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Note: The views expressed in this report are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of CESBA or the province of Ontario.

Introduction

Adult and continuing education (A&CE) programs play an important role in the lives of individuals and communities. They have the power to transform adults by equipping them with the skills they need for success in life, work, and further education. Adults join A&CE programs for a variety of reasons, which include the following: completing a high school diploma, upgrading courses to pursue post-secondary education, retraining for a new job/career, and acquiring new skills. Many adults who take part in A&CE come from vulnerable populations and have experienced personal hardships (Youmans et al., 2017). With this mind, adult and continuing education programs provide an opportunity to promote equitable outcomes for adults with respect to employment opportunities, post-secondary education, and career pathways.

As graduation rates in Ontario continue to climb in the K-12 system, there may be fewer Ontarians without a high school diploma (OSSD) that need to access A&CE programs. However, the decrease in adults without an Ontario diploma may be offset by an increase in the adult immigration population. These newer cohorts may be harder to serve, with more challenging barriers. In the spring of 2021, CESBA commissioned Drs. Godden and Youmans to conduct a province-wide study of adult and continuing education programs in Ontario to investigate how they support the learning and achievement of adult learners. The overarching research question for the study was:

How are adult learners supported in their learning and achievement (e.g., career pathway planning, PLAR, etc.) through A&CE credit programs across the province?

To respond to this research question, online surveys were developed and distributed to adult learners, teachers, instructors, guidance counsellors, and administrators in A&CE programs across Ontario. This report presents the findings from this research study and discusses their implications for A&CE programs. We hope information in this report will be used to strengthen adult and continuing education programs across the province of Ontario, and beyond.

Purpose

The purpose of the CESBA A&CE study was to examine how adult learners are supported in their learning and achievement through A&CE programs across the province. Main topics of investigation were the delivery of PLAR, adult learner supports and enablers, adult learner challenges and barriers, and best practices and innovations for supporting adult learner success. Information obtained from this study highlights the strengths of existing A&CE programs in Ontario and offers insights into how they can be improved to better support adult learners.

Method

Drs. Youmans and Godden collected data from 12 participating district school boards (eight from eastern Ontario, two from western Ontario, and two from northern Ontario) and one Indigenous post-secondary institution. Appropriate ethics clearance was obtained prior to data collection. Data was collected from A&CE adult learners, teachers, instructors, guidance counsellors, and administrators via online surveys. Three separate online surveys were developed and distributed for the purpose of the CESBA A&CE study: one for adult learners; one for teachers, instructors, and guidance counsellors; and one for administrators. Survey question topics included: the delivery of PLAR, adult learner supports and enablers, adult learner challenges and barriers, and innovative practices for supporting adult learner success. All three surveys included closed-ended questions and open-response questions about A&CE supports. Quantitative data analysis was conducted on closed-ended responses using SPSS, a statistics software program. Open-ended responses were coded using thematic qualitative analysis. Study results for each of the three participants groups are presented, beginning with adult learners, followed by teachers, and ending with administrators.

Findings: Adult Learners

One Hundred and sixty-nine adult learners from Ontario responded to the A&CE CESBA study survey. Adult learners' ages ranged from 19 to 71, with a median age of 29 years old. Sixty-five percent of adult learners were female, 33% were male, and 2% preferred not disclose information about their gender. Twenty-two percent of adult learners were newcomers to Canada (i.e., arrived in Canada in the last five years) and 34% were immigrants. Twenty-six percent of adult learners identified as a racial minority. Five percent of adult learners identified as being First Nations, Metis, or Inuit.

Adult learners were asked why they were participating in A&CE (see Table 1). Over half of adult learners (54%) indicated that they were completing their high school diploma. Twenty-eight percent of adult learners were taking part in A&CE to upgrade their high school courses so they could pursue post-secondary education, 10% were training for a new career, and 7% were re-doing their credentials in the Canadian education system.

Table 1. Adult Learner Responses About Why They Are Participating in A&CE

Reason for Participating in A&CE	% of Adult learners
Re-doing high school credentials in the Canadian education system	7%
Retraining for a new career	10%
To complete my high school diploma	54%
To upgrade high school courses so I can pursue post-secondary education	28%

n = 167

Learners' explanations about what helped them decide to join A&CE were in line with their reasons for participating in A&CE. For example, many adult learners expressed joining because of their future aspirations. They indicated that they wanted:

- a high school diploma (39)
- to pursue post-secondary education (16)
- a better future (10)
- to upgrade their education (9)
- to pursue a new career or trade (8)

Other adult learners indicated that the support of family and friends (13), A&CE staff (8), self-motivation (7), and a community partner (1) helped them to make the decision to join A&CE. Other positive student motivators were related to the following A&CE program features:

- flexible programming (8)
- programs being free (4)
- information/registration online (3)
- proximity of programs (2)
- time efficient programs (2)

Samples of adult learner responses for motivating factors are identified below.

Future aspirations

"I have decided to finish my grade 12 so I could get my dream job."

"I've always wanted to have my high school diploma, so I decided that it was time to finish that goal."

Support

"My mom and sister pushed me to get my high-school."

"The advice from my guidance counsellors helped me make my decision."

Program Features

"Knowing I could do my correspondence at home and online."

"It was easy to sign up online!"

Adult learners were asked about what helps them stay committed to A&CE. Many adult learners indicated that they focus on their personal goals of:

- completing high school (45)
- career/employment (23)
- post-secondary education (17)
- a better future (9adult)

Other influences adult learners identified as helping them stay committed to A&CE were the following:

- teachers/tutors (19)
- enjoyment of learning (12)
- personal strength (12)
- support of family and friends (9)
- having children (6)
- flexible programs (4)
- positive school environment (4)
- high quality programs/courses (3)
- time efficient programs (3)

Adult learners were asked about what type of learning they do in their A&CE program (see Table 2). The majority of adult learners (57%) indicated that they did online learning. Eighteen percent of adult learners did correspondence, 11% did hybrid learning, 10% attended in-person classes, 2% had participated in multiple types of learning, and 1% did a dual credit program.

Table 2. Adult Learner Responses About What Type of Learning They Do in A&CE

Type of Learning	% of Adult Learners
correspondence/self-study	1%
books/print	
correspondence/self-study	17%
online	
hybrid learning (partially in-person and partially online)	11%
in-person classes	10%

online learning	57%
multiple types	2%
dual credit program	1%

n= 167

Adult learners reported seven ways that they learned about adult and continuing education (see Table 3). Thirty-three percent of adult learners learned about A&CE through a family member, friend, or colleague, and 29% learned about it through an online search or research. Other ways that adult learners learned about A&CE were through a community partner (17%), being known in the community (8%), prior school staff (6%), prior experience (4%), and ads (4%),

Table 3. Adult Learner Responses to How They Learned About A&CE

Method for Learning About A&CE	% of Adult Learners
Ads	4%
Community partner	17%
Family member or friend	33%
Known in community	8%
Online search/research	29%
Prior experience	4%
Prior school staff	6%

n = 140

Learning and Holistic Supports

Adult learners identified the learning supports they received through A&CE (see Table 4). Eighty-six percent of adult learners reported receiving one or more learning supports. Of the 14% of adult learners who reported not receiving supports, 10%

indicated they were unavailable and 4% communicated that they were not required. The most frequently reported learning support was guidance counselling, which was used by 44% of adult learners. The other supports reported were basic skills development (33%), technology support (29%), skills inventory (22%), tutoring (20%), individual programming (18%), and other (10%).

Table 4. Learning Supports in A&CE

Learning Support	% of Adult learners Receiving the Support
basic skills development (e.g., literacy and numeracy)	33%
guidance counselling	44%
individual programming	18%
technology support (e.g., someone available to answer technology questions, ability to borrow a computer)	29%
skills inventory to identify your strengths and weaknesses	22%
Tutoring	20%
Other	10%

n = 147

Adult learners also identified holistic supports they received in adult and continuing education programs (see Table 5). Sixty-nine percent of adult learners reported receiving at least one holistic support. Twenty-nine percent of adult learners indicated that holistic supports were unavailable, while 2% indicated that they were not required. The most frequent holistic supports adult learners received were: mental health support (31%), referrals to other agencies (21%), and food (16%), transportation (14%), and childcare (12%). The least frequent holistic support was clothing (4%).

Table 5. Holistic Supports in A&CE

Holistic Support	% of Adult learners Receiving the Support
Mental health	31%
Referrals to other agencies	21%
Childcare	12%
Transportation	14%
Food	16%
Clothing	4%
Other	13%

n = 99

One open-response survey question asked adult learners to describe how they would like to be supported in A&CE. The most frequently reported answers were:

- more teacher support (18)
- face-to-face learning (5)
- guidance counselling (5)
- financial support (5)
- updated courses/course materials (3)
- peer support (i.e., study groups; 3)
- food (3)
- transportation (3)
- mental health support (2)
- program flexibility (2)

PLAR

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is the formal evaluation and credit-granting process whereby adult learners may obtain credits for prior learning. Prior learning includes the knowledge and skills that adult learners have acquired, in both formal and informal ways. When asked if they knew about PLAR, only 56% of adult learners knew what it was. Adult learners who knew about PLAR were asked how they

learned about it (see Table 6). Forty-four percent learned about it from a guidance counsellor, 18% heard about it from a teacher, and 10% were told about it from a principal/administrator. Other ways that adult learners learned about PLAR were from administrative secretaries (7%), advertisements (7%), peers (5%), a community partner (3%), online/school websites (3%), and family (2%). Sixty-one percent of adult learners who knew about PLAR indicated that they had earned PLAR credits. The range of PLAR credits earned was between one and 26 (the maximum amount of PLAR credits that can be earned), with the median being 11.

Table 6. Adult Learner Responses to How They Learned About PLAR

Method for Learning About PLAR	% of Adult learners
Guidance counsellor	44%
Teacher	18%
Principal/administrator	10%
Peers	6%
Administrative secretaries	7%
Advertisements	7%
Online/school websites	3%
Family	2%
Community partner	3%

n = 93

When asked what the PLAR experience was like for them, the majority of adult learners responded affirmatively. Their comments were categorized as follows:

- very positive/positive (16)
- very easy/easy (9)
- challenging/a little challenging (2)
- okay (1)

One adult learner explained, “It was great! I got credit for things I had learned in life.”

Another adult learner appreciated how it helped make graduating from high school more attainable:

“It was a good experience as it got me that much closer to graduating which, at the time felt like it was going to take forever.”

Adult learners who had taken part in the PLAR process liked that it:

- helped them earn credits towards their high school diploma quickly (16)
- honoured their prior schooling and life experiences (13)
- was easy and straightforward (11)
- supported learning (2)
- was self-paced (1)

The benefit of PLAR was summarized by one student: “It was great to have my life experiences recognized and to have them count towards my diploma.”

Adult learners suggested the following changes for the PLAR process:

- raise greater awareness about PLAR (3)
- increased teacher support during PLAR (1)
- make it accessible at home (1)
- quicker turn around time so you know if you have earned the credits (1)
- have financial courses or budgeting as part of PLAR (1)
- include better PLAR support materials (i.e., online videos; 1)
- make all credits available through PLAR (1)

At the end of the survey when adult learners were asked if they would like to tell us anything else about their A&CE experience, they indicated the following:

- it was a positive experience for them
- more teacher support is needed
- courses should be updated
- a need to help adults ease back into the school setting

One adult learner communicated her positive experience: ““It's a very helpful and patient program, which is exactly what people like me need when facing the challenges I did.”

Findings: Teachers

There were 39 responses to the A&CE teacher survey. Twenty-nine responses were from Ontario-certified teachers, six were from Ontario-certified guidance counsellors, three were from instructors, and one was unidentified. The amount of time teachers and instructors had worked in A&CE ranged from one and a half to 25 years, with the average being 11 years. They had one to 10 years of experience teaching in an online or blended format, with an average of three years experience. Participating guidance counsellors' experience ranged from three to 20 years, with the average being nine years.

For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to teachers, instructors, and guidance counsellors as “teachers” in this section. Many of the teacher questions were open-ended. With this in mind, numbers are reported next to responses to indicate how many people provided the response.

Teachers were asked what skills they focus on developing in adult learners. They identified a combination of soft skills and hard skills:

- Communication skills (11)
- Self-advocacy (10)
- Academic skills (8)
- Technology/digital literacy (7)
- Literacy (6)
- Responsibility/independence (6)
- Problem solving (6)
- Soft skills (6)
- Perseverance/resilience (6)
- Time management (5)
- Critical thinking (4)
- Workplace skills (3)
- Research (3)
- Confidence (3)
- Organization (3)
- Numeracy/financial skills (2)
- Planning/goal setting (2)

- Creativity (2)
- Flexibility/adaptability (2)
- Self-care (1)

Learning and holistic supports

Teachers used a number of strategies to support learning. The most frequent reported strategies for supporting adult learners were:

- Regular communication/check-ins (10)
- Supportive classroom environment (8)
- Feedback (e.g., formative feedback, peer feedback; 7)
- Technology (e.g., recording live classes, Google Read and Write, etc.; 6)
- Scaffolding (6)
- Getting to know adult learners and their needs/caring (6)
- Extra learning support (e.g., tutoring, extra help sessions, one-on-one support, resources; 6)
- Relevant examples/discussions (4)
- Modifications for adult learners with special education needs (3)
- Relevant examples/discussions (4)
- Flexibility (2)

When teachers were asked what supports were needed to promote the success of adult learners, they identified the following:

- Flexibility (11)
- Learning support (e.g., tutors, extra help, language learning support, resources; 11)
- Access to technology (e.g., computers, reliable internet; 11)
- Recognition and removal of barriers (e.g., childcare, mental health, food banks, financial support; 9)
- Teacher support (7)
- Guidance counsellors (6)
- Digital skills (3)
- Regular feedback (3)
- Support system (e.g., peers, community partners) (3)
- Meaningful course content (2)
- Increased funding (2)
- Safe classroom space/place to work (2)
- Special education teachers (1)

Enablers and barriers in adult and continuing education

Teachers were asked about enablers and barriers to access for adult learners (see Table 7). The five most frequent responses to enablers of access were varied methods of delivery (10), technology available through school (7), website/online ads (6), guidance counsellors (5), and community partnerships (5). The five most frequent responses to barriers to access were lack of technology/internet (17), competing time commitments (15), lack of transportation (9), lack of computer literacy (9), and lack of childcare (8).

Table 7. Enablers and Barriers to Access to A&CE for Adult Learners Identified by Teachers

Enablers of Access to A&CE	Barriers to Access of A&CE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied methods of delivery (10) • Technology available through school (7) • Website/online ads (6) • Guidance counsellors (5) • Community partnerships (5) • Multiple locations (4) • Online tools and supports (3) • Dedicated staff (2) • Online registration (2) • Known in community (2) • Social media presence (1) • Tutoring availability (1) • PLAR (1) • Emphasis on co-op credits (1) • Partnerships with non-credit programs, like ESL (1) • Pilot hybrid program (1) • Flexibility (1) • Multiple start times in the day (1) • Continuous enrolment (1) • Central location (1) • Pamphlets distribution (1) • Transit passes/transportation discounts (1) • Childcare availability (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of technology/internet (17) • Competing time commitments (work, family, etc.) (15) • Lack of transportation (9) • Lack computer literacy (9) • Lack of childcare (8) • Lack of mental health support (6) • Poverty/financial instability (5) • Unaware of existence and availability of A&CE in the community (4) • Language skills (3) • Lack of flexibility of program/learning support offerings (3) • Lack of confidence (3) • Transient living/homelessness (2) • Lack of personal identification cards/past education documents (2) • Substance abuse (2) • Require permanent residency to participate (1) • Lack of program funding that results in courses being cancelled (1) • Illness (1)

In addition, teachers were asked to identify enablers and barriers to adult learner outcomes in A&CE (see Table 8). The five most frequent reported enablers of outcomes for adult learners were experienced and supportive staff (9), availability of one-on-one support/tutoring (7), regular check-ins/communication with adult learners (6), flexible schedules (6), and supportive adult programs (e.g., co-op, dual credit, school to work; 6). The five most frequent reported barriers to outcomes for adult learners were other time/commitments/responsibilities (21), lack of internet/technology (9), lack of academic skills/growth mindset (7), lack of childcare (7), and lack of computer skills (5).

Table 8. Enablers and Barriers to Outcomes for Adult Learners in A&CE Identified by Teachers

Enablers of Outcomes in A&CE	Barriers to Outcomes in A&CE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced and supportive staff (9) • Availability of one-on-one support/tutoring (7) • Regular check-ins/communication with adult learners (6) • Flexible schedules (6) • Supportive adult-focused learning programs (e.g., co-op, dual credit, school to work; 6) • Multiple modes of program delivery (5) • PLAR (5) • LBS/core essentials programs (5) • ESL programs (5) • Community partners (4) • Guidance counsellor support (3) • Technology provision (3) • Special education resources/staff (3) • Online tools and supports (2) • Wellness/social worker support (1) • Credit recovery (1) • Resource provision (1) • Technology training for adult learners (1) • Childcare availability (1) • Culture of care (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other time commitments/responsibilities (21) • Lack of internet/technology (9) • Lack of academic skills/growth mindset (7) • Lack of childcare (7) • Lack of computer skills (5) • Lack of transportation (5) • Mental health challenges (3) • Illness (3) • Substance abuse (2) • Lack of learning support (2) • Lack of self-confidence/self-sabotage (2) • Program accessibility (1) • Financial instability (1) • Lack of school board resources that elementary and secondary adult learners have access to (1) • Lack of clear direction/goal setting (1)

Teachers had the following suggestions for removing barriers for adult learners:

- Provision/lending of technology (9)
- Childcare provision (8)
- More flexible schedules/program delivery (6)
- Computer/technology training (6)
- Funding for guidance, special education, social workers, mental health support (5)
- Transportation funds (4)
- Partnerships with LBS to reduce learning gaps and prepare adults for credit pathways (3)
- Wraparound services (3)
- Learning skills training (3)
- Change funding model to support more robust programming (3)
- Language skill development support (2)
- Train A&CE teachers and treat them all equitably (2)
- Supportive adult-centred learning programs (e.g., co-op, dual credit, school to work; 2)
- Availability of in-person support (2)
- Partnering with community sites (2)
- Streamline the intake process (1)
- Opportunities for adult learners and staff to upgrade skills (1)
- Financial literacy training (1)
- Financial support for adult learners (1)
- Enable A&CE teachers to connect and share best practices (1)
- On-site library/resource centre for adult learners (1)
- Smaller class sizes (1)
- Greater flexibility with assessment and evaluation policies (1)

Best practices and innovations in adult and continuing education

Twenty teachers who completed the survey indicated that they had participated in the Adult Education Strategy (AES) commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education from 2016 to 2019. Teachers were from the following four partnership regions: eastern Ontario, western Ontario, northwest Ontario, and central Ontario. They reported learning about the following best practices and innovations from the AES:

- The distribution of a survey to adult learners to get a better understanding of their needs

- The importance of intake and PLAR supports
- Resource sharing with another school board
- Hosting a conference to provide PD for A&CE teachers, guidance counsellors, and administrators
- Using a slower intake process for the adult learners that discusses their education plan, PLAR, etc.
- Teaching adult learners computer skills to ensure their success
- Making online registration available for adult learners
- Using a hybrid model of three days at school and two days online per week

Teachers identified using the following best practices and innovations in their school boards to support adult learner achievement:

- A variety of high-quality instructional methods (e.g., hands-on activities, vertical non-permanent surfaces, group problem-solving, next generation simulators) and resources
- Flexible scheduling
- Having a student success teacher to help develop adult learners develop metacognitive strategies and offer academic support
- Regular contact with adult learners
- Supportive adult-focused learning programs (e.g., co-op)
- PLAR program
- Post PLAR credit package for those entering the world of work
- Online registration
- Blended learning
- Technology to support learning (e.g., online videos, interactive whiteboards, etc.)
- Single sign on for technology apps
- Differentiated instruction (e.g., chunking material)
- Clear and organized predictable structure to reduce anxiety
- Listening to adult learners (and their stories) and building community to be able to respond to their needs and plan relevant instructional activities

- Opportunities for self-assessment
- Opportunities for course review
- Collaboration and connection
- Working on soft skills
- Professional learning communities for A&CE staff to promote student achievement
- Using seed money from participation in the Adult Education Strategy to open three LBS programs (called Skills Training and Employment Preparation) in communities without an LBS presence

Findings: Administrators

Thirteen administrators from 10 school boards and one Indigenous post-secondary institution completed the administrator survey. Eight respondents were principals, three were vice-principals, one was a manager, and one was unidentified. Administrators' years of experience ranged from six months to 23 years, with the average being eight years. The amount of time administrators had worked in A&CE ranged from one to 16 years, with the average being eight years.

When administrators were asked what percentage of learners complete their adult and continuing education programs, there was a wide difference in their responses, ranging from 7% to 90%. The average completion percentage for adult learners in these school boards was 62%.

The processes to support program completion communicated by administrators included the following:

- Supportive teachers (6)
- Guidance services and career pathway planning (5)
- Caring adult for support (3)
- Variety of available programs (3)

- Cross program supports (ESL to LBS to Credit; 3)
- Re-engagement phone calls/strategies (2)
- Flexible program schedules/timelines (2)
- Community partnerships (2)
- PLAR – builds confidence (2)
- Adult-centred learning programs (e.g., dual-credit programs, co-op; 2)
- Sharing success stories of past adult learners
- Regular check-ins
- School-based team meetings
- Referrals to outside agencies
- Tutoring
- One-on-one support
- Special service counsellors home visits
- Individualized pathways
- Adapting curriculum to make it relevant to adult learners

When asked about the most important processes for promoting adult learner completion, administrators outlined the following:

- Regular check-ins (4)
- Connection with a caring adult/mentor/teacher (3)
- PLAR (3)
- Initial needs assessment and co-creation of an individualized plan (2)
- Flexible programs/timelines (2)
- Having adult learners come on site to complete some lessons (action research project by one board)
- Hybrid delivery model
- Provision of food
- Re-engagement
- Sharing student success stories
- Referrals from partner agencies

Learning and holistic supports

Administrators were asked to identify the learning supports (see Table 9) and holistic supports they provided for adult learners (see Table 10). There was variation in the amount of learning supports provided for adult learners by school boards. Three boards provided all six learning supports, three boards provided five learning supports, three provided four learning supports, and two boards provided three learning supports.

Technology support was provided by all school boards (11) and skills inventories were provided by the least number of school boards (5). It is important to note that in school boards without guidance counsellors or part-time guidance counsellors, the following staff assisted with guidance and career pathway planning:

- teachers and site monitors
- secretaries, teachers, and principal
- department heads

Table 9. Learning supports provided for adult learners by school boards

School Board/ Institution	Learning Supports Provided for Adult Learners						Total
	Tutoring	Basic skills development	Individualized programming	Guidance counselling	Skills inventory	Technology support	
1			✓	✓		✓	3
2		✓		✓*		✓	3
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
4		✓	✓	✓*	✓	✓	5
5	✓		✓	✓		✓	4
6		✓	✓		✓	✓	4
7	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	5
8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
10	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	5
11		✓	✓	✓*		✓	4
Total	6	9	10	10	5	11	

Note: The symbol ✓* indicates that there was either a limited availability of professional guidance counselling (part-time) or a lack of professional guidance counselling available.

There was a lot of variation in the amount of holistic supports provided for adult learners by school boards. One board provided all six holistic supports, two boards provided five holistic supports, one board provided four holistic supports, three boards provided three holistic supports, one board provided two holistic supports, two boards provided one holistic support, and one board provided no formal holistic supports. Referrals to other agencies was the holistic support provided by the greatest number of school boards (8) and childcare was available at the least number of school boards (2).

Table 10. Holistic supports provided for adult learners by school boards

School Board/ Institution	Holistic Supports Provided for Adult Learners						Total
	Transportation	Mental health support	Food	Childcare availability	Clothing	Referrals to other agencies	
1			✓		✓	✓	3
2			✓			✓	2
3		✓	✓		✓	✓	4
4	✓	✓	✓				3
5		✓					1
6							0
7						✓	1
8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
9		✓		✓		✓	3
10	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	5
11	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	5
Total	4	7	7	2	5	8	

Additional supports for adult learners reported by administrators included the following:

- Adult-centred learning programs (e.g., co-op, dual credit)

- Each adult learner is assigned one caring adult to check in on them regularly; monthly staff meetings to discuss student concerns
- Connections to community supports and employment agencies
- School resource officer from the police department to develop positive relationships
- Partnerships with non-credit programs to prepare adult learners for credit pathways
- Cultural supports for adult learners, including a culture lead and opportunities to participate in cultural practices

When asked what supports administrators would like to see provided in their boards, they identified the following:

- Mental health supports (e.g., on-site mental health practitioner; 4)
- Childcare availability (3)
- Transportation supports (2)
- Special education
- Summer programming
- Work-based training opportunities (e.g., trades and apprenticeships)
- Multiple drop-in centres for adult learners who are doing online programs
- Adult education reception centre
- Affordable housing for adult learners

PLAR

Administrators were asked to identify the percentage of their adult learners that were PLAR eligible. Responses ranged from 30% to 90%, with the average percentage of PLAR eligible adults being 60%. According to administrators, all but one school board had a process in place for adult learners to be made aware of PLAR. They described their PLAR processes as follows:

- PLAR process is explained at registration and adult learners are referred accordingly (5)
- Guidance counsellors review PLAR with new adult learners at intake (2)

- Adult learners are assessed to see if they are PLAR eligible (upon registration and receipt of student records; 2)
- Upon registration, adult learners receive an email about PLAR and guidance counsellors seek out PLAR opportunities with adult learners

There are a variety of ways that PLAR is administered at different school boards (see Table 11). The most commonly used PLAR administration process was through guidance counsellors, which was the case at four school boards.

Table 11. PLAR administration among select school boards in Ontario

Different ways that PLAR is administrated in select school boards in Ontario

- Via guidance counsellors
- Through department heads at each school site
- Central administration through a PLAR school board lead
- Designated PLAR staff to support adult learners through the process
- Adult learners are registered in a PLAR course and their applications and submissions are reviewed by a PLAR assessor. If eligible, adult learners write PLAR assessment packages for junior credits and adult learners develop portfolio packages to earn senior credits.
- A designated instructor determines adult learners' readiness to write PLAR tests and supervises testing. Tests are marked by a teacher (under the supervision of the principal).
- PLAR services provided through continuing education.
- PLAR is administered by teachers at each local site.

When asked about the impact that PLAR had on adult learners, administrators had powerful comments to share about its positive influence (see Table 12). Administrators described how PLAR made graduation attainable in a reasonable amount of time, validated adult learners' life experiences, built their confidence, gave them hope of completing their high school diploma, and prepared them for success at the post-secondary level.

Table 12. Administrator Comments About the Positive Influence of PLAR on Adult Learners

The Influence of PLAR on Adult Learners

“[PLAR] provides hope, encouragement, and confidence to begin and stick with their studies. [Adult learners] are often very surprised realizing they are closer to their OSSD than they every realized.” – Principal

“PLAR gives our adult learners motivation and optimism. They realize that this process truly is a recognition of their life story and what they have learned along the way. The elusive diploma feels more attainable.” – Vice-principal

“It's a game-changer. Adults who return to school with very few credits cannot spend 1-2-3 years of their lives 'catching up...they need to see light at the end of the tunnel clearly....and with a plan. PLAR offers that plan.” – Principal

Enablers and barriers in adult and continuing education

Administrators were asked about enablers and barriers to access for adult learners (see Table 13). The three most frequent responses to enablers of access were guidance (3), multiple sites (3), and flexible programming (3). The three most frequent responses to barriers to access were other time commitments/responsibilities (6), lack of technology/connectivity (6), and lack of transportation (5).

Table 13. Enablers and Barriers to Access to A&CE for Adult Learners Identified by Administrators

Enablers of Access to A&CE	Barriers to Access of A&CE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance (3) • Multiple sites (3) • Flexible programming (3) • Provision of technology (e.g., computers and wireless hubs; 2) • Childcare (2) • Training support funds/financial support (2) • Re-engagement services (2) • Online registration • PLAR • 1-800 phone number • Eliminating transportation challenges • Daily contact with adult learners • Re-engagement services (2) • Promotion of equity programs • Partnerships with non-credit programs (e.g., LBS and ESL) • Main contact person for adult learners • Individual modifications as required • In-house marketing team for promotion • Developed a strong presence in the school board and community • Food provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other time commitments/responsibilities (6) • Lack of technology/connectivity (6) • Lack of transportation (5) • Financial constraints/poverty (4) • Childcare (4) • Lack of digital literacy skills (2) • Lack of self-confidence (2) • Insufficient enrolment for certain courses (2) • Lack of mental health and addiction services (2) • Lack of literacy/numeracy skills • Being unaware of available supports • Only one school site • Food scarcity • Lack of affordable housing • Past negative schooling experiences • Negative stigma of adult education

In addition, administrators were asked to identify enablers and barriers to adult learner outcomes in A&CE (see Table 14). The three most frequently reported enablers of outcomes for adult learners were experienced and supportive staff (8), guidance staff (5), and community partnerships that provide support services (5). The three most frequent reported barriers to outcomes for adult learners were other time/commitments/responsibilities (7), lack of transportation (5), and lack of childcare (4).

Table 14. Enablers and Barriers to Outcomes for Adult Learners in A&CE Identified by Administrators

Enablers of Outcomes in A&CE	Barriers to Outcomes in A&CE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced and supportive staff (8) • Guidance staff (5) • Community partnerships that provide support services (5) • Re-engagement services (2) • Food programs (2) • Adult-centred learning programs (e.g., coop, school to work; 2) • Online registration • Provision of technology (e.g., computers and wireless hubs) • PLAR • Special services counsellors • 1-800 number • Daily contact with student • Multiple sites • Promotion of equity programs • Childcare • Special education support (where possible) • Family supports • Partnerships with non-credit programs (e.g., LBS and ESL) • Range of programs • Financial support (e.g., Ontario Works) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other time commitments/responsibilities (7) • Lack of transportation (5) • Childcare (4) • Lack of mental health support/addiction services (3) • Lack of technology/connectivity (2) • Financial constraints/poverty (2) • Food scarcity (2) • Lack of affordable/stable housing (2) • Negative stigma of adult education (2) • Lack of self-confidence (2) • Challenges with health and wellness (2) • Lack of digital literacy skills • Insufficient enrolment for certain courses • Lack of literacy/numeracy skills • Only one school site • Past negative schooling experiences • Unmet special education needs • Lack of trained guidance counsellors • Lack of funding for high quality programs • Lack of family support

Administrators had the following suggestions for removing barriers for adult learners:

- Make childcare accessible (6)
- Provide financial supports (4)
- Funding for guidance staff (4)
- Training for A&CE staff (2)
- Funding for mental health and addiction services on site (2)
- Technology funds for adult learners (2)
- Funding for special education staff (2)
- Provide transportation funds (2)

- Funding supports for social workers
- Make night school available in rural areas
- Partner with community agencies to provide local programs/mobile programs
- Offer in-person programs at multiple sites across a region
- Offer study skills classes and strategies for success
- Provide technology training in advance of online courses
- Assign a “Student Support Mentor” staff member to every adult learner – regular check-ins and make supports known
- Comprehensive poverty reduction strategies
- Provision of wraparound services through community partners
- Develop curriculum content that is relevant to Indigenous adult learners and make classrooms safe and welcoming environments
- Provide additional parking on site

Best practices and innovations in adult and continuing education

Eleven administrators who completed the survey indicated that they had participated in the Adult Education Strategy (AES) commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education from 2016 to 2019. They reported learning about the following best practices and innovations from the AES:

- Developing partnerships to support adult learners
- Using online marketing tools/social media to develop a community presence
- Improving the PLAR process for adult learners
- Promoting adult and continuing education effectively within your own school board and community
- Capacity/champions to improve A&CE programs
- Effective intake, assessment, and referral processes for adults
- Virtual classes in remote locations
- Partnering with community agencies (e.g., libraries and public health agencies) to offer adult education programs in harder to reach areas
- Guidance assessment practices

- Online registration
- Regular language circles to bring the community in

Administrators identified using the following best practices and innovations in their school boards to support adult learner achievement:

- Online marketing/website improvement to increase enrolment
- Online registration
- Hybrid learning
- Online synchronous courses
- Expanding A&CE classrooms in community agencies (e.g., libraries, public health offices)
- Increasing the digital footprint of A&CE programs
- Optimizing PLAR
- Adult-centred learning programs (e.g., co-op, dual credit, school to work)
- Mapping/bundling curriculum expectations across courses
- Partnering with employment agencies on their Skills Advanced Ontario Projects to meet staff shortages in certain sectors
- Improving the intake form to allow for input from staff prior to course determinations
- Regular school-based team meetings
- Technology for student pathway tracking
- Having adult learners meet with guidance counsellors to determine program fit
- Exploring options for credit recovery
- Offering pathway programs in needed employment areas
- Providing adult learners with technology and internet services
- Providing pathways into credit programs for adult learners in non-credit programs
- Movement towards a central intake process in the board
- Integrating education and career pathways via various programs
- Having a social worker on staff who was a graduate student
- Culturally relevant curriculum materials/land-based learning programs

Key Findings and Implications

The CESBA Adult and Continuing Education study examined how adult learners are supported in their learning and achievement through A&CE credit programs across Ontario. In total, 169 adult learners, 39 teachers, and 13 administrators from 12 school boards and one Indigenous post-secondary institution participated in the study.

Participants' responses provided insights into A&CE programs in Ontario. Key findings and their implications are highlighted for each stakeholder group in table format (see Table 15).

Table 15. Key Findings and Implications of the CESBA A&CE Study

A&CE Stakeholder	Key Findings	Implications
Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over half of adult learners (54%) reported joining A&CE to complete their high school diploma • Adult learners' most frequent reported reasons for joining A&CE and staying committed to it centered on their goal for a better future (e.g., obtaining a high school diploma, pursuing post-secondary education, training for a new career, etc.) • The majority of A&CE adult learners were completing their program online (57%) and some were doing correspondence (18%) • The way most adult learners find out about A&CE is through family and friends • A high percentage (86%) of adult learners reported the use of one or more learning supports, but the general use of learning supports by individual adult learners was low (guidance counselling – 44%, tutoring – 20%) • Sixty-nine percent of adult learners reported the use of one or more holistic supports, but the use of individual supports is low (mental 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to A&CE administrators and teachers, there are underlying reasons (e.g., learning disabilities, mental health challenges, etc.) adult learners returning to complete a high school diploma were not initially successful; additional supports are needed to ensure success • Adult learners need the support of professionally trained guidance counsellors to develop effective career pathway plans and to set and monitor appropriate goals • While online learning and correspondence offer flexibility needed for adult learners, these modes of delivery should have built-in support structures to promote adult learner success • The benefits of A&CE need to be made more widely known so that it does not heavily rely on word-of-mouth referrals • Given the unique needs of adult learners, learning supports, like guidance counselling and special education staff, should be government-funded; adult learners need to be made aware of learning supports available to them

<p>health – 31%, childcare – 12%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult learners reported wanting more teacher interaction and support, face-to-face learning, guidance counselling, and financial support • Only 56% of adult learners knew what PLAR is; adult learners who engaged with PLAR indicated that it was a positive experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic supports are an important enabler of adult learner success; school boards need to be given funding and direction to invest in making them available to adult learners • Teachers and guidance counsellors play an invaluable role in supporting adult learners; they require special training to do so; some adult learners prefer face-to-face learning, which they should have the option to do • PLAR is enabler of student achievement and success; school boards need to ensure that PLAR eligible adult learners can obtain their diploma in a time efficient manner
<p>Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers reported developing a wide variety of soft and hard skills in adult learners • Teachers identified regular check-ins/communication with adult learners, a positive classroom environment, and feedback • More modes of program delivery and flexible scheduling were identified by teachers (and administrators) as enablers of adult learner success • Provision of technology and technology training are required to promote learner success • Teachers identified a variety of holistic supports for promoting adult learner success • Partnerships between non-credit (e.g., LBS and ESL) and credit pathways promoted adult learner success • Teachers identified resource sharing and professional development as important methods related to best practices and innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A framework for skills needed by adult learners (e.g., study, essential, and employability skills) and how to develop them would be helpful for teachers • The role of teachers in A&CE is invaluable; ways to facilitate teacher interaction and support, especially in an online environment, should be examined and adopted • School boards with limited modes of delivery should consider expanding their services and look to innovative approaches (e.g., partnering with community sites, hybrid learning) • Online guidance services, beyond the pandemic, could allow increased flexibility for staff and adult learners • Funds for technology should be provided for adult learners and they should receive technology training prior to online or hybrid learning • Wraparound services are recommended in A&CE to remove barriers to participation through the provision of holistic supports (e.g., mental health, childcare, food, etc.) • Partnerships between non-credit (e.g., LBS and ESL) and credit pathways should be strengthened and encouraged • A&CE teachers need opportunities to network with their colleagues to share best practices and develop innovations collaboratively

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- Administrators
- There was great variation reported by administrators in the percentage of adult learners who complete their A&CE programs
 - Administrators reported variation in the number of learning and holistic supports available in their respective school boards
 - Adult-centred learning programs help adults achieve their goals
 - There is a lot of variety in how school boards make adult learners aware of PLAR and administer PLAR
 - Administrators reported similar enablers to adult learner success as teachers; one of these enablers is financial support
 - As capacity is developed in A&CE staff, they will continue to share best practices and develop innovative solutions to challenges
 - Supportive teachers and guidance counsellors play an important role in successful program completion; given that working with adults is very different than working with children, A&CE teachers and guidance counsellors would benefit from specialized training
 - Adult learners should have access to multiple learning and holistic supports and be made aware of their availability
 - Greater investments should be made in adult-centred programs, like dual-credit programs, co-op, and school to work programs
 - School boards should consider improving and aligning their PLAR processes to make them more accessible to adult learners
 - Adult learners have complex lives and competing responsibilities; they would benefit from financial support while they complete their A&CE programs
 - A&CE is an important field of education that requires funding to develop capacity in staff to strengthen adult learner achievement and outcomes
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Conclusion

Adult and continuing education programs in Ontario are meeting the needs of adult learners by helping them achieve their goal of a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities. Many school boards provide flexible program options that make them accessible for adults with complex lives. Instances of such programs include online learning, hybrid learning, and programs available in local community agencies (e.g., libraries, public health unit). Regardless of whether adults learn through face-to-face delivery, online delivery, hybrid learning, or correspondence/self-study, they require learning and holistic supports. There is variability in the number of supports provided by each school board. To ensure the success of all adult learners, funding should be allocated to school boards to ensure that they are able to offer a full suite of

learning and holistic supports. Examples of two crucial supports are special education staff and trained guidance counsellors. To support the health and well-being of adult learners, on-site mental health support staff (e.g., social workers, psychologists) and financial support would be beneficial. PLAR should be optimized in school boards to help adult learners complete their high school diploma and partnerships between non-credit and credit pathways should be established to help adult learners develop strong foundational skills that foster their success. The Adult Education Strategy from 2016 to 2019 was an important investment made by the Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) that helped build capacity in the field of A&CE in Ontario. It is hoped that the MOE will make additional investments based on recommendations in this report that will ultimately lead to increased adult learner achievement and positive outcomes.

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