

Literacy & Basic Skills in the Western Region

A Special Report

about the 2009-10 Budget Initiative Funding





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This report has been brought to you by the Adult Learning Networks of Southwestern Ontario.



1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On March 26, 2009, Ontario's Minister of Finance rose in parliament and announced, "we will expand training and literacy programs". The 2009 Ontario Budget, revealed the scope of this expansion:

These measures are designed to respond quickly to the short-term challenges posed by the global economic slowdown while preparing the province's workforce for the new economy. These include...\$90 million over two years to expand literacy and basic skills training, including funding for community projects, distance learning and workplace literacy. These services will help up to 13,000 people per year.

On July 2, 2009, MTCU disclosed how the program expansion would proceed:

The province is investing \$25 million in colleges, school boards and community literacy organizations in the Employment Ontario network to help laid-off workers and other adult learners train for highly skilled jobs.

In addition, Ontario is providing \$5 million this year to expand online literacy training.

After this public announcement, LBS and AU programs in the Western Region were told what additional funding they would receive and how many additional learners they were expected to serve.

This investment, internally referred to as Budget Initiative Funding (BIF) started to flow in September 2009.

1.2 Scope of Report

This report details the activity of the Western Region LBS agencies during the first half of this fiscal year (2009-2010), describes the impact of the BIF and considers the important issues heading into the 2010-2011 fiscal year.

1.3 Methodology

Most of the statistics and graphs included in this report come from an in depth survey of the LBS / AU delivery agencies and Learning Networks of Ontario situated in the Western Region. This survey was conducted in October and November 2009.

Survey results include the responses from 40 different agencies covering 52 sites. In addition, survey respondents represented all three sectors (community, school board, college) and all four streams (Anglophone, Francophone, Deaf, Native).

We believe this to be the first cross-sectoral and cross-stream mid-year analysis of LBS activity and community impact from a regional perspective.



2. LBS / AU Delivery Agencies

Every year, LBS agencies, coordinated by their Networks, participate in literacy service planning. Part of this process includes analyzing programming gaps in the community and identifying how these gaps could be addressed with additional funding.

Due to this annual exercise, agencies were quite prepared to respond to the Budget Initiative Funding. In just a few months, agencies made and continue to make a sizable impact on their communities. Delivery agencies have expanded their capacity in providing literacy and essential skills training, while at the same time enhancing the services they provide to Employment Ontario clients.

2.1 Expanding Capacity

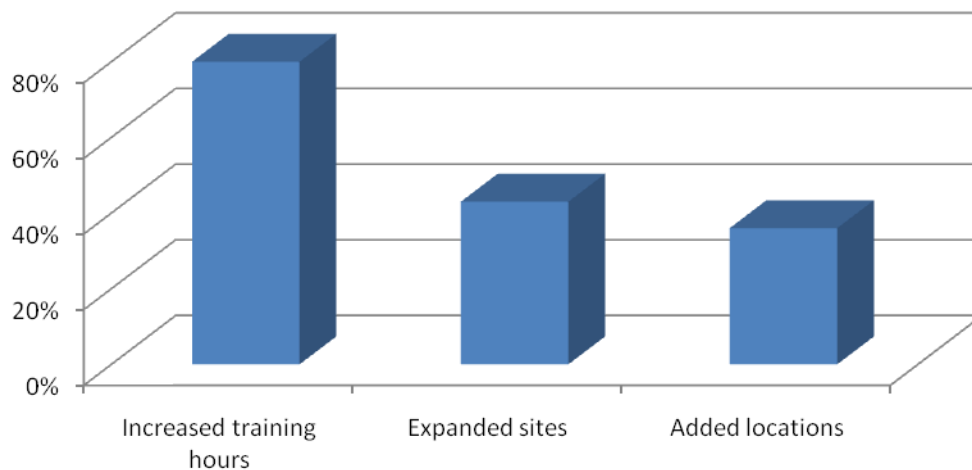
As soon as the economic downturn started and well before the March 2009 budget announcement, LBS / AU agencies in the Western Region have been experiencing a noticeable and documented increase in demands for literacy and essentials skills training. The steady stream of laid-off workers from manufacturing and other low-skilled industries contributed to an unprecedented number of new clients, long waitlists, and a considerable drain on agency resources.

Most LBS agencies were running beyond full capacity and the system was challenged to keep up with the demands from individuals, Action Centres, employment services agencies and other Employment Ontario partners and stakeholders.

When MTCU informed LBS / AU agencies about the additional funding in July the impact was felt immediately. Agencies were able to introduce summer programming for the first time or add additional summer hours. This allowed for more clients to be more prepared for September enrolment in credit and college classes.

Throughout the remainder of the summer and through the fall, agencies continued to increase capacity by hiring new instructors, adding training hours, opening new program locations and expanding existing facilities. All of these measures were put in place in order to serve more clients more effectively.

How have LBS / AU agencies expanded capacity in order to serve more clients?



A sampling of the additional services made possible with the additional funding:

- "We have increased classroom time by 28%, increasing instructor time in the areas of English/grammar, math, and computer training."
- "New community centre program and more staff to service more clients."
- "We offered 99 hrs/wk of services with an 11 week summer break. We now offer 129 hrs/wk of services with a 5 week summer break."
- "I have increased Coordinator and instructor hours for a new location and will start to ramp up instructor hours more as need increases."

- "Small group hours increased from 17 hours per week to 27 hours per week resulting in a tutor/student caseload increase of 24%."
- "We had a nine hour a week instructor before, and we now have two instructors working a combined total of 44 hours per week."
- "We had offered 54 hours of service per week, and are now offering 77 hours per week - an increase of 29%. We have increased hours primarily at sites where there are Action Centres located."
- "Last fiscal year, we operated a total of 122 hours per week. This fiscal year we have opened 3 new locations and have offered programming in action centres. Programming has expanded to 160 hours per week. This is a 31% increase in service."
- "Increased hours over the summer by 40% (from 10 weeks to 14), increased evening ACE classes by 30 % (added 2 classes), increased LBS classroom hours by 11% (from 19-21 hours), added 2 hours of support for online learners (new*100%)."

A sampling of the types of new locations where clients are now being served made possible with the additional funding:

- "Added programs to the rural area for accessibility through partnership with the library and Community centres."
- "New class scheduled to start in First Nation community."
- "Class added in small rural community, previously unserved, to work at the Action Centre of laid off factory employees."

Clients served

- 85% report serving an increased number of clients compared to last fiscal year (96% report the same level or more)
- 88% report serving an increased number of clients compared to April 1, 2009 (98% report the same level or more)
- 50% of agencies have already met their increased clients targets tied to the additional funding (Note - this at mid-year)

2.2 Enhancing Services

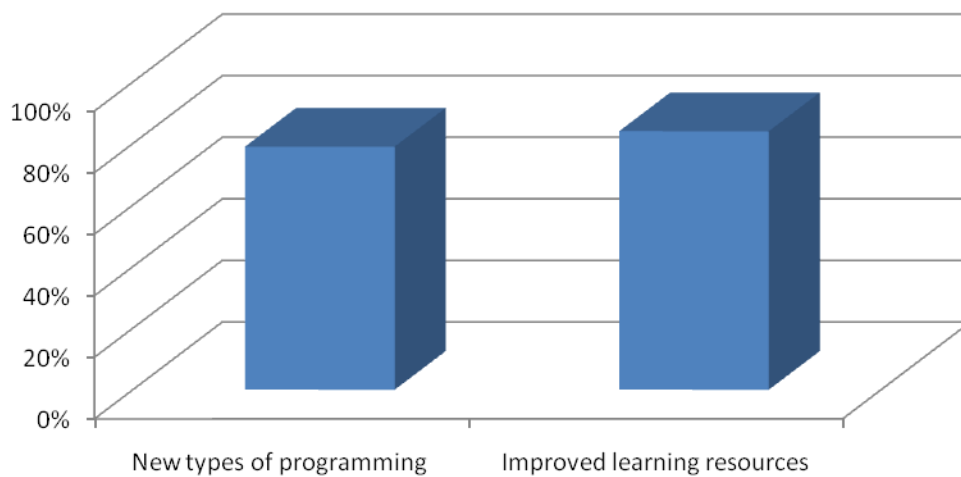
LBS / AU agencies operate within a continuous improvement framework. Every year, agencies target performance measures related to efficiency, effectiveness or client satisfaction. With the Budget Initiative Funding, agencies took steps to enhance the literacy and essentials skills training provided to clients.

Agencies enhanced the range of programming available throughout the LBS system. In some cases, this was math support for current or aspiring apprentices or occupation specific essential skills modules. Client need for updated information and communication technology skills compelled many agencies to introduce computer literacy classes to aid workers' electronic job search and online learning skills.



These examples of service enhancements enabled agencies to better respond to the increasingly diverse set of client goals.

How have agencies enhanced literacy training services?



A sampling of the types of new resources added made possible with the additional funding:

- computers
- textbooks
- student supports
- learning materials
- workplace related program materials
- computer software
- brailled resources for blind learners
- TOWES tests
- assistive technology devices (for example, reading pens)





A sampling of the types of news programming options made possible with the additional funding:

- “Math support for apprentices.”
- “2 day essential skills program to increase hours of learning for students.”
- “expanded existing program to provide more hours of class time to small groups to have students improve skills and move through quicker.”
- “We also added 4 Computer classes to support the existing LBS learners currently attending.”
- “we have provided short one month programs (2 days a week) that offer computers and some certificate programs eg smart serve and WHMIS ...we also plan to grow and add CPR to the mix as well. Short programs to add skills to a person’s resume...”
- “GED Prep classes”
- “Essential Skills assessments for learners with disabilities and employment goals”
- “Transition to Credit program for OSSD/HS diploma.”
- “Addition of Physics and Chemistry to Math classes.”
- “Employment prep programme.”
- “Assistive technology programming for identified Learning Disabilities.”
- “Transition to credit for students with ESL background, older adults and students with learning disabilities.”



3. Learning Networks of Ontario

The Learning Networks of Ontario (also known as Regional Literacy Networks) are charged with the responsibility of coordinating and supporting the LBS / AU delivery agencies through the long standing process called Literacy Service Planning.

Networks also play a strong role in the community as a gateway to skills for work, learning and life. This role has taken the form of enhanced information and referral, marketing LBS / AU programs and raising awareness of literacy and essential skills. Over years, although more prominently in the last two years, Networks have combined their expertise in the area of functional skills with their knowledge of adult learning pathways to provide screening and assessment services to clients of organizations such as Ontario Works, Action Centres and Employment Assessment Service providers.

The Budget Initiative Funding allowed Networks to increase their capacity for supporting LBS agencies; reaching out to Action Centres, laid-off workers and other Employment Ontario clients; and supporting the ongoing integration of Employment Ontario itself.

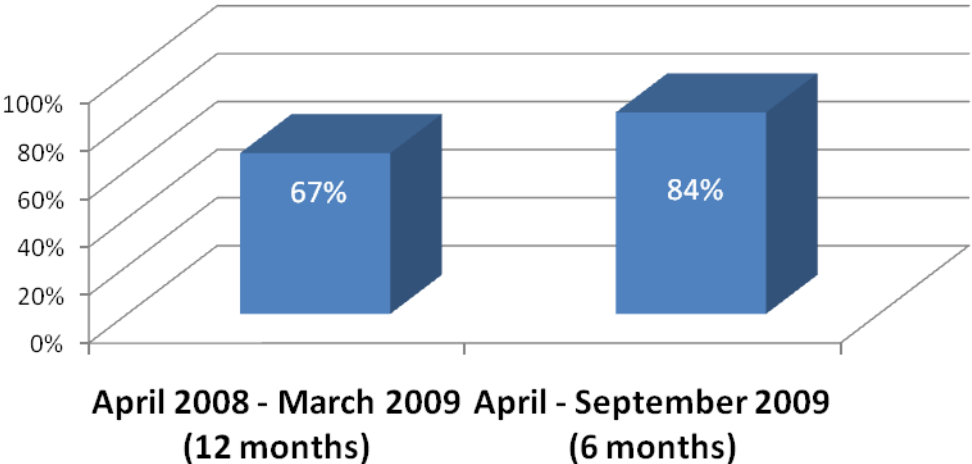
3.1 Integrating Employment Ontario

Since the inception of Employment Ontario in November 2006, there has been growing recognition of the need for many clients to access multiple services to best meet their goals. While many of the EO service providers have been diligently learning about what each service can do for their clients', the economic downturn and its resulting surge in clients demand for services, have preoccupied the time and energy of delivery agencies. As development organizations, Networks were able to step into the breach to help connect clients to the services they require.

Two Network-led initiatives have supported the integration of Employment Ontario: Educational Interviews and Centralized Assessment (known in the Western Region as the Educational Essential Skills Assessment).

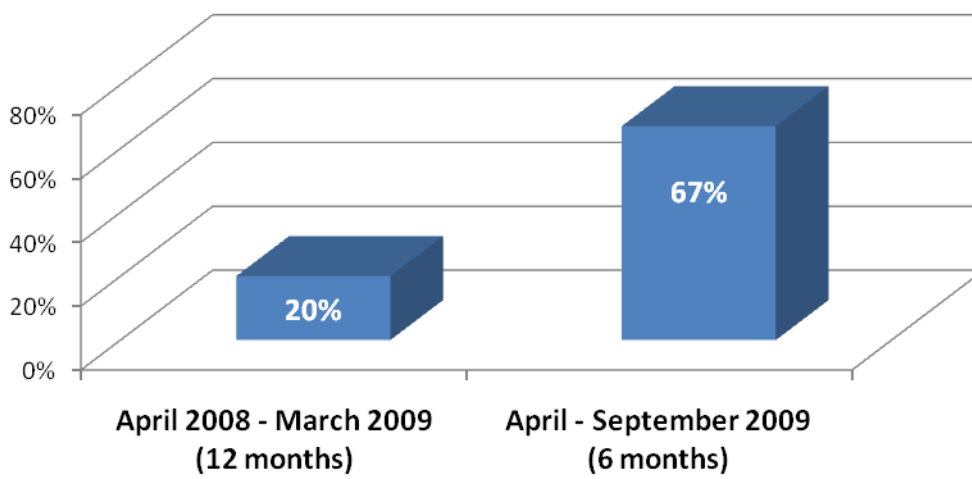
Educational Interviews are short one-to-one sessions with laid-off workers who may want to upgrade their skills or credentials but are unaware or confused about what they need or how to start. Most Educational Interviews are conducted at Action Centres.

Educational Interviews resulting in a referral to an upgrading program



The Educational Essential Skills Assessment is an assessment tool developed by the Adult Basic Education Association of Hamilton-Wentworth (ABEA). The assessment is individualized, indicates both the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) and the Essential Skills (ES) levels the client requires to achieve their goal, and provides an Educational Action Plan to move a client from a current level of skill to a required level of skill for their training and employment goal.

EESAs conducted with Second Career / OSD applicants



3.2 Working with Laid-off Workers

In addition to the nearly 1100 educational interviews and Educational Essentials Skills Assessments conducted over the last two years, Networks have also increased their capacity to work closely with Action Centres.

At the time of the survey, there were at least 45 Action Centres in the Western Region. All seven Networks have made contact with Action Centres in their areas and have provided a range of services:

- Presentations to Adjustment Committees about LBS and AU programs
- Attending open houses to talk with workers
- Presentations about obtaining high school equivalency (GED)
- Creating and distributing flyers, brochures, posters and other materials about adult learning options



4. Looking Forward to 2010-11

Western Region LBS delivery agencies have started planning for the next fiscal year.

While it's always difficult to forecast future demand for services, there are a few strong indicators that demand for literacy and essential skills training services will continue to be high. Statistics at both the agency, community and regional level point to the strong possibility that the LBS / AU network will be running at full capacity again in 2010-11.

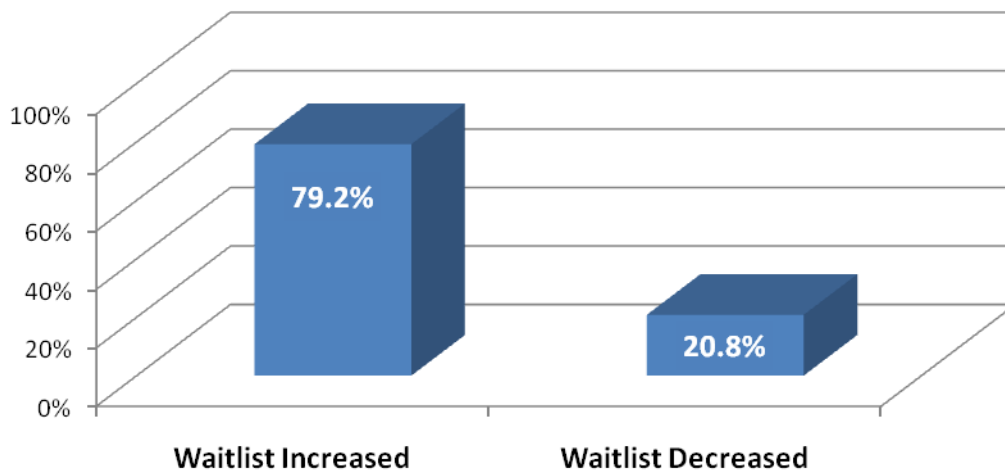
4.1 Capacity

One of the major trends in the Western Region over the past 2 years has been the prevalence and magnitude of the waiting lists agencies are keeping. While the Budget Initiative Funding was timely and helped meet the skyrocketing demand for literacy training, many agencies continue to report waitlists. While 80% of agencies increased the total number of training hours offered through the BIF, over 60% of agencies reported a waitlist in September. These numbers do not even reflect the number of agencies who report being over capacity (that is, serving more clients than the maximum in small groups and larger classes).

In the recent employment insurance report released by Statistics Canada (December 22, 2009), there were year-over-year increases in EI beneficiaries in Ontario. This included specific references to large centres in the Western Region including Hamilton (4,800 to 10,000) and Kitchener (4,200 to 8,100). The accompanying data also reports the following year-over-year percentage increases:

- Hamilton 107.1%
- Kitchener 94.7%
- London 59.3%
- St. Catharines–Niagara 85.1%
- Windsor 32.0%

Change in agency waitlists compared to last fiscal year



4.2 Demand

While the supply of literacy training increased in the latter half of the 2009-2010 fiscal year, there is no confirmation of how that supply will look in 2010-2011.

However, what is known is the existence of three key factors that will continue to drive demand for literacy services:

- Second Career

The new Second Career operational guidelines include provision for academic upgrading needed before beginning school. In fact, due to the changes to applicant criteria, more clients may see LBS / AU programs as a viable upgrading strategy as opposed to Second Career.

- Workers Attitude Toward Upgrading

Workers are coming to terms with the new reality of Ontario's labour market in Ontario. Many more workers are exploring ways to upgrade their skills now in preparation for the possibility of layoffs, plant closures and other workplace changes.

- Slack Labour Market

Due to higher unemployment, employers are more selective in hiring and can afford to ask for higher skills and credentials. In this situation both the likelihood of employment and the level of earnings for adults with lower literacy skills may suffer. This is compelling job searchers to upgrade skills and prepare for credentials (high school credits, GED, college).



4.3 At Risk

The 2009-2010 Budget Initiative Funding expires on March 31, 2010. However, most agencies will need to prepare for and make decisions about services for next fiscal year much before that date.

Strong demand for literacy and essential skills training services will remain strong well into next fiscal year, but agencies will not be able to respond to this demand unless the Budget Initiative Funding is renewed and the renewal is communicated well in advance of the new fiscal year.

There are a few risks worth highlighting regarding the funding situation for next fiscal year.



Scenario	Risks
<p>Additional funding is not renewed in 2010-2011 (and funding levels revert back to 2008-2009 levels).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hundreds of potential clients may not be able to access literacy services. • Some current clients may need to be exited in order to bring client numbers in line with reduced capacity. • Contracts for new staff will not be renewed, thus eliminating the infusion of young, new talent into the field.
<p>Additional funding may ultimately be renewed, but no communication is received by the end of January 2010.</p> <p>(This was the case last year when communication about funding was not communicated until July, thereby delaying the expansion of services.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies will be afraid to keep new services without funding guarantees. • New services will be wound down, leases on new locations will expire, new instructors will move on in search of a more stable career. • Agencies will need to stop client intake in February in order to wind down services to meet reduced capacity.
<p>Additional funding may ultimately be renewed, but funding does not flow until September 2010 (similar to this year).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller agencies may not be able to maintain additional services due to cash flow shortages. • Some agencies are not allowed to run deficits. They may not be able to expand programming, in spite of waiting lists, until fall 2010. • The ‘accordion effect’ on services does not allow for efficient and effective, continuously improving literacy services.