner needs. We are seeing a growing number of neurodivergent adults and clients navigating mental health challenges, all of whom benefit from personalized approaches and case management.

On top of that, many of our clients are in crisis with housing insecurity, food insecurity and burn out from the system. We're also serving a larger number of working adults with irregular hours, juggling child care, gig work, or shift-based employment. Flexibility is key, but staffing and funding models haven't evolved to match the increasing demand for drop-in, hybrid, or on-demand learning options.

Funding formulas, program expectations, and service delivery models often assume a "one-size-fits-most" approach. That's no longer reality. We're doing our best to adapt but without updated tools, tech, and flexibility in the system, the gap between learner needs and service capacity will only grow."  
-Survey Respondent

## Newcomers

In 2023, the Ontario Government announced it was doubling the number of economic immigrants it selects in 2025 to over 18,000 to help solve the province's critical labour shortage.

Although this will help reduce the labour shortage, there is cause for concern for agencies supporting newcomers. Employment agencies may be sending these immigrants to Get SET to gain English language skills in order to be employable.

The Get SET agencies have indicated the strain on their ability to deliver quality services is impacted by the removal of the Canadian Language Benchmarks level 6 from the Get SET guidelines in December 2023.

This change has resulted in many more newcomers being served by an already under-resourced Get SET program. However, the guidelines are clear that one of the criteria for eligibility is proficiency in speaking and listening so a learner can benefit fully from the language of Get SET instruction, but they do not provide any clarification. The only reference to language on the Participant Registration is the self-identification of Francophone. This strongly supports that Newcomer should be a suitability indicator moving forward.

If the aim of the government is to ensure that newcomers gain proficiency in the English or French language to facilitate their employment goal, then there is also an obligation to ensure there are resources for supporting the services that provide that instruction. As the Human Rights Code of Ontario states in the Policy on discrimination and language in:

## Services, Goods, and Facilities Section 1:

*Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to services, goods and facilities, without discrimination because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability.*

And,

## Employment Section 5: (1)

*Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to employment without discrimination because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, record of offences, marital status, family status or disability.<sup>10</sup>*

As stated, the language training is an issue for Integrated Employment Services:

*Newcomers receive more wraparound supports from organizations that provide bridging programs and settlement services. However, language training remains a persistent gap that cannot be addressed alone. A broader system integration with language and literacy supports will support newcomers better.<sup>11</sup>*

*"We are experiencing a large increase in learners whose first language is not English. This can be challenging as processes and instruction methods have to be continuously adapted to accommodate. As well, all Ontario Works potential referrals are being streamlined through employment services run by Fedcap. Therefore, a larger number of learners are not being referred and are falling through the cracks as there is no accountability and the focus is on employment instead of increasing skills to encourage employment retention." –Survey Respondent*

## Digital Skills

The digital skills gap presents another significant challenge and is an issue of great importance to the economy. However, the ministry does not allow learners to enter the Get SET program specifically to learn these skills. With the push from the provincial government to move services and education online, they are failing to grasp that being connected is only one part of engaging online. As the paper *Adult Education: The Missing Piece to Bridging the Digital Divide* discusses, the digital divide is more than just connecting to the internet but rather the ability to navigate and interact with the services delivered online. With the appropriate resources, Get SET is well positioned to be able to deliver these services and fill this gap:

*“This paper argues that, as a new form of inequality, the digital divide goes beyond access to adequate and affordable connections and devices. Rather, it relates to the benefits that users derive from online services, resources and networks through digital skills – in other words, the technical ability to use digital tools – acquired while interacting with technology. Policies limited to connecting users with technology essentially imply a do-it-yourself approach to digital learning, resulting in inadequate and unequally distributed digital skills. Therefore, while improving the accessibility and affordability of internet services is undoubtedly necessary, it is not sufficient to bridge the digital divide. Accessibility must be supported by formal learning opportunities offered by adult education programs, libraries and community organizations.*

*We argue that Canada’s adult education and skills development system should take*

*a more prominent place in bridging the divide between those who have the necessary digital skills to thrive in the modern economy and those who don’t. Adult education providers are tightly integrated into local communities across Canada and are able to skillfully navigate the intricacies of educating adults, from youth to seniors. Moreover, by incorporating digital skills training in their upgrading, vocational, language and literacy skills curriculums, adult education programs can do more than teach digital skills. They can help learners acquire digital literacy – the ability to use digital skills and understand multimedia environments confidently and critically for purposes that meet diverse needs.”<sup>12</sup>*



## Needs of Younger Learners

Get SET has seen an increase in the younger demographic, a trend that is a result of the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research from the report *Ontario Learning Since the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Updated Look at Student Experiences and Outcomes in 2021–2022* indicates that many young learners experienced significant learning loss and reduced academic preparedness and well being:

*“UNESCO reported a learning loss of two thirds of an academic year, on average and worldwide, from school closures (Wong, 2021), and our survey indicated ongoing threats to students’ sense of academic preparedness, self-efficacy, satisfaction and well-being: all of which are known to affect persistence.*

*The students we surveyed who entered postsecondary from high school reported gaps in their learning, and this was particularly true for students from lower-income backgrounds. We should assume current cohorts will bring similar, albeit smaller, gaps in learning, stemming from disruptions in K-12. Institutions can develop strategies to equitably address these potential learning losses and find opportunities to develop skills, like time management and organization, so students are well positioned to stay on top of their workloads. Institutions should also ensure accessible, reliable information about mental health supports is widely distributed to incoming students, with targeted outreach to students with disabilities as well as women and gender-diverse students, who expressed challenges in higher numbers.”<sup>13</sup>*

## **Service Delivery Challenges with Changing Demographics and Learners’ Needs**

Agencies were asked to describe their experiences around the challenges of changing demographics and learner needs. Below are examples of the range of challenges that agencies face consistently:

- Learners who are in the youth category coming directly to Get SET from high school reinforcing that online learning is not the best option.
- Transportation and/or transportation supports.
- An increase in the number of people wanting to deepen their knowledge of the French language.
- Immigrants who are Anglophone but want to learn French.
- Highly educated newcomers needs include digital and socio-emotional skills.
- Newcomers with low literacy skills increasing a demand for one-to-one tutoring.
- ESL learners have longer training plans and different needs.
- Little to no accessible language services in the north.
- Being able to hire staff is a major challenge. We have fewer volunteers since COVID. Less people are willing to work face to face/one on one with a learner. Hiring an instructor would ensure there is less of a wait to get a tutor.
- We have had a huge increase in young people looking to get their OSSD who have about 15 credits on their transcript. There is no school board program funded in our community by MLITSD. We are community based and work with 2 different school boards to support these learners. We have a large increase in employers referring workers for skills training- notably Essential English. We can’t keep instructors. We have a constant revolving door of instructors - we just get them trained and they move or quit for a higher paying job with more hours and perks.
- We have faced challenges providing access to wrap around services for learners with complex mental health

needs. We have had more learners who are receiving support and who need transportation support.

- People are coming in almost everyday looking for food stability/housing resources. Transportation is a major issue within rural areas.
- Older demos increasingly needing digital skill upgrading for life and work- don't always mesh with Ministry suitability.
- Youth aged 18–25 needing high school credit upgrading due to mental health challenges post-COVID and lack of success during high school.
- More high school students in alternative adolescent education requiring Get SET supports (post-pandemic students that fell through the gaps).

**“The challenge we face is that we don't always have local supports that can address some of the challenges that we are seeing with the changing demographics/learner needs. We are seeing seniors wanting digital literacy because they cannot afford to stay retired – but their age is outside of our suitability. We are seeing youth who are struggling in the traditional classroom environment looking for intervention. We are seeing newcomers who cannot access language services locally.**

**Because of Get SET suitability factors, we are confined to who we can help and how – and often, that means offering services/supports to someone who exceeds our suitability because of lack of referral options. The alternative is to deny services knowing they will not receive supports elsewhere because of service delivery, and that helps no one.” –Survey Respondent**

## Service Delivery Strategies Developed to Address the Changing Demographics and Learner Needs

Agencies were asked to describe the strategies they have developed to address shifting demographics and increasingly complex learner needs. Overall, agencies reported significant efforts to adapt programs despite challenging funding issues and experiencing organizational constraints. When asked about the current environment, responses included:

- Adapting and updating training for learners, including targeted training courses, bridging courses for secondary school credit, adding conversational circles for newcomers.
- Increasing flexibility in agency hours and adding more online opportunities - especially for shift workers.
- Communicating and working more closely with community partners and organizations; offering workshops for their clients etc.
- Additional training for both paid staff and volunteers to better serve learners with a variety of needs/issues; targeting their volunteer recruitment to special topics such as digital skills.
- Improving/updating intake assessments
- Finding creative outreach opportunities; creative use of training supports.
- Maximizing training and resources within their budgets - funding is an issue for nearly all respondents.
- We have drivers who pick up learners, but we have to cover their mileage costs.
- We had to adapt our French courses to meet their needs.

- Applying for external grants to meet the growing demands of newcomers, individuals who want to learn French but have no prior knowledge of the language, and the increasing needs related to technology (email, cybersecurity, social media, etc.)
- Working more closely with community partners, ES, Ontario Works, and mental health providers to co-support clients and streamline wraparound services.
- Hosting other community agencies in Get SET offices so that people do not have to travel outside of town to receive services.

*“To respond to these changing demographics and increasingly complex learner needs, our agency has had to get creative and adaptive. We’ve shifted some of our instructional approach to be more flexible and goal-focused, in employment, health, financial literacy, and digital skills. This helps us engage learners with varied life experience and makes learning more relevant and motivating. We’ve developed a more thorough intake process to better identify learner barriers, goals, and supports needed (including referrals to community services). This allows us to personalize learning pathways while also building trust and retention. We’re working more closely with community partners, ES, Ontario Works, and mental health providers to co-support clients and streamline wraparound services. We’ve also opened space in our programs to support community partners’ clients who may not meet typical literacy eligibility but still benefit from skill-building.*

*We’re integrating more digital tools — including virtual learning options, assistive tech, and even AI to meet learners where they’re at. We’ve invested in training staff to work from a trauma-informed lens,*

*recognizing that many learners arrive with complex histories. Encouragement, flexibility, and celebrating small wins go a long way toward keeping learners engaged and building confidence. We upskill where possible, and we are proud of our ability to innovate in response to learner need, but we’re also doing it on limited funding, which adds to burnout risk and limits scalability.”*  
-Survey Respondent

The lack of understanding of the services that Get SET delivers can be attributed to the push towards employment for most individuals entering the social services system. The following comment from an agency is an example of the struggle for Get SET:

*“OW has requested that we build more life sustainability courses, how to build a chore schedule, how to shop around for groceries, how often you should wash yourself and your house. They have said the clients they have now are simply nowhere near getting a job and first need to gain some independence and have also asked that these courses don’t go beyond 1 day or 3 hours of time. Why isn’t OW providing training?”*



The ES Transformation report<sup>14</sup> states that there is confusion about the classification of Literacy. Some Ontario reports classify literacy as part of Life Skills and in the SSM model literacy is classified as Adult Education. Therefore, OW's understanding is that Get SET delivers basic life skills.

This misunderstanding can be rectified with the province providing a clearly defined marketing strategy. This strategy would provide clarity and definition to the services supported and delivered across the province.

During the writing of this report, the province rebranded Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) to Get SET (Skills, Education and Training). This rebranding is one step toward assisting in clarifying the role of literacy service providers and helping outside community agencies in better understanding the services delivered. However, it is up to the agencies to define the scope of work being done and the type of client to whom they are delivering services.

The Ministry needs to respond with a funding model that respects and values the needs of the agencies and learners. This model must consider that learners come to Get SET with many needs, not just literacy issues, which raises the question: Where does Get SET fit? Given the social services aspect of Get SET programming, would it fit better within the goals of the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) which is a funding model other provinces use?

As stated in the report Life Stabilization for Adult Learners in Get SET Programs,

*“No learner comes to a Get SET program with only a single need, and those that are most apparent may be helped or hindered by the learner’s other barriers or challenges.*”

*To uncover those diverse and multi-layered needs, Get SET programs need additional time to devote to these learners.”<sup>15</sup>*

## Suitability Indicators

Agencies were asked which suitability indicators continue to apply based on current conditions and trends, and to explain their rationale for the indicators they selected.

The majority of respondents selected indicators because they still apply and reflect the learners in their programs. Several agencies indicated all indicators are still relevant. A significant number of agencies suggested that Deaf, Francophone, and to some degree, Indigenous, should not be suitability indicators for Anglophone programs because agencies are not able to serve these groups adequately. There are specialized agencies that can better meet the needs of these clients.

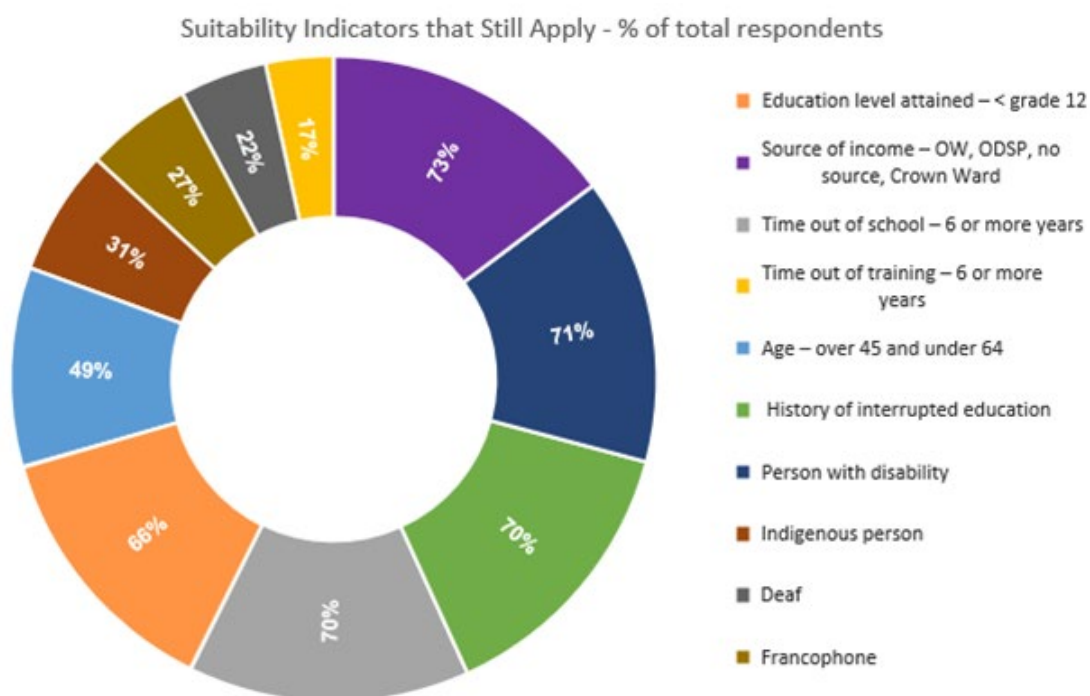
## Key Themes from Agency Feedback

One focus group highlighted that these indicators can be limiting and fail to account for the diverse backgrounds of learners including those with disabilities who may not wish to identify as such. The discussion also touched on the challenges faced by individuals with higher education seeking support, questioning the applicability of these indicators in their cases.

Other participants questioned the limitations of current indicators and the need for adjustments to better serve learners. They highlighted the vagueness of some indicators, particularly time out of school, and emphasized the need for clearer definitions. The discussion also touched on the concept of interrupted education and the need for specific criteria. Several participants agreed that current criteria are outdated and hinder

access to services. Emerging from this is that soft skills align more closely with mental health supports than with education supports. Because of this, mental health and soft skills are essential to Get SET programming and could be considered a suitability criterion.

As noted in the report “Soft Skills in LBS Programs” from Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO), adult learners are not inclined to self-identify as having a learning disability, mental health condition, low literacy skills, or many other of the existing suitability criteria. It is yet another indication that people do not want to self-identify and therefore it follows that soft skills intervention should be a key component of any service delivery not just a suitability indicator within Get SET programming. It may in fact reduce stigmatization of a disability.



*“In a 1997 study, Egloff identified two related characteristics of adult learners that perpetuate their literacy deficits: 1) fear of stigmatization and 2) negative self-concept. In the first, fear that other people will discover an adult learner’s reading or writing challenges prompt the learner to hide their disability and deploy diversionary tactics that block its discovery. In the second, the learner believes that they lack the ability to learn to read or write at the same level as their peers.*

*Both characteristics serve to prevent the learner from improving their literacy skills. Learners either expend effort on hiding their disability that could otherwise be used to develop, or they embrace a sense of futility that they will never perform at the level of their colleagues. Within a work context, these characteristics prevent career advancement (learners will turn down promotions for fear of discovery), damage working relationships (learners will become angry when asked to perform a task that could expose their disability), force dependence on others (learners will eventually require others to read for them) and limit advancement (learners will turn down promotions for fear of discovery), damage working relationships (learners will become angry when asked to perform a task that could expose their disability), force*

*dependence on others (learners will eventually require others to read for them) and limit opportunities for social engagement (since even reading a restaurant menu in front of others is stressful; Egloff, 1997). These consequences suggest that the social nature of the workplace itself helps to perpetuate literacy deficits. That is, if not for the fear of what others think, and the unfair comparisons to others' abilities, the effort to hide their challenges would be unnecessary and normal learning should be able to resume.”<sup>16</sup>*

## Survey Comments

- “Individuals should not be prevented from entering programs based on suitability indicators.”
- “I don’t see why someone’s age or cultural background should be an indicator of suitability for our program.”
- “The age indicator is not indicative of the learners we serve and age should not be a focus – as long as they are 18 then they should be served. Time out of school or training is also not indicative of need. I’ve been out of school for 20 years but have maintained my skill level. But we have recent high school graduates who still do not have the skills they need to fill out a form correctly. The level of skill and training across Ontario is variable and should not be used as an indicator of suitability for services.”
- “We believe that these indicators make a make a person suitable for Get SET services and directly correlate to goal paths. Education and employment specifically.”
- “We serve a specific population (Deaf, deafened, hard of hearing) – we are seeing an increase in more students coming directly from high school who are seeking Get SET support to transition to employment and/or postsecondary; although they have graduated high school, their skill levels are not where they can transition successfully to employment and/or postsecondary, and in fact a proportion face challenges with independent living. They are goal-driven learners seeking to improve their opportunities (wherever they are starting from, they want to move forward) and they make the most of the opportunity to participate in Get SET.”
- “We aren’t getting OW clients because of the changes due to the SSMs. It’s a reality that is not being acknowledged. Referrals don’t translate to CaMS based learners. The newcomers that we help who are OALCF level 1 or 2 in A and B are educated and some, recently educated. We get younger learners who are coming to Canada for safety. We can’t serve Francophone because we are Anglophone. We can’t serve Deaf because we don’t have the tools or money available. We aren’t getting Indigenous because they are being served by Indigenous programs.”

Although agencies differ on their views on specific suitability indicators, 64% agree that the use of one or more community resources should be considered a suitability indicator. In the Learner Needs section of this report, there are clearly many issues that impact learner retention and success. By including other external factors, the Ministry is provided with more relevant, accurate and timely information. This may lead to more responsive measures taken by the Ministry.

As the report “Literacy and Basic Skills and Life Stabilization” states:

*However, in order to be successful, learners often require the support of many agencies. Life stabilization is not about merely one need; it is many different needs that intersect. These needs can be met through different levels of service whether it is a specific wraparound support or referrals to agencies for a particular need.*

The report goes on to emphasize the importance of Wraparound support:

*“The wraparound process is a team-based planning process that develops an individualized plan which uses the strengths of the learner and their team members to develop strategies the entire team takes on to effectively address the learner’s needs.”<sup>17</sup>*



In addition, this report reinforces the notion that learner success depends on coordinated multi-agency supports and structures rather than agencies providing service independently:

*“The number of unfilled jobs in Ontario has dropped by over 49 per cent since April 2022. However, effective employment services have become more crucial than ever for bridging the gap for jobseekers, especially those with disabilities or people on social assistance, to gain the skill sets they need to pursue lifelong, rewarding careers.”<sup>18</sup>*

*“This statement, however admirable, doesn’t take into account that Employment Services does not provide these services on their own and that there are many agencies working to ensure that clients are successful. It involves the wraparound support of community partners that is so critical.”<sup>19</sup>*

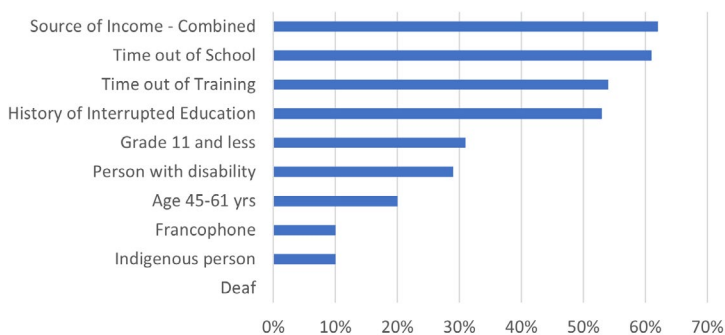
Suitability indicators are a recurring concern in reports conducted by CLO. The ES Transformation report published by CLO clearly states that there has been no change in the opinion of agencies regarding the effectiveness of suitability indicators as they currently exist, and there is continued concern for their relevance and effectiveness.

*“From agencies’ responses, it is evident they are frustrated with a lack of acknowledgment that the suitability indicators currently being used need to be updated to reflect the reality of today’s demographic. In addition, there is an indication that the number of newcomer referrals have increased both in numbers and complexity resulting in a strain on agencies’ resources. These responses from*

agencies also support that, along with the transformation at ES, the Ministry has fallen behind on updating the suitability for LBS. Updating is necessary so that LBS can accommodate clients in need of their services. This is particularly true for the digital skills for which ES clients are being referred and are necessary to participate in the current labour market.”<sup>20</sup>

This suggests that Milestones and/or Culminating Tasks may not be the only measure of success and that the current funding model should be revised to ensure the intersecting needs of the Get SET learner are being met. Arguably, a coordinated model of support would be the most effective use of ministry funding and would lead to more sustainable outcomes in the long-term. The importance of wraparound supports cannot be overstated. The chart below demonstrates that Get SET serves mostly clients with lower levels of education, interrupted education, who have been out of school for more than six years, and their source of income is some type of social assistance. Although the self-identification of Newcomer is not a suitability indicator, going forward it should be considered based on the recent change to eligibility to Get SET programming.

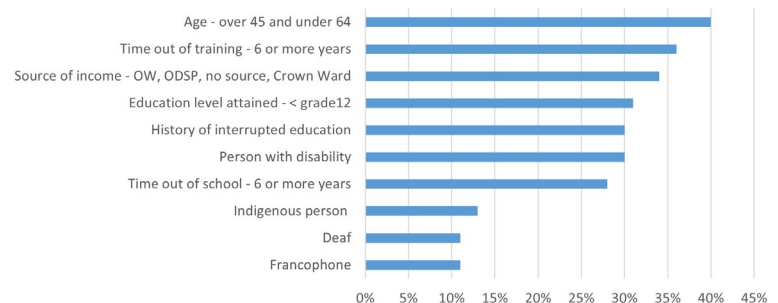
Current (2024/2025) Learners' Suitability Indicators



Source: Literacy and Basic Skills All Data – Learner/Profile - #60BR 2022 to 2025 Provincial Roll-up Reports

Agencies were asked which suitability indicators still apply but need an updated definition based on current conditions and trends. As you can clearly see, Francophone, Deaf, and Indigenous persons are not a priority for agencies. The majority of agencies indicated that these do not apply since they are specific streams and have agencies dedicated to them. On the other hand, the respondents strongly suggested most remaining suitability indicators require clearer and updated definitions to reflect current needs.

Suitability Indicators that NEED an updated definition - % of total respondents



The comments below from survey respondents are categorized according to the specific suitability indicator:

### Education level attained:

- “Grade 12 needs to be more clearly defined. We serve many people that have a grade 12 certificate of completion or grade 12 essential level diploma. This is not a grade 12 diploma or close to an equivalent but I can’t click any other box because technically yes, they have a grade 12.”
- “Education level needs specification because many learners self identify as having high-school in their home countries but are seeking OSSD in Canada to apply for work or college.”
- “We need to add OSSC to the level of education received.”

### Source of Income:

- *“Add Employment Insurance, CPP and OAP”*
- *“Remove crown ward”*

### Time out of school – 6 or more years:

- *“Decrease the amount of time, suggested 2 years or more”*

### Time out of training:

- *“Training needs to be clearly defined”*

### Age – over 45 and under 64:

- *“Age should be removed as a suitability criterion since anyone over the age of 19 is eligible for services.”*
- *“The age would better reflect trends if it starts at a lower range.”*
- *“Under 64 is no longer accurate. People are working or returning to work well into their 70’s.”*

### History of interrupted education:

- *“A history of interrupted education at any stage, not limited to primary or secondary levels.”*

### Person with disability:

- *“Person with a disability needs to be changed, most people do not want to say they have a disability but do have significant mental health challenges. Disability is the wrong word to be using.”*

### Francophone and Deaf:

- *“Anglophone programs should not be measured in suitability when they can’t serve Francophone or deaf.”*

One respondent clearly identified the need for a change in the term “suitability.”

Respondents expressed mixed, but largely critical views of current suitability indicators. Many questioned the relevance of age, cultural background, and time out of school as measures of need, noting that skill levels vary widely regardless of these factors and that such indicators can exclude learners who genuinely require support. Agencies emphasized that suitability should be based on actual skill gaps and learner goals rather than demographic characteristics.

Participants also highlighted that existing indicators are often vague, outdated, and do not sufficiently reflect diverse learner experiences including the following indicators: people with disabilities, highly educated individuals, and newcomers. Several stressed that suitability criteria should not act as a barrier to access. At the same time, agencies serving specialized populations noted that learners—particularly recent high school graduates—may still require Get SET support despite formal credentials. ES system changes affecting referrals and service pathways were also cited as limiting who agencies can serve, reinforcing the need for clearer definitions, updated criteria, and more flexible approaches to determining learner suitability.

*“I think ‘suitability’ should be tied to specific circumstances - do you have a need for Get SET support (lower skills levels), can you participate fully in the program, and are you likely to be positively impacted by such participation? Eligibility for and prioritization of particular populations are different things - for example, we may wish to identify income thresholds for eligibility (in the allocation of limited public resources)*

*or identify certain groups of people as priority as a means to address systemic inequities and disproportionate barriers these populations may encounter (e.g., persons with disabilities, Indigenous persons), but I wouldn't apply the term "suitable" ... Overall, I think some of the language is outdated or unclear - probably should be updated." - Survey Respondent*

Agencies were asked what new suitability indicators should be added and why, given current conditions and trends.

Respondents noted that many learners seeking help do not fit existing suitability indicators despite having clear skill gaps, particularly in digital skills and workplace readiness. They expressed concern that current criteria unfairly exclude individuals with some postsecondary education or employment history who still need upgrading to remain employable. Suggestions for change included broadening or redefining age-related indicators, incorporating life stability factors such as housing, food security, and mental health, and adding clearer definitions for newcomers based on language proficiency or length of time in Canada. Overall, respondents emphasized the need for more inclusive, needs-based criteria—or the removal of suitability requirements altogether—to ensure that learners who actively seek support are not turned away.

Survey Respondents comments about criteria included the following:

*"Stability such as housing, mental health, and food insecurity."*

*"Age related – change the age indicator to a wider range."*

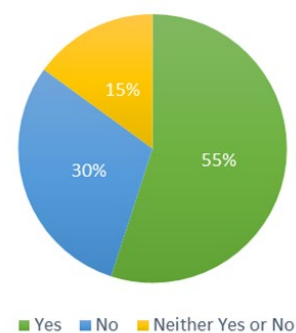
*"Mental health."*

*"I think there are many learners that come in that don't have any of the suitabilities, I'm not sure what indicators could be added, widening the age group, even adding that they didn't finish college. Some people come in here and pass the assessment deeming [sic] them ineligible for our program but could score very low on the digital assessment. Our ETC told me that if they have any college at all or any type of employment that I should not be allowing them into the program but I think that is completely unfair. These people have gotten the courage to come in here and ask for help they need to learn computer software for a new job I think adding suitability's that will make these types of clients fit would be great or better yet, get rid of suitability completely and let's help educate everyone that has come here for help."*

*"Newcomers – potentially adding a definition whether it is a proficiency level or the time the person has been in Canada."*

On the topic of suitability indicators, the last question asked was whether or not there should be suitability indicators. 55% replied Yes, 30% replied No, and 15% replied Neither Yes or No.

**Should there be Suitability Indicators - % of total respondents**



## Comments From Respondents Who Answered No:

*“It adds an unnecessary strain on programs which are already underfunded to meet another arbitrary target. Since the suitability criteria do not supersede the eligibility criteria, it sets up a dynamic where programs may be contractually obligated to provide services that ultimately damage their reporting outcomes.”*

*“The question is more complicated than yes or no indicates. Clearly there should be a measure of appropriate service and mechanisms to ensure that the people who need our services are correct. The current manner in which suitability markers are used may be unwieldy. The number required seems very arbitrary. Why cannot having one marker be sufficient? Yes, we can have learners without markers but that means another learner needs more than 3, which leads to many challenges in trying to manage. To increase suitability percentages, it is insufficient to target marketing to underserved populations.”*

## Comments From Respondents Who Answered Yes:

*“As they exist currently, the suitability criteria do not reflect the complexity and diversity of learners who seek support through Get SET. Therefore, if the criteria are not updated, it makes sense to eliminate them. However, if they are expanded and updated, then they may contribute to a more well-rounded screening and needs assessment for learners.”*

*“Underserved populations should continue to be prioritized, albeit updated to include groups who may not have historically been included in this definition (seniors, etc.).”*

*“In the Literacy and Basic Skills program, it is essential that we hold ourselves accountable for serving those in our society who face the greatest barriers. There are undeniable pressures—such as meeting service numbers and demonstrating measurable progress—that can create incentives to prioritize learners with fewer challenges, simply because their outcomes might be easier to show. However, doing so would defeat the very purpose of our work. Literacy programs exist to support those who have been most marginalized and excluded from educational opportunities. While organizations face significant fiscal constraints and resource limitations, we must resist the temptation to focus on the easiest successes and instead remain steadfast in our commitment to those who need us most.”*

*“Perhaps guidelines but more transparent and more guidelines rather than measures that feed into SQS.”*

## Comments From Those Who Did Not Answer Yes or No:

*“Again, how is suitability defined/ being used? Is it the program being suitable for the person, or the person being suitable for the program? I think language needs to be updated - differentiating between eligible, suitable, and priority .... clear definitions and an understanding of how the terms are being employed, to what end. Someone might be eligible and suitable, for example, but they may not necessarily be prioritized - so many of these decisions rest on decisions about the allocation of limited public resources and so are value-laden and subject to bias.”*

*“Unsure if there needs to be suitability indicators to attain service. As anyone who is in need of service should be suitable.”*

# Effects of the Employment Service Transformation

The Employment Service (ES) Transformation has now taken place in all parts of the province. There is a mix of public, private and non-profit Service System Managers (SSM).

- 62% of respondents indicated they are in an area that has either a non-profit or public SSM
- 19% indicated they are in an area covered by private SSMs
- 24% of respondents are in Phase 3 of the transformation and are, therefore, just beginning to experience related changes

Agencies were asked what changes in learner demographics they attribute to the transformation.

The responses are grouped by the phase of the transformation agencies are in:

## Prototype:

- More learners that are looking for life skills and less employment.

## Phase 1:

- Although we have seen a decline in ES referrals, we still have those who access our services for job readiness skills.
- Less referrals, clients with more barriers.
- None. Demographics are the same.
- None- we still get the same learners referred from ES after the transformation. But we now have none from OW or ODSP.

## Phase 2:

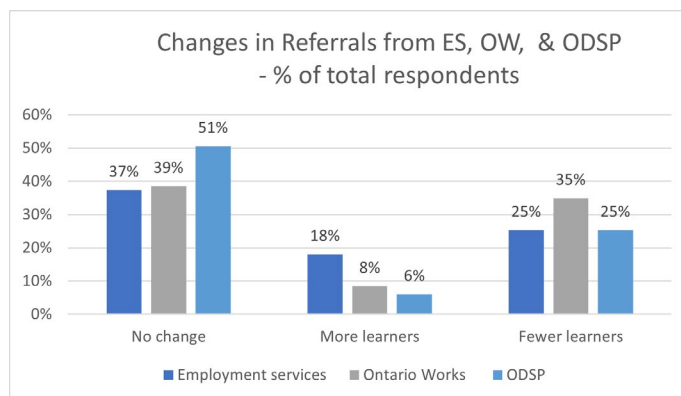
- We are seeing a wider range of abilities, higher levels of education, ages exceeding 64.
- We are getting fewer referrals. Workers aren't even given an option in their new paperwork. Workers are not being educated about Get SET resources. Workers have not received education about the CAEC and most don't understand how prior learning assessments work or how to prepare students for them. Every worker I have met feel they don't have enough time or resources to assist clients in a meaningful way. The outcomes expected are not realistic.
- We do not have regular referrals to the Get SET program anymore from Ontario Works. Prior to the pandemic, we did get a lot of referrals from the Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) program. I don't see this anymore.
- We are seeing more referrals from employment services however I do not believe this is due to the transformation but more to do with relationship building. We have 2 EO services in our area but only receive regular referrals from one agency.
- Some service providers are more actively seeking partnerships and referrals.
- None but the staff at ES seem to be under a lot of stress.
- None/no major changes.
- I have not seen a change in learner demographics as a result of ES referrals at this time. I do not receive many referrals from ES currently

### Phase 3:

- Many individuals with language barriers, as well as younger adults, are not ready or willing to participate in full-time training due to financial struggles and the immediate need for employment.
- Lack of referrals from an income support demographic. The push is for employment, but they are not ready for employment and should be seeking Get SET supports first.
- Less referrals from Employment Services; Less partnering from Employment Services.
- More digital skills- linked to employment goal path Reading comprehension for workplace certifications. Moderately less OW referrals due to life stability model. Gaps in service identified by ES partners would be preferred to be filled by targeted training workshops delivered on-site at their offices.
- We are just starting to see changes in things such as how learners apply for OW etc.
- Trending younger high school and older adults.
- More learners in receipt of assistance and/or looking for work.



Agencies were also asked whether they had experienced a change in the number of referrals from OW, ODSP and ES since the transformation was implemented in their area.



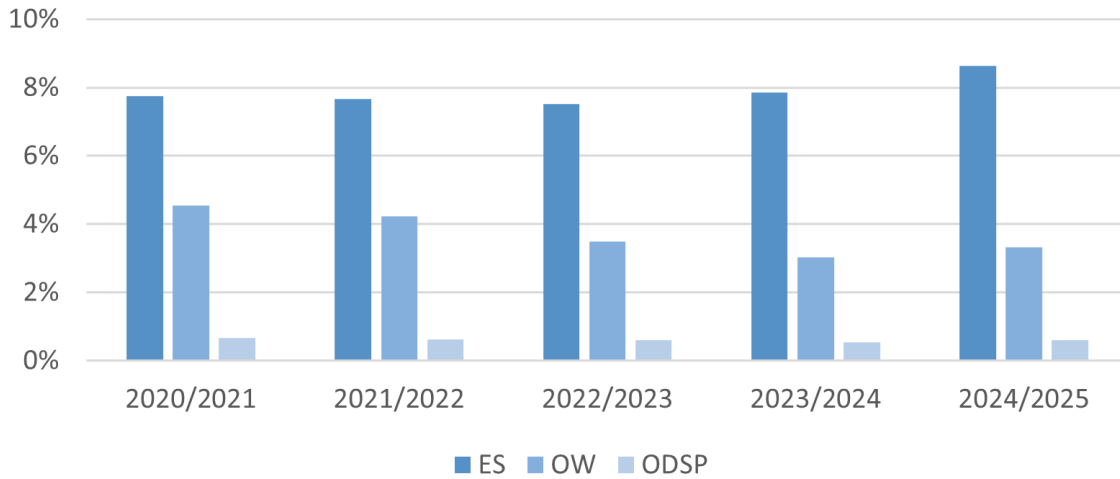
As this chart clearly demonstrates, these numbers concur with the provincial statistics which show that the number of referrals has dropped or stagnated from these particular groups.

58% of respondents indicated that most or some referrals are appropriate. However, agencies raised concerns regarding the appropriateness of the referrals.

Some comments regarding the appropriateness of referrals include:

- some referral partners do not understand the training Get SET can and cannot provide, nor do they appreciate that upgrading takes time - it isn't a quick fix.
- some ES providers appear to dismiss Get SET as a viable or necessary option for clients.
- Employment service agencies sometimes refer clients who don't speak English well enough to enter Get SET, though they often think their English is much better than it is.

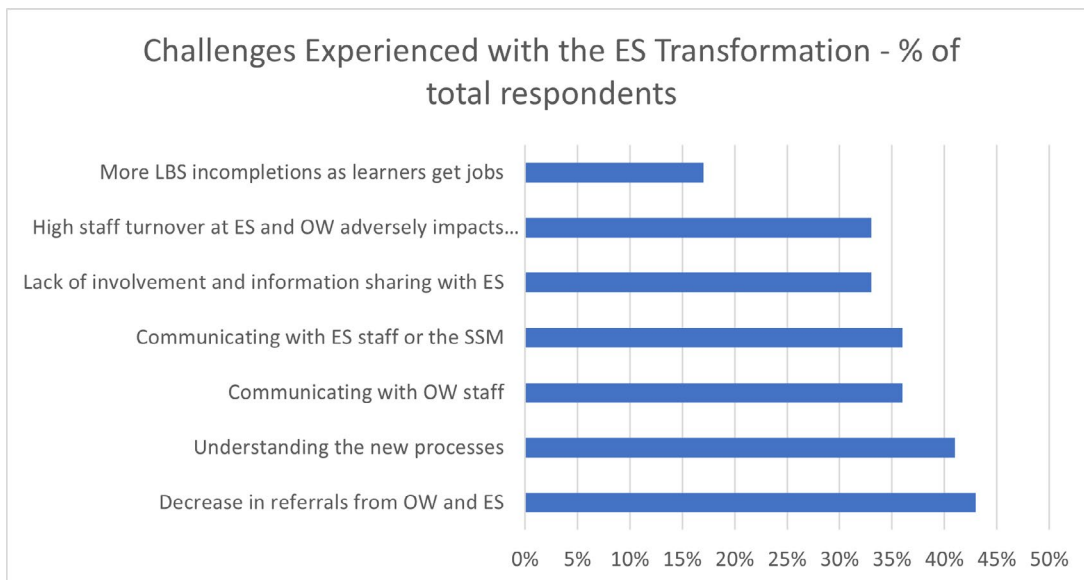
### Referrals IN to Get SET during ES Transformation



In “The Impact of the Employment Services Transformation on LBS Community Based Agencies” report put out by CLO, it states the following:

*“In the IES Services Program Guidelines specific to Ontario Works and OSDP clients, it states clearly that there are two components to the Integrated Case Management - the Action Plan and the Employment Action Plan. This report is concerned with the Action Plan. The Plan is developed & managed by social assistance caseworkers for their clients and include Action Plan goals, support needs, referral to community services and outcomes. It is at this point in time where an appropriate referral to LBS can be made.”*<sup>21</sup>

If this included Get SET programming, this may work towards establishing an additional wraparound support that can only benefit the client and potentially lead to more successful outcomes. This chart indicates that community partners have a limited understanding of Get SET programs. This may be attributed to several factors, including challenges agencies are experiencing with the ES Transformation.



The First Work Report, “What’s Working What’s Not Working,” indicates 57% of survey respondents in Employment Services saw no change in community engagement. The report did indicate that prioritizing external partnerships can mitigate challenges and deliver better outcomes for clients and service providers. However, addressing this may be challenging with no funding to support it. The report goes on to state that the transformation has disrupted established processes.

The First Work Report asked their survey respondents whether there had been changes to clients’ employability skills.

*“Skills training workshops fared slightly better with 26% reporting gains, while 34% note regression. 77% of respondents notice there was minimal impact on connecting clients to complementary supports for enhancing their readiness for employability. This suggests that there is room for strengthening employment collaboratively and systematically, without which the employability outcomes cannot improve comprehensively.”* <sup>22</sup>

This interpretation suggests that Employment Services do not have a strong understanding of the services of Get SET, which may be a contributing factor to the lack of communication and referrals. The lack of referrals may also be a result of the high turnover of staff at employment service agencies. Further to these issues is the Rigid Success Metrics IES is required to follow as cited in the First Work Report, “What’s Working, What’s Not: Safeguarding Ontario’s Future through IES Reform.”

It is important to note that education and training are no longer a qualifier for funding or a successful outcome.

*“Service providers highlighted that with IES, a fundamental shift has occurred in how outcomes are defined. Now education and training no longer qualify as successful case closures, but only employment or job placement as success metrics and the only qualifier for funding. Respondents argued that this narrow focus forces them to prioritize employment over tailored supports.”* <sup>23</sup>

## Changes made to Get SET Programming to Address these Changes and Challenges

Respondents identified several ways they have adjusted programming and operations to respond to the changes and challenges arising from the ES transformation. Many are prioritizing the renewal and development of communication channels and working relationships with Employment Services (ES) agency staff, Ontario Works (OW), and Service System Managers (SSMs). This includes meeting more regularly with staff from individual offices and participating in community roundtables. In addition, respondents are developing educational materials that outline Get SET services and other learning options to better inform frontline staff and caseworkers of the work they do.



Some agencies have adapted, or attempted to adapt, their programming to better meet the specific needs of Employment Services (ES) clients. This has included an increased focus on Skills for Success and employment-readiness training, such as Smart Serve, as well as financial and digital skills programming. However, expanding programming remains challenging without additional funding. Although ES has funding to support programs developed for its clients, these funds cannot be used to compensate Get SET agencies. Agencies also reported difficulties in enrolling a sufficient number of ES clients to run targeted programs. In response, one agency has introduced more flexible hours and scheduling to better accommodate learners' competing commitments.

Other agencies are expanding public outreach efforts to attract clients from a wider community and reduce reliance on ES and OW for referrals.

- We have started communicating more closely with certain caseworkers when the learner is willing to share that information with us. We also offered French language courses to DTSSAB staff so they can respond to requests from Francophones and serve them in their preferred language.
- We are in a unique position because we had been working with an ES office that rarely made referrals. We know how to acquire our own clients. When a new ES office took over, we developed a great relationship. I could talk to everyone about our program, and they referred individuals who needed our help. Then the SSM came, and we reverted to the previous situation.

- We were able to avoid most of these challenges because of feedback from other Get SET providers whose regions began the transformation earlier. We had a head start on firming up relationships with OW and ES before the changes were implemented here.
- We've gone to the public directly. Worked to connect with more non-ES partners such as Foodbanks, immigration services and community associations.
- We are working to rejuvenate and/or form new connections with our colleagues in OW and ES agencies through meetings, information sharing, and visiting the locations more regularly.
- We were not able to address the challenge mentioned above due to status quo budget. We proactively communicated the challenges to the funder.

Agencies described a range of strategies to manage challenges related to referrals and ES system changes. These strategies include strengthening direct communication with caseworkers, building staff capacity in language services, and proactively developing relationships with Employment Services and Ontario Works before or during the transformation.

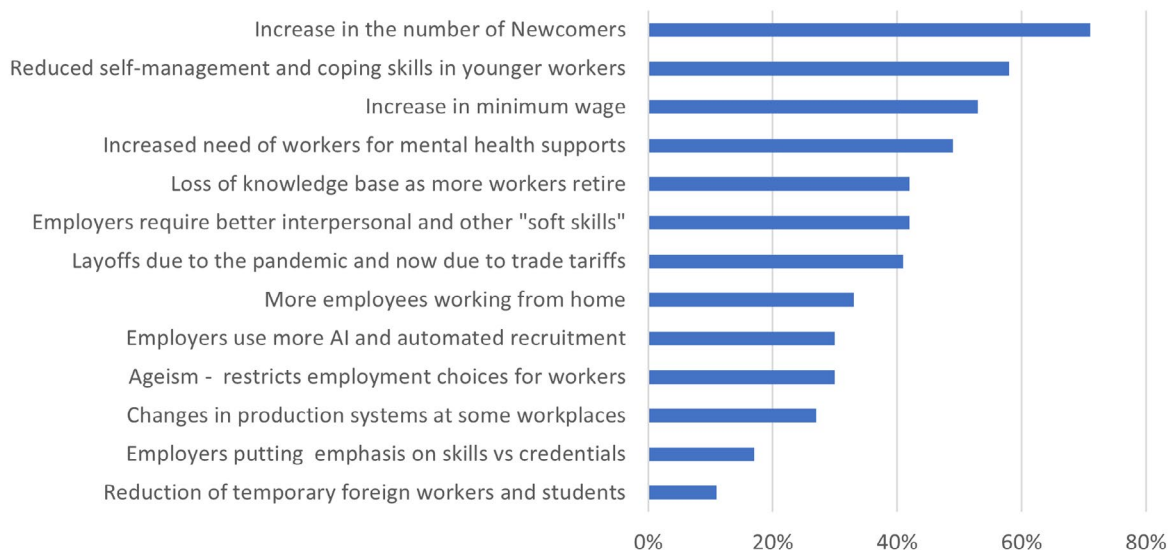
Some agencies reduced reliance on ES referrals by engaging directly with the public and expanding partnerships with non-ES organizations such as food banks, immigration services, and community groups.

Others noted that inadequate funding restricted their ability to respond fully, leading them to formally communicate limits and challenges to funders.

# Effects of the Labour Market

Since the pandemic, there have been changes in the labour market, and in the expectations and recruitment practices of employers. Respondents were asked to identify the changes they have seen in their community.

Labour Market Changes - % of total respondents



These changes have affected the demographics of the learners being served and the learners themselves. In turn, this affects the services the agencies must consider.

Our respondents provided some examples of changes they have seen:

- Increased needs for soft-skills and digital skills training
- Challenges for younger clients due to poor self-management skills and lack of experience
- Challenges for older clients who lack digital skills
- Demand for quick training, which is often unrealistic
- Greater competition for jobs - people with lower skills are having greater difficulty
- Difficulties in serving newcomers who have inadequate English skills
- More clients identifying with mental health issues and neurodivergence, greater need for more wrap-around services, and greater need for Get SET staff training
- More one-to-one time needed for more learners with complex challenges
- We have noticed an increased need for wrap around services including mental health services in our learners. We observe older adults experience more barriers to finding employment than younger learners. Learners seeking employment are experiencing increased uncertainty due to tariffs and political turmoil.
- We monitor the local labour market and adjust programming based on needs.

*“Since the pandemic, the cost of living, particularly for food and rent has increased exponentially. Many learners are using food banks routinely which is directly as a result of their very high rental costs. The pressures that they have incurred has increased the need for additional mental health supports. Situationally the learners’ lives are much more complex and cannot be restricted because of ageism. There are many more newcomers and longer waiting lists for ESL Programs. LBS Programs are helping out when possible but the strains of dealing with the results of learner trauma experienced vicariously has placed an additional stress on practitioners. Some choose to retire earlier and the loss of the intellectual capital is a huge disadvantage to any LBS Program. Soft skills are a necessity and their importance should be part of any interview process. It’s important that LBS Learners become familiar with the need for acquiring soft skills as there are some cultures where these factors are not emphasized. The possession of well-honed soft skills is not a universal requirement, but they are a definite necessity for a much more professional interpersonal experience, whether participating in the classroom or the workforce.” - Survey Respondant*

Overall, agencies are closely monitoring local labour market conditions and adjusting programming to better respond to changing learner needs and economic uncertainty. Respondents reported that labour market shifts are driving increased demand for soft skills and digital skills training, while revealing distinct challenges across age groups. Younger learners often lack self-management skills and work experience, whereas older learners face barriers related to limited digital literacy. Heightened competition for jobs has made it more difficult for individuals with

lower skills to secure employment, and expectations for rapid training outcomes are frequently unrealistic. Agencies are also reporting an increase in newcomers with insufficient English proficiency, alongside a growing number of learners identifying with mental health challenges or neurodivergence. Combined, these trends are increasing the need for wraparound supports, staff training, and individualized instruction.

## **Changes Made to Programming to Address These Changes/ Challenges**

Many respondents have increased their focus on programming related to employment including more soft skills training, working directly with employers to address employee skills gaps, and linking learners at job fairs and other employment services. Several respondents have added ESL activities and/or conversation circles in English or French with one Francophone agency has adding a French as a Second Language course.

Other respondents have increased digital training, notably including AI and technical support from partners such as Contact North and the Learning Hub to provide more access to online courses. One agency increased its focus on OALCF Level 2 which has increased the number of learners.

A number of respondents are working more closely with community partners to provide wrap-around service, linking Get SET training to address some of the learners’ challenges such as communicating with doctors, social workers, etc. and gaining access to support services.

Several respondents stated they have not made any changes, either because they feel their programming is adequate or because of funding constraints.

## Strategic Changes Agencies Have Made to Accommodate Changes and Challenges

### Employment related changes:

- Offering Customer Service/POS, Smart Serve and Safe food Handling training
- Offering Soft Skills training
- Reaching out and working with employers

### Language related changes:

- Offering French as a Second Language to meet demand
- Adding ESL tutoring, activities and conversational English

### Community Wrap-around changes:

- Supporting health/mental health through modification of the learning plan to incorporate self-advocacy
- Increasing awareness of community supports
- Adapting to referral partner/learner needs through customized curriculum

### Digital Skills:

- Integrating AI training
- Monitoring the local labour market
- Partnering with the Learning Hub to offer more opportunities to learners

### Miscellaneous:

- Flexible scheduling
- Continually adapting programs and support systems to address evolving needs
- More emphasis on OALCF Level 2 which attracts more learners

## Get SET Success Stories

While there are numerous wonderful success stories, we are featuring four in this report:

*“A community elder who was called in to teach Anishinaabemowin was unable to use the computer systems in place. By helping her learn digital technology, she continues to teach her native language.”*

*“We worked with a young man who was facing eviction, on OW and was on his way to losing his license due to choices he was making. We worked for over a year with him and employment services. When this man first came into the office he would not make eye contact, sat slouching in a chair and gave one word answer (with a grumble). This young man is now working fulltime, has secured a beautiful apartment, greets everyone with a smile and a handshake. He is happy and doing very well in life. He is a completely different adult today.”*

*“In collaboration with an ES provider who identified a gap in service in the varying degrees their job seekers had in digital skill proficiency, contracted a volunteer to deliver a customized workshop with specific learning topics. This workshop was delivered on-site at the ES provider’s location in their computer lab.”*

*“We established a new partnership with an EO service provider that will provide learners with timely access to services and also enables our instructors to make efficient referrals.”*

# Key Findings

## Learner Demographic

Agencies report significant shifts in learner demographics. There has been an overall increase in learners with disabilities, a younger cohort affected by COVID-related disruptions to schooling, and a significant rise in linguistic diversity driven by an increase in immigration. In addition, many learners aspire to post-secondary education but face systemic and personal barriers that prevent access. Coinciding with this, others are redirecting toward employment pathways as provincial policy emphasizes workforce attachment.

The growing demand from younger learners seeking high school completion or equivalency has also risen. The challenges this presents are compounded by limited CAEC resources and confusion around credential options. At the same time, agencies are serving a more diverse population including Indigenous learners, newcomers, individuals with disabilities and older adults. These demographic shifts are compounded by increased needs for social connection, language support, and inclusive learning environments—trends influenced by both long-term impact of the pandemic and increased immigration.

## Learner Needs

Agencies are working diligently to adapt. However, the gap between demand and service capacity is widening. The need for updated tools, technology, funding flexibility, and system-level alignment continues to increase as the gap between learner needs and service capacity continues to widen, putting both learners and providers at risk of falling further behind.

## Suitability Indicators

Suitability indicators should be reassessed and updated. When clearly defined and based on actual learner needs, and applied as flexible guidance rather than rigid targets, these indicators will continue to support accountability while better reflecting the diversity and complexity of individuals accessing Get SET services. Without meaningful change, the existing framework risks creating unnecessary barriers to access, placing additional strain on agencies, and weakening the program's purpose of supporting those who face the greatest challenges in learning, employment, and fully participating in Ontario's society, communities and economy.

Respondents expressed diverse and nuanced views on the use of suitability indicators. Those opposed to the current framework argued that the current system places unnecessary strain on already underfunded programs, relies on arbitrary thresholds, and can negatively affect reporting outcomes without improving service quality. They emphasized that rigid use of these indicators complicates service delivery and does not accurately reflect learner needs.

Respondents who supported keeping suitability indicators stressed the importance of accountability and prioritizing learners facing the greatest barriers, but only if the criteria are significantly updated and expanded to reflect current learner diversity. They advocated for clearer, more transparent guidelines focused on screening and needs assessment rather than performance targets, and for broadening the definition of underserved populations. Those without a definitive position highlighted confusion around the purpose and meaning of "suitability," calling for clearer distinctions between eligibility, suitability, and priority.

## Effects of ES Transformation

The ES Transformation has unintentionally weakened pathways between employment services and adult education, reducing access to Get SET supports for learners with significant barriers. Agencies continue to innovate within limited resources. However, the sustainability and effectiveness of these efforts are limited without systemic changes. Re-establishing education and training as recognized and valued outcomes, improving communication and understanding between systems, and resourcing collaboration appropriately are necessary if the transformation is to support Ontario's broader goals of workforce development and poverty reduction.

## Effects of the Labour Market

The evidence suggests that labour market instability and rising employer expectations are increasing both the complexity of learner needs and the demands placed on Get SET providers. While agencies are actively adapting through innovative programming, partnerships, and flexible delivery models, continued responsiveness will depend on adequate resourcing and government recognition of Get SET as a critical link between learners and a rapidly changing labour market. A strong foundation using the Get SET program will help ensure Ontario achieves its goal of "Building Ontario."

If the goal of the provincial government is economic growth and stability, then Get SET can assist in providing the foundation that makes this possible.

## Funding

It will come as no surprise to anyone that the issue of funding was always in the forefront of every comment throughout this survey.

Unfortunately, the reality is that agencies are beyond frustrated. The Ministry has made changes that increase the demand for services by eliminating CLB 6 as a requirement, failing to recognize that limiting the age to 64 impacts the senior population, and reducing the minimum age from 19 to 18.

These changes have had a significant impact on agencies who are not equipped to deal with them.

The lack of resources/funding is causing staff burnout, less community engagement and reduced programming.



And yet, in the [2025-2026 Strategic Plan for the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills](#), there is no mention of funding for the Get SET Program.

Although it does say:

*“Strengthening Workforce Participation, by improving service coordination and outcomes for individuals furthest from the labour market, contributing to inclusive economic growth and stronger labour force attachment.”* <sup>24</sup>

This statement suggests that those furthest from the labour market need support and, in many cases, Get SET learners are in that category.

Get SET agencies receive annual operating funding from the Ministry of Immigration, Labour, Training and Skills Development; however, this base funding has not increased in nearly ten years.

While some agencies are able to access additional funding to deliver specific programs, these funds are inconsistent, time-limited, and unevenly distributed across the province.

This funding instability limits agencies' ability to plan sustainably and deliver the long-term outcomes expected by government, communities, and learners.

The prolonged absence of funding increases—despite rising costs, expanding eligibility, and growing learner complexity—has created a widening gap between demand and service capacity. This disparity is compounded by the lack of corresponding provincial support, even as expectations for accountability, responsiveness, and labour market alignment continue to grow.

Agencies are increasingly restricted in their ability to invest in innovative, flexible, and learner-centred delivery models that today's labour market requires.

An immediate increase in funding would strengthen agencies' capacity to serve a larger number of learners, reduce wait times, stabilize staffing, and expand access to foundational literacy, language, and digital skills. In turn, these investments would contribute to improved productivity, higher labour market participation, positive GDP impacts, reduced pressure on health care and social services, and stronger long-term social returns.

The urgency of this investment is underscored by the most recent PIAAC results, which show that approximately 30%

widely considered the minimum threshold for success in the workplace. If the government is serious about reducing poverty, increasing workforce participation, and building a resilient economy, it has a responsibility to closely examine and strengthen the funding provided to the agencies charged with preparing Ontarians for work, learning, and full participation in society.

Compounding these challenges, agency staff have seen no meaningful wage increases, leaving Get SET providers unable to compete in an increasingly tight labour market.

This threatens recruitment and retention, undermines service continuity, and places the long-term sustainability of the Get SET system at risk at a time when its role is more critical than ever.



# Recommendations

## Learner Needs

- **Strengthen System Integration:** Improve coordination between Get SET, employment services, mental health providers, and social supports to create seamless pathways and holistic learner experiences.
- **Invest in Mental Health and Wraparound Supports:** Provide dedicated funding and partnerships to address the mental health, housing, food security, and social support needs that increasingly prevent learners from engaging successfully in programming.
- **Address Digital Equity:** Expand resources for digital literacy training, device access, and internet connectivity, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

## Modernize Suitability Indicators

- Revise suitability indicators to reflect current learner needs and remove barriers that prevent access for those facing the greatest challenges, including individuals with mental health concerns and complex support needs.

## ES Transformation

- **Re-establish Education and Training as Valued Outcomes:** Recognize foundational skill development and education pathways as legitimate and essential outcomes alongside employment, particularly for learners requiring longer-term support.
- Expand programming to meet the needs of individuals referred from Employment Services.

- Strengthen direct communication with caseworkers, building staff capacity in language services, and proactively developing relationships with Employment Services and Ontario Works.

## Funding

- **Increase Base Operating Funding:** Provide immediate, inflation-adjusted increases to Get SET base funding to address rising costs, expand service capacity, stabilize staffing, and support innovation in program delivery.
- **Support Workforce Stability:** Enable competitive wages and professional development opportunities for Get SET practitioners to ensure recruitment, retention, and program quality.



## Conclusion

If Ontario is to achieve its goal of an educated workforce as a driver of economic growth, it must prioritize learners who face the greatest barriers to participation in work, learning, and community life. Workforce readiness depends not only on credentials alone; it depends on intentional development of foundational literacy, language, digital, and social-emotional skills, alongside adaptability and a commitment to lifelong learning. These competencies are central to meeting the evolving demands of today's and tomorrow's labour market—and they are the outcomes that Get SET programs are designed to build.

The evidence presented demonstrates that Get SET providers are increasingly being asked to function as both adult education institutions and frontline stabilizing supports, particularly in our current environment where housing and food insecurity, mental health challenges, language barriers, and digital exclusion have become more commonplace amongst learners. While agencies have responded with creativity and commitment, the absence of coordinated investment—especially in wraparound support such as mental health and community supports—means the gap between learner needs and service capacity continues to grow.

Outdated suitability indicators, a narrowed employment-first focus resulting from the ES Transformation, and increased labour market pressures have further complicated accessing Get SET for those in need. Without reform, current structures risk reinforcing short-term outcomes at the expense of sustainable workforce participation and poverty reduction. Re-establishing education and training as valued outcomes, modernizing suitability indicators to reflect needs of today's learners,

and strengthening collaboration across systems are essential to restoring effective pathways for learners. At the core of these challenges is chronic underfunding. Nearly a decade without an increase in base operating funding has left Get SET agencies struggling to keep pace with rising costs, expanding eligibility, and increasing learner complexity. Even modest, inflation-adjusted investment would have far-reaching benefits as it would provide an opportunity to expand access, stabilize staffing, improve learner outcomes, and deliver measurable economic and social returns. With nearly 30% of Canadians lacking the baseline literacy skills required for workplace success, continued underinvestment undermines Ontario's productivity, workforce participation, poverty reduction, and economic resilience.

Ultimately, the sustainability and effectiveness of Ontario's Get SET system depends on meaningful policy alignment and renewed investment. Recognizing Get SET as a foundational pillar of workforce development—rather than a peripheral support—would enable agencies to fulfill their mandate and ensure those facing the greatest barriers are not left behind. Without decisive action, the growing disparity between learner needs and system capacity will continue to erode opportunities for individuals most in need and weaken Ontario's long-term social and economic outcomes.



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This report was researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO). CLO is a provincial support organization that serves English-language, community-based Get SET agencies (formerly Literacy and Basic Skills) in communities large and small across the province of Ontario. We are located in Midland, Ontario.

You can learn more about our organization by [visiting our website](#) and by following us on social media.

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