



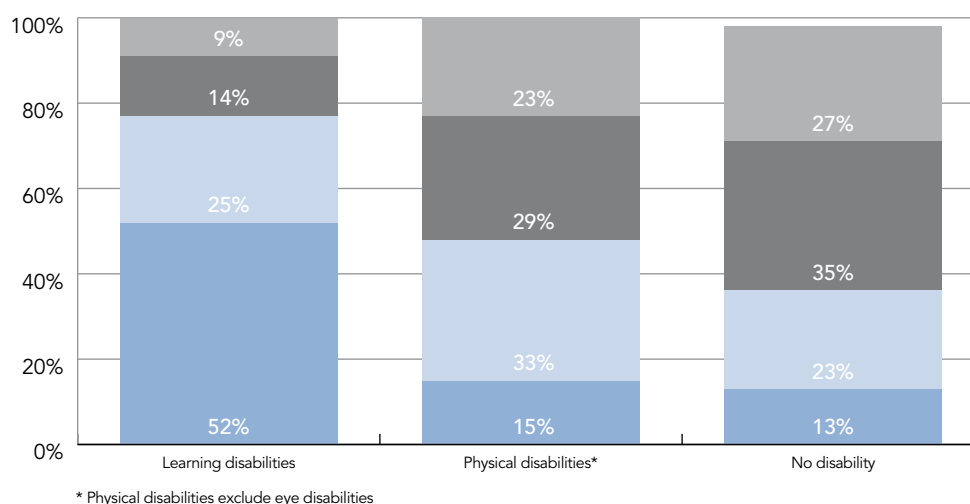
# LESSONS IN LEARNING

Canada slow to overcome  
limits for disabled learners

February 26, 2007

For Canadians with disabilities, learning opportunities are often limited, depriving them of further opportunities and curtailing their potential contributions. In some cases, limitations on learning are imposed directly by the disabling conditions. In other instances, the limitations arise from society's inability or unwillingness to alleviate restrictions on the activities of people with disabilities.<sup>1,2,3</sup> In either case, these limitations hamper their social and economic well-being. Canada and Canadians would benefit from ensuring that Canadians with disabilities have richer opportunities to learn and to make contributions.

**Figure 1:**  
Literacy outcomes by type of disability



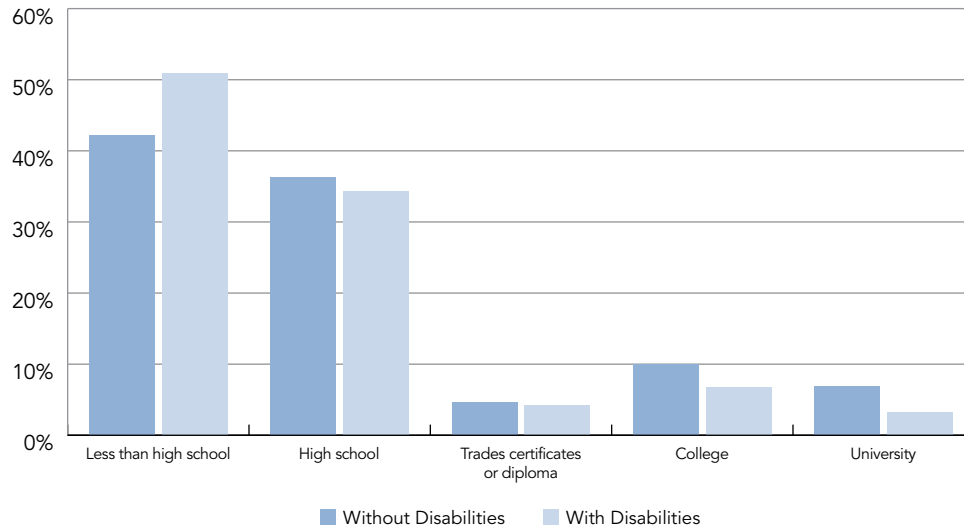
Source: IALS 1994.<sup>5</sup>

Approximately 12% (3.6 million) of Canadians report that their activities are limited by disabling conditions.<sup>4</sup> Disabilities are less common among children (3.3% of those under 15) than among older Canadians (53.3% of those over 75). Regardless of age, many of these Canadians also face challenges with literacy, education, employment, earnings and quality of life.

## Disability and literacy

Literacy skills among Canadians with disabilities tend to be weaker than among non-disabled Canadians. However, literacy outcomes vary substantially as a function of the nature and severity of particular disabilities. Not surprisingly, Canadians with learning disabilities are much more likely to experience difficulties with literacy than are Canadians with physical disabilities. According to the International Adult Literacy Survey, 62% of non-disabled Canadian adults possess literacy skills at the level required to meet most everyday reading requirements. This proportion falls to 52% for adults with physical disabilities and plummets to 23% among those with learning disabilities (see Figure 1).

**Figure 2:**  
Educational attainment among Canadian youth, ages 15–24



Source: Statistics Canada, PALS 2001 in *Advancing the Inclusion of People with Disabilities 2006*

## Disability and educational attainment

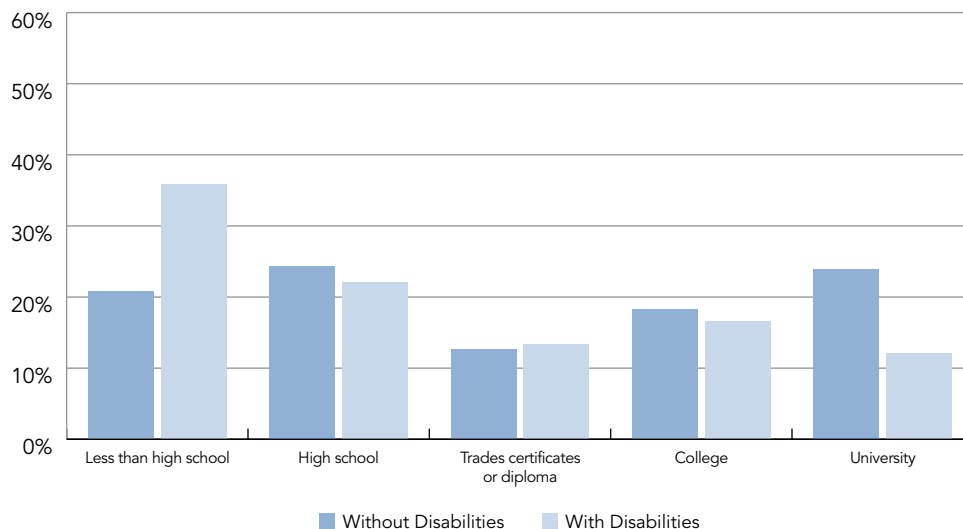
Educational attainment is also affected by disabling conditions. Among younger Canadians (aged 15–24), differences between those with and those without disabilities are relatively small. However, those with disabilities are less likely to have any type of degree or diploma than those without disabilities (see Figure 2).

Among older age groups (aged 25–64), the differences are larger: those with disabilities are substantially more likely to be without a high-school diploma and less likely to have a university degree than those without disabilities (see Figure 3).

## Disability, employment and earnings

Employment and earnings are tightly linked to education. Therefore, it is not surprising that Canadians with disabling conditions also have lower labour force participation rates, lower employment rates and lower earnings.

**Figure 3:**  
Educational attainment among Canadian adults, ages 16–64

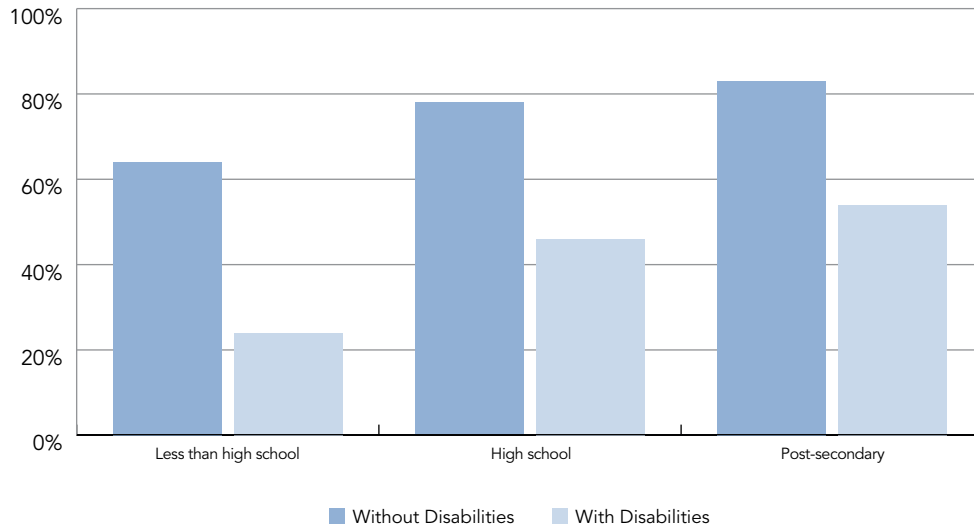


Source: Statistics Canada, PALS 2001 in *Advancing the Inclusion of People with Disabilities 2006*

Labour force participation rates vary substantially as a function of the severity of disabilities. Data from the 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS) indicate that labour force participation rates are around 70% for Canadians with mild disabilities, but fall to 45% for those with moderate disabilities and to 26% for those with severe disabilities. Employment rates are also significantly lower for Canadians with disabilities (44%) than for those without (78%)—even when differences in educational attainment are accounted for. For example, employment rates for Canadians with disabilities at the highest levels of educational attainment are lower than for Canadians without disabilities at the lowest level of educational attainment (see Figure 4).

Caring for children with disabilities is also related to negative employment outcomes. For example, PALS data indicate that, for 54% of five to 14-year-olds with disabilities, the child's condition affected the family's employment situation. In particular, family members worked fewer hours, changed their work hours, refused jobs, quit working, or turned down promotions to take care of the child.

**Figure 4:**  
Employment rates by educational attainment



Source: Canadian Council on Social Development

Differences in employment rates result in a substantial income disparity between Canadians with and without disabilities. In 2001, the median income for working-age Canadians (15–64 years) with disabilities was \$15,000. This figure was 67% higher (\$25,000) for working-age Canadians without disabilities.

## Lessons in learning

Overall, the data suggest that Canadians with disabilities are not enjoying positive learning outcomes to the same extent as non-disabled Canadians, nor are they reaping the same benefits in the labour market. Ensuring a fuller range of opportunities for Canadians with disabilities will require a multi-lateral approach that includes: changing attitudes toward people with disabilities, providing support for parents of children facing disabling conditions, creating conditions to ensure school success, encouraging and supporting further education, and accommodating people with disabling conditions in the workplace and community.

## Changing attitudes toward people with disabilities

Canadian attitudes toward people with disabilities have improved since the days when the disabled were largely excluded from mainstream society. These changing attitudes are reflected in the Charter of Rights and in provincial and territorial legislation guaranteeing equal rights and the provision of services for Canadians with disabilities. Despite improvement, many Canadians with disabilities still face discrimination. For example, 36% of Canadians without disabilities report having witnessed discrimination against people with disabilities, and 52% of Canadians with disabilities report having personally experienced some type of discrimination on a regular or occasional basis.<sup>6</sup>

Discrimination starts very early in the lives of people with disabilities: Approximately 20% of parents of pre-school children with disabilities report that their child has been refused day care or babysitting services due to their condition. In their meta-analytic study of the attitudes of school age children, Nowicki and Sandieson<sup>7</sup> found that children preferred children without disabilities to children who had physical and intellectual disabling conditions. In research by McDougall and colleagues<sup>8</sup> with 1,872 high-school students, the majority (61%) held neutral or positive attitudes toward disabled peers with disabilities, but a substantial number (21%) held below neutral to very negative attitudes.

Attitudes are learned; therefore, positive and non-discriminatory attitudes toward people with disabilities can be learned. The available research suggests that positive attitudes can be fostered through contact, information and communication. For example, a number of studies have shown that students without disabilities develop positive attitudes toward students with disabilities when opportunities for structured contact are created. Contact is particularly effective when students with and without disabilities have the opportunity to cooperate with one another, when they must each contribute something important in order to accomplish shared tasks and when their interactions are supported by authority figures. Information can also be effective in fostering positive attitudes by increasing the perceived competence of those without disabilities in interacting with those with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

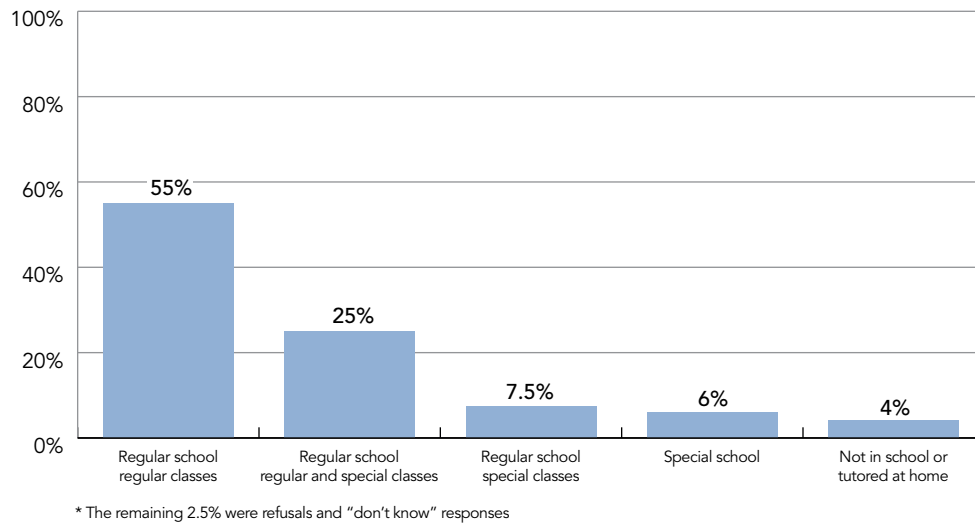
There are a number of Canadian initiatives designed to communicate that people with disabilities can function in and contribute to society with respect to learning, employment, transportation, housing, etc. For example, in 2006, the Ontario government launched the Media Access and Participation Initiative (MAP) to raise the profile of people with disabilities in the Canadian movie, television and radio industry. In the same year, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) announced the Open Your Mind initiative. The initiative demonstrates and encourages the employability of people with disabilities in a variety of fields.

## **Providing support for parents of children facing disabling conditions**

Support for children with disabilities at an early age is essential for promoting optimal development, preparing them for the learning opportunities that become available when they start school and reducing the need for more intensive support as they grow older.<sup>10</sup> Parents raising children with disabilities face barriers such as financial hardship, time constraints, and social isolation (Statistics Canada, 2003).<sup>11</sup> They need additional financial and social support when balancing work, family and child care. To accommodate these needs, federal and provincial governments provide support and services such as the Disability Tax Credit, respite care, community living supports and residential services. In addition, organizations and websites such as the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada and Special Needs Opportunity Windows (SNOW) also provide information, tools and services for parents of children with disabilities.

## Creating conditions to ensure school success

**Figure 5:**  
Distribution of disabled students in schools and classes



Source: Government of Canada using PALS data

For school-age children with disabilities, access to the education system is a key issue. In Canada, almost all (96%) school-age children with disabilities attend school. Most children (87%) attend regular schools, either in regular classes or special education classes (see Figure 5). Only 5.3% of disabled children attend special classes in a regular school, and 6% attend a special education school (see Figure 5).

With the majority of disabled children attending regular classes, it is important for teachers to be well-prepared and supported in order to meet the needs of all students. Some jurisdictions limit the number of students in classes in which special needs students are enrolled (see, for example, British Columbia).

Students with disabilities can help professionals meet their needs by learning to advocate for themselves. For example, one special needs teacher in British Columbia helps students with disabilities to prepare a written description of their disabilities and an explanation of how teachers can help to accommodate their needs in the classroom. Once developed, the student asks each teacher to read and sign the form specifying the student's recommended accommodations. This approach is beneficial in a number of ways. It provides teachers with guidance about helping students with disabilities to learn, formalizes each teacher's commitment to helping the student learn and helps to develop the students' ability to advocate on their own behalf.

## Encouraging and supporting further education

For individuals with disabilities, opportunities for further learning are often limited by various obstacles. For adults with disabilities, limited access to learning programs, community transportation and child care make learning more difficult. Additional challenges, such as low literacy skills, can further exacerbate these difficulties. While Canadians are becoming more aware of physical accessibility issues (e.g. architectural features for people with limited mobility),<sup>12</sup> other types of accessibility issues are often ignored. These include access to educational programs, and to assistance and services for learners with special needs.

The additional costs born by students with disabilities can also become a barrier to their participation in education and training. PALS results show that among the 1.6 million disabled people aged 15 and over who required assistive aids and devices to assist them with daily functions, such as hearing, seeing, speaking and walking, 40% reported that they could not obtain all the needed aids and devices, primarily because of the high cost of the equipment. For many people with disabilities, this equipment is critically important to their participation in education and training.

To encourage and support lifelong learning, the federal and provincial governments provide various financial supports. For example, in 1999–2000, 4,500 students with disabilities received Canada Study Grants. In 2001, the government increased the maximum grant to cover exceptional costs associated with disabilities for people who pursued higher education. There are also enhancements to the Canada Study Grants for students who need additional support, such as the supplementary grant available for those who find the maximum grant insufficient to meet assessed needs. Provincial and territorial governments also provide financial support in addition to the Canada Study Grants. For example, the Northwest Territories government offers direct grants to individuals to cover their direct disability-related costs, such as fees for tutors, interpreters, note-takers, attendant services, transportation and equipment expenses.<sup>13</sup>

Educational institutions play an important role in accommodating special needs. Services and support for students with disabilities are most effective when they are tailored to unique needs of individual students. For example, most Canadian universities have disability resource centres that provide a range of supports and services for people with disabling conditions. Upon assessment of needs, a student with a disability could receive services ranging from assistive services (e.g., note-takers), information for funding, career counseling and adaptive technology support (e.g. specialized computers and software). Educational innovations such as e-learning can also expand the accessibility of higher education.

For students with disabilities, participation in extracurricular activities can improve social skills, promote health and wellness, foster a sense of belonging, and increase students' commitment to academic achievement. In 2004, the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) launched a project to foster inclusivity on campus. The project provides guidance on how to ensure extracurricular activities are accessible to students with disabilities. For example, ensuring web pages are accessible to students who are blind, choosing movies with captioning, and including disabled students in the planning and running of events.



Educators who work with students with disabilities can be most effective when they are well-informed and have access to current information on disability issues. Literacy for Independent Living (LIL) is the first online library of its kind to provide literacy information and resources for people working with adult learners who have disabilities. These resources can also encourage collaboration among organizations and educational institutions, so the needs of adult learners with disabilities can be better accommodated.

## **Accommodating people with disabling conditions in the workplace and community**

Although skill and labour shortages in the workplace are becoming more intense, employers tend to offer workplace training only to their best-educated and best-trained employees, a practice that one author refers to as “train the best and forget the rest.”<sup>14</sup> The consequence is a waste of human resources and is especially damaging for individuals whose chances for employment are already reduced as a consequence of their disabilities.<sup>15</sup> PALS results show that only 51% of employed working-age individuals with disabilities reported having received work-related training within five years prior to the survey. Among the obstacles to work-related training faced by people with disabilities include cost (cited by 47% of respondents), the individual’s condition (30%) and inadequate transportation (7.3%). The Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work tries to address such obstacles by developing partnerships among community, government and business sectors to provide training for disabled people. The Council reports that 85% of the learners who complete their programs are retained by their host employers upon graduation.

NEADS and The Conference Board of Canada have developed guidelines to support the employment of people with disabilities and to create an inclusive working environments. For example, to attract diverse candidates, job advertisements can be circulated among organizations that provide services to people with disabilities. Participating in job fairs held by communities that serve people with disabilities can also help employers recruit talented candidates. To enhance workforce participation, there are also employment programs designed for people with disabilities to help them land the jobs they want, such as the Workplace Essential Skills Partnership (WESP) run by the Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB).

Programs and organizations that provide affordable and well-designed assistive technologies, also contribute significantly to the mission of accommodating people with disabling conditions in the workplace and community. For example, the government of British Columbia’s Adult Services program provides disabled adult learners with special technology support and proper training on how to use adaptive technologies.<sup>16</sup> Also, the Adaptech Research Network provides policy and technological support to the higher education community. A list of affordable adaptive technologies is provided for learners and educators facing disability issues.

## Not there yet

Learning opportunities for Canadians with disabilities are slowly improving because of technological advances that help them to overcome limitations imposed by disabling conditions, and because society is increasingly willing to eliminate the barriers that restrict the activities of people with disabilities. Nonetheless, there is ample room for improvement. Recognizing the real and potential contributions of people with disabling conditions benefits the person with disabilities and helps Canada live up to its reputation as a socially just nation.

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