



REPORT: Adult learners, what do you think?

Attention Learners and tutors, programs: This is the same report that was given to the government so it is not as plainly written as the summary of the report. (To read the summary, see the page called [What learners had to say to the government.](#))

Learner survey results: Over 150 learners from 10 regions of Canada responded to our questions. We have compiled the information to reflect their learning experiences and to offer their advice. We hope that what they say can inform the federal government's learning agenda.

1. Why did you return to school / training?

Of the total responses about 15% of learners are at the basic level and focused on learning to read and write or improving basic skills. The others (83) expressed more varied reasons for returning to school. A third (33%) cited returning to get their education: GED, College or follow a specific career path. Their answers suggested that simply becoming educated was their primary goal. Another 25% of learners talked of family and personal reasons for improving their literacy: reading to their children, helping with homework, living independently, gaining confidence.

The specific goal of "getting a job" was a reason given by 18%. Many acknowledged that there was no possibility of any work without literacy skills. Another 16% combined the need for a better / higher education with having a better choice of job and a more secure future. A small percentage of learners (7%) were in programs to learn English. (Some learn English as a secondary gain in regional literacy groups i.e. located in Quebec or in the North.) Others in Eastern regions mentioned "seasonal employment" as a factor in their return to school.

Quotes:

"I returned to school because I was having problems with my reading, writing and math. I like to live independently and without education I ended up doing things I didn't really like. Everything seemed to be overtaking me and leaving me behind. The literacy program was the only way for me to do what I like and to be where I want to be. That's why I returned to the program a year ago."

"... to improve my standard of living and get my grade 12, then obtain good paying work and not just survive."

"...to keep up with the times, to learn to read and write because today you have to read and write lots of things. When I was young, it didn't matter if you knew how to read and write, you just had to know how to work. I am 75 years old."

"...to learn how to communicate my thoughts and ideas."

"I wanted to prove I could do better."

"I wanted to be a role model for my kids."

"I was tired of being poor."

2. Has anything made it hard for you to go to school or stay in school?

It is no surprise that most learners quote economic hardship as the main reason they have trouble attending or staying in school. For some the need for money means holding down a job to pay for school costs (transportation, childcare, supplies, clothes). This often affects school attendance and family life.

Family responsibilities, such as children's health, are also a major factor in school attendance or the ability to do homework, especially for female students. Childcare costs can often mean greater poverty while attending school or the decision not to start.

Transportation problems, the location of programs and access due to program waiting lists were often mentioned as barriers to attending school.

As well, personal or health issues and the stress of negative learning experiences in the past were seen as factors inhibiting success at school.

Quotes:

"Poverty is always a big factor when deciding to go back to school, it often means welfare or U.I.C. I am mostly concerned about single parents who have to worry about putting good food on the table and all of the other needs that children have. I personally never had enough food and was so ashamed to have to go down to the Food Bank to see myself through until the end of the month."

"I have to drive my bike to school because I don't have any other transportation. In the winter I take the bus. Also in the summer I have to switch to evening classes because there is no financial support for childcare for me to come in the day."

"The fear of failure - of not understanding what is being taught - of being ridiculed or not understood by an instructor: all those wonderful experiences I had in public school! As a result I have a high standard for myself. Once I ease up on me then I can return."

"For me going to school and staying in school has been an emotional safety issue. All of my life I have to hide the fact that I had reading and writing difficulties. I was shamed of that fact that I could not read well. When it came time for me to do something about it. I found it impossible to face going back to school because of the fear I had. I believe if it had not been for a chance encounter with a tutor, who found out I had these problems, I would still be one of the low literacy statistics."

3. What has helped you to go to school? What kind of program works for you? What support do you get?

The majority of learners recognized their family and friends as the support system they need for success in school. Next they acknowledge the work of their and tutors, teachers, especially those with caring, patience and commitment to subject matter addressing the real learning needs of

adults. Many learners provided specific names of teachers and programs and wrote of their gratitude.

Successful literacy programs were most often described as safe environments that regarded learners as unique and respected their learning styles and pace. Almost all felt they learned most in interactive small groups with some one to one tutoring alternatives. As well, many listed fellow students as supporters. The best programs seem to break isolation and model community involvement in their approach and structure. The learning in these environments transcend reading and writing skills.

Those learners who were eligible / receiving financial support for their studies recognized this as the primary support in attending school. Most expressed gratitude to the government for this help in their comments.

Quotes:

"My family supports me to go to school. They don't want to see me depend on someone else. They want me to go as high as I can and I want to excel in my life."

"What helped was lots of positive encouragement and support of family and friends. Financial assistance from various organizations that promote learning, and learner-centered, individually paced programs that allow a tremendous amount of flexibility to the learner."

"I was lucky enough to first get into a combined upgrading/life skills program and the support of a community kitchen, parenting courses and general coping skills that were taught were wonderful. Also it meant a lot that the school geared itself so I was out of school when my child was. When I went into a regular program that was not there and I suffered for it."

"The first program that helped me was the local one on one tutoring program literacy program. With the help of my tutor I learned how to sound out words. This program also helped to build my self confidence. The most important support I received was emotional. The tutor created a safe environment for me to learn in. They validated my feeling instead of dismissing them. I am able to go to school and continue to work at the same time. If it was not for the flexible class times, I would not have been able to attend."

"The people in the literacy program are wonderful. There is coaching and people are all here for the same reasons. I enjoy being around everybody. The flexibility in class time helps when I have to put my kids first. I like the reading and writing together as a group. I get a lot of support from other learners."

4. How has your life changed since you have been going to school? (What can you do now that you couldn't do before?)

We wanted to find out what changes the learners noticed in themselves since going to school. Although they mention improved reading and writing levels or skills on the computer and other competencies; many of the changes they noted were not measured by tests or their teachers. Learners described their increased self-esteem, confidence, hope and ability to speak out for themselves. They often talked of gains in independence and the desire to help others.

Quotes:

"Well, I enjoy going to school. I think I read more, like the newspaper and books which helps me with the everyday. There are a few things I learned that probably would have made things in the past easier."

"I have more confidence in myself which touches every aspect of my life."

"I am now able to understand instructions, directions, labels, and signs. I am now able to make important daily decisions that can greatly affect the quality of life for me and my family. I am able to be a full participant in society. I feel more like a citizen and a part of this democracy and the democratic process where I never felt a part before. I am now more informed and am able to make decisions based on choices that I never had prior to getting an education."

"Now it makes me feel good when my children bring their homework home. I can sit down with them and understand what I am doing in their math, spelling and sentences."

"I can speak to people and look them in the eye."

"I have enough confidence to take on more responsibility in my community. I volunteer, work and place more value on me as a person than I did before."

"If I don't know I wait for them to talk and figure it out. Before I used to just turn off and feel stupid. Turned my emotions off in the past- now I don't feel bad about myself so I don't."

"Now that I understand what someone is saying (big words), I know how to answer them."

"Since I have been coming here, my marks at college have jumped from a D or C to A- or A+. It has made me realize that my dreams can come true."

"Before I came to the learning program I was unemployed because I didn't have self-confidence to look for a job but now I feel more loving with my life and myself. Life is definitely better than before."

"For me I can handle what comes up, where before I could not do. Now, I got my First Aid, Driver's License and food handlers, all because I can read."

"I have been at the learning program for three years and I am responsible for the attendance sheet. I can write letters and memos; something I couldn't do before. I can use the dictionary. I also read stories to my children and can read notes from the school that my children came home with. I also learned that I am a good person with a good attitude."

"Our children's respect for us grows as we learn to respect ourselves."

"I have a voice!"

5. What are your future literacy and life goals?

The answers that learners gave to this question about their future goals were as varied and unique as the learners themselves. Many beginning learners recognize a long road ahead and want to take things step by step. Other learners have dreams of their life's work. They speak for themselves in the sample responses that follow.

Quotes:

"I would really like to be able to write a short story or stories for children. I would also love to help anyone who needs help with any school problems."

"My future goal is to become a Personal Support Worker."

"I want to be a role model to my kids and family."

"I want to work and be able to provide for my children. I want to set a good example and get off of government assistance."

"I plan to become a Certified General Accountant, and maybe later, a Chartered Accountant."

"My goals are to get a better job and to keep on learning however and wherever I can."

"I would like to become an Environmental Researcher by attending Fleming College."

"My goal is to do an accounting course in college and after that I want to open my own business."

"I want to advocate for literacy and the family as a whole at the government level. To attend university and take political science."

"On my retirement I would like to read some novels and some newspapers. Maybe when my wife retires we could do some traveling and I could read some signs so we won't get lost."

"My plan for the future is in the next three years to finish my night school and get my college and become someone."

"I like arts and I want to take an interior designer course, if everything goes as I wish."

"My life goal is to hopefully get a paid job one day."

"I want to take a computer course."

"My goal is to become an Electrical Engineer."

"I would like to speak, to write and to read perfectly."

"To start with I would like to be able to upgrade both math and English to a grade twelve level. But most important to me is to go the University and earn a Master's in Psychology and become a councilor. I some day would love to help set up peer counseling for learners with low literacy."

6. What would you say are the most important points to include in a national plan for adult literacy?

Learners made suggestions about issues they would like addressed in a national learning plan. Although many of their ideas may not fall within federal jurisdiction, they have implications for any national plan and reflect the adult learner's reality. They called for:

- ✓ **funding for new and existing literacy programs**
- ✓ **voluntary participation in programs (forced attendance doesn't work)**
- ✓ **open access to literacy programs for all in need of literacy training**
- ✓ **supports while attending school: books/supplies, childcare, living allowances and transportation.**

- ✓ consultation with learners and inclusion in decision-making on issues effecting their education.
- ✓ learners valued and respected for their life experience and existing skills
- ✓ literacy as a right of all Canadians (should be written into the Charter of Rights)
- ✓ encourage quality literacy programs and teachers (as described in #3)
- ✓ promote learning and literacy as a societal value

Quotes:

"More programs than now and computers are needed. Keep everything but add programs so that more people can come and there's no wait to get in. On-site programs for kids too so that you can still go in the summer time."

"I think it would be good if childcare was provided. I also think it is best to let people set their own goals each week instead of telling them what they are going to do. I think allowing people to work and learn at their own pace gives you less stress and pressure. You want to work because you feel more relaxed. I also think more money should be given to literacy organizations to help them with all the work they do. That way they could hire more staff and have more learners."

"A government grant to those who would like to further their education. Money is usually the reason for not furthering education (or the lost wages of going back to school)."

"Take the focus off jobs, jobs, jobs. Learning is a process and one of the rewards is work, but it is only one of the rewards. The goal of literacy has to be learning not a career."

"To have a good education it is important to have access to a library, to have good exercise books and easy access to a computer."

"The plan should include enough money to take some of the pressure off and enough sense to acknowledge that as people learn they blossom and as they blossom they get more productive. One follows the other if the focus is on the learning not the product."

"Better funding for expanded better programs and increased existing programs to attract good enthusiastic teachers. Larger and more private spaces. Decreased waiting lists. Books: Canadian books!"

"Government should come in and speak to students in the programs."

"People who flee their countries should have access to a process that does not require them to have original certificates and diplomas."

"Culturally-appropriate needs assessment and programs should be available in all communities."

"Support groups, more one to one programs, more advertising to let people know that there is help out there and that they would be in a secure environment. A way that people could get counseling and assessment at a reduced cost."

"The government should put more money into programs so that people on welfare can learn to read and write. This would help that person to get a job and get off the system. They can be proud of themselves."

"Do not devalue learners. They are the ultimate consumers of literacy programs and they know better than anyone else what learners need, what they don't need, what works, and what doesn't work."

"More funding, more support, recognize learner's ability to read and write, dept of Ed must make literacy a priority, more public awareness of literacy problems and issues."

"Look at the possibilities of Learning Centers becoming credited centers. So we can upgrade and be credited without returning to a school / institution."

"Once programs are started they should be ongoing; short term programs do not meet the needs of most learners. There should be one entry process for programs/going back to school where learners are able to fill out all applications at one time and in one place."

"Information about learning and skill development programs needs to be available in all communities in recognized locations and easily available to all (1-800 numbers, cable TV, etc). If you can't read how are you going to find out what's available? Programs are needed for all ability levels"

"Learning supports and easy access (tutors, scribes, adapted evaluations, technological special equipment, etc.) are essential for adults with learning disabilities."

"Financial needs of students need to be individually assessed and recognized and career counseling needs to be readily available at all phases of training."

"More support for learners. Recognize learners as a person not a problem. See him or her for their abilities not as a hindrance."

"I believe that learners need to be supported financially, educationally and emotionally. What I mean by financially is that there be no tuition on ABE and that there be easier access to loans and grants for adult learners on assistance. That there always be free daycare for adult learners who are upgrading their schooling. What I mean by educationally is that there be enough room in programs for all the people who are willing to go back to school."

"At all skill levels funding is required to assist learners in providing feedback to government about the effectiveness of existing programs/services and about what would be more useful to them; go to them; don't expect them to come to you."

"Address the issue of low income in the adult learner's life."

"Have a conference every two years, so that many adult learners may get together and share some of their stories and their talents. Many have great talents that are hidden or never given the chance for recognition. This is huge to ones self-esteem and gives hope and courage that they can learn and are worthwhile, and have something to offer to the community. Planning a conference can be very exiting but also a learning process. It means commitment, team-work, organization skills, building confidence, growth and self awareness."

"Ensure that learners are included in every stage of the decision-making processes that evolve regarding adult literacy. The process must truly be totally inclusive rather than exclusionary. Bring all the stockholders together and share in the discussions and debates of all the players."

"One of the most important issue is that there be enough seats for adults"

that want to make a career change. There needs to be adequate financial assistance for the young adult learners. A student, who is a single parent, needs a proper facility for their small children to attend while they are in class."

"Be sure that the students have a way of talking to each other and reading about what is happening in their region and across the province/country. (electronic conferencing) Work toward getting a good computer in every student's home so they can practice on a daily basis."

"It is inexplicable that in a country as affluent and diverse as Canada, that we as a nation refuse to come to terms with the fact that X percent of Canadians are illiterate. Without drastic increases in funding from both private and public sectors, we may face a dismal future in the global arena."

"Adult learners are Canadians. They are part of this democratic system and they are voters. Most of those who do possess low literacy/numeracy skills are quite smart in many other ways. The fact alone that they have learned how to survive and exist in a culture so rich in information is in itself a testament to the perseverance and creativity they possess."

"Invest in Canada's # 1 resource - the people. When you educate one person it has a tremendous impact on that individual's family, their community, their province, and their country. When you invest in them, all Canadians benefit in so many ways."