

Each year, Calgary Learns convenes local providers of foundational adult learning programs to discuss needs and trends in the sector. The community consultation helps Calgary Learns shape future funding priorities and influences our strategic direction.

In May, Calgary Learns staff hosted 25 leaders and educators from the following 20 agencies: Alberta Health Services, Alberta Human Services, Bow Valley College, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Calgary Immigrant Women's Association, Calgary John Howard Society, Calgary Learns (Board), Calgary Public Library, Calgary SCOPE Society, Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative, Families Matter Society, Further Education Society of Alberta, Immigrant Services Calgary, Literacy Alberta, Momentum, Mount Royal University, Ready4Learning/Bowness Montgomery Early Literacy Project, Rocky View Schools Community Learning, Upstart/United Way of Calgary and Area, and the YWCA of Calgary.

This year we turned our focus to learner engagement and the Essential Skills framework. The consultation focused on the challenges and opportunities in our current adult learning landscape. Our intended outcomes included:

- A clearer grasp of Calgary Learns' world: our direction, and of our funders, and our funding
- A deeper understanding of foundational adult learners and how their experience fits with the Essential Skills framework – in the community learning context (vs just employment)
- A better connection with our colleagues here
- A sense of the opportunities & a common hope for meeting the challenges in the next year

In two rounds of table discussion, participants discussed the following questions. Their responses appear below in the bulleted remarks. Table representatives reported to the larger group after each round and the consultation concluded with a plenary reflection on the themes and possible next steps.

DISCUSSION ROUND 1

What do your learners want, need, and ask for?

Key themes: Relationship building, support, a sense of belonging, help in determining want versus needs and truly working to help meet their needs and set and accomplish learning goals.

We learned that learners are asking for classes and programming the following areas:

- They want to break into the workforce
- Classes to help with computer skills
- ESL programming
- Basic language instruction and learning skills
- Reading and writing
- Development of math skills
- Education, diploma, GED, upgrade, basic literacy
- Classes that meet their immediate needs: citizenship, technology, employability, upgrading
- They want to understand the process and learning path

We heard that learners need programming that is:

- Convenient and accessible

- Free service – transportation, child care, flexible and consistent
- Finances as a barrier to self-improvement, especially when learner needs are not aligning with available funding supports.
- Motivating
- Celebrates and validates their goals
- Helps them to believe that they can learn and how to learn
- Is inclusive creates a sense of belonging and an environment that is safe supportive and non-judgmental
- Breaks down goals into steps and smaller goals
- To know where they are at: assessment and awareness – sensitivity to where they are at.
- Relevant, interesting, and provides variety of approaches
- Is sensitive to their previous learning experiences and backgrounds

We discussed the importance of holistic and supportive environments for learners and that our learners need supports to be embedded and built into the parameters of existing programming and this in turn helps in:

- Relationship and confidence building
- Opening doors to community involvement
- Providing volunteer opportunities
- Helping them to access support networks
- Increasing socializing opportunities
- Providing one on one, individualized help and mentoring

In your experience, what helps your learners engage in learning and stay engaged?

Key themes: Relationship development, passionate teachers and ease of access

Key to learner engagement

- Providing relevant content that will help learners in their daily life
- Allowing for one on one informed discussion to bring learners to small groups
- Providing support from counselors with life issues
- Giving learner options that meet their learning and lifestyle needs
- Developing and establish relationships to feel comfortable and commit
- Explore and share in learning increasing confidence
- Outreach informal discussion with facilitators – get to know the facilitators before the programming starts.
- Confidence building (in self) gets familiar with content so that they can be successful/risk taking
- Support from agencies and community with daily responsibilities that learners find difficult
- Peer support sense of belonging and to be part of a community, sense of resiliency
- Respect for the learners as a person
- Being heard and listened to
- Peer support sense of belonging and being part of a community sense of resiliency
- Facilitators who can focus on learners rather than focus on content
- Guide on the side vs. sage on the stage (the value of peer learning)
- Relevant appropriate, respectful, support materials
- “Shoulder time” – before-and/or-after time for learner support and questions

- Honoring and valuing/recognizing experience and expertise
- They benefit from the large web of support and resources available beyond the program they are in
- Always keeping the door and the heart open (don't always refer out!)

Participants identified that networking across agencies to get learners the support that they need is also crucial for success in helping to meet learn needs. We discussed the value of Learning or Welcome Centre to plan and guide people to all access points including help in the following areas:

- Transition strategies
- Action plan for future
- Potential Work opportunities
- Labor market
- Post-secondary
- Next steps

Benefits would include the:

- Ability to better identify/encourage non-learners
- Promote school as community in school
- Ability to better build relationships with community partners and agencies like the Calgary Public Library learning lab and take programs to the community through community agencies.

DISCUSSION ROUND 2

How are you using the Essential Skills (ES) framework currently? As the province adopts the Essential Skills framework, what do you see as our: Current challenges? Most promising ideas? Opportunities?

Issues:

Funding and space for training, embedding essential skills into everyday life, assessment and measurement: how do we let funders know that the anecdotal and qualitative count? How this fits with the government's results does based measurement?

Groups discussed two main ways to use Essential Skills with learners: embedded (invisible) and in deliberate (overt) discussions with learners about essential skills as a way to discuss their current assets and progress. Both are being used in programs, examples of each include:

Embedded: Public education ongoing teaching and learning

Deliberate: Computer training, health literacy class, financial literacy event, inmate low-literacy learner program

Additional comments around this included:

- Look at how Alberta Health Services are embedding essential skills into training sessions. Instructors are trained to increase awareness of essential skills and to incorporate more consciously into curriculum paradigm shift.
- How do we help programs to extract and identify the essential skills they are already delivering?
- Having instructors/facilitators self-identifying their own skills/levels and understanding and application of the essential skills framework.

- Business development, being able to identify where the learner is and how we draw it out essential skills development
- Being mindful that essential skills training has to be relevant to everyday lives, building their capacity strengths

Challenges:

- Consistency/shared languages
- How do we tell learners who we are teaching ES balances ownership/teaching
- How to embed essential skills
- How to measure (pre/post) assessment
- Increased awareness, outside literacy field and understood by business
- Overcoming idea that it is too standardized/formalized/scary
- Using essential skills to work with low level learners
- Assessing some skills i.e. thinking
- Defining outcomes
- Holding ground vs. growing
- Making essential skills relevant to a variety of group i.e. seniors, those with learning disabilities, how to we use essential skills accorss different contexts with different learners.
- Making sure essential sills do not become too employment focused
- Designed to fit the workplace
- Mobilize resources to connect and share/collaborate
- Cultural bias
- Time vs. content
- Innovation vs. entrenchment
- Can aid self-empowerment if essential skills are understood and embracedlearners can be architects of their own futures help learners identify the relevancy?
- How to explicitly teach them to learners- need training to teach appropriate skills –levels how to integrate them into different levels of program/space funding to provide # or programs needed in the community.
- To be explicit – need resources and support to demonstrate essential skills emphasis in content and delivery

Promising Ideas

- Partnership amongst agencies “sharing”
- Simple ideas and activities
- Learners having a voice and choice
- Explore more networking we do not need to reinvent the wheel.
- Encourage more lifelong learning Essential skills – kitchen program
- Tie them to existing programs
- Opportunities for ways to improve programs (help us to meet needs of learner’s e.g. Document use, numeracy, working with others)
- Different way of approaching the use of essential skills working to the strengths and intere Learning how to learn
- Continuous learning /stabilized learning
- Learning is fluid
- Assets of learners.

Opportunities

- Collaborate
- Form partnerships
- Seek funding support
- Awareness
- Initiative in developing open/transparent learning strategies
- Citizen-centric
- Empowerment of learners
- Awareness of the essential skills
- Give learners a sense of confidence that they can accomplish their goals
- Anecdotal success needs to be considered
- Develop a modified assessment tool

FULL GROUP REFLECTION & WRAP UP

What had real meaning for you from what you heard today?

- Commonality of challenges and opportunities for learners and learning across all the fields represented here today regardless of target populations – a validation for many here
- Nice to see diverse groups coming together, a common voice
- Opportunity for relationship building and increasing understanding of resources available to us
- One participant noted: I feel encouraged, hopeful: more people are talking about ES – I’m no longer the lone voice. This is a room full of hopeful people looking at ES

Any surprises? Discomfort? Or insights?

- A couple of people noted that they want more of these kinds of consultations – a chance to regroup in the fall especially, to look reflect together some more on measurement.
- A “wish”: carve out time for thoughtful analysis – make the case for making the best that it can be, REALLY take this forward well, it doesn’t have to happen overnight, this is a process.
- One participant learned about Social Return on Investment today – “for me, SROI happened just as a result of being here today,” this forum and dialogue created it.

What could happen that would enable us to feel fully engaged and energized about this next year?

- Staying connected, a little networking in 3-4 months?
- We could use a Community of Practice around IFL, LES challenges and opportunities
- In a Community of Practice each of us could share success stories, aha moments w/learners & participants

What needs our immediate attention going forward?

The following comments reflect the areas where participants suggested Calgary Learns could continue to be involved and advocate for learners and essential skills development in our community:

- Calgary Learns is really the driver here, the hub of this conversation. CL has become the focal point, Calgary Learns is a strong, effective vehicle for communicating, moving forward, representing and advocating to government and community
- Look for ways to continue to advocate for the value of qualitative and anecdotal assessment to funders.
- December Networking event could continue some of this discussion