



Capacity Building in Adult Education: Sharing and Developing Best Practices in Eastern Ontario

Dr. Sandy Youmans and Dr. Lorraine Godden, Queen's University

In 2014 The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) announced the development of a provincial Adult Education Strategy (AES) to improve the educational outcomes of adult learners (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The AES highlighted the importance of school board collaboration and regional school board partnerships in the provision of a range of quality programs and services to meet the diverse needs of adult learners. To work towards implementation of the AES, the OME invested up to three years of funding in regional school board partnerships. During the first year, partnerships were required to develop a multi-year strategic plan and conduct an environmental scan of the adult education services provided in their region. The Eastern Regional Partnership for Adult Education (ERP AE) is one of seven regional partnerships that participated in this process. As part of their strategic plan, the ERP AE committed to building capacity in its members across nine school boards during its second year in operation. This research monograph describes how capacity in Adult Education (AE) was developed by the ERP AE and it identifies the capacity that was built among its members. The need for ongoing capacity development in AE is also addressed in light of the vital role it plays in the lives of adults and society.

How was **Capacity** in Adult Education Developed by the ERPAE?

The ERPAE used a unique approach to capacity building marked by continuous learning and a collaborative structure. While most professional development is often limited to one- or two-day learning events, the ERPAE took a continuous learning approach to capacity building that involved four sets of two-day sessions spread out over the course of a school year (i.e., November, December, February, March). These capacity building sessions (CBSs) enabled members to engage with complex issues in Adult Education in a sustained manner and cultivate relationships with ERPAE members, including colleagues from their own school board. Learning from CBSs was intended to set the groundwork for the development and piloting of innovative practices in Adult Education by each ERPAE school board.

In order to facilitate learning from within the region, study groups related to each of the four key AES mandates (i.e., flexible delivery; intake, assessment, and referral; Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR); guidance, career counselling, and pathway planning) and a fifth regionally identified area (i.e., community and region-wide awareness) were established with representation from each school board. At the onset of study groups, members participated in team building activities and created group norms to foster positive team dynamics. A major

component of study groups involved mandate-specific school board presentations so that members could learn about the programs and services offered by each school board in the region. During presentations, both best practices and areas for growth were identified. In addition to learning from other regional school boards, ERPAE members were provided with opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from their own school board to reflect on their study group learning and plan strategically for the future. Ultimately, each school board in the partnership was tasked with developing a proposal to pilot an innovative Adult Education practice related to one of the AES mandates (or the fifth regionally identified area). After learning from within the region, ERPAE members learned from other regions and experts in the province during CBSs. Topics and guest speakers included:

- **PLAR, James Michaud, Coordinator of NERPAE**
- **Adult Education Programs and Flexible Delivery, Simcoe County DSB**
- **CESBA, Bernadette Beaupre, Executive Director of CESBA**
- **Adult Education Marketing, Shelley Mayer, President of RAMP**
- **PLAR, Bonnie Kennedy, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment**
- **Championing and Positioning Your District School Board, Eleanor Newman, Executive Director of EOSDN**

ERPAE members were given ample opportunity to learn about AE from within and outside the region during capacity building sessions. The next section discusses the type of capacity that was built in ERPAE members as a result of their participation in CBSs.

What Capacity Was Built in ERPAE Members?

To document the capacity that was built in ERPAE members, researchers asked members to complete an online survey and take part in an individual interview about their capacity building session experiences. In total, 37 ERPAE members responded to the survey and 22 ERPAE members participated in an

individual interview. Qualitative survey and interview responses were analyzed thematically to identify what capacity had been built in ERPAE members. Analyses revealed three main areas where capacity development had occurred: Knowledge of Adult Education, Adult Education Roles, and Adult Education Practices.

Examples of ERPAE member capacity development are reported by these three main areas (see Table 1).

Table 1. Adult Education Capacity Development Reported by ERPAE Members

	KNOWLEDGE OF ADULT EDUCATION	ADULT EDUCATION ROLES	ADULT EDUCATION PRACTICES
Examples Reported by Participants	<p>Greater understanding of AE as a field, Ontario AE Ministry initiatives and directives, and AE programs in the region</p> <p>Understanding of the urban/rural differences in the region and challenges faced by different boards (e.g., clientele, geography, funding, staffing)</p> <p>The value of acting on opportunities for regional collaboration</p>	<p>Strategies for providing a culture of care and building confidence in adult learners</p> <p>Confidence in and understanding of own role in AE</p> <p>Understanding how the work of the AE team supports the goals of adult learners, the district school board, and the larger community</p>	<p>Opportunity to develop the board's AE program (e.g., identify gaps and strategies to overcome them)</p> <p>Consistent application of PLAR</p> <p>Guidance best practices</p> <p>Optimizing the use of funding registers</p> <p>Developing strong supports in all AE programs (e.g., guidance and special education)</p> <p>Using marketing strategies and creating a positive brand for AE</p> <p>Increased collaboration between credit and non-credit AE programs to support the needs of diverse adult learners</p> <p>Working together as a region to develop capacity and enact change</p>

Knowledge of Adult Education: ERPAE members reported increased knowledge of AE in terms of the field in general, Ontario AE Ministry initiatives and directives, and AE programs in the eastern region. In addition, ERPAE members became aware of urban/rural differences in the region and AE challenges faced by different boards in the partnership. Lastly, the value of acting on opportunities for regional collaboration was recognized by the partnership.

Adult Education Roles: With respect to Adult Education roles, members shared strategies for developing a culture of care and building confidence in adult learners. Some members reported that capacity building sessions fostered confidence in their role as an AE educator. Moreover, members developed an understanding of how the AE team supports the goals of adult learners, the district school board, and the larger community.

Adult Education Practices: According to ERPAE members, capacity building sessions provided them with the opportunity to develop their board's AE programs. It also led them to improve key AE practices, like the consistent application of PLAR, the development of guidance best practices, optimizing AE funding registers, building strong supports (e.g., guidance and special education) in all programs, increased collaboration between credit and non-credit AE programs to meet the needs of diverse adult learners, and creating a strong and positive brand for AE to reach as many adult learners as possible. Lastly, ERPAE members acknowledged the pivotal role of their partnership in developing capacity and enacting change.

In Summary

The continuous learning approach and collaborative structure of ERPAE capacity building sessions (CBSs) enabled members to develop in relation to their knowledge of AE, confidence in and understanding of AE roles, and application of effective AE practices. Ultimately, the project led to:

- a growing capacity across the group to articulate, describe, and adopt effective practices within the different programs that form Adult Education;
- members' increased understanding of the roles and responsibilities of AE staff, DSB staff, and community agencies; and
- recognition of the importance of district school board, regional, and community agency collaboration to support the diverse needs of adult learners.

CBSs were a successful means of professional development, but ongoing efforts are needed to develop capacity and improve the quality of AE in Ontario, across Canada, and internationally, given the wide-ranging benefits it has in the lives of adults and society. For example, Adult Education has been shown to make a positive impact in: activating citizens to volunteer, vote, and take functional roles in society (OECD, 2006). Similarly, the acquisition of basic skills enables adults to adopt healthier lifestyles, contribute to the creation of fairer societies, and help their community, region, and nation create economic growth (European Association for the Education of

Adults, 2015). AE programs have established routes to employment, are associated with positive employment outcomes, and have prepared newcomers for successful societal integration (Hughes, Adriaanse, & Barnes, 2016). Conversely, when citizens are not provided with opportunities to develop basic skills, there are economic and social costs to society (e.g., Field, 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Vignoles, Wolf, & Galindo-Rueda, 2003; Zhang & Palameta, 2006). During capacity building sessions, ERPAE members provided numerous accounts of the benefits of Adult Education they had witnessed firsthand in the lives of their students, reinforcing the value of their work across the region. The collective success experienced by the ERPAE in this phase of the AES reinforces the “importance of building capacity in teachers and instructors in the K-12/Adult Credit systems, to support the development of a highly skilled workforce” (Conway, Campbell, Hardt, Loat, & Sood, 2016, p. 29).

References

- Conway, S., Campbell, C., Hardt, R., Loat, A., & Sood, P. (2016). *Building the workforce of tomorrow: A shared responsibility*. The Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario.
- European Association for the Education of Adults. (2015). *Manifesto for adult learning in the 21st century*. Brussels: European Association for the Education of Adults. Retrieved from <https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/manifesto.pdf>
- Hughes, D., Adriaanse, K., & Barnes, S-A. (2016). *Adult education: Too important to be left to chance*. London, UK: All Party Parliamentary Group for Adult Education.
- Field, J. (2012). Is lifelong learning making a difference? Research-based evidence on the impact of adult learning, in D. Aspen, J. Chapman, K. Evans, & R. Bagnall, (eds.). *Second international handbook of lifelong learning*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Jenkins, A. (2006). Women, lifelong learning and transitions into employment. *Work, Employment & Society*, 20(2), 309-328.
- Jenkins, A., Vignoles, A., Wolf, A., & Galindo-Rueda, F. (2003). The determinants and labour market effects of lifelong learning. *Applied Economics*, 35, 1711-1721.
- OECD. (2006). *Where immigrant students succeed. A comparative review of performance and engagement in PISA 2003*. Paris: OECD.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). *An adult education strategy for Ontario: A memorandum to school board directors*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Ministry of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/memos/dec2014/DM2014SBDofE.pdf>
- Zhang, X., & Palameta, B. (2006). *Participation in adult schooling and its earnings impact in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.



Acknowledgment

The authors thank the representatives of the Eastern Regional Partnership for Adult Education (ERPAE) and the students and staff from the District School Boards associated with the ERPAE for their support and assistance in the creation of this publication. Funding to support this publication came from the Ontario Ministry of Education. The views expressed in this publication are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province of Ontario or the Ontario Ministry of Education.

