

Supporting Learners through Service Coordination and Referrals

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The logo for Employment Ontario, featuring the words "EMPLOYMENT" and "ONTARIO" in white, bold, uppercase letters stacked vertically within a black rectangular box.

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Why are learner supports and service coordination important?

There are two important features of an adult literacy program that contribute significantly to positive learner outcomes. The first is quality instruction for an adult to gain the needed literacy skills and competencies. The second is timely access to the needed supports and services.

Literacy practitioners understand that unless learners can devote the time, energy and focus to their learning activities, they will not make the necessary progress they need to achieve their goals. Worries about finances, child care and other personal challenges can distract and undermine a learner's efforts with their literacy learning. This paper provides practitioners with an overview of how service coordination and referrals can contribute to positive learner outcomes.

There are many reasons why adults lack the literacy-related skills and competencies they need for work, further education and training, as well as for their personal lives. For some adults, elementary and secondary school was a negative experience resulting in a poor attitude towards learning. Either physical or mental health challenges may have interrupted regular attendance causing some students to fall behind their peers and consequently lose motivation. Others, particularly those living in poverty, may have left secondary school to meet the practical demands of work or family; while others may have become involved in crime or addiction making it difficult to continue with the education that might have led to a career path. For some adults their level of literacy skills and competencies may have been appropriate until their work or home circumstances dramatically changed due to an accident at work, the closure of their plant or a change in marital status. Many of these adults have become literacy learners and bring their challenges along with their dreams and their specific learning needs to Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS). Some will come with a network of supports, others with none.

Most literacy learners are people who need additional supports to succeed. LBS service providers are primarily resourced and mandated to provide quality literacy instruction and use service coordination and referral as the way to link learners to the other non-instructional supports they need. The learner plan tracks the most important of these supports providing learners with a broader view of their plans in order to help them to reach their goals. Tracking information about learner supports also sets in place the information needed for program improvement.

Learners are best served when all services and programs work seamlessly together. LBS service providers are required to work with other organizations to better coordinate non-instructional supports for learners.

What are the main supports that contribute to learner success?

Based on the data examined and the input from a wide range of LBS practitioners and service providers, as well as an examination of effective practices in other jurisdictions, there are fifteen supports that fall under five main categories which are important for learner success.

Financial/Material Supports

- Income Support

- Transportation
- Childcare

Academic Supports

- LD Assessment/Programming
- Tutoring/Mentoring
- Monitoring/Support of program participation

Employment Supports

- Job Search
- Monitoring/Support for entry/re-entry into the workforce (e.g. orientation to workplace, work experience and job coaching, motivation/attitude regarding employment, etc.)

Social Service Supports

- Housing Assistance
- Legal Assistance (including parole, pardon, custody, CAS)
- Personal/Family Counselling (including Anger Management/Stress Management Groups)
- Life/Social Skills (e.g. time management, interpersonal skills, assertiveness, problem solving, conflict resolution, etc.)

Health Supports

- Mental Health Assessment/Support
- Addiction/Substance Abuse Counselling or Program
- Food/Nutrition

How do practitioners decide what “other supports” learners require?

Evaluating the challenges and barriers learners face is an important task for each LBS service provider and is done as the organization’s resources allow. There are many instruments that may help, but practitioners should also use interviews and observation to determine what supports might be appropriate for the learner to succeed.

There is a consensus in the literature and among many literacy practitioners in Ontario that there is no one way to get the information needed to make good decisions about the supports a learner may need. Some learners will need several, perhaps comprehensive supports and, therefore, will need to have a more comprehensive assessment process. However, undertaking a comprehensive assessment for all learners would be a very time-consuming process and, in many cases, might not be needed to help a learner progress toward his or her goal.

Generally:

1. The best ways to determine needs is based on “trust” – i.e. the willingness of learners to disclose (directly or indirectly) the challenges they have and for which they need some support to address.
2. This trust is only developed over a period of time and benefits from a face-to-face relationship between a learner and a staff member.
3. A supportive relationship helps in the assessment of learner’s challenges. The identification of needed supports is most likely to occur when the learner feels that the service provider is trying to address challenges and solve problems and is not judging the learner. Once the relationship is established, learners understand that not all challenges can be addressed within the LBS Program and that staff will facilitate the necessary referrals to other service providers.
4. There is no one tool to identify the challenges that a learner is reluctant to disclose or that arise unexpectedly. Practitioners will become aware of the need through a more informal process which includes a regular review of learner progress and a supportive relationship.
5. A combination of approaches helps to identify which learners need supports and what kinds of supports they may need.

LBS practitioners build successful relationships through a detailed initial assessment and extended orientation period which combine learning activities with self-discovery activities.

There are a number of instruments available and currently used in Ontario – mostly by employment counsellors – to determine the kinds of barriers/challenges and thus supports required. These instruments include the Employment Service Needs Inventory (ESNI), Employment Readiness Scale (ERS), Barriers to Employment Success Inventory (BESI), Barriers to Success and Transition to Work Inventory (TWI), though this last tool is more focused on goals than barriers and challenges.¹

These tools may seem overtly focussed on those learners with employment goals. However, the instruments also identify many of the personal, family, and circumstantial challenges LBS learners face. It is important for the LBS service provider to determine if the learner has already been assessed by these tools through other service providers (such as Ontario Works or Employment Service). LBS service providers must work with their community on this important aspect of assessment and the subsequent program planning and delivery. The *Learner Plan Template* includes a place for information about key learner supports to be recorded. The learner plan, as a result, will include not only the learner’s learning activities but also the range of other services and supports the learner either uses, is being referred to, or will access once prepared by the LBS Program. In this way, learners have a much larger view of what they require to be able to achieve their goals.

It is important that all LBS service providers and practitioners are aware of the resources available in the community and have the ability to work with a range of community service providers. Strong working relations with community partners will help in the development of the tools and processes that identify (a) which learners might require each type of support and (b) options for providing these supports.

Both of these tasks should be priorities for service coordination between LBS service providers and other agencies in each community. Regional networks have an important role to play in facilitating an increase in knowledge of community information and strengthening service coordination.

¹ The Barriers to Success tool was recently developed by Christine Lamarra as part of her “Discovery Challenge” component and piloted in the WLES project conducted by the Peel Adult Learning Centre.

How does service coordination help learners?

Currently, LBS Program participants who demonstrate need have access to training supports. These include financial assistance for transportation and childcare. Although very important, these are only two of the many kinds of supports learners might need. LBS service providers identify other needed supports and make appropriate referrals that will help literacy learners in achieving their goals. LBS service providers presently do this according to their understanding of what will contribute to learner success. This paper builds on practitioner knowledge and practice and current research to identify the learner supports and types of service coordination that have the greatest positive impact on learners' success.

There are four principal approaches to service coordination and referral:²

ACTIVE CASE MANAGEMENT occurs when a practitioner oversees the identification of a learner's needs, coordinates referrals to the appropriate services and supports and monitors the provision of the supports and their effectiveness in meeting the learner's needs. Active case management can strengthen a program's capacity to assess learner barriers and provide referrals or direct services more efficiently. Employment Service providers under Employment Ontario currently use this approach to service coordination.

INTERAGENCY COOPERATION occurs when agencies are able to cooperate to ensure that learner supports are in place. For example, an agency might provide all the assessment services in a community and track the effectiveness of referrals. Cooperation might be either formal or informal, and involve different agencies (or distinct departments within a complex organization such as a college or multi-service agency) sharing responsibility for learners' programs by offering different elements which, taken together, provide a broader range of supports.

INTEGRATED PROGRAMMING occurs when employment and training services are provided concurrently, ideally through a single service provider. The most common form of integrated programming involves literacy and vocational skills training.

A COMMUNITY-WIDE PLANNING PROCESS occurs when community service providers cooperate to ensure that their services are accessible to learners and effective in meeting their range of needs. While LBS agencies have long participated in a literacy services planning process, a broader community-wide process would link LBS service providers with providers of a range of other services and supports such as health or social service providers.

For the purposes of this paper case management, as one form of service coordination, will be described in detail. Please see Appendix 1 for more details on the other three types of service coordination.

How is a learner helped through case management?

LBS service providers cannot by themselves meet the range of needs and address the breadth of challenges learners can bring to their learning program. Making the necessary supports available requires coordination among a range of service providers. In an effort to provide the supports needed by many learners, the most common approach has been active case management. This is an approach

² These four approaches, including examples of each from Ontario LBS programs and full reference information on the studies cited, are presented in more detail in Rowen, *Approaches to Service Coordination* (Ontario Literacy Coalition, March 2011) www.on.literacy.ca

adopted by many Employment Service providers under Employment Ontario (EO) and is being done informally by some LBS service providers. When addressing the needs of the “harder-to-serve” client, case management has been among the major investments of system reform in both the United States and the United Kingdom. A “soft” version of this approach is currently used by many LBS service providers who have reported that individual practitioners work to find the right supports for particular learners.

This function lies at the heart of both identifying and providing opportunities for learners to be referred to the additional supports and services they may need to be successful. Each LBS service provider can only do so to the extent to which their resources will allow. However, the function of literacy services planning and coordination that is facilitated by regional networks in each community is the forum where service providers can discuss how the function of case management can be best provided in their community.

The concept of active case management will be familiar to LBS service providers as they continue to work informally with income support caseworkers (Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Workers Safety and Insurance Board) and counsellors through existing Employment Service (through Employment Ontario).

A significant number of literacy learners require comprehensive supports and access to these supports significantly increases the success of these learners. It has been observed that “the more ‘wrap-around’ services [literacy programs] can provide their students, the better educational results they will achieve” (Liebowitz et al 2003: 30, 13). While this is true for adult literacy learners in general, it is seen as particularly important for harder-to-serve learners including, for example, disengaged older youth (Bloom et al 2010). A recent study of initiatives in five states, Stephens (2009) noted that “a different approach to delivering education and training to adults was needed: a holistic approach that blends skills training with comprehensive support and student services to help low-income and/or low-skill adults persist ...and earn a credential that has value in the labour market” (p. 6).

When using an active case management approach, the client deals with a single point of contact. This person has a clear responsibility to provide support and to coordinate services to meet the needs of that individual. The learning experiences from both the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) pinpoints this designated role as key to learner success. (See Rowen 2011 for further discussion.)

A U.K study (Sadler and Smith 2004) reported a decline in attrition rates of more than half in one program and a full two-thirds in another based, in large measure, on the monitoring provided by the “literacy support worker” and the supports available through their case management. The authors observed the following for at-risk learners:

- Service providers need to be proactive, identify potential problems and take corrective action quickly.
- Individual strategies are needed to meet each learner’s needs. In many cases there is value in putting staff time into more intensive support early on, which can be withdrawn gradually as the learner gains in confidence.
- Learners need to feel that they belong: this encourages commitment and increases the likelihood that they will stay in the program and achieve desired outcomes.
- Additional visits and extra contact time are often required to address difficulties effectively.
- Staff working with learners who are at risk need a non-judgemental approach and need to develop good counselling skills in order to give the right level of support. They need to be sensitive enough to pick up any hints that there could be something not quite right (p. 29).

In summary, a significant proportion of literacy learners require multiple if not comprehensive supports to be successful in their learning program. One successful approach is case management which determines and then facilitates access to the range of supports beyond those typically available through LBS service providers. This is a longer-term goal of program integration under Employment Ontario. It will take some time to reach this goal. In the interim, LBS service providers can continue to work with other non-LBS providers to refer learners to the supports needed for success. The learner plan can help practitioners identify the need for more intensive case management by tracking learner supports and referrals and analysing how receiving supports impacts on positive learner outcomes.

Appendix 1

How is a learner helped through interagency cooperation?

Coordinating services through interagency cooperation addresses two concerns: the types of supports required by learners in the LBS Program are broad and include financial, health and social services, as well as academic and employment related supports; and LBS service providers do not provide these supports.

Interagency cooperation can be used to deliver assessment and referral services. For example, some non-LBS agencies are asking for a common “screening tool” to help determine which of their clients might benefit from LBS programming. Similarly, there are communities where, among LBS service providers, a single common assessment approach is used which results in each service provider referring learners to the LBS service provider that can best serve them.

Interagency cooperation can be used in the informal arrangements between agencies that “negotiate” with each other to provide particular services or supports. These are often based on specific and personal relationships within the community. Many LBS practitioners find this effective and are working towards formalizing these relationships.

An example of this approach can be seen in the informal arrangement developed at one Ontario college to support learners with mental health needs. Through an informal arrangement mediated by the local Ontario Works office, learners were able to quickly access assessment and support available through the local office of the Canadian Mental Health Association. Normally an appointment for an assessment would require a considerable wait but the arrangement facilitated the quick assessment needed for the learners to be able to maintain their participation in the LBS programming.

A clear benefit of this approach is that, when well executed, there are clear roles and well defined services. The supports needed are clearly identified, as is who will provide them. The results, while perhaps more difficult to attribute to one or more of the cooperating agencies, are similarly clear. The details of the partnerships under this approach are not constrained; but rather, can shift to accommodate both the needs of learners for different supports and services and the growth in the relationships among the cooperating agencies.

How can we help learners through integrated programming?

Integrated programming provides a combination of services and supports concurrently through a single provider. Indeed, it is possible to see the importance of this approach and its central place in the OALCF which has adopted a task-based approach as described in the Foundation Paper *Practitioners Guide to Task Based Programming*.

The benefits of integrated programming include major gains in learning, perseverance in programs and in later success. A recent overview of transition-oriented programming in the U.S. (MPR Associates 2010)

noted the value of efforts “*which combine contextualized skills instruction, workforce training, and other support services to help adults improve their basic skills.*” The benefits of this approach and recommendations for implementation are also noted in a review of integrated programming in five U.S. states (Stephens 2009), and in an extensive study of the benefits of integrated programming for literacy and basic skills in the U.K. (Casey et al 2007) which reported significant increases in both learner retention and attainment compared to traditional programs.

The majority of examples of integrated training have focused on the integration of literacy and basic skills with vocational preparation, based on research about “functional context education” (e.g. Sticht 1997) which designs integrated programs for literacy and basic skills development in the context of vocational training. In some cases, this has included some additional supports; for example, job search, job coaching and vocational placements. There are many examples of the range of integrated programming which can be cited in Ontario and other jurisdictions.

For example, the John Howard Society of Sault Ste. Marie is an example of integrated programming which provides both literacy and basic skills activities with a range of life skills/social skills supports. In addition, the program explicitly integrates several employment supports (including employment readiness, job development and job coaching), as well as active case management to support learners with more comprehensive support needs.

There are examples of integrated programming in the college sector of integrating LBS with pre-apprenticeship programming; and in several school boards of integrating literacy with credit courses (through a PLAR process). Similar to the well-documented practices in other jurisdictions, there are several examples of integrating LBS with vocational skills and there is already evidence of the success of these approaches.³

In summary, the experiences of integrated programming are longstanding and have demonstrated positive results over a period of time in many contexts. It is a useful approach for integrating elements of LBS, employment supports and specific skills training. This could occur in multi-service agencies which provide opportunities for integration within the same organization or “single focussed” agencies which have developed the necessary relationships to ensure that integration addresses learners challenges.

How is a learner helped through community-wide planning?

This approach is used in communities where agencies have the knowledge of learner needs, of local employment, labour markets and opportunities; and where practitioners have the experience of longstanding service provision. The approach is possible when practitioners from a range of service providers share a commitment to build the relationships necessary to design potential solutions to the challenge of service coordination. While there are constraints on their capacities, the argument to improve local, community-wide planning is compelling. The consultations with a range of LBS programs and networks suggests a clear desire to implement a broader planning process, one that includes those providing the range of services and supports literacy learners need and which require coordination among very different organizations.

³ A considerable number of examples were received from programs in different literacy sectors and streams, some of which are outlined in detail in Rowen, 2011.

Literacy and Basic Skills service providers plan literacy programming through the literacy services planning and coordination process. While this has served to develop coherence among LBS service providers, it is recognized that the focus for planning and coordination should extend beyond LBS service providers to those other organizations whose mandates complement LBS and who have the capacity to provide some of the additional supports needed.

In Ontario, there are new groups of employment and training service providers that include the LBS delivery system. For example, the Community Employment Resource Partnership (CERP) in Peterborough and the Employment Assistance Resource Network (EARN) and Skills Development Flagship in Hamilton have developed to address the need for greater communication and planning among a range of providers. These and other examples in communities big and small, urban and rural, and in all regions of the province, are compelling evidence that those providing services in the community are creating their own opportunities to share their experiences and challenges with each other.

The regional network, Literacy Link South Central (LLSC), developed an integrated service plan including literacy and Employment Service. It was the result of an extensive process which involved not only the regional network, but a wide range of Employment Service delivery partners under the auspices of the Employment Sector Council of London/Middlesex (ESCLM), which itself is comprised of forty-five employment and training organizations. Several other groups were involved through the consultation process and in particular, through the Joint Service Planning Task Force which included ESCLM and LLSC, the local training board, the United Way, the City of London, London Council for Adult Education and Partners in Employment.

Among the ideas informing this work there is a commitment to common assessment and referral, not only in principle, but through the development of concrete tools and protocols. These are a precondition for any attempt at coordination involving stand-alone agencies. There is also a commitment to joint activities beyond the co-location of otherwise discrete services and agencies. The approach includes a shared responsibility for working with the client and developing a “unified” service plan which includes a range of supports.

Of the four approaches outlined, community-wide planning is the most difficult. The results tend to be longer term and are sometimes difficult to see. Among its main benefits are (a) developing protocols to ensure services are available and provided, thereby serving more learners and those learners with varied needs, (b) ensuring that some agencies are not working at cross purposes and that all major components of an integrated system are included, (c) providing a focus for new and emerging initiatives, (d) providing the opportunity to reallocate resources and to consolidate organizations, if needed; and (e) providing a community building opportunity.