

Factsheet: Adult Learners in a Post-Pandemic World

Ontario's adult learner landscape has changed significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Get SET (Skills, Education, and Training) programs, formerly known as Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS), serve learners with increasingly diverse backgrounds, goals, experiences, and support needs.

Based on the report [Adult Learners in a Post-Pandemic World: Examining the Adult Learner Landscape in Ontario's Get SET Programs](#), this factsheet:

- Highlights changes to learner demographics and needs.
- Identifies key successes and challenges.
- Shares strategies agencies are using to respond.
- Offers recommendations to support accessible, sustainable, and high-quality services.

This factsheet summarizes the successes, challenges, and strategies related to adapting Get SET programs to the adult learner landscape in a post-pandemic world.



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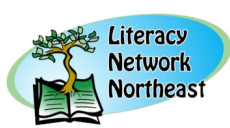
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Get SET

Skills, Education and Training

Canada



Ontario



Introduction



Get SET programs help adults develop foundational skills for education, employment, independence, and community participation. These include literacy, numeracy, communication, digital skills, social-emotional skills, and employment readiness.

Since the pandemic, many learners have been managing several challenges at once, including mental health concerns, housing and food insecurity, language barriers, disability, disrupted education, low digital skills, unstable employment, and limited access to community services.

At the same time, Get SET agencies are responding to higher costs, staffing pressures, changing referral systems, and funding that has not kept pace with increasingly complex needs.

This factsheet summarizes the findings of the report [Adult Learners in a Post-Pandemic World: Examining the Adult Learner Landscape in Ontario's Get SET Programs](#).

Research for the report included:

- A review of provincial Get SET learner and profile data
- Four focus groups
- One-to-one meetings
- Informal discussions with practitioners
- A provincial survey

The research examined demographic changes since April 2023, learner needs, suitability indicators, the Employment Services Transformation, labour market shifts, agency strategies, and learner and program successes. Information was also cited from the following sources:

- [Building a Strong Foundation for Success: Reducing Poverty in Ontario \(2020-2025\)](#)
- [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](#)

The findings reflect the experiences of participating agencies and practitioners. Not all Get SET agencies took part in the survey or focus groups, so the results may not represent every region or agency across Ontario.

Changes to Learner Demographics

While some provincial data show relatively stable trends, individual agencies reported significant local changes in learner demographics and needs. This means that local agency experience is important for understanding how the post-pandemic learner landscape is changing across Ontario.

More Learners with Disabilities

Provincial data show that the percentage of learners identifying as persons with disabilities increased from 24% before the pandemic to 29% after the pandemic. In the survey, 58% of respondents reported an increase.

Agencies are also serving more learners who are neurodivergent or experiencing mental health challenges. These learners may need individualized instruction, additional time, accessible materials, assistive technology, flexible schedules, and help connecting with other services.

More Newcomers and Greater Linguistic Diversity

The percentage of newcomers in Get SET increased from 14% at the end of the pandemic to 21% at the end of 2024/2025.

Some newcomers have high levels of formal education but need support with English or French, digital skills, workplace communication, and Canadian systems. Others have limited literacy in their first language and need longer learning plans and intensive one-to-one instruction.

The removal of Canadian Language Benchmarks Level 6 from the Get SET

guidelines has also increased the number of newcomers seeking services from agencies that were already under-resourced.

Younger Learners Affected by Educational Disruption

Agencies reported more young adults who struggled with online schooling or disengaged from school during the pandemic. Some have a diploma or partial credits but lack the skills needed for employment or post-secondary education.

They may need support with:

- Reading, writing, and numeracy
- Time management and organization
- Confidence and motivation
- Digital learning
- High school completion or equivalency
- Understanding the Canadian Adult Education Credential

Although the provincial age distribution has changed very little overall, some communities are seeing significant increases in learners aged 18 to 25.

Older Adults Returning to Learning

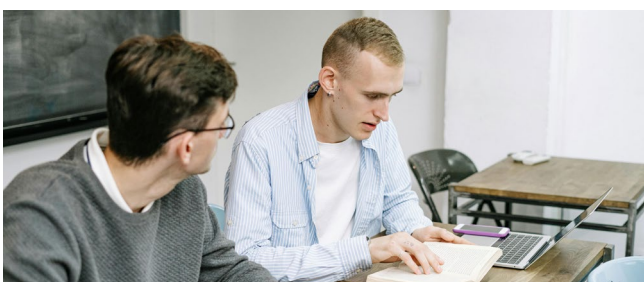
Some agencies are serving more older adults who need to return to work or remain employed because of rising living costs. They may need digital skills, employment preparation, help adapting to workplace technology, and flexible instruction.

The current age suitability indicator does not fully reflect adults who are working or returning to work beyond age 64.

Greater Focus on Employment

Fifty-three percent of survey respondents reported an increase in the number of unemployed learners seeking work.

However, many learners need substantial skills development and life stabilization before they are ready to find and keep employment. Others hope to enter post-secondary education but face financial, academic, personal, or systemic barriers.



Rising Learner Needs

The largest reported increases were:

- Housing needs: 42%
- Food needs: 41%
- Mental health needs: 41%

Agencies also reported increased needs related to transportation, childcare, income, healthcare, language, digital skills, interpersonal skills, and self-management.

Housing instability may force learners to move, change programs, or leave training. Food insecurity, financial stress, and mental health challenges can affect attendance, concentration, confidence, and progress.

Fifty-nine percent of agencies reported that learners do not remain in their program while accessing other community services. Sixty-four percent said that the use of community resources should be considered when determining suitability, as it can signal a need for coordinated, long-term support.

Challenges

Mental Health and Life Stabilization

Agencies reported more learners experiencing anxiety, depression, trauma, burnout, social isolation, low confidence, and difficulty managing stress.

Mental health services may have long waits, high costs, transportation barriers, or a lack of practitioners who can communicate in a learner's preferred language or in American Sign Language. These challenges are especially serious in rural and northern communities.

Get SET practitioners are not mental health professionals, but they increasingly provide frontline support and help learners find appropriate services.

Access to Community Supports

Referrals are not always enough. Services may be unavailable locally, unaffordable, inaccessible, or difficult to reach.

Common barriers include:

- Limited public transit and transportation costs
- Long waiting lists
- The cost of assessments and specialized services
- Lack of accessible or culturally appropriate supports
- Shortages of healthcare and mental health workers
- Limited services in rural and northern communities

Digital Exclusion

Digital access involves more than having a device or internet connection. Learners must also know how to use technology safely, confidently, and effectively.

They may need help with email, online job applications, government and healthcare services, cybersecurity, workplace software, virtual learning, artificial intelligence, and finding reliable information.

However, learners cannot always enter Get SET solely to improve digital skills. This creates a barrier for adults whose lack of digital knowledge limits their participation in work, education, and daily life.

Language and Communication Barriers

Newcomers may have difficulty accessing local language services or may face long waiting lists. Some are referred to Get SET even when their speaking and listening skills make it difficult to benefit fully from instruction.

Agencies must adapt materials and teaching approaches while providing longer learning plans, conversation practice, workplace language, and more one-to-one support.

Rural and Northern Barriers

Learners in rural, remote, and northern communities may have fewer services, limited transportation, unreliable internet, and little access to language or specialized supports.

Online instruction improves access for some learners, but it is not suitable for everyone. Many learners need in-person support, particularly those with low digital skills, disabilities, language barriers, or negative experiences with online learning.



Outdated Suitability Indicators

Agencies reported that some suitability indicators are outdated, unclear, or no longer reflect the people seeking Get SET services.

Concerns include:

- Age ranges that overlook younger learners or adults working beyond age 64
- A six-year time-out-of-school measure that may exclude recent graduates with significant skill gaps
- Education definitions that do not reflect certificates of completion, international education, or interrupted post-secondary studies
- Learners who do not identify as having a disability but have serious mental health or learning barriers
- Highly educated newcomers who need language, digital, or workplace skills
- Learners with digital skill gaps who do not meet other suitability measures
- Indicators for specialized groups that some agencies are not equipped or funded to serve

Agencies suggested that suitability should be based more directly on actual skill gaps, learner goals, barriers, and the likely benefit of Get SET participation.

Effects of the Employment Services Transformation

The Employment Services Transformation has weakened some pathways between Employment Services, Ontario Works, and Get SET.

Agencies reported:

- Fewer or inconsistent referrals
- Loss of long-standing relationships with caseworkers
- Staff turnover and changing contacts
- Limited understanding of Get SET services
- Confusion about referral processes
- Greater emphasis on rapid employment
- Less recognition of education and training as successful outcomes
- Pressure to provide short programs for people with complex needs

An employment-first approach may overlook the foundational learning and life stabilization some adults need before they can find and retain suitable work.

Changing Labour Market Expectations

Employers increasingly expect digital, communication, interpersonal, self-management, adaptability, and job-specific skills.

- Younger learners may lack employment experience and self-management skills
- Older learners may face digital and age-related barriers
- Newcomers may have strong professional experience but need language and workplace communication support

Staffing and Funding Pressures

Get SET base operating funding has not increased in nearly ten years. During that time, operating costs, eligibility, learner complexity, technology needs, and demand for individualized support have all increased.

Agencies reported difficulty recruiting and retaining instructors and volunteers. Staff may leave for better pay, more hours, benefits, and greater stability. Burnout is also growing as practitioners manage heavy workloads and support learners in crisis.

Successes



Supporting Cultural and Community Participation

One agency supported a community Elder who had been invited to teach Anishinaabemowin but could not use the required computer systems.

By helping her develop digital skills, the agency enabled her to continue teaching her language and sharing her knowledge. This success shows how digital literacy can support cultural preservation, confidence, independence, and intergenerational learning.

Supporting Employment and Life Stability

One agency worked for over a year with a young man receiving Ontario Works who was facing eviction and at risk of losing his driver's licence.

The agency worked with him and Employment Services to address both learning and life needs. He is now working full-time, living in a stable apartment, communicating more confidently, and experiencing greater independence and well-being.

His progress demonstrates that success may involve skills development, relationship-building, employment support, and life stabilization.

Responding to Digital Skills Gaps

After an Employment Services provider identified wide differences in the digital skills of learners, a Get SET agency arranged a customized workshop at the Employment Services location.

The workshop addressed specific needs, used an existing computer lab, reduced access barriers, and demonstrated the value of Get SET expertise.



What These Successes Show

The success stories demonstrate the importance of:

- Understanding the whole learner
- Building trust
- Providing flexible and individualized instruction
- Working with community partners
- Addressing digital, social-emotional, and employment skills together
- Recognizing progress beyond test results or immediate employment
- Supporting learners through setbacks
- Celebrating small achievements as part of long-term success

Strategies

Flexible and Learner-Centred Delivery

Agencies are:

- Offering flexible hours and evening options
- Providing online, hybrid, and in-person learning
- Adjusting schedules for shift workers
- Developing shorter, focused activities
- Providing one-to-one instruction when needed
- Allowing additional time for language, disability, or mental health barriers
- Revising learning plans when circumstances change

Flexibility helps learners balance education with work, childcare, health, transportation, and other responsibilities.

Improved Intake and Assessment

Some agencies have strengthened intake to better identify learner goals, existing skills, barriers, digital and language needs, accommodations, and appropriate referrals.

A more complete intake process helps agencies personalize learning, build trust, and identify concerns before they lead to disengagement.

Relevant and Goal-Focused Programming

Agencies are connecting instruction to goals that matter to learners. Programming may include:

- Employment preparation
- Digital, financial, and health literacy
- Workplace language
- High school credit and CAEC preparation
- Customer service and point-of-sale training
- Smart Serve and Safe Food Handling
- Soft skills and self-advocacy
- Job-search skills

Real-life activities can increase motivation and show how learning applies to work, education, and daily life.

Language and Newcomer Supports

Agencies are responding to linguistic diversity by adding English tutoring, conversation circles, workplace language activities, adapted French courses, and more individualized learning plans.

Some agencies have applied for external grants to help meet growing language and newcomer needs.



Digital Tools and Technology

Agencies are integrating virtual learning, assistive technology, artificial intelligence training, online courses, cybersecurity, email, and workplace software.

Technology can improve access, but agencies also recognize that digital delivery must not replace in-person instruction for learners who need direct support.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Some agencies are training staff to create safe, welcoming environments, recognize the effects of trauma, support learner choice, respond flexibly to interrupted attendance, and celebrate persistence.

Creating Better Referral Pathways

One agency developed a new partnership with an Employment Ontario service provider. The partnership gave learners more timely access to services and allowed instructors to make faster, more effective referrals.

“Encouragement, flexibility, and celebrating small wins go a long way toward keeping learners engaged and building confidence.”

Strengthening Community Partnerships

Agencies are working more closely with Employment Services, Ontario Works, mental health providers, food banks, settlement services, school boards, employers, libraries, and other community organizations.

These partnerships support wraparound services and reduce the expectation that a single organization can meet every learner's needs.

Some agencies host other service providers in their offices, reducing transportation barriers and allowing learners to access several supports in one familiar place.



Improving Communication With Referral Partners

To respond to changes caused by the Employment Services Transformation, agencies are:

- Meeting directly with caseworkers
- Visiting Employment Services and Ontario Works offices
- Participating in community planning tables
- Sharing clear information about Get SET
- Creating promotional and referral materials
- Maintaining regular contact
- Rebuilding relationships after staff changes

Reducing Reliance on Employment Services Referrals

Because referrals have become less reliable in some regions, agencies are expanding direct outreach through food banks, immigration services, community groups, websites, social media, job fairs, and local events.

These approaches help reach learners who might otherwise fall through gaps in the system.

Responding to Local Labour Market Needs

Agencies are working with employers to identify local skill gaps, offer employment-related certifications, increase soft-skills training and digital instruction, customize curriculum, and support job retention and job searches.

Addressing Transportation Barriers

Some agencies arrange for drivers to pick up learners, but these solutions increase mileage and staffing costs. Transportation remains a major barrier in communities without public transit.

Making the Most of Limited Resources

Agencies are training staff and volunteers, recruiting people with digital or language expertise, applying for short-term grants, sharing resources, using community computer labs, and adapting existing curriculum.

Agencies have shown a strong ability to innovate, but many successful approaches cannot be expanded or sustained without additional funding.

Recommendations



The findings also connect to Ontario's broader goals around employment, access to supports, and digital participation.

Get SET programs are well positioned to help learners build the foundational, digital, social-emotional, and employment-readiness skills needed to participate in a changing economy.

Strengthen System Integration

Improve coordination among Get SET, Employment Services, Ontario Works, mental health providers, settlement and language services, education providers, and other community organizations.

Clear referral processes and coordinated planning can create smoother pathways and reduce the need for learners to navigate disconnected systems.

Invest in Mental Health and Wraparound Supports

Provide dedicated resources and partnerships for mental health, housing, food security, transportation, childcare, disability supports, language services, healthcare, and assessments.

Address Digital Equity

Expand support for digital instruction, devices, affordable internet, assistive technology, online safety, and access in rural and underserved communities.

Digital skills should be recognized as a valid and important reason for accessing Get SET.

Modernize Suitability Indicators

Revise the indicators to reflect current learner needs and ensure they do not prevent people with clear skill gaps from receiving support.

The review should consider:

- Mental health and complex support needs
- Housing and food insecurity
- Newcomer and language needs
- Digital skills
- Interrupted post-secondary education
- Younger learners with pandemic-related learning gaps
- Older adults returning to work
- Use of community services
- Actual skill levels and learner goals

Definitions should clearly distinguish among eligibility, suitability, and priority for service.

Recognize Education and Training as Valued Outcomes

Education, foundational skill development, and training should be recognized as legitimate outcomes alongside employment.

Sustainable employment is more likely when learners have the literacy, language, digital, interpersonal, and self-management skills required by the workplace.

Improve Employment Services Pathways

Employment Services, Service System Managers, and Ontario Works should understand the role of Get SET, include it in planning, make appropriate referrals, recognize that rapid employment is not suitable for everyone, and communicate consistently with agencies.

Increase Base Operating Funding

Provide an immediate, inflation-adjusted increase to Get SET base operating funding.

Stable funding would allow agencies to:

- Respond to rising costs
- Hire and retain qualified staff
- Reduce wait times
- Improve accessibility
- Invest in technology
- Strengthen partnerships
- Provide individualized support
- Plan sustainable programs

Support Workforce Stability

Funding should enable competitive wages, stable hours, benefits, professional development, volunteer coordination, succession planning, and realistic workloads.

A stable and skilled workforce is essential to program quality, learner safety, and long-term sustainability.



Conclusion

Ontario's workforce depends on adults having the foundational skills needed to learn, communicate, use technology, adapt, and participate in changing workplaces.

Get SET programs play a central role in developing these skills. They also increasingly support adults experiencing mental health challenges, housing and food insecurity, language barriers, disability, digital exclusion, and disrupted education.

Agencies have responded with creativity and commitment. They have developed new courses, strengthened intake, adopted digital and trauma-informed approaches, built partnerships, and reached learners who are being missed by other systems. However, the gap between learner needs and agency capacity continues to grow.

Outdated suitability indicators, weakened referral pathways, an employment-first focus, staffing pressures, and nearly a decade without increased base operating funding are limiting the ability of agencies to respond.

Get SET should be recognized as a foundational part of Ontario's workforce development system. Renewed investment would help agencies expand access, stabilize staffing, improve learner outcomes, and ensure that adults facing the greatest barriers are not left behind.

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The report was led by [Community Literacy of Ontario](#) in partnership with [Simcoe Muskoka Skillforce](#), [Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy](#), [Project Read Literacy Network](#), and [Literacy Network Northeast](#).