

Workplace Essential Skills Program

Strategic Plan 2011-2014

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"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire"
William Butler Yeats

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Introduction

Development of the Workplace Essential Skills (WES) program began in the fall of 2009 in response to the reported low levels of literacy in the existing New Brunswick workforce¹ and indicators of a growing skills gap in the province as a result of changing labour demands.

The WES program offers an accelerated path for lower-skilled adults to gain the knowledge and skills they require for employment. The program aims to assist individuals who are employed and those who are actively seeking employment by providing a framework to acquire or enhance essential skills needed in today's labour market.

The Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour (PETL) has implemented and manages program delivery through a network of regional WES teams. Two Centres of Excellence (one for each official language) have been established in Collège communautaire du Nouveau Brunswick (CCNB), Bathurst and New Brunswick Community College (NBCC), Saint John. The goal is to support the program through specialized expertise in such areas as the development of learning content, prior-learning assessment, measurement, evaluation, and in providing other related tools and services.

Private sector partners include employers, business and industry associations, sector councils, unions, and non-governmental literacy organizations.

An implementation evaluation² was conducted in 2010, and the final report was submitted in February 2011. The main objectives of the evaluation were to: a) focus on achieving outputs and, where feasible, immediate outcomes; b) evaluate the extent to which the program is meeting the needs of its target beneficiaries; and c) evaluate the overall effectiveness of the current approaches to program delivery and design.

In addition to making a number of recommendations for improvement, the report highlighted many accomplishments and strengths. It concluded that the training provided meets the needs of the target groups and both learner and employer-focused outcomes have been met. This is supported by ongoing evaluation data which indicates that employers and learners are generally satisfied with the services provided and cite many positive outcomes.

The findings of the implementation evaluation and feedback from program staff, partners and stakeholders were taken into consideration within this strategic planning process. Steps were also taken to ensure that the *WES Strategic Plan* is driven by and consistent with the priorities outlined within *Working Together for Adult Literacy: An Adult Literacy Strategy for New Brunswick*.

¹ *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 2003*; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Statistics Canada

² *Implementation Evaluation of the NB Workplace Essential Skills (WES) Program, February 2011*; Goss Gilroy Inc., Ottawa

Definition of Essential Skills

Essential skills are the foundational skills required to successfully participate in the Canadian labour market. They help people perform the tasks required by their occupation, provide people with a foundation for learning other skills, and enhance people's ability to innovate and adapt to workplace change.³ Essential skills include:

- Reading – reading materials in the form of sentences and paragraphs
- Document Use – tasks that involve a variety of information displays in which words, numbers, symbols and other visual characteristics (e.g. lines, colours or, shapes) are given meaning by their spatial arrangement
- Numeracy – using numbers and thinking in quantitative terms to complete tasks
- Writing – writing text and writing in documents, such as filling in forms, and non-paper-based writing, such as typing on a computer
- Oral Communication – using speech to give and exchange thoughts and information
- Working with Others – employees working with others to carry out their tasks
- Thinking – The process of evaluating ideas or information to reach a rational decision
- Computer Use – using different kinds of computer applications and other related technical tools
- Continuous Learning – Worker's participation in an ongoing process of acquiring skills and knowledge

The International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS), 2003, measured proficiency across four of these domains (essential skills), grouping scores into proficiency levels one through five. Within the study, level three was defined as the "desired level" of competence, often referred to as "functional level" i.e. the level that enables adults to function adequately at home, at work and in their communities.

Benefits

Within the workplace, companies have consistently reported the following types of benefits of workplace essential skills training:

- improved product/service quality
- improved health and safety practices
- improved recruitment and retention
- improved communication amongst team members.



³ Essential Skills: Skills to Build On, 2007; Human Resources and Social Development Canada

Companies also indicated increased employee confidence, leading to greater employee engagement and increased ability to undertake further training. This contributes to greater productivity and flexibility, and ultimately economic competitiveness and success.

Additionally, those seeking employment cited benefits such as increased confidence when seeking employment, access to work experience and jobs. And, there is evidence from both employed and unemployed learners that an interest in continued and further learning is also a common, positive outcome.

The WES Program

Vision

All current and potential employees in New Brunswick gain the essential skills they need to meet the changing demands of the workplace.

Target group

The WES program has two distinct target client groups – individuals who are already employed and those who are actively seeking employment (employables). The table below defines the program target groups in more detail.

Employed	Employable
Adults with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">below functional level (level 3) skills in one or more essential skills, including at least one of the core literacy skills⁴ Note: Additional focus is on occupations within targeted priority sectors ⁵	Adults (aged 18 and over) who: <ul style="list-style-type: none">are case managed⁶have an occupational goal, andhave a skill gap in one or more entry level essential skills, including at least one of the core literacy skills

Secondary Beneficiaries

Although the learners are the primary beneficiaries of this program, there is also a clear, secondary beneficiary group - that of employers.

⁴ Core Literacy Skills: Document Use, Reading, Writing, Numeracy

⁵ Targeted priority sectors: 1) Trade, finance, insurance, real estate and leasing; 2) Manufacturing; 3) Health care and social assistance; 4) Construction; 5) Accommodation and Food Services; as defined in *Literacy in New Brunswick; Implications of findings from IALSS 2003, 2006*, Learning Policy Directorate, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

⁶ Referred by Employment Development, Social Development, Public Safety or Worksafe NB.

The employer focus for employed learners is small and medium-sized businesses. Incubation services⁷ only will be offered to large employers and government agencies. For initiatives targeting employable individuals, the employer focus will be determined according to regional labour needs.

Products/Services

The following table outlines the products/services that the WES program offers to New Brunswickers, and what differentiates them from other training or essential skills training options:

	Employed	Employable
Service/product	Tools, resources and expertise for employers and employees, to encourage and facilitate adult learning opportunities in work-related essential skills	Tools, resources and expertise to facilitate adult learning opportunities in work-related essential skills, as a pathway to further education or employment
Differentiator	Focus on adults with low literacy and essential skills levels	

Priorities

A number of strategic priorities have been identified to support the vision:

- 1. Increase reach and capacity**
- 2. Clarify measures of success and establish key performance indicators**
- 3. Further improve quality and effectiveness of service delivery**
- 4. Develop and enhance strategic partnerships**

Priority 1: Increase reach and capacity

Ref: ⁸WTP 1, 2

The initial roll-out of the WES Program was met with significant demand from employers and learners which has exceeded the capacity of some regions. In order to reach more adults with a range of essential skills levels and needs, different motivations and different circumstances, it is important to offer a diversity of learning opportunities in a variety of environments.

⁷The provision of tools, resources and expertise to initiate and nurture the development of workplace essential skills training as an integral feature of workplace learning within an organization, with the aim of the employer taking ownership of and facilitating WES training on an ongoing basis.

⁸ Each priority is cross-referenced to the associated Working Together for Adult Literacy: An Adult Literacy Strategy for New Brunswick priority (WTP).

Objectives:

1. Explore and develop alternative options for service delivery through:

- Strategic partnerships
- Embedding essential skills training within other training opportunities
- Diverse tools and approaches

The work setting provides a wealth of relationships and contexts (e.g. unions, trade associations, mentors and coaches etc.) which will be utilized to enhance access to workplace essential skills training. Key partnerships will be developed in a controlled manner to test alternative models of delivery, such as provincial partnerships, incubation of services within larger companies, and “hub” models (training for learners from small and medium-sized businesses with similar essential skill needs or coming from similar occupational profiles).

Essential skills do not stand alone. They represent the foundation for all other learning and skills development. Opportunities to embed essential skills development within existing, formal and informal learning situations, and to address essential skills challenges in the routine work context, will be explored and developed.

Diversity of programming, flexibility in delivery methods and relevant, contextualized resources are all important to encouraging adults to take up opportunities to develop their skills. Informed by a literature review of barriers to adult learning, new, innovative delivery approaches for both level one and level two⁹ learners will be explored. A small number deemed to have potential for success in the New Brunswick context will be identified for testing.

2. Develop infrastructure to support shared ownership of workplace essential skills training

One of the most significant developments within the WES program is that of strategic partnerships to foster new, innovative and collaborative approaches to the provision of essential skills training. This implies, in some cases, that ownership of essential skills services will be shared with non-government organizations.

In this environment, it is important that the WES program define and develop the appropriate mechanisms for assuring quality, consistency and communication across all stakeholders.

PETL has already developed a Quality Framework for Adult Literacy and Essential Skills Service Delivery in New Brunswick (see priority 3) and will take measures to ensure that all new service delivery partners are accountable within the terms of this framework.

⁹ IALSS proficiency levels

3. Develop awareness of work-related essential skills needs

Experience to date shows that employer awareness of literacy and essentials skills needs is limited and that learners lack awareness of their need to improve their skills. Best practice from other jurisdictions will guide effective approaches to meeting these challenges and raising awareness across all stakeholders.

4. Ensure a clearly defined budget that is allocated in accordance with the requirements of the funding sources and provides adequate funding for the two target groups

At present, and until March 2014, the Canada New Brunswick Labour Market Agreement (LMA) provides funding for programs targeting employed individuals. Current funding for unemployed individuals is limited, thereby constraining services for this target group.

PETL will continue to work towards ensuring appropriate funding for both target groups.

5. Maximize employer contributions as part of funding model

Some employers do currently invest in the WES training for their employees through monetary and in-kind contributions of employee paid time for assessment and/or training, training space etc. However, it is important to continue to focus on encouraging as much of an employer contribution as possible to encourage ownership, foster a culture of workplace learning and work towards sustainability.

Priority 2: Clarify measures of success and establish key performance indicators

Ref: ¹⁰WTPAs

As development of the program has progressed, it has become apparent that essential skills training is not the only service offered with value to learners and/or employers. Occupational profiles, training needs assessments and individual learning plans also seem to have significant value as discrete deliverables. The program team will explore this concept in more detail to clearly define the value proposition for each program deliverable. Over time, it has also become apparent that different stakeholders have different measures of success. We will analyze these different measures, determine which of them are appropriate and measurable, and ensure that they are reflected in the program evaluation framework. We will establish key performance indicators to monitor progress and success.

Objectives:

1. Establish and communicate well-defined measures of success

A clear understanding of measures of success and the development of key performance indicators is vital to fully and clearly demonstrate the value of the program to all stakeholders.

¹⁰ Each priority is cross-referenced to the associated *Working Together for Adult Literacy: An Adult Literacy Strategy for New Brunswick* priority (WTP).

Initially, a comprehensive evaluation framework was established for the WES program, covering different measures and requiring significant amounts of data to be captured, recorded and reported. Once the program was underway, it became clear that different partners had their own definition of success for their client group. There are also challenges with evaluation tools and, additionally, changes to evaluation tools have further complicated this area. The development of alternative delivery models where the WES program facilitates others to lead the actual delivery will likely present further challenges.

We will communicate performance indicators through regular and frequent communication with stakeholders.

2. Achieve appropriate balance between administration, coordination and service delivery

The current service delivery model is proving to be administration-heavy. Initial calculations of cost per learner indicate that this delivery model is comparatively costly. However, this calculation is based on a simple measure of number of learners and does not take into account other potential deliverables.

We will review the cost per learner measure and refine, as appropriate. We will develop measures to streamline processes to find efficiencies in administration, coordination and service delivery.

Priority 3: Further improve quality and effectiveness of service delivery Ref: ¹¹WTP 3

PETL launched the Quality Framework for Literacy and Essential Skills Service Delivery in New Brunswick (Quality Framework) in February 2011. The framework applies to all adult literacy and essential skills service delivery undertaken by, on behalf of, or funded by the Government of New Brunswick. The framework includes a set of quality standards and a quality assurance model outlining operational support for quality assessment, internal assessment and external assessment. This enables program staff and service delivery partners to gain an understanding of quality as it relates to literacy and essential skills service delivery.

The framework will help identify strengths and weaknesses in relation to the standards and provides an access point for support to meet these standards.

Additionally, learners have a right to expect meaningful outcomes from their learning and for their learning to be recognized within relevant jurisdictions. Wherever possible, learning should result in recognition and certification that is widely accepted and transferable. There should also be clearly defined learning pathways so they can make informed choices consistent with their goals.

¹¹ Each priority is cross-referenced to the associated *Working Together for Adult Literacy: An Adult Literacy Strategy for New Brunswick* priority (WTP).

Through the next phase of implementation of the Quality Framework, we will undertake initial pilot projects for mentored internal assessment. These will include WES service delivery in one region. The goal is to develop an internal assessment guide and tools, which will be provided to all those involved in service delivery.

Objectives:

1. Develop a detailed quality improvement plan, to include:

a. Processes/tools for monitoring quality – especially of end-user experience (training)

In alignment with the implementation of the Quality Framework¹², a number of processes/tools have been developed by the Centres of Excellence to assure consistent quality of service delivery across all regions.

b. Standards – consistency, administration

Given the fast pace of development over the last 18 months, administrative guidelines, processes and tools have changed frequently, leading to some inconsistency across the regions. We will reaffirm standards and review and revise guidelines. To ensure a common understanding, all changes and revisions will be communicated to staff.

c. Assessment

Having worked with processes and tools for the different levels of assessment, regional staff has identified issues of continuity and integrity as it relates to adult learning principles. We will undertake a holistic review of assessment within the program and develop recommendations for improvement.

d. Application of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

Processes and tools are at various stages of development for the appropriate and effective use of PLAR within the program. We will assign resources to continue to focus on developing this area, using established best practices as benchmarks.

e. Learning resources – more appropriate, contextualized

Given the relatively short duration of WES interventions, it is important to ensure that the training is as focused and relevant as possible. One key element of this is learning materials that are contextualized to the work environment/s of learners. Over time, a database of contextualized resources has been developed, but each new initiative brings challenges in this area. We will continue to develop and provide a selection of materials for different sectors and types of business.

¹²Quality Framework for Adult Literacy and Essential Skills Service Delivery in New Brunswick, 2011

2. Develop sustainable professional development model for WES staff and 3rd party service providers

The quality of service delivery depends largely on the skills and knowledge of the staff providing those services. We will continue to support professional development and facilitate sharing of best practices and success stories, on an ongoing basis.

3. Develop WES as an accepted entry requirement to post-secondary institutions

To be meaningful to learners, WES training needs to be part of an accepted pathway to post-secondary education and/or employment. CCNB and Apprenticeship & Occupational Certification are currently undertaking pilots whereby WES training is provided as a precursor to pre-employment training¹³. The objective of these pilots is to determine if WES training prepares an adult for pre-employment training as well as or better than other entry pathways. We will develop a detailed plan to map out the remaining steps required to move towards full acceptance of the appropriateness of WES training as a learning pathway.

4. Work towards accreditation of WES training

The WES training pilot project at CCNB Bathurst has been developed in such a way as to meet the standards required by CCNB for certification. We will continue to explore the viability and options relating to accreditation of WES training.

Priority 4: Develop and enhance strategic partnerships Ref: ¹⁴WTP 4

Stakeholders from government, industry, business, labour and community can all play a role in the potential success of WES training. Although some strong partnerships have been developed regionally, we will work to develop and enhance strategic partnerships at both provincial and regional levels.

Objectives:

1. Align partnerships with strategic direction

A lack of clarity exists regarding the mutual expectations of strategic partners. We will work towards clarifying respective roles and responsibilities, levels of accountability, expected outcomes, etc.

2. Improve linkages with adult literacy and essential skills partners

In recognition that learners have different needs and varied situations, we will provide a range of pathways to improving skills. Community-based adult literacy and essential skills partners can offer alternatives to and support for WES training. We will improve linkages in order to serve learners better.

¹³ CCNB pilots are focused on pre-employment courses that currently require High School Diploma, an Adult High School Diploma, or a Diploma of High School Equivalency (GED) as an entry requirement.

¹⁴ Each priority is cross-referenced to the associated *Working Together for Adult Literacy: An Adult Literacy Strategy for New Brunswick* priority (WTP).

3. Ensure consistent and reliable communication with stakeholders

Experience to date has highlighted the challenges and importance of persistent and timely communication across all stakeholders. We will further develop communication protocols to address these challenges.

Measuring Progress

As outlined earlier, we will work towards clarifying meaningful measures of success and ensuring that we have the tools and processes in place to record and report on progress. We will review the current evaluation framework that drives the capture of both quantitative and qualitative data.

With regard to the strategic priorities outlined in the Workplace Essential Skills Strategic Plan, relevant areas for measures of success would include:

- Detailed action plan to support the strategy
- Learner participation
- Employer participation
- Strategic partnerships
- Shared ownership of WES service delivery
- Employer investment in WES initiatives
- Number and diversity of learning options
- Innovative programming
- Implementation of the Quality Framework for Adult Literacy and Essential Skills Service Delivery
- Learners gaining recognized and/or accredited learning outcomes
- Key performance indicators for the WES program
- Reporting mechanisms for provincial progress against pre-defined goal targets and/or performance measures, as they pertain to the strategy
- Improved quality.

Action Plan

A detailed provincial action plan has been developed to support the WES Strategic Plan. The provincial action plan will feed each WES regional action plan, helping in the determination of specific targets and objectives for each regional WES team.