

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**17<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL PANEL DISCUSSION**

## **Fostering Progress: Strengthening Connections**

**October 26, 2022**



## 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Panel Discussion

# Fostering Progress: Strengthening Connections

*Shirley Graham, Ottawa Carleton District School Board - retired. Winner of 2021 TESL Ontario Distinguished Contribution Award (Moderator)*

*Stefany Cutuli, Manager, Settlement Network, Ontario Region, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada*

*Yvonne Ferrer, Director of Settlement Services, Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development*

*Pauline McNaughton, Manager, Enhanced Programming, Skills Development and Apprenticeship Branch, Student Achievement Division, Ontario Ministry of Education*

### Overview

Canada is committed to immigration as a key economic engine. To that end, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD), and the Ministry of Education, Ontario (MEDU) are all grappling with record numbers of new permanent residents. At the same time, the country is experiencing significant increases in humanitarian arrivals, notably from Ukraine. These newcomers are welcomed with an array of services and training opportunities to integrate in the community and economic life.

As the country emerges from the pandemic, some changes linger, such as the array of learning modalities offered. At the same time, the demand for services is picking up and waitlists are growing, presenting challenges. These organizations are each working to ensure the most efficient delivery of services and are looking at innovative ways to meet the economic and personal needs of newcomers. They are also taking steps to make digital tools more seamless and accessible for instructors.

### Context

The theme for the panel was **Fostering Progress: Strengthening Connections**. To that end, the different Canadian and provincial ministries provided updates and underscored both their partnerships and distinctive offerings as the country emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic but faces new geopolitical forces affecting migration patterns.

### Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

Stefany Cutuli shared IRCC's initiatives as Canada welcomes record numbers of newcomers. Language training is a major component of the settlement programs. IRCC's learnings from the pandemic provide a pathway to offering flexible options to meet the needs of the most people.

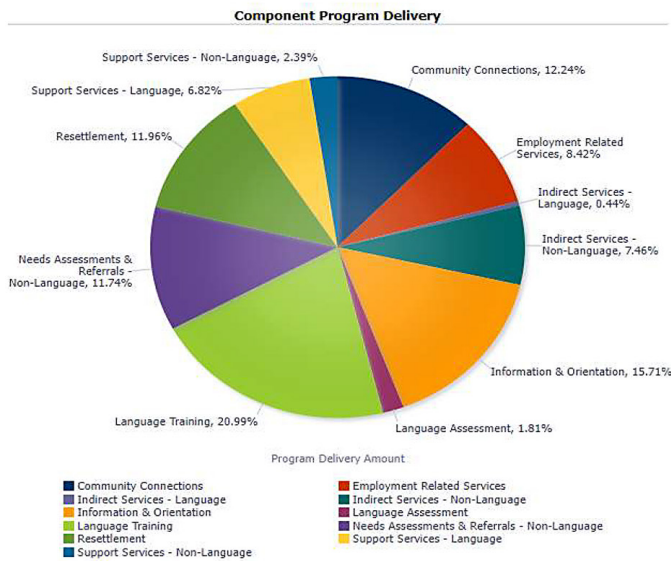
**Canada's immigration levels are increasing according to economic objectives, placing a premium on the varied settlement programs offered.**

Canada remains committed to increasing immigration targets to benefit its economy. Last year, Canada welcomed over 400,000 new permanent residents, the most immigrants in a single year in the country's history. This trend will continue as Canada relies on immigration to ensure a sufficient labour force in the face of an aging population and declining fertility. Amidst this surge in immigration, Francophone migration is also increasing, as Canada works to a target of 4.4% of Francophone immigrants outside of Quebec by 2023.

Even as economic needs are the core of Canada's immigration policy, settlement services represent a whole-of-society approach to support the diverse needs of all permanent residents and help newcomers gain necessary skills and tools to succeed. These six streams are:

1. Language training
2. Needs assessment and referral
3. Information and orientation
4. Employment-related services to prepare for the workforce
5. Community connections
6. Support services to facilitate access

## Language Sector in Ontario



Growing number of service providers offering in-person language training

A continuation of various online delivery models

Extension of Covid-19 funding flexibilities to support responsive service delivery

Settlement is national but delivery is managed at the regional or provincial level, so IRCC partners closely with its counterparts.

Language training is a key element of the settlement program to settle into a community and improve employability.

Language proficiency is the key to successful social and economic settlement and integration. Language programs to help newcomers improve their English and French language skills in order to establish connections to their communities must be flexible and responsive because these newcomers have diverse needs.

IRCC's language programs are designed for adults. The approach is standardized and practical. At the same time, it is also flexible: in the types of services that providers offer, in the availability of courses and schedules, in the modes of delivery, and in the focus of the courses.

IRCC's settlement approach has evolved from being largely focusing on providing immigrants with basic language training to a larger program with more varied offerings, including basic literacy, employment-related language training, and training in both official languages, adapted to the need of French speaking newcomers settling in Francophone minority communities.

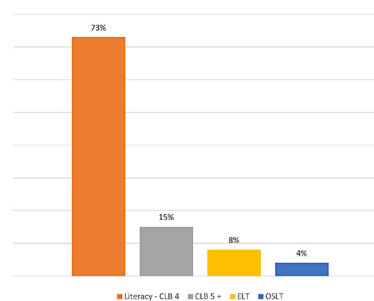
Investments in language training reflect the government's priorities, notably literacy to CLB 4 level.

Language is a major investment of the settlement program both across the country and in Ontario, resulting in about 30% of spending. This includes language training, language assessment, support services, and indirect services. Because the pandemic is not over, IRCC has extended COVID-related funding flexibilities.

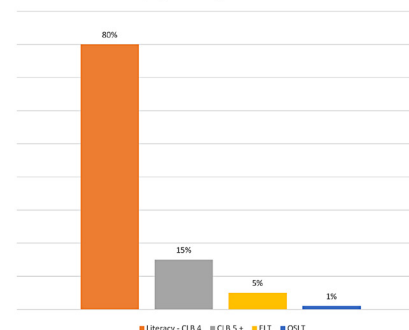
In spite of COVID, there was little interruption in language training, as programs were adapted to virtual formats. Service providers remained flexible as health and safety measures evolved. Currently programs are trending back to in-person but many continue to opt for the other delivery models including hybrid, blended, and asynchronous.

### Breakdown of IRCC-Funded Courses in Ontario

IRCC-Funded Language Training Courses in 2021-2022



IRCC Language Training Courses for 2022-2023



The vast majority of IRCC-funded courses in Ontario are literacy through CLB 4. The slight changes from year to year underscore IRCC's commitment to flexibility in response to client needs.

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*"IRCC continues to focus language investments at the literacy through CLB 4, as it continues to be the priority of the department."*

*Stefany Cutuli, IRCC*

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#### Language training is experiencing a significant uptake this year, even as the digital learning environment is expanding.

The number of monthly assessments has more than doubled this year, and enrollment is also up. One driver in the rapid uptake in language assessments is the arrival of displaced Ukrainians. This increased demand leads to the urgency of effectively managing waitlists to ensure as many people as possible can access language training. IRCC is continually monitoring waitlists in an effort to make adjustments and better meet needs. IRCC is aware of an increase in demand for evening and weekend classes.

The work and learning environment continues to evolve. The integrated national platform, Avenue, is gaining popularity, with over 47,000 user accounts. Its predecessor had only a tiny fraction of that amount. Avenue is the subject of ongoing product enhancements to be more accessible and flexible. The integration with Tutela is a significant undertaking. It will allow instructors to access Tutela within their Avenue account and import resources. Avenue is also developing a mobile app to increase its flexibility on tablets and smartphones.

#### IRCC is committed to continually improving its services and has identified specific areas of focus.

IRCC is looking ahead to ensure it is best meeting the needs of clients and the community. Key initiatives include:

- Continuing to respond to the needs of clients by improving access to tools, training, resources and professional development. It is learning from experience to optimize online and hybrid instruction.
- Enhancing ongoing efforts to incorporate indigenous history and perspective into programming to strengthen newcomers' understanding of Canada.
- Remaining committed to Canada's two official languages and renewing programming targets for French speaking newcomers.
- Preparing for the next call for proposals, as current contribution agreements are set to expire in 2025. This involves determining processes and priorities for the next round.
- Making waitlists a key priority.

## Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD)

Yvonne Ferrer offered an overview of the MLTSD's notable accomplishments and challenges. As assessment numbers rise to pre-pandemic levels, the hope is that enrollment will follow. In anticipation, there has been a focus on creating efficiency, eliminating duplication, and addressing waitlists, in partnership with the national government.

#### Historically high levels of immigration reflect both economic needs and geopolitical developments.

Canada is experiencing historically high levels of incoming migration of all types. New permanent residents are joined by large numbers of humanitarian arrivals. Canada has set high targets for Afghan refugees, resulting in high numbers of refugee claimants. The many arrivals from Ukraine highlight the need for language training, as 60% of Ukrainian clients have been assessed at CLB level 1-4.

At the same time, Ontario continues to face a significant labour shortage and is relying on immigration as a key strategy to deal with it. In spite of this, immigrant skills continue to be underutilized, with language barriers being one important hurdle that contributes to immigrant underemployment.

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*"Language barrier is not the only barrier, but it's an important barrier that contributes to the underutilization of immigrant skills, and it's a barrier to effective participation in the community but also in the labour market."*

*Yvonne Ferrer, MLTSD*

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#### MLTSD offers an array of services to facilitate settlement and community participation.

To meet the varied needs of these arrivals, Ontario offers an array of services to a large number of clients. These services aim to facilitate finding community, building language skills, and furthering career goals.

### Settlement Programs-at-a-Glance

<p><b>Newcomer Settlement</b></p> <p>Multilingual information, orientation and referral services to help newcomers start their lives in Ontario and integrate successfully.</p> <p>~ 76,000 annual clients</p>	<p><b>Language Training</b></p> <p>Language assessment and training to help adult immigrants gain the language skills they need to live and work in Ontario.</p> <p>~ 47,000 annual clients</p>
<p><b>Language Interpreter Services</b></p> <p>24/7 language interpreter services to help survivors of domestic or sexual violence with language barriers access community, healthcare, and legal services.</p> <p>~ 9,000 annual clients</p>	<p><b>Bridge Training</b></p> <p>Occupation-specific training, licensure preparation and employment supports to help skilled immigrants obtain employment in their field</p> <p>~5,000 annual clients</p>

The last year has been one of pandemic recovery and associated growth, along with ongoing challenges.

As society begins to move on from the pandemic, some lost ground is being made up. But there remain hurdles as evidence of the massive disruption that occurred.

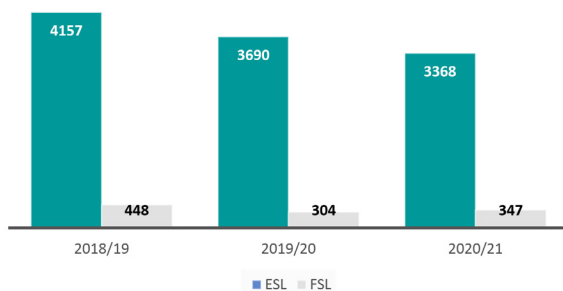
Noteworthy successes in the past year include:

- Significant growth in the number of online and employment-related and occupation-specific curriculum resources available to ESL instructors, which are now deployed in ONYX. This supports the ongoing interest in hybrid and online learning.
- Pandemic recovery signs including increased participation in in-person learning and return to pre-pandemic volume for language assessment (but not yet in language training).
- Guidelines for class size, attendance, and waitlists released at the start of the school year to ensure the greatest efficiency in filling class seats.

Data tracking outcomes and what is working well also reveals several challenges.

- Enrollment remains significantly below pre pandemic levels (47,000 compared to 70,000), although it's creeping up. There is a reduction in courses as well.

### Number of Courses Delivered Annually

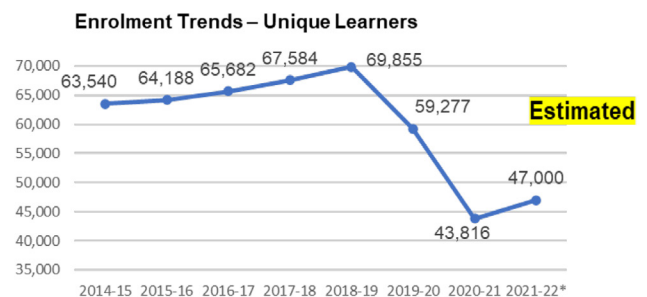


- Learning retention is a concern since about half of all language learners participate in less than 100 hours of language training, which results in difficulty achieving measurable outcomes. In fact, the results show that learners with more than 200 hours of training exhibit much better language progression than those with less than 200 hours. (77% compared to 41%)

### Language learners skew to working-age females with some education.

The increase in assessment volumes will hopefully result in comparable increases in language training in the coming months.

### Trends in Enrollment of Unique Learners



Current learners are overwhelmingly of working age and mostly female. More than half have some post-secondary education. The proportion of refugee claimants has increased from 22% in 2018-19 to nearly 29% in 2020-21, reflecting the trends in humanitarian arrivals. At the same time, there is a decrease in participation from naturalized citizens. This may be because in today's tight labour market, they are finding sufficient opportunities.

### MLITSD's priorities for the coming year emphasize a pragmatic approach to efficiently delivering services.

The Ministry will continue to partner with IRCC on service coordination. This is vital, as the enrollment recovery continues and creates waitlists and other pressures. The national and provincial governments will also continue to work on reducing duplication while ensuring that clients without other options can participate in provincial programs.

The integration of the Onyx curriculum resources into Avenue is a priority, with the goal of a single learning management system by next September. MLITSD shared an inventory of employment-related curriculum with ESL language instructors to enhance employment outcomes. In general, MLITSD utilizes ongoing measurement to support an approach of continuous improvement.

## Ministry of Education in Ontario (MEDU)

Pauline McNaughton shared exciting changes to open up possibilities for adults to earn credit based on recognition of prior skills and experience. School board adult education programs often include innovative offerings for career preparation in healthcare, apprenticeship and other areas, while also supporting transitions to a variety of post-secondary education and training pathways.

### Adult credit programs are attracting younger learners and offering flexible modes of instruction.

In the past decade, enrollment in Adult, Alternative, and Continuing education programs has supported youth, with about half of participants between 18 and 25. A high percentage of adult learners are also immigrants to Canada.

Significant funding is provided to school boards to support Adult and Continuing Education programs: over \$90 million in 2020-21. Even before the pandemic, delivery was becoming increasingly flexible, and the programs continue to evolve as the balance of in-person and hybrid/online options changes post COVID. The modalities include in-person, remote, online, self-study and correspondence, and cooperative education. Moreover, learners' options include continuous intake, semesters, or quad masters, or up to six terms per year.

### Continuing education for adults has been expanded in key ways, as adults can leverage prior knowledge and skills.

The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Policy (PLAR) is a process whereby the knowledge and skills that adults have acquired—in both formal and informal ways, outside of secondary school—are recognized for credit. It is a formal evaluation process approved by the principals to earn credit towards an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

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*"PLAR has not changed, it's definitely a way that adults can get recognition for the knowledge and skills that they bring, which is so relevant to newcomers."*

*Pauline McNaughton, MEDU*

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One change to PLAR is the revised mandatory requirements that took effect earlier this year. The word "mandatory" is stressed to increase consistent uptake of the PLAR process across school boards, so that it is more consistently available and supported. The goal is to ensure that all adults have access to PLAR to expedite their process.

Another key change is to update the definition of a mature student qualifications for PLAR. The new definition makes clear that a student who is 18 can access PLAR without having to be out of school for a year. Making it a straight 18-year-old requirement

expands the opportunity for students who were behind their peers, enabling them to catch up expeditiously.

School boards can intervene and provide support to help obtain credits and prepare students for PLAR. MEDU has engaged in outreach and intensive training with school boards to improve their understanding and ability to support PLAR. The net result is a significant increase in awareness at the secondary level about this vital opportunity to account for these skills.

### Integration with local school boards enables newcomers to more easily pursue a pathway to their career.

As a result of integration possible at the local school board level across non-credit language training, literacy and basic skills and adult credit programs, newcomers arriving with varying levels of education can receive guidance and career counselling to understand the pathways available to them to complete a high school diploma or prerequisite courses required in order to move forward with their careers through postsecondary education and training. Many school boards are able to intervene earlier to help newcomers plan an integrated pathway to achieving a level of employment closer to the career they left behind.

School boards offer a variety of employment-related opportunities combined with earning a secondary school diploma. These options provide ways for an immigrants to access additional training in a field where they already have familiarity. For example, the Personal Support Worker initiative may help immigrants from healthcare backgrounds who are seeking employment, or who may be upskilling to pursue nursing or other frontline healthcare areas.

MEDU is continuing to fund school board PSW programs for the coming year, with PSW students eligible for up to \$2000 to cover equipment, supplies, and fees, as well as a grant for the required work placement. CESBA, the adult and continuing education school board administrators' body, has a dedicated PSW support person, working hand in glove with the school board PSW programs the ministry is funding.

### Outside of school boards, the MEDU looks for ways to support adult learners in obtaining credentials and moving forward on their career path.

Other flexible options outside of school boards are through the Independent Learning Centre (ILC). For some, GED is the best option to get a high school equivalency credential and open up opportunities. Another option, the dual credit school college work initiative, allows eligible high school students to take college or apprenticeship courses to count toward a diploma, postsecondary certificate, or certificate of apprenticeship. The program has a specific component for adult learners who are new to Ontario, so they have flexibility to explore their options. This program offers the opportunity to earn secondary credit and college credit at the same time and explore post-secondary education pathways.

## Discussion

After the presentations, the moderator conducted a facilitated discussion with the panelists. This was followed by an opportunity for the participants to raise additional issues and questions. Comments from this discussion are summarized below.

**MLITSD funding has caused uncertainty.** Notwithstanding the need for timely communication about funding levels, a number of factors in recent years caused delays: transition between ministries, elections, etc. Current funding agreements with school boards expire in March and the expectation is that future funding levels will soon be communicated so that organizations have sufficient time to plan. While there have been funding cuts, enrollment has fallen more. MLITSD is monitoring the trends and may implement adjustments based on need.

**TESL confronts labour challenges.** Organizations are seeing labour shortages at administrative and instructional levels due to funding uncertainty, salary non-competitiveness, and staff burn-out. However, agencies like IRCC fund a range of organizations, which can discuss staffing challenges with their program officer. MLITSD's funding model has not changed. The cap requires target enrollment to meet the cap, but the program has also increased the flexibility to adjust to whatever are current needs.

**System capacity is challenged in light of increases in immigration levels and waitlists.** IRCC believes that the best solutions to addressing waitlisting capacity are collaboration between funders and settlement service providers and examining current service models. In addition, national and provincial authorities must work together to address emerging issues.

The arrivals reflect the managed immigration targets, the commitments to bring 40,000 Afghan refugees in the coming years, and the influx of Ukrainian nationals. While more than 640,000 Ukrainian individuals have applied for visas, the arrivals lag so far, and only 74,000 have arrived to date. While half of arrivals typically stay in Ontario, Ukrainians have shown an increased interest in moving to other parts of the country. In any case, all stakeholders will need to work closely to ensure capacity. The Ontario authorities have met recently with assessment centres to understand the nature of the bottleneck.

For adult credit learners, school boards will conduct business planning to increase capacity. The MEDU notes that the funding is there, within reason, to ensure sufficient infrastructure.

**The government at the national and provincial level will continue to support quality assurance in ESL.** The national government uses certification of minimum requirements to teach English or French as a second language. Ontario has distinct requirements from other provinces as well. The flexibility of online and hybrid service delivery requires stakeholders to continue to build the appropriate curriculum.

The MEDU funds CESBA as its primary provincial stakeholder group and upholder of many of its priorities. Turnover at the school board level necessitates additional training and workshops to keep up the service level.

**Little training will be required to use the Onyx integration with Avenue.** This exciting prospect is meant to remove barriers for instructors. Program administrations can reach out to Avenue to discuss options to use Avenue and make it simple and accessible.

**There are options available to adults with post-secondary experience outside of Canada in addition to the high school diploma/PLAR route.** All post-secondary institutions, universities, private career colleges and the like have mature pathway options, and a number have access programs for immigrants so they should not have to earn a high school diploma if they are already at or beyond that level. However, adult immigrants sometimes come into an adult credit program, regardless of whether they are seeking a high school diploma for other reasons. They may be seeking a more structured way to build language skills relevant to a particular pathway or want some cooperative education opportunity. In addition, the revised PLAR policy allows for recognition of courses taken at a Canadian post-secondary institution, removing a significant barrier to further degree programs.

**The MLITSD guidelines on minimum and maximum class size and waitlist management are meant to ensure efficient use of resources.** MLITSD is proactively monitoring learner attendance and waitlists. The minimum class size is set for 10 learners for core and workplace language, and five learners for literacy courses. The maximums range from 10 to 30, depending on the level. MLITSD recognizes regional variation may require variances, since a minimum of 10 learners may not be possible in some locations. Those providers should contact the Ministry. They are also asked to assess the viability of combining two small classes where possible.

**MLITSD cap on funding in light of immigration increases.** All MLITSD services are capped, not just language training, which had previously been excepted. When the Ministry provides funding, it approves a level to which the organization needs to manage the funding. The Ministry cannot preclude funding increases in the future if immigration increases, but it would be based on an assessment of current conditions and the overall department budget.

**It is challenging to combine anti-racism objectives with trends around online learning.** Online and hybrid learning need to support inclusivity and anti-racism, even as the students are not physically together and forming community. These learning modalities are still in transition and this challenge may be addressed by bringing an inclusion and equity lens to the delivery model. Most do not currently offer opportunities for learners to interact, so they may need to evolve to prioritize relationships in online programming. In addition, even as online is necessary to meet certain people's needs, in-person training continues giving those participants the classroom community experience that instructors strive for.

## Summary

Canada's commitment to welcoming newcomers is notable, even against the backdrop of record numbers of arrivals and while still reeling in the aftermath the consequences of the global pandemic. Many Canadians may be surprised by the number of immigrants admitted into the country thus far in 2022, and may not be aware of how the arrival of immigrants helps the long-term vitality of Canada's economy. A particular issue the country is facing right now is the uncertain path forward for Ukrainians who have applied for entry into Canada.

The agencies responsible for language training for immigrants are working diligently to provide efficient and relevant services, combining flexible modes of learning with a range of curriculum offerings that meet different educational and employment objectives. Systemic improvements among the agencies, such as integrating digital platforms, are key steps to improving delivery of services and meeting the high demand for language training and other services.

## Biographies

### Stefany Cutuli

Stefany Cutuli is a Manager in the Settlement Network (SN) – Ontario Region, Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Stefany is responsible for the geographic areas of Peel, Halton and Northern Ontario. She also has responsibility in the Language program stream as the lead for Settlement Network Ontario. She has worked 16 years in IRCC in various roles within the Settlement Network and in the Refugee Unit in IRCC's Domestic Network.

### Yvonne Ferrer

Yvonne Ferrer is the Director of Settlement Services at the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. In this role, Yvonne is responsible for developing policy directions for programs and initiatives that support the social and economic integration of newcomers, overseeing the delivery of settlement, adult language training and bridge training services including administration of over 150 agreements with service delivery partners, and developing policy and program initiatives to address foreign qualification recognition barriers to help immigrants overcome labour market integration barriers. Yvonne has extensive experience leading policy and operations in the fields of immigration, women's issues, justice programs, housing policy, and community initiatives in the social, arts and environmental sectors.

### Pauline McNaughton

Pauline McNaughton is Manager of the Enhanced Programming unit of the Skills Development and Apprenticeship Branch in the Ministry of Education, with responsibility for a number of policy and program areas to support student achievement for students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 and Adult Learners. This includes Adult and Continuing Education, School College Work Initiative and Dual Credit program, summer programs (credit and non-credit) and tutoring support programs. Pauline has worked for over 12 years with the Ontario Government and more broadly in the adult education sector for over 25 years in the school board, college and non-profit organizations.





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