



From Barriers to Breakthroughs

Advancing Practitioner
Development in
Ontario's LBS Sector

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Author: Michelle Thompson

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Executive Summary

In recent years, Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) sector has undergone a significant transformation, particularly in how programs are delivered and how educators access professional development (PD). The shift toward virtual and hybrid learning, an increasing emphasis on socio-emotional skills and digital communication, and the evolving needs of adult learners have reshaped expectations around PD for LBS practitioners.

The diverse delivery models, cultural streams, geographic regions, and differences in organization size and funding structures have highlighted the need for a clearer understanding of the way PD is experienced, accessed, and supported across the province.

In the spring of 2024, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD) commissioned AlphaPlus to lead a research project to identify the gaps, barriers, and priorities related to PD within Ontario's LBS network. This project aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that influence practitioners' participation and engagement, and how practitioners apply the knowledge and skills they learn to their day-to-day practices.

Using a participatory and collaborative approach, AlphaPlus facilitated 26.5 hours of consultations with 30 individuals from across all delivery sectors and cultural streams. Participatory research is developed collaboratively, using a flexible and iterative approach to designing activities and potential improvements within a sector. The methodology aimed to give LBS practitioners and administrators a mechanism for providing feedback about current policies and processes ([Vaughan & Jaquez, 2020](#)).

The findings point to several opportunities for strengthening the sector, including support for curriculum design, enhanced knowledge-sharing infrastructure, targeted funding strategies, and improved technological and linguistic accessibility.

What We Heard

Across the sector, participants were aligned on both the challenges they face in accessing and applying PD, and the conditions needed to support meaningful participation.

The most significant barriers to fully engaging in LBS PD, are:

- Limited time, whether released or paid, to attend PD, including a lack of staffing coverage.
- Unequal technological readiness for delivering and accessing digital forms of PD (e.g. Internet connectivity, digital literacy, access to platforms).
- Gaps in PD content cultural relevance and accessibility, especially for Deaf, Indigenous, and Francophone practitioners.
- Imbalance between compliance-focused PD and practice-based learning opportunities.
- Existing PD delivery budgets are overstretched, undermining collaboration, staffing, and long-term planning.

What's Needed (Recommendations)

- Flexible and inclusive PD delivery formats (e.g. low bandwidth, blended, translated).
- Opportunities for designing and testing practical tools aligned with real-world needs, without increasing administrative burdens.
- Prioritize culturally responsive and holistic learning materials, co-developed across the delivery sectors and cultural streams.
- Structural investment, rather than redistributing or re-allocating existing funds, which could compromise service delivery.

In phase one, the study identified the most significant challenges that educators face in participating in PD. In phase two, consultations focused on exploring the feasibility of four solution models:

1. **Pilot paid PD time** in under-resourced settings to assess its feasibility and impact.
2. **Establish a provincial PD hub** to centralize tools, learning events, and sector knowledge.
3. **Support peer-led maker spaces** and informal mentorship networks.
4. **Explore micro-credentials** to support recognition of practitioner growth and development.

These models were evaluated and tested by research participants to determine if they could enhance MLITSD's approach to supporting the sector in a more responsive and sustainable way.

What's Next?

The insights presented here were gathered through voluntary consultations, in collaboration with AlphaPlus and other support organizations. While the findings reflect a broad cross-section of voices, they may not capture the full range of experiences across the LBS network.

The study demonstrated a strong need for system-level supports, coordinated planning, and targeted investments that can be tested and scaled. The recommendations in the report are intended to be layered and adaptive – addressing both short-term constraints and long-term sector capacity.

This report presents a rich body of insights from experienced practitioners and administrators across the province. It highlights both the persistent barriers to professional development and the creativity, commitment, and collaborative energy that exists within the LBS field. While the formal research phase is now complete and project funding has concluded, AlphaPlus is exploring modest follow-up engagement opportunities to support broader sector alignment and momentum around next steps.

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1. Introduction

Educators in Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) sector play a significant role in supporting service delivery to adult learners across the province. Yet, practitioners experience a complex set of structural and procedural barriers when it comes to planning their professional development (PD) pathways. This report draws on sector-wide qualitative findings that identify systemic and organizational challenges and strengths. Sector-wide consultations revealed a high turnover in the LBS field, creating added pressures for already under-resourced service providers

“This report offers a blueprint for empowering practitioners to continue to grow in their careers and invest long-term in the LBS sector while applying what they learn to their practice”.

Research demonstrates that quality PD programs can significantly reduce employee turnover and increase workplace satisfaction and employee engagement (Hollar, Kuchinka, & Feinberg, 2022). Therefore, the author examined both external and internal drivers affecting PD participation. This report offers a blueprint for empowering practitioners to continue to grow in their careers and invest long-term in the LBS sector while applying what they learn to their practice

Since 2020, the LBS sector has experienced a monumental shift away from in-person training and towards hybrid and online modes of learning. While online PD presents opportunities for saving money and expanding reach, some service providers are experiencing a disparity in financial resources and technological readiness. In addition, previous studies have demonstrated that practitioners lack the time to attend and implement new knowledge due to organizational financial constraints, often feeling overextended and sometimes facing a variety of technological limitations (Purpose Co, 2022; Made Manifest, 2022; Cathexis, 2023; Cathexis, 2022). These reports also found that many service providers in the sector view the existing PD content as lacking cultural relevance and accessibility, suggesting that the training needs of practitioners are shifting.

1.1 The Literacy Network

LBS service providers are organized by delivery sector and cultural streams. There are three delivery sectors: college, school board and community-based, and three cultural streams: Indigenous, Francophone, and Deaf/Blind. In total, 300 sites are delivering LBS services in rural, remote, and urban communities (Ontario Ministry of Labor, Training and Skills Development, 2019). The programs are funded by the Government of Ontario, under the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD), which oversees Employment Ontario and Literacy and Basic Skills.

Service providers are supported by 16 regional literacy networks. These networks play an active role across the province to facilitate community planning and support LBS providers. Each region proposes an annual PD plan, and funding is allocated based on a set of criteria. Offerings vary from conferences to in-house PD, to pop-up events, depending on the budget, population, and geographic area they serve.

The sector is further supported by 26 support organizations including: Contact North, AlphaPlus, Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes, Centre FORA, Deaf Literacy Initiative, Community Literacy of Ontario, Laubach Literacy Ontario, Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, Continuing Education School Board Administrators, and College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading. These organizations lead PD-related initiatives for LBS program providers with the support of the MLITSD.

A significant portion of existing training focuses on administrative knowledge, such as monitoring learner progress, reporting, and compliance. Conversations between the Ministry, the service organizations, and the regional literacy networks have identified a need for more practice-focused training (e.g. land-based learning, trauma-informed teaching, digital literacy), and stakeholders are open to collaborating on new projects together.

1.2 Research Objectives

In July and August 2024, AlphaPlus met with MLITSD to set the priorities of the study. The main objectives consisted of: 1) assessing the barriers to PD participation within the LBS sector, particularly for educators, 2) identifying potential solution models for improving engagement, and exploring their feasibility and how they could improve the current model, 3) documenting common trends across LBS Ontario and sector-specific needs for developing recommendations for improving

the current approach, policies, and processes that support service providers, and 4) strengthening service providers and support organizations' capacity to meet practitioners' PD-related needs.

In late September and early October 2024, research participants were officially recruited. AlphaPlus facilitated meetings with key support organizations representing the delivery sectors and cultural streams. We introduced the project and gathered insight and feedback related to its purpose, scope, and methodology. Research participants were selected for their ability to provide key insights into administrative and teaching processes, the impact of provincial policies and frameworks, and their experience with PD initiatives across Ontario.

The initial consultations identified four things the service providers hoped to get out of the study:

- Determine which PD delivery formats work best for LBS practitioners, whether they are asynchronous vs synchronous or virtual vs in person.
- Reflect the diversity of the LBS network, including rural vs urban, geography, funding models, size of organizations, dual professional roles, and the three cultural streams: Deaf/Blind, Indigenous and Francophone organizations.
- Identify the challenges and barriers educators experience when participating in PD programs, and explore how factors such as experience level, gaps in content, funding constraints, gaps in access, turnover and knowledge loss, and language accessibility affect PD delivery.
- Have the option to share research questions with frontline educators and program administrators and receive the final report in support of capacity building in each of the sub-sectors/streams.

The researcher intended to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key barriers to attending, participating in, and applying PD programs?
2. How do these barriers affect member organizations' ability to consistently attend and fully engage in PD?
2. What feasible solutions, models or strategies would best address existing challenges related to PD and gaps in knowledge/skill implementation - particularly those linked to organizational capacity, practitioner engagement and motivation, and effectiveness of learning opportunities?
3. "How would these models work and what would be their impact?"
4. What would the LBS sector need for successful implementation?

1.3 Expected Outcomes

This report summarizes the findings from phases one and two of the study and offers an evaluation of potential solution models. Quoting the project agreement, the project's purpose was to “evaluate the impact, efficacy, and cost of various strategies aimed at increasing LBS practitioners’ participation in professional development.” As such, this document aims to recommend the most impactful approaches that can enhance PD delivery within the LBS sector. It provides actionable solutions based on insights from practitioners and administrators. The outcomes are intended to support capacity-building efforts in the delivery sectors and cultural streams and inform the Ministry’s future work.

2. Methodology

The research involved an extensive literature review covering previous surveys conducted in Ontario’s LBS practitioner network and other industry reports and academic studies related to PD. The review identified potential barriers and drivers of PD participation. It explored approaches used in other jurisdictions for incentivizing educators to engage more fully in their learning pathways.

2.1 Approach and Methods

This study used a participatory inquiry methodology to center the voices and experiences of stakeholders as co-creators of knowledge. Participatory research is often used to explore real-world professional development needs and solutions in a collaborative and contextually grounded manner. Our consultations with the LBS sector applied an ‘appreciative inquiry’, which is essential for problem-solving in managerial spaces and conducting organizational or systems inquiry in a social context (Moore, 2019).

Typically, participatory studies use iteration, collaboration, and pay close attention to the relevance, context, and impact of the information collected (Smith, 2021; Cornish *et al.*, 2023). This method can inform policy changes and positively affect the sector in which the research is conducted (Vaughan & Jaquez, 2020). Accordingly, the objectives of this study were developed collaboratively, prioritizing a flexible approach to the research activities that accommodated the contrasting mandates, sizes, and funding structures of service providers in the LBS sector.

The project was divided into two phases: 1) interviews and focus groups with service providers responsible for the administration and delivery of literacy and basic skills services in Ontario, and 2)

a validation meeting and collaborative ‘workshop’ focused on assessing potential solution models. In total, the author facilitated 26.5 hours of consultations with 30 individuals representing various delivery sectors and cultural streams across Ontario. The findings pinpointed several opportunities for capacity building and support in the areas of curriculum design, knowledge sharing, targeted funding opportunities, and technological and linguistic accessibility.

Two guiding principles of the project were ensuring that the views of each sector delivery and cultural stream were represented in the final report and that the knowledge and recommendations generated from the exercise could benefit various stakeholders in the LBS sector. This way, the research findings could inform and strengthen capacity-building efforts, curriculum design, program evaluation, and strategic partnerships. The study engaged participants in knowledge creation and problem-solving to influence impactful action and outcomes (Busch *et al.*, 2019; Vaughn, Neyer, & Maynard, 2023). This allowed the researcher to take a systemic view of the LBS delivery sectors and cultural streams, with educators at the centre of the provincial network. To quote Vaughn *et al.*, “When collaborative change is implemented effectively, community members are viewed as valuable owners and experts instead of being seen as disinterested or unqualified partners” (Vaughn *et al.*, 2023, p. 1).

This project offered practitioners and administrators a mechanism by which to provide collective and nuanced feedback and to discuss unmet challenges and needs, rather than viewing them as disengaged or unmotivated. The scope of the research reflected a broad view of PD delivery and examined participants’ overall experience with professional development as LBS practitioners. The research design relied on a review of industry reports and publications produced by a variety of academic, public, and private authors and input from MILTSD. As such, the purpose of this report is two-fold. It is intended to inform the Ministry’s future policies and processes related to PD funding and support initiatives and to provide insights into capacity-building areas that may inform the work of support organizations, the regional literacy networks, and service providers.

2.2 Techniques

During initial consultations, participants placed importance on giving practitioners a voice, and many asked for a group format, although a few preferred one-on-one interviews. AlphaPlus chose a hybrid approach which allowed each stream and sector to choose. The final structure consisted of four focus groups, and three one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

The author's data collection and analysis were completed in two phases. In phase one, the researcher met with participants via semi-structured interviews or focus groups carried out in late November 2024 using Zoom. The participants identified cross-sectoral efficiencies vs inefficiencies, areas of productivity vs barriers (Moore, 2019), challenges vs strengths, factors related to PD design and delivery modes, and knowledge sharing processes.

The conversations generated rich qualitative data that were then transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed. During phase two, participants had the opportunity to collectively explore emerging patterns, meanings, and results from the first phase and discuss their implications (Kessler, 2013; Cornish *et al.*, 2023). Using a workshop-style group format that included a brainstorming discussion, data collection focused on the collective evaluation of four professionalization models (solution models). They ranged from incentivizing participation with paid PD to implementing collaborative programs such as a maker space or a provincial hub highlighted their potential feasibility within the LBS network.

The data collected during both phases was analyzed and organized into thematic categories, using direct quotes from discussions with practitioners and administrators. The results highlighted common trends in how they access, use, and adapt what they learn, identifying several barriers to participation in PD and implementation of new knowledge. The researcher probed participants for input on the kinds of support they would need to successfully implement the solutions they view as viable. The results of these consultations represent co-created knowledge that can be applied to both policy and practice.

2.3 Study Challenges

Due to the diversity in size of each sector and stream and its available resources, some participants represented organizations with smaller teams. Participants were given the choice to engage in individual interviews or focus groups to provide flexibility. The data collection activities were designed to discuss stream-specific concerns to avoid losing or improperly documenting these nuanced issues. The final report endeavored to reflect these nuances while providing common LBS sector themes.

There was a healthy amount of skepticism due to a lack of follow-through from government funders during past consultation efforts to address sectorial problems. This, coupled with regular shifting political will and funding priorities across provincial, federal, and regional government levels, risked undermining collaboration with service providers and eroding trust within the sector. To address

this challenge, open dialogue and the co-development of goals were used as key principles in the design of the project. The researcher acknowledged the power dynamics between stakeholders and strived for transparency about the limitations and goals of the study. Emphasis was placed on designing inclusive spaces for discussing historical and political contexts and the need for systemic change. The 30 participants across the sector represent the breadth of sectoral and cultural representation across the LBS network.

3. Literature Review

Philosopher Robert Cummins (2000) aptly states that teachers are often “overwhelmed with things to explain, and somewhat underwhelmed by things to explain them with” (p. 120). Several researchers have explored what influences PD participation, for example, what motivates educators (Zhang, Admiraal, & Saab, 2021), why they enjoy interacting with peers and sharing new knowledge (Richter, Eisenkraft, & Fischer, 2024; Datnow, 2018; Gu, 2014), and why meaningful learning experience have a greater impact (Kwakman in Wai-Yan, & Hak-Chung, 2010).

While this literature review covers motivational factors, the research goes beyond the idea that motivation is the primary factor related to positive training results and effective changes in teaching practices (Rheinhold *et al.*, 2018; Emo, 2015). While it’s true that attending good PD can motivate educators to develop new techniques and knowledge and embed them into their day-to-day practice (technique to skill) (Desimone as cited in Sims *et al.*, 2023, p. 5), other factors such as organizational and systemic barriers play a significant part in the success of PD initiatives.

Having new knowledge of techniques, such as classroom management or formative assessment practices, isn't enough to bring about change (Cohen & Wiseman, 2019). PD can fail when it doesn't provide space for the implementation of new knowledge or when teachers are unable to reconcile what they learn with what they experience on a practical level (Gregoire, 2003; Sims *et al.*, 2023; Hill & Chin, 2018). The objectives of training must extend beyond a desire to build new skills and endeavor to equip educators with the tools they need to apply new skills effectively and sustainably. Research demonstrates that effective PD is content-focused, uses active learning, involves collaboration, is job-embedded, teaches models of effective practice, provides coaching and expert support, and gives learners opportunities for feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and

Gardner, 2017; Sims *et al.*, 2023, p. 5). Therefore, this researcher explored external factors that may influence the successful completion and implementation of LBS PD.

3.1 PD Participation Drivers

Kwakman (cited in Wai-Yan & Hak-Chung, 2010) identifies both internal and external factors that can predict teacher participation in PD: 1) personal factors such as attitude, assessment of feasibility and meaningfulness, emotional exhaustion, and sense of accomplishment; 2) task-oriented factors such as work pressures, emotional demands, job variety, and autonomy; and 3) work environment factors such as having support from management or colleagues. Having relevant and realistic content is the most significant factor in active PD participation (34%), followed by having opportunities to share new ideas (32%), and whether the program meets the actual needs of educators (25%). The use of hands-on activities is also a significant factor (25%), as is having access to resources for implementation (20%) (Wai-Yan, & Hak-Chung, 2010).

Another study carried out in the LBS sector identified their top motivations as “learning for inspiration”, staying current on knowledge and skills, increasing competencies as educators or leaders, staying compliant, and creating a new career path (Mollins, 2022). The report recommended strengthening PD experiences by:

1. Supporting practitioners in building personal learning networks.
2. Creating ways to share resources for 'just-in-time' learning.
3. Creating learning pathways for people new to the field and those in leadership roles.
4. Ensuring the cost of PD is funded and individuals are given enough time to attend and to reflect on, implement and evaluate new knowledge and skills.
5. Creating a professional development plan that puts practitioners at the centre of decision-making.

In short, when personal experience and self-management are prioritized, learners feel good about PD (Mollins, 2022). Factors inhibiting effective PD delivery included not providing access to resources for implementation of new knowledge (21%), not having enough money to pay for courses (19%), having a heavy workload that prevents or deters people from attending (18%), poorly designed or structured content (18%), and irrelevant or unrealistic content (14%) (Wai-Yan, & Hak-Chung, 2010, p. 15; Kessler, 2013; Richter, Eisenkraft, & Fischer, 2024, p. 10. “Building collective and collaborative connections with colleagues in PD courses may be a process that builds teachers’

resilience during stressful times of policy reform” (Datnow, 2018; Gu, 2014). Two additional studies conducted in Ontario’s LBS sector demonstrated a need for knowledge-sharing opportunities, such as structured forums (Purpose Co., 2022; Cathexis, 2023, p. 13).

The psychological wellness of teachers can influence their willingness to engage in PD (Crave, Yeung, & Han, 2014). One Australian study found that PD programs focusing on Indigenous teaching have a positive effect on Indigenous teachers’ psychological well-being and effectiveness. These PD activities included formal certificate studies, workshops, and mentorship that provide Indigenous-focused content, approaches, and techniques (Crave, Yeung, & Han, 2014, p. 102). Therefore, creating a psychologically and culturally safe work environment is critical to the optimal participation in training programs and individual career pathways. While the study does not investigate psychological and cultural safety, several research participants raised the issue of developing culturally relevant PD content and ensuring the perspectives of each cultural stream are reflected in any solution implemented within the sector.

3.2 Organizational Considerations

In Ontario's LBS sector, many service providers have few financial resources and small service delivery teams. In some cases, individuals have dual roles requiring them to assume both administrative and teaching responsibilities, making it difficult for them to fully immerse themselves in teacher training. Time constraints are a significant barrier to PD participation for LBS practitioners, who often lack the time to attend training and build practice-based tools (Mollins, 2022; Purpose Co., 2022; Made Manifest, 2022; Cathexis, 2023). A study demonstrated that providers outside of e-Channel and the college sector often “do not have access to a learning management system (LMS) or a repository of LBS resources” (Cathexis, 2022, p. 4).

Some organizations have internal support such as IT or curriculum developers, though these roles are not funded through MLITSD. As a result, many service providers use piecemeal tech solutions. On a practical level, sector-wide collaboration must include a mechanism for sharing learning materials, curriculums, and best practices and support for organizations to acquire IT support, equipment, and software licensing (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2024).

Considering the push towards blended and online PD and program delivery, the lack of access to key technological platforms and low-bandwidth PD design raises concerns for service providers outside of e-Channel. To create content that meets the current needs of all LBS practitioners, a deeper understanding of the technological barriers to accessing PD is needed. The study explored factors

such as technological readiness, internet connectivity, and digital literacy among LBS practitioners and service providers.

3.3 Incentive Processes

Research shows that PD programs should not undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1971; Lepper *et al.*, 1973). One study cautions using external rewards, which can distort and reduce the internal and personal motivating factors of educators (Ulber *et al.*, 2016). Linking PD participation to salary increases or career progression “leads to higher and more sustainable student learning outcomes without distorting teachers’ incentives” (Paredes & Sevilla, 2024, p. 2-3). For example, if a course is a prerequisite for a promotion, it receives a high level of participation.

An incentive program should improve employee satisfaction and enthusiasm and encourage employees to improve their professional level and cooperation. To be successful, PD incentive programs must be collaborative and involve input from educators while encouraging them to work with others to improve their skills (Lin, 2024, p. 96). Paredes & Sevilla (2024) recommend that incentive programs focus on providing salary increases to individuals with high participation rates and offering opportunities for career progression to individuals who consistently attend PD events (Paredes & Sevilla, 2024).

3.4 Systemic Barriers

An industry report found that ensuring sustained core funding to provincial and territorial adult education programs could help stabilize operations, facilitate long-term planning, and reduce administrative redundancies. Connecting community-level adult education with broader digital literacy resources and efforts by creating a cross-sectoral network could assist with program coordination, enhancing digital skills and access for underserved communities (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2024, p. 25). In addition, including digital learning solutions in PD planning priorities and implementing both in-person and virtual knowledge-sharing initiatives are crucial to supporting educators in a post-COVID world. Therefore, the study explored the feasibility of networking options such as a provincial hub and a maker space for educators.

Building on these findings, the study explored content relevance, paid PD initiatives, and knowledge sharing opportunities. In addition, heavy workloads are particularly problematic for participants in a middle management role.

4. Research Findings

The following is a summary of the findings from phases one and two, reflecting the overarching themes and providing sectoral nuances. The findings are grouped under common themes (e.g. shifting modes of PD delivery, relevance of PD content, accessibility of content, financial and time constraints, and more knowledge sharing opportunities).

4.1 Adapting to Shifting Modes of PD Delivery

LBS practitioners primarily access PD programs through in-person and online conferences, webinars, pop-up events, and blended or self-study formats. Post-COVID-19, there has been a noticeable shift toward online formats, and in-person participation has declined significantly. This is somewhat of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, online PD is efficient in reaching broader audiences. On the other hand, the transition has underscored challenges like internet connectivity, particularly in rural and northern areas. However, connectivity issues can also present in other parts of the province.

Online vs In-Person PD

Many teachers appreciate the flexibility and convenience of online learning formats; however, for some, in-person training remains highly valued. When online training is poorly designed, it can create barriers rather than remove them. While online learning has become more prevalent post-COVID, it has not necessarily translated to better access for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing practitioners. One participant stated, "Not all platforms are optimized for accessibility," adding that features like closed captioning and sign language interpretation are not always reliably available. This technological gap often leaves educators in the Deaf/Blind cultural stream feeling excluded from critical learning opportunities (Focus group participant, Deaf/Blind stream, November 25th, 2024).

One example of a strategy that showed promise incorporated video-based PD sessions that included sign language interpretation and closed captions. These elements allowed Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing professionals to engage fully in the learning process through synchronous activities while

moving through materials at their own pace (asynchronous). The example highlights the importance of using blended learning formats to enhance accessibility. Combining real-time interaction with asynchronous content provides flexibility and accommodates the diverse needs of professionals.

An Executive Director from the community sector observed that "While online PD is convenient and cost-effective, it often lacks the energy and collaborative spirit of in-person gatherings" (Focus group participant, community sector, November 26th, 2024). Another participant stated that in-person sessions are perceived as more valuable by her team because they allow for dedicated time away from regular duties (Focus group participant, community sector, November 26th, 2024). These comments suggest that in-person PD are still valued by some practitioners, despite the convenience and cost-cutting benefits of online learning.

Internet Connectivity

Reliable internet connectivity is critical to accessing online and hybrid modes of learning. Yet, in the LBS sector, it remains a persistent challenge, highlighting the need for improved infrastructure in Ontario. It also presents an opportunity to redesign courses with low-bandwidth formats and other solutions that enhance access for learners with limited connectivity. These disparities are not only common in the North but also in other regions across the province. One research participant from the Indigenous stream shared an anecdote about a colleague who, despite living near a city in Southern Ontario, struggles with poor internet connectivity, making it difficult to participate fully in online sessions (Interview participant, Indigenous stream, November 26, 2024).

In general, access to both online and in-person PD was challenging for practitioners in rural areas. Internet connectivity issues and the costs associated with long travel distances were cited as significant obstacles to attending events in other regions. Working in a rural area poses a problem with accessing reliable Internet, illustrating the unique constraints faced by rural educators. Despite these challenges, participants emphasized the importance of PD sessions that accommodate both urban and rural practitioners through hybrid formats and targeted scheduling (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, November 27th, 2024). The timing of programs was noted as an important factor in practitioners' ability to attend training sessions.

While hybrid and online learning programs have expanded access, geographic and logistical barriers persist, particularly for rural practitioners. One participant explained, "Practitioners in rural areas...have the same opportunities, but geographic location can often prevent them from attending in person because there might not be enough or any travel money" (Interview participant, college

sector, November 21st, 2024). Participants in the community sector praised blended learning formats that combine real-time interaction with asynchronous content, allowing for flexibility while maintaining engagement. One research participant shared an example of a regional conference that successfully combined live workshops with follow-up online modules (Focus group participant, community sector, November 26th, 2024).

Discussion

Poor internet connectivity can negatively impact PD learning and teaching. In addition, a study found that, except for the college sector, most LBS providers in Ontario not using e-Channel “do not have access to a learning management system (LMS) or a repository of LBS resources” (Cathexis, 2022, p. 4). Courses and teaching practices designed with bandwidth and immediacy of tools in mind can better support people with limited internet connections and make PD more accessible across the province (University of British Columbia, 2024).

There is a need for targeted investments in digital infrastructure and low bandwidth learning solutions designed to facilitate online learning for people with limited or unreliable internet. In addition, mandatory or self-paced modules are often met with resistance, and blended learning formats and live sessions tend to garner higher participation rates, suggesting the sector relies on a balanced approach that offers a blend of in-person, hybrid, and asynchronous PD.

While some organizations have internal support roles, such as IT specialists and curriculum developers, these resources are not funded through the LBS program. As a result, solutions are a piecemeal set of platforms, programs, and resources, creating disparities in access to resources and technological capacity between organizations of varying sizes and mandates. These disparities highlight a need to develop sector-specific standards for infrastructure and staff competencies and ensure staff are trained on new tools and policies (Interview participant, settlement sector, December 18th, 2024).

A research participant from the Deaf/Blind stream emphasized the need for systemic change to ensure equitable access to PD. He called for increased investment in accessibility technologies, targeted funding for interpreter training, and a commitment to inclusivity in PD program design. As one individual explained, "equity in professional development is not just a moral imperative; it is essential for fostering diverse and competent professional communities" (Focus group participant, Deaf/Blind stream, November 25th, 2024).

The lack of consistent access to learning management systems (LMS, e-Channel, and other digital tools reveals a digital divide within the LBS sector. These technological disparities limit the ability of practitioners to consistently participate in PD, worsening inequalities across regions and organizations.

“Even well-designed PD can be out of reach for some if a basic level of infrastructure and low-bandwidth friendly tools are not provided across the sectors and cultural streams.” – Research Participant

4.2 Content Relevance and Accessibility

Research participants across multiple streams emphasized a need for PD to be culturally relevant and responsive to their specific contexts. In the Indigenous stream, one person underscored the importance of tailoring training to reflect the lived experiences and cultural frameworks of those delivering the programs. "Trauma-informed training, for instance, aligns well with the spiritual component, helping practitioners connect deeply with the content" (Interview participant, Indigenous stream, November 26th, 2024). She highlighted how holistic approaches such as the medicine wheel integrate physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the self, making training more meaningful.

Similar concerns were raised by the Deaf/Blind stream and community sector, participants noted a lack of stream-specific training resources. One respondent from the community sector highlighted that many training materials are designed for general audiences and fail to account for the unique challenges faced by specific groups, such as Indigenous or Francophone practitioners (Focus group participant, community sector, November 26th, 2024). She elaborated on this issue, saying, "The lack of resources tailored to community-based programs adds to the complexity of delivering effective training."

One person noted that while there have been attempts to create inclusive materials, these often do not adequately address the specific needs and experiences of practitioners in various contexts (Focus group participant, Deaf/Blind stream, November 25th, 2024). One participant noted that the

cultural diversity of the sector is a significant driver for content relevance: “Cultural awareness... and DEI initiatives... are a huge one” (Focus group participant, community sector, November 20th, 2024). Another participant highlighted the growing need to address social issues like mental illness or food insecurity, which directly impact learners’ success. Prioritizing cultural awareness, DEI initiatives, and the broader social issues affecting learners across the province is essential for ensuring that LBS education remains relevant, responsive, and equitable. The sector can advance these priorities by working collaboratively across cultural streams to share knowledge, develop inclusive resources, and advocate for holistic supports that meet practitioners’ diverse needs.

Practice-Based vs Compliance-Focused Content

In the school board sector, service providers echoed concerns about content relevance, saying that sessions are often heavily compliance-oriented, leaving little room for training that supports instructional practice or leadership development. “At the start of a school calendar year...it is very compliance-focused,” leaving minimal room for practice-focused PD topics like curriculum development, classroom management, or adult education principles, which are effective in supporting educators’ day-to-day needs (Interview participant, school board sector, November 20th, 2024).

Participants highlighted the need for practical and applied training rather than theoretical content. One respondent from the Francophone stream stated, “*C’est beau avoir la théorie, mais comment on peut l’appliquer et se l’approprié, ça manque.*” (It’s great to have the theory, but what’s missing is how we can apply it and really make it our own.) (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, November 27th, 2024). This emphasizes the gap between training content and its real-world implementation.

Sector-specific tools and tailored sessions, such as those addressing digital literacy and mental health, were described as having the most impact. Tailored training could have the benefit of improving mental health outcomes and fostering resilience among LBS learners, while offering tools and strategies for educators experiencing stress.

Some practitioners find value in compliance-focused training, although stakeholders point to a lack of resources as a deterrent to providing a full range of services and meeting administrative requirements (Cathexis, 2016). When asked what additional compliance-focused training would look like, the most common responses were: 1) a general refresher regarding all aspects of the OALCF, 2) training on implementation of the next phase of the PMF (e.g. Learner Gains), 3) ways to

meaningfully integrate Milestones and Culminating Tasks into existing curricula, and 4) the apprenticeship goal path (Cathexis, 2016, p. 59). That said, the Deaf stream (58%) indicates its instructors have not received as much training compared to other streams (Cathexis, 2016, p. 59).

Accessibility of PD Content

A recurring theme in the discussions with the Deaf/Blind stream is that PD needs to be available in accessible formats" (Focus group participant, Deaf/Blind stream, November 25th, 2024). Most PD resources are heavily reliant on audio-based materials, which creates a barrier for Deaf professionals unless interpreters or alternative formats are provided.

One of the most pressing challenges highlighted by the Deaf/Blind stream is that service providers rely on real-time interpretation, which "adds layers of complexity and can lead to delays in accessing PD opportunities" (Focus group participant, Deaf/Blind stream, November 25th, 2024). Furthermore, even with interpreters, the quality of the interpretation and the availability of interpreters familiar with sector-specific terminology are not always guaranteed. This gap underscores the need for "more systemic support and funding to train interpreters in specialized fields," one participant from the Deaf/Blind stream said.

This study echoed the existing literature on ASL/LSQ translation services. This gap has negative consequences on practitioners, reducing access to learning materials (Russell & Winston, 2014). As a result, Deaf and Hard-of Hearing learners can experience social isolation due to an inability to communicate with their hearing peers and instructors, affecting their overall wellbeing and reducing their ability to network with other sectors (Lunney, 2005). To better support Deaf/Blind participants in implementing OALCF training, the sector must develop accessible PD formats—such as captioned and visually-rich materials—in tandem with targeted investment in high-quality, specialized interpreter training and funding that ensures timely, reliable support.

Participants in the Francophone stream voiced frustration about the general lack of French-language resources, underscoring the linguistic disparity in PD offerings in Ontario (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, November 27th, 2024). Several people have explored pooling resources among neighboring centers.

Discussion

Hybrid and blended modes of learning can alleviate some of the barriers identified in the study, but in-person PD remains a valued form of delivery because of its potential for peer-to-peer networking and hands-on training. One participant in the college sector suggested using a balanced approach, combining the convenience of online programs with the depth of in-person sessions. A holistic approach, she said, might better address the diverse needs of LBS practitioners while fostering professional growth and collaboration.

Using evidence-based methodologies for selecting, designing, and delivering PD programs could help promote culturally responsive practices (CRP). One study demonstrated that existing frameworks for CRPs can help teachers “develop skills to promote inclusive, respectful, and equitable classroom environments” but that there are few baselines for assessing their efficacy and appropriateness (Bottiani et al, 2017). Offering culturally responsive learning opportunities to practitioners would promote higher achievement among linguistically and culturally diverse educators (Callins, 2006; Hale, 2001).

Assessing the feasibility and meaningfulness of learning content is a significant predictor of PD participant success (Wai-Yan & Hak-Chung, 2010; Crave, Yeung, & Han, 2014). Having relevant and realistic content is the most significant factor in PD participation (34%), followed by having opportunities to share new ideas (32%), and meeting the needs identified by educators (25%). Using hands-on activities (25%) and providing sufficient resources for implementation (20%) were also factors in participation (Wai-Yan, & Hak-Chung, 2010). These trends suggest that PD initiatives should move beyond traditional instruction-based sessions and begin to prioritize opportunities for knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer networking in spaces that support hands-on, practice-based learning.

For the Deaf stream, this would address the emotional and cultural dimensions of PD for Deaf practitioners, which can foster a sense of belonging and mutual support. One interviewee explained, “Creating spaces where Deaf professionals can share experiences and strategies in their native language—American Sign Language—can significantly enhance engagement and learning outcomes.” However, Deaf individuals who use ASL-English and LSQ-français translators are experiencing a critical shortage of qualified interpreters (Vermes, 2024; McLaughlin, 2010; Canadian Hearing Services, 2024).

4.3 Financial and Time Constraints

One Executive Director at a community-based LBS organization emphasized the impact of financial and time constraints on PD participation (Focus group participant, community sector, November 26th, 2024). She explained, "Even when we manage to access training, implementing what we learn becomes a challenge..." This concern reflects a widespread frustration that training materials often remain unused in small, underfunded organizations.

Another echoed this, noting that for her small team, PD participation often means choosing between training and service delivery. "If I send someone to training, we have to pull back on services that day, which creates a significant barrier" (Focus group participant, community sector, November 26th, 2024).

Time Constraints

Time constraints emerged as a significant barrier to PD participation for educators (Purpose Co., 2022; Made Manifest, 2022; Cathexis, 2023). LBS practitioners are overextended, have limited time to attend PD and minimal capacity to implement new knowledge and build tools afterwards (Mollins, 2022). Research participants emphasized that smaller organizations, in particular, face significant challenges due to limited staffing and financial resources. One community sector practitioner explained, "Having a small office, it's really, really hard to be able to get all your staff to go to PD... And that's why the online is better. We can all be in the office... the office is open" (Focus group participant, community sector, November 20th, 2024).

The school board sector noted a lack of dedicated time for LBS-focused PD. "We used to have almost a half a day...now the school board mandates so much...we get very little time as just LBS [PD]" and this results in PD being reduced to brief, fragmented sessions, often absorbed into existing workloads (Interview participant, school board sector, November 20th, 2024). Instructors learn about LBS on their own time and the expectation for instructors to complete training outside of paid hours, the participant said.

Financial Constraints

Underfunding can lead to poor information exchange and lack of teaching or technological resources and transparency, which can impact the motivation of practitioners and administrators. In turn, these issues create barriers to meeting organizational and professional goals. The college sector highlighted the lack of sufficient funding, particularly for translating resources into French or ASL, and the need for paid release time for part-time instructors. A respondent noted, “We don’t have money for translating resources into French or using ASL interpreters to deliver some of our training...we have to basically come up with the money ourselves” (Interview participant, college sector, November 21st, 2024).

Funding limitations affect accessibility and the ability to adapt resources. One participant from the Francophone stream noted that without the budget to pay for transportation for personnel, the lack of funds always impacts practitioners’ ability to attend in-person training (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, November 27th, 2024). The problem is intensified for rural service providers.

Discussion

The research findings echo the recommendation made in the Mollins’ report (2022); good PD experiences require funding that covers the cost of training and provide staff with sufficient time to attend, learn, reflect, implement and evaluate new knowledge and skills. In the last decade, the LBS field has seen a shift in federal policy redirecting millions of dollars from federal-provincial Labour Market Agreements to the Canada Job Grant program, prioritizing workforce training over foundational skill development (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2014).

The collapse of funding left many practitioners in Ontario in precarious positions, undermining the sector’s ability to deliver services. The current funding structure, while intended to make things more efficient, reflects the dismantling of the previous network model, which was never replaced (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2014). At the provincial level, stakeholders have seen a reduction in financial resources as a result of these changes.

In Ontario, LBS service providers have different levels of capacity when it comes to training practitioners in programs. For example, “While providers are receiving training support to implement the OALCF, they want more” (Cathexis, 2016, p. 59). To improve PD accessibility and participation levels in the long-term, participants recommended increasing funding and providing more equitable access to resources and a continued focus on sector-specific training.

4.4 More Knowledge-Sharing Opportunities for Practitioners

Participants hoped that an emphasis on collaborative strategies across the province and investments from the MLITSD would enhance the professional development experience for educators in both urban and rural settings. The community sector emphasized peer-to-peer knowledge sharing activities through informal mentorship and community networks as critical for learning and collaboration. One participant remarked, "We're really good at sharing among ourselves—just picking up the phone and asking a colleague if they have resources or solutions to a problem" (Focus group participant, community sector, November 26th, 2024).

Research confirms that knowledge exchange is the biggest reason teachers participate in PD (Kessler, 2013; Richter, Eisenkraft, & Fischer, 2024; Timerly *et al.*, 2007). Investing in diverse knowledge-sharing formats is, therefore, an effective and cost-effective way to build collective knowledge and enhance resilience and wellbeing within the sector (Datnow, 2018; Gu, 2014). As an example, the Deaf/Blind stream raised the emotional dimensions of PD for Deaf practitioners, noting that many teachers feel isolated within their professional communities due to communication barriers. This suggests that opportunities for knowledge-sharing and peer-to-peer contact are critical for practitioner wellness.

Centralized Repository

A centralized repository would streamline this process, making it easier and more efficient for teachers while saving valuable time. A participant noted that some work is already being done to streamline access and avoid duplication by centralizing resources in a searchable online repository. Most practitioners, regardless of their sectors or cultural streams, agree that centralizing resources would improve access to learning materials and implementation tools. This strategy would also facilitate sector-wide navigation of publicly available resources. As it stands, educators often rely on piecemeal solutions and spend considerable time researching online to find suitable educational resources.

Knowledge Implementation

A recurring theme for the community sector was the difficulty of implementing PD due to limited follow-up support during implementation. One participant echoed the need for more self-paced learning opportunities and a central repository where practitioners could access asynchronous PD recordings and materials. “I would like personally to see... something that if you do attend a webinar then afterwards, there’s something that you can kind of test your knowledge... to remind yourself of the key points,” she stated (Focus group participant, community sector, November 20th, 2024). The repository would provide people with a means of accessing training later, she added.

One participant from the community sector emphasized, “We don’t have the capacity... to support people as they integrate that information... You can get all this knowledge bombarded at you, but then you need time to internalize it and understand it and apply it, and we just don’t have the capacity” (Focus group participant, community sector, November 20th, 2024), pointing to gaps in the long-term application of PD learnings. Many of the sectors and cultural streams underscored the importance of accessible mechanisms for knowledge sharing. One participant mentioned a centralized “resources forum site” (Focus group participant, community sector, November 20th, 2024) developed collaboratively across sectors, where practitioners could access materials and upcoming PD opportunities.

Mentorship

Informal mentorship was presented as a promising strategy. The college sector shared successful tools and strategies for PD design and implementation, including mentorship and collaborative planning. A respondent from the college sector described a common approach, saying, “I can pair up (person A) with (person B) at College X because she’s been doing this for years...Not that (person B) needs more training, but just that (person A) can be a go-to person” (Personal communication, college sector, November 21st, 2024). This peer-to-peer learning, while ad hoc, was noted as a cost-effective way to address immediate needs and build community.

One participant noted the importance of fostering mutual learning, pointing out that younger staff bring fresh ideas, especially with newer technologies, which can complement the knowledge of experienced mentors. “Younger staff... have been bringing ideas that some of the people who have been mentoring us may never have thought of, especially surrounding newer technologies and tools” (Focus group participant, community sector, November 20th, 2024).

Discussion

Investing in more knowledge-sharing initiatives could significantly improve operational efficiencies by reducing duplication of effort and enabling educators to build on proven strategies and continue to produce relevant and responsive learning resources. Such a program would foster a sense of community and shared purpose, which could enhance teacher wellbeing and reduce information silos and staff turnover.

By creating collaborative spaces for mutual support, the sector can strengthen relationships across the province and build a more connected network equipped to adapt to future challenges.

Knowledge sharing is a vital part of the learning process. Sharing among peers creates stronger communication channels and enhances motivation to participate. Initiatives like mentorships, communities of practice, virtual and in-person collaborative activities, and maker spaces can not only facilitate knowledge transfer and skill development but also provide a space for experienced people to transfer knowledge and wisdom to new practitioners.

However, participants made a distinction between planning and policy development activities at the administrative level and learning activities rooted in teaching practices, which LBS educators would like to see more of. See the 'Solution Models' section for more information.

4.5 Systemic and Organizational Constraints

In some sectors, structural and systemic constraints play a role in limiting PD opportunities. One participant mentioned that practitioners working in school boards are "mandated to follow a certain path," which leaves little flexibility for tailoring PD to individual or team needs (Interview participant, school board sector, November 20th, 2024). For the school board sector, any changes would require administrative buy-in. Another respondent suggested, "It could be part of the mandate...instructors need some time for PD," noting that institutionalised support for PD days can help alleviate time constraints (Interview participant, school board sector, November 20th, 2024).

Across Ontario's LBS sector, there is significant chronic underfunding, hindering the implementation of meaningful PD. Small organizations face the most financial instability, although an important factor is the past funding structure changes at the federal level that fragmented the LBS sector in Canada. The lack of paid release time for part-time instructors in some of the sectors limits their ability to participate in PD. A sustainable funding model that includes dedicated resources for PD delivery, translation, and staff time away from teaching duties would help improve conditions in the sector and ensure broader participation.

The Francophone stream also advocated for dedicated PD days and increasing MLITSD financial support for any mandatory training (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, November 27th, 2024). This would respond to the need for comprehensive backing when new requirements are introduced. See the 'Paid PD' solution model for more information. Another person emphasized the importance of aligning PD requirements with personal and organizational goals, saying it would make practitioners feel like they were being listened to.

Overall, the study underscored the need for targeted investments, strategic alignment of PD objectives, and more flexibility in delivery methods to enhance both PD participation and implementation of new skills and knowledge in the day-to-day. While online options offer convenience, participants expressed that in-person and collaborative learning remain invaluable for fostering meaningful professional growth. A participant described efforts to balance training design and requirements for both new and experienced staff, acknowledging that long-term employees may be resistant to some PD, but could play a role in providing support to new educators: "I really know my job well..." (Interview participant, school board sector, November 20th, 2024).

Technological barriers and inequities across the province have worsened these problems, with some service providers struggling with poor internet connectivity, inadequate translation, and limited access to critical platforms such as a Learning Management System (LMS). These barriers make accessing online, hybrid, and blended forms of learning difficult for LBS educators.

Discussion

For colleges, school boards, and community-based organizations, supporting flexible, adaptable programs and hybrid models that synchronous and asynchronous materials would offer more control over learning pathways and accommodate diverse needs, budgets, and schedules. The LBS network needs sustainable funding models that address rapidly changing technology and learner needs and demographics. A holistic approach to designing curriculum for practitioners would have

significant implications, both in terms of strengthening PD practices and streamlining operations and collaborative projects.

To address the imbalance in resources across sectors and cultural streams, colleges could potentially expand or redesign PD offerings to include LBS-focused practice-based sessions that align with the needs of other groups. Since they already have a strong LMS infrastructure, they may be able to play a leadership role in supporting shared access across the LBS sectors. Several participants identified Contact North as a potential PD hub. To reduce financial and time constraints, larger organizations, colleges and school boards could partner with external bodies and co-host learning opportunities for others. Community-based organizations, especially smaller ones and those located in remote and rural communities, could continue to face barriers related to time and money unless targeted funding is implemented to address their realities and needs.

A central place for housing educational resources would benefit the community sector, and informal models such as mentorship and peer-to-peer learning would require some support to scale across service providers. Cultural safety, accessibility of technology, and translation require sector-wide collaboration and coordination and support from the Government of Ontario to create long-term viable solutions. Equity and inclusion must be prioritized across all sectors, not just those who identify gaps in accessibility. This cross-sectorial approach could potentially reduce isolation among marginalized practitioners in the Deaf/Blind, Indigenous, and Francophone streams.

Accessibility and inclusivity are major challenges in the Francophone and Deaf/Blind sectors. Materials are often too generic, compliance-driven and don't address the diverse needs of LBS educators. The shortage of qualified and specialized interpreters and the lack of deaf-friendly platforms and translated content (French and ASL) highlight the need for targeted investments in inclusive content design, interpreter training, and the development of accessible learning platforms.

5. Assessing Solution Models

This section presents a series of solution models that emerged through collaborative, workshop-style consultations and brainstorming sessions with LBS stakeholders during Phase Two. These models build directly on the gaps and challenges identified in Phase One. A summary of their potential benefits and challenges for the LBS sector is provided. The results section demonstrates

the responses from participants and explores the feasibility of each model from the perspective of the LBS delivery sectors and cultural streams. Considerations for implementation are also provided.

5.1 Investing in a Provincial Hub

There is no unified body or approach to establishing clear standards in the LBS field. The fragmented structure of Ontario's LBS network and its diverse service delivery models, cultural and linguistic diversity, and funding jurisdictions hinder standardization, professionalization, and, at times, collaborative knowledge sharing.

Establishing a centralized hub, while logistically challenging, could help establish province-wide standards and guidelines for LBS-related training. A unified approach to planning, designing, delivery, and administration has the potential to reduce inefficiencies and duplications.

Theoretically, projects that might fall within the umbrella of a provincial hub include a certification or micro-credentials program, province-wide knowledge-sharing events, collaboration on provincial guidelines or standards, or a province-wide digital repository for storing/sharing training resources.

For example, Alberta's Community Adult Learning Program ([CALP](#)) holds an annual literacy and learning symposium, has created a portal for sharing resources and learning opportunities with practitioners, and shares information about training events and educational resources through its website. [TESL Ontario](#) (Teachers of English as a Second Language) has a community of practice for its members and offers educators a certification program and professional designation.

Benefits:

- May reduce the fragmented, 'piece-meal' approach to designing PD and implementing tech solutions.
- May remove barriers for practitioners to access practice-focused resources.
- May reduce information silos and duplication of efforts, creating more efficiency.
- May enhance existing collaboration and capacity to facilitate what the Ministry wants to implement.

- It may create more opportunities for creating baselines and standards across the LBS field (e.g. tech standards, competencies).

Challenges:

- May not tangibly address the time constraints of practitioners or the need for front-line support/coverage during PD program participation.
- May not reduce the existing administrative burden on practitioners and service providers and could even add to it depending on how it is implemented.
- May not work for such a diverse sector due to variances in funding jurisdictions (e.g. criteria, priorities, eligibility, requirements).
- Could require initial and long-term financial investment to design, implement, staff, manage, and evaluate the hub.

Responses from Participants

All sectors and cultural streams expressed support for a centralized PD hub in principle. “We keep reinventing the wheel in every board. A provincial hub could stop that,” noted one school board participant (March 7, 2025). Similarly, a community sector practitioner emphasized, “It would be great to have a shared space” (Focus Group participant, Community Sector, March 11, 2025).

The main benefits of the hub model include a reduction of duplication of efforts, a mechanism for sharing best practices, and a place for housing resources and sharing events and networking opportunities (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, February 5th, 2025; Interview, Indigenous Stream, February 26th, 2025; Focus group, School Board sector, March 7th, 2025; Focus group participant, Deaf/Hard of Hearing stream; March 6th, 2025; Focus Group participant, Community Sector, March 5th, 2025). “If it was done right, it could connect us instead of isolating us” (Focus group participant, Deaf/Hard of Hearing stream, March 6th, 2025).

However, there were concerns about implementation and whether it could accommodate the diversity of roles across institutions (Personal communication, College sector, February 25th, 2025). A provincial hub would require ongoing time investment in content curation, outreach, moderation, and updates, or otherwise risk being underused (Focus group participant, Deaf/Hard of Hearing stream, March 6th, 2025). Such as hub would need to consider the diversity of the LBS sector and the specific needs of the cultural streams and community-based organizations, otherwise it may not be effective in addressing accessibility and content relevance issues identified during phase one of the research (Focus group participant, Deaf/Hard of Hearing stream, March 6th, 2025; Focus group participant, Community sector, March 11th, 2025).

The community sector expressed a strong need for a centralized place to access PD opportunities, resources, tools, and peer-shared knowledge. “I spend too much time searching for resources or PD. It would be great to have a shared space” (Focus group participant, Community sector, March 11th, 2025). Potentially, a provincial hub could respond to these needs, however, the project would need ongoing funding to remain relevant, inclusive, current, and active. “I just worry about it becoming outdated or not representative of the diversity of programs” (Focus group participant, Community Sector, March 5th, 2025).

Considerations for Implementation

School boards may be reluctant to cede control over PD content if this model is implemented. Any hub must allow for local adaptation such as policy updates for data sharing and program evaluation (Focus group participant, School board sector, March 7th, 2025). Across the sectors and streams, a virtual hub is preferred, which many viewed as a digital space that would provide access to curated PD resources, registering for training, and connecting with peers across the province.

The Indigenous sector raised concerns about the risk of becoming too bureaucratic and reproducing colonial structures if not governed inclusively. “A hub only matters if it’s rooted in relationship, not just content delivery.” (Personal communication, Indigenous stream, February 26th, 2025). The risk of a unified approach is that it may not adequately reflect regional, cultural, and Indigenous nation-specific approaches. Indigenous practitioners must have decision-making power over how content for their cultural stream is curated and shared (Personal communication, Indigenous stream, February 26th, 2025).

The hub model risks over-centralizing the LBS sector and eroding the distinct context of the cultural streams, for instance, the current French-language programs being offered (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, February 5th, 2025). The hub could create moderate to high costs if it is mandated to develop and maintain a high-quality digital platform. The model requires a sustained investment in tech infrastructure and staff to manage the project, update the information, and promote the hub long-term.

5.2 Creating Maker Spaces for Practitioners

A maker space is an informal site that operates as an adaptable meeting space to provide workshops and flexible learning activities. Educators can engage in creating practice-based tools, explore and share ideas for implementing new knowledge, and learn technical skills through a self-organized learning model (Sleigh *et al.*, 2015; Sandvik & Thestrup, 2017; Sheridan *et al.*, 2014).

A New Zealand [study](#) conducted by the Department of Education found that learning communities in which ideas, experiences, and challenges are shared have a more positive impact than release time for PD ([Timperley *et al.*, 2007](#)). Factors such as having a sense of community and sharing knowledge, best practices, and teaching practices are viewed as highly valuable. One example of a successful maker space in the LBS sector involved the Toronto District School Board. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers needed to learn how to use their Learning Management System.

After some initial sessions, the group self-organized into a peer-learning community to share insights from their day-to-day experiences. The facilitator addressed occasional technical questions but mostly observed how the group's collaborative dynamic thrived. Another example is the University of Toronto's OISE Library. The library has successfully implemented the [K-12 Manipulatives Database](#), which offers makerspace kits, toys, games, and other resources and tools. It provides a physical space equipped for digital creation, socializing, and group learning.

Benefits:

- Educators can design their own learning experience, giving them more agency.
- Existing PD materials could be repurposed/adapted to different groups and contexts rather than reinventing the wheel.
- This is an ideal place to solve problems and innovate as a sector.
- May strengthen an already strong collaborative culture and create opportunities for more interactions with peers (e.g. peer-learning, networking), but specifically for teachers.
- It may provide an opportunity to share educational tools, resources and knowledge.

Challenges:

- Requires financial investment in the form of equipment, space (unless virtual), and a facilitator.
- Requires a mindset shift from traditional learning (consumer) to co-creator requires time.
- Experienced educators or people outside 'creative' disciplines may be resistant to the change.

- Designing one space that meets the needs of all sectors/streams could be a challenge. An option would be to create several maker spaces to meet the specific needs of the LBS network.
- Could make existing time/scheduling issue for teachers worse if there are any training requirements to learn to use/facilitate the maker space(s).

Response from Participants

The makerspace model is inspired by a need for more collaborative, peer-to-peer, hands-on learning spaces in the LBS sector. It proposes establishing regional maker spaces (primarily virtually) where educators can co-create resources, share best practices, and engage in peer-driven, experiential learning. “This would give us a chance to learn by doing – not just watching slides” (Interview, Indigenous Sector, February 26th, 2025). Maker spaces would allow practitioners to see and touch what they’re creating and understand its cultural meaning.

A research participant from the Indigenous sector noted that the model supports oral knowledge transfer, relational learning, and tactile approaches, which are aligned with Indigenous pedagogies (Interview, Indigenous Sector, February 26th, 2025). However, she noted that a hands-on model would require a physical space, materials, travel support, and a facilitator, raising the issue of difficult access for remote communities. “Some of our best PD has been making drums together or working on regalia – we learn from each other while we do that” (Interview, Indigenous Sector, February 26th, 2025).

Maker spaces offer a collaborative environment where practitioners co-create tools, share practices, and test new approaches. Co-creating pedagogical tools and resources enhances motivation, although someone needs to hold the space (Focus Group, Francophone Stream, February 5th, 2025). As a participant in the Francophone said, “*On a beaucoup d'idées dans le réseau, mais on manque d'occasions pour les développer ensemble.*” “We have lots of ideas in the network, but we lack opportunities to develop them together.” The model could help build a sense of community and ownership over learning.

Considerations for Implementation

Overall, there was enthusiasm across delivery sectors and cultural streams for a maker space or a series of maker spaces. Several people noted that teachers need a “safe place to fail” when testing out new things (Focus Group Participant, Community Sector, March 5th, 2025; Focus Group, School Boards, March 7th, 2025; Focus Group Participant, Deaf/Blind stream, March 6th, 2025).

However, across geographic areas, different approaches, content foci, and technological solutions may be needed to avoid creating new barriers and reduce existing inequities. A physical space would require an investment in rent, staff, equipment, and materials, which could be a deterrent for some organizations. Most streams and sectors appeared to prefer a virtual space, which would address most of these barriers and reduce the cost. For example, one person suggested implementing virtual or mobile “pop-up” labs in rural areas.

Many participants appreciated that a maker Space can provide experiential learning through hands-on, exploratory activities with real-world applications, where people can engage with technology. The school board noted that maker spaces are an opportunity for peer collaboration and lends itself well to adult learning styles (Focus Group, School Boards, March 7th, 2025). “We need safe spaces to fail, reflect, and tinker—not just sit and be told,” a participant from the school boards sector said.

School boards lack physical space and infrastructure to support maker space learning environments. The LBS network would need to identify and hire skilled facilitators who can model experiential learning and foster peer-to-peer interactions. In addition, organizations would need to allow enough time for iterative, hands-on learning may require changes to how PD is typically scheduled or structured.

5.3 Piloting a Paid PD Time Initiative

Models for 'Paid PD' vary according to their industry. However, two common approaches include 1) providing a PD stipend to educators to encourage them to develop their skills and knowledge and 2) requiring a set number of annual PD days or hours paid through a negotiated agreement with service providers or a third party such as a union. Stipends can cover the cost of certification, courses, conferences, or coaching or could be provided in the form of an annual bonus. The model could be combined with a certification or credentialization program. Examples of paid PD models include Doctors of Nova Scotia and the Ontario Education Act.

An incentive process tied to paid time off and release from other work duties would align with the feedback AlphaPlus received from research participants and with previous industry report

recommendations. This could help address the heavy workload preventing or deterring participants from attending, particularly for participants with dual roles that overlap with middle management responsibilities (Wai-Yan & Hak-Chung, 2010).

Benefits:

- May help service providers and support organizations be more proactive in planning and developing training that responds to the needs of the LBS network.
- May reduce distractions from other work responsibilities for educators and give them time to think about how to implement new knowledge and skills.
- May give educators time to develop practice-based resources (and share them with others).
- May increase practitioners' motivation to attend PD, their level of engagement, and provide them with the opportunities they desire for sharing knowledge and exchanging ideas with peers.

Challenges:

- Without reducing administrative burdens (especially for smaller organizations), it doesn't fully address time constraints.
- There may be implementation/design challenges due to the diversity of the sectors and streams (e.g. funding models, jurisdictional limits, union vs non-union).
- Replacing educators during paid PD time may be a challenge, creating additional financial burdens for 'supply LBS teachers' or requiring service providers to close to the public during PD hours.

Incentive processes can be effective at motivating teachers and building competencies; however, success depends on the content and form of the PD experience (Wai-Yan & Hak-Chung, 2010; Mollins, 2022). Teachers who participate in learning communities where ideas, experiences, and challenges are shared feel more supported when implementing new knowledge and change into their practice than they do when receiving monetary incentives such as paid PD (Timperly et al., 2007).

Participant Responses

Community sector participants responded positively to this solution model, repeatedly stressing that they do not have the time, capacity, or funding to engage in PD during unpaid hours. "We can't afford to send anyone to training because there's no one left to run the program" (Focus group

participant, community sector, March 5th, 2025). Some viewed the paid PD model as a way of addressing burnout risks. Another participant advocated for paid PD opportunities due to underfunding and precarious contracts that prevent many staff members from participating in training initiatives. “So many practitioners are part-time or contract, and training often takes place outside of their paid hours” (Focus group participant, community sector, March 5th, 2025).

For the Deaf/Blind sector, several people emphasized the need for PD to be compensated, either through stipends or paid release time. One participant noted that educators sometimes complete training outside their work hours and without pay. “We lose great staff because they can’t keep learning *and* working.” He noted that paid PD could encourage higher participation across roles and regions, but scaling a successful PD incentive program across all sectors could be a challenge due to the different employment and legal structures (e.g. part part-time, unionized) (Focus group participant, Deaf/Blind sector, March 6th, 2025).

The school board sector and Francophone stream felt that paid PD could help address practitioner fatigue from doing unpaid training. Teachers attend LBS-related training on their own time, which is unsustainable. This model could address the lack of time and monetary compensation, which are key barriers to PD participation. Potentially, this could create more equity between better-funded and under-resourced programs. However, a participant cautioned against implementing a program without addressing other barriers within the sector. For example, in smaller organizations, there is no one to replace practitioners when they attend training.

“On n’a pas les moyens de libérer les gens pour la formation, donc ils doivent choisir entre apprendre et servir.” (We can’t afford to release people for training, so they have to choose between learning and serving.) (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, February 5th, 2025).

Considerations for Implementation

For Paid PD to work, funding models must explicitly support them, not just to cover registration fees but also to cover the cost of staff and backfilling roles. This model is a structural investment in programs and should be embedded into paid roles rather than treated as an add-on. A participant noted that funding models must be adapted to cover PD participation time, especially for part-time or precariously employed staff.

The payment model would need to be equitable and easy to administer. One possibility would be to pair paid PD with flexible formats to accommodate various types of work schedules. This is critical

for programs that serve marginalized communities, where staff are underpaid and overstretched. Due to existing budget constraints within the LBS sector, organizations would need to balance limited funding while exploring the right mechanisms to compensate educators fairly for PD.

A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to work. One participant recommended making paid PD available to all adult education staff and structuring PD into the workday through release time or dedicated PD days. Several participants noted that such a program could create high operational costs depending on the size of the staff and hours that need to be covered. A paid PD initiative would require stable funding and policy changes to embed PD compensation into core funding.

5.4 Assessing the Feasibility of Micro-Credentials

“Digital badges are electronic symbols used as micro-credentials to document achievement or skills mastered such as course completion, professional development participation, or training completion” (Parker, as cited in Stefaniak & Carey, 2019). They offer a personalized learning pathway to LBS teachers that can be adapted to various contexts, which could lend itself well to the diversity of the LBS delivery sectors and cultural streams.

The approach has been adopted by post-secondary institutions such as Carleton University and Arizona State University and is used by the Federation of CEGEPS in Quebec and the Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes (COFA). COFA, a support organization for the Francophone cultural stream, is already in the process of implementing a digital badging system. Such a program could bolster recognition of LBS instructors’ competencies and act as a motivator due to its potential for fostering career growth.

Benefits:

- The value of a competency-focused badge system is that it allows documentation and verification of skills and can motivate learners to engage in learning.
- The badges function as micro-credentials, documenting professional achievements and skills ranging from course-level implementations to department-wide and university-wide training programs.

- They serve as pedagogical and motivational tools, fostering skill recognition and community building.
- May provide opportunities for collaboration, peer interactions, and feedback if they include a component where educators meet to discuss the program.
- Designed for distance learning environments, which works well for a geographically diverse sector.
- Could provide a unified approach to developing, evaluating, and maintaining sector-wide standards, for example common rubrics or surveys related to teaching practices and technology use.

Challenges:

- The badges are less likely to be adopted when they increase teachers' workload or their purpose is unclear. "It takes time to pitch, design, develop, promote, implement, and manage a badge program," pointing to the program's resource-intensive nature (Stefaniak & Carey, 2019, p. 13).
- The badges work well for educators who are working towards credentials if they are tied to course credit, address instructional gaps, and foster uniformity. However, when administrators struggle to convince instructors of the program's efficacy, they don't work.
- The badge system is complex, which can negatively impact their diffusion and adoption. Where badges were tied closely to internal learning outcomes and rarely shared externally, the value is less obvious.
- Badge credentials require some form of assessment, which can require time and expertise.

Participant Responses

One participant suggested using a badging system to incentivize and track participation. "We could identify skill and talent, and it gives some sort of reward for people taking the PD and allows us to see, you know, common areas where there are common strengths or things that they want to work on and that kind of thing as well," according to one participant from the community sector (Focus group participant, community sector, November 20th, 2024).

A participant in the Francophone focus group suggested initiatives like their digital badging system can recognise instructors' competencies and motivate staff while fostering a sense of accomplishment. One participant from the community sector said, "The work is so different in every region. A one-size-fits-all certificate wouldn't mean much unless it's specific." (Focus group participant, Francophone stream, February 5th, 2025). The Francophone stream has already begun the work to design and implement a micro-credentials program and shared some lessons learned.

Practitioners can sometimes face technological barriers of a lack of familiarity with the model. Translating the resources requires additional financial investments, and they must be designed in a way that allows for flexibility, given the busy and irregular schedules of practitioners.

One participant felt that the program gives value to the learning experience and makes the work she does in the LBS sector more visible and tangible. “Ça valorise notre apprentissage, surtout quand on travaille dans un secteur souvent invisible.” (It values our learning, especially when we work in a sector that often goes unseen). (Personal communication, Francophone stream, February 5th, 2025). For the school board sector, participants saw the model as having potential, saying modular learning could work to validate professional learning, but concerns were raised around implementation. “We need to link them to advancement or pay grid movements, otherwise what’s the incentive?”

Considerations for Implementation

School Boards would need to integrate an LBS-specific micro-credentials program into existing HR structures to make them meaningful for career progression or salary enhancement. Implementation would require negotiation with unions around professional advancement and workload expectations. Community-based organizations would likely want to customize the micro-credentials to suit their needs and reflect the diversity of roles in the sector. The value and adoption of the model would depend on the credibility of the credentials and whether funders or employers would recognize them. Micro-credentials should be aligned with sector competencies and recognized by funders and professional networks. They must be accessible to part-time, rural, or independent educators.

Credentials must honour Indigenous ways of knowing, including oral traditions, relational learning, and teachings from Elders. They would need to be led or co-developed by Indigenous educators to ensure relevance and cultural safety. A co-developed model would be critical, particularly for Indigenous service providers who would expect them to be relevant and would respect their knowledge systems. “We do lots of learning already – we go to ceremonies, we talk with Elders, we attend language classes – and that’s learning that matters.” “We don’t need more colonial structures; we need validation of what we’re already doing.” (Interview participant, Indigenous stream, February 26th, 2025)

The implementation of a province wide or several sector/stream specific micro-credentials requires investments in technology to ensure educators across different regions have equitable access to the platforms to manage their digital badges.

6. Recommendations

Based on the results from phase one and the reflections gathered during the workshops in phase two, the author puts forth five recommendations for the sector.

Recommendation 1: Establish technological standards in response to variances in technological readiness and digital literacy within the LBS sector.

The disparities in technological capacity and access to technological platforms, strong internet, and digital resources create inequitable access to resources, suggesting having province-wide standards for infrastructure and staff competencies could ensure all practitioners receive the same training on tools and policies. Establishing standards for technological readiness and digital literacy could help provide more equitable access to online and blended PD.

More technological equity can be achieved by shifting priorities in curriculum design and introducing the following baselines:

1. Continue to provide a variety of options for accessing PD programs, such as on-site, virtual, and self-paced learning programs, offering relevant learner-specific experiences and content specific to service providers' goals and operational needs (Reynolds, 2023).
2. When designing courses and teaching practices, keep low bandwidth and immediacy of tools in mind to better support and connect practitioners and administrators with low technological readiness or poor internet connectivity.
3. Create PD programs that integrate course development standards similar to the UBC's [ETS Online Course Readiness Guide](#) (UBC, 2024), for example, adopt standards for image, video and file optimization, alternative formats like Alt text PDF, ePub, electronic braille, or immersive readers that provide descriptions when images aren't loading properly (UBC CTLT, 2020).
4. Introduce mobile-friendly courses that run on data and offer pre-recorded lectures, using discussion boards, email, group chat and messaging, and collaborative documents that reduce accessibility issues (UBC CTLT, 2020).
5. Enable offline content by providing HTML files and downloadable materials and adapting low-bandwidth settings such as disabling HD on Zoom, creating transcripts, and running quality checks (UBC CTLT, 2020).
6. Increase investments in Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing friendly and other accessible technologies, providing targeted funding for interpreter fees and training when creating or delivering PD.

7. Fund sector/stream specific micro-credentials initiatives that allow for stream specific customization rather than eroding local autonomy (e.g. Francophone, Indigenous, Deaf streams).

The successful implementation of these recommendations relies both on the digital maturity of service providers and the competencies of practitioners. Low bandwidth learning environments and investments in digital infrastructure can help improve technological equity and reduce existing barriers related to accessing online training.

Recommendation 2: Enhance and modernize PD curriculum design practices to better align with evolving changes in LBS sector and to provide culturally (and socially) responsive content.

Quality PD curriculum prioritizes relevant and realistic content, builds in time for educators to share ideas and provide input, and offers practical resources for implementing new knowledge and skills (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). ensure the PD program will meet their needs.

1. Apply a culturally responsive PD model that bridges the gap between theory and practice, for example, providing hand-on culturally mediated instruction, reshaping existing curriculum to better reflect the diversity of LBS learners, and demonstrating cultural sensitivity by using cooperative learning approaches.
2. Select multicultural literature and other learning materials to promote inclusivity, foster understanding of diverse perspectives, and reflect the lived realities of LBS learners and practitioners (Callins, 2006, p. 63).
3. Review existing diversity-focused curriculum to better understand the measures, outcomes, and results of these types of training sessions and their impact on practitioners and LBS learners (Bottiani *et al.*, 2017). Bottiani *et al.* recommend establishing standards of evidence for the effectiveness of learning content to ensure rigorous program features are used.

Additionally, the author reiterates the Canadian Language Industry Association's (2025) recommendations to invest in more ASL/LSQ interpretation services. A collaborative and targeted response is needed to address the shortage of qualified interpreters by working with service providers, interpreter education programs, provincial and federal governments, interpreter referral agencies, and consumer advocacy organizations.

A cross-sectorial effort to expand access to qualified interpreters could include:

1. Expanding ASL/LSQ studies programs in Ontario.
2. Establishing more effective ways of scheduling interpreting services.
3. Exploring accessible technology and other tools that maximize coverage across the country.

4. Establishing mentorship programs for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing practitioners and providing incentives to recruit and retain interpreters.

Expanding existing post-secondary programs for interpreters and preparing graduates for complex, independent assignments and freelance contracts such as the ones needed in the LBS sector (Canadian Language Industry Association, 2025).

Recommendation 3: Prioritize and increase targeted investments in infrastructure and build more culturally relevant and accessible materials, taking into account the financial imbalances within the sector.

Consultations with service providers show that PD-related time constraints are largely due to a lack of financial resources at the organizational level. Increasing funding through targeted investment in infrastructure and the development of culturally relevant materials emerged as key recommendations during consultations with Ontario's LBS sector.

1. The Ministry's investment in targeted funding related to infrastructure, that is, the organizational systems that support LBS teaching, is critical. As one respondent stated, "Equity in professional development is not just about access; it's about creating meaningful opportunities that truly support practitioners in their unique contexts."
2. Incentivize educators to participate in PD by providing financial incentives such as the potential for a pay raise, an annual bonus, or stipend tied to attending and completing PD courses. One participant noted that the lack of financial incentives contributes to low engagement.
3. Create opportunities for career growth in the sector. Many practitioners stay committed out of a sense of duty to their students rather than for professional advancement opportunities (Personal communication, Indigenous stream, November 26th, 2024).
4. In the long term, if funding is allocated for paid PD time, a risk assessment tied to the increase of costs and administrative burdens to service providers, and to the potential impact of changing funding formulas should be conducted prior to implementing such as program.

A study demonstrated that time release, when used as an incentive to encourage teachers to participate in PD, can be successful (deNoyelles & Seilhamer, 2015). However, to be effective, incentives must be rooted in the organizational work culture, which requires close collaboration and consultation with service providers and understanding individual and sectoral professional contexts.

Recommendation 4: Invest in diverse knowledge-sharing initiatives that represent the relevant and current needs of LBS practitioners and provide culturally and psychologically safe spaces.

In line with Tracey Mollins' report (2022), we recommend strengthening PD experiences by investing in more opportunities for sharing resources for just-in-time learning and ensuring programs are appropriately funded to cover the cost of the time staff require to attend, learn, reflect, implement and evaluate new knowledge and skills.

Knowledge sharing initiatives may look like:

1. A variety of knowledge sharing spaces, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. This would respond to the diverse needs of the LBS sector, reduce communication barriers and increase peer-to-peer contact.
2. Offer opportunities for practitioners to evaluate, discuss, and test new skills, tools, and knowledge, and offer time and support for the day-to-day implementation of PD into practice.
3. Create a central digital repository where asynchronous PD recordings and materials can be accessed by practitioners once PD is completed.
4. Offer mentorship and mutual learning opportunities, particularly when new technologies are introduced, or new practitioners are onboarded.
5. Leverage existing resources and forums in the LBS sector such as e-Channel, Basecamp and expand knowledge sharing initiatives through college sector organizations such as Contact North.

The report calls for the regional literacy networks and support organizations to lead the co-creation of culturally relevant, accessible PD and pilot virtual and mobile maker spaces for practice-based learning. Colleges and school boards may be instrumental in sharing LMS infrastructure across sectors and streams and contributing to the development of shared standards and resources. There is also a need to create a system-wide repository and asset-building PD plan that put practitioners at the centre of decision-making. Such as plan could include advocating for funding that aligns with real costs and needs. However, this plan must reflect the diverse needs, levels of preparedness and digital maturity of service providers.

Recommendation 5: Prioritize inclusive and collaborative governance models when implementing province-wide strategies or programs intended to address LBS gaps.

Stakeholders, in particular Indigenous and Francophone service providers, emphasize that a cross-sectoral projects such as a provincial hub must reflect the diversity of the LBS network, including cultural, linguistic, and regional realities. While widely supported, a centralized hub could be expensive to launch and maintain in the long term. It could also be seen as duplicated existing infrastructure (e.g. Contact North, regional networks, AlphaPlus) or ‘over-centralizing’ a sector that thrives on its diverse approaches and strengths.

1. A hub model requires a representative advisory or governance structure from the beginning, with decision-making roles given to the cultural streams. This would guide content curation, language accessibility, and teaching approaches.
2. To reduce overlap and duplication risks, clearly define the distinct roles and purposes of a maker spaces (development and testing) and a provincial hub (coordination and access) and how they can work together.
3. Build on what already exists. If the goal is to reduce duplication efforts and increase efficiencies, the hub model should use an integrated approach. Mapping and evaluating existing PD platforms, repositories, and networks across the sector could leverage what already exists and simply connect and amplify LBS assets.
4. Build in flexibility for local adaptation of this model by giving delivery sectors and cultural streams the ability to tailor content and tools and adjust PD pathways according to their policies and regional/cultural needs.
5. Prioritize accessibility, relevance, and usability in any program design attached to a “hub” model. For example, embedding multilingual tech support, providing various delivery formats (land-based, hybrid, virtual, in person).

As an ensemble, these five recommendations are interconnected and provide the foundation for a sector-wide roadmap that is forward-thinking and grounded in the lived experiences of LBS practitioners. Each recommendation reinforces the other and calls for inclusive governance, culturally responsive learning materials, equitable infrastructure, and collaborative knowledge-sharing practices. These recommendations are in service of a digitally empowered and accessible province-wide strategy that will ensure all delivery sectors and cultural streams are supported. They reflect a shared commitment and readiness within the sector to embrace meaningful digital transformation, while recognizing the diversity of Ontario’s LBS network and its willingness to collaborate on improving practitioner development as strengths.

7. Conclusion

Across sectors, but particularly in the community-based delivery sector, the biggest barrier and source of frustration is the limited time practitioners and administrators with dual roles can commit to professional development. The sector views increasing targeted investments in infrastructure and building relevant and accessible curriculum and building digital readiness to deliver blended and online training solutions to educators. Knowledge sharing was identified as a strength in the sector but follow up support and additional funds are needed to develop inclusive resources and dynamic peer-to-peer spaces where regional and cultural/linguistic needs can be met.

A few sector-specific nuances worth mentioning primarily relate to the cultural streams and the community-based sector. Rural and remote organizations, unsurprisingly, experience more technological barriers when accessing online or hybrid training and face higher costs when attending in-person session. The Indigenous stream called for flexibility in the design and delivery of PD programs, recommending a mix of on-site, virtual, and self-paced options that integrate the lived experience of practitioners, cultural frameworks and pedagogical approaches.

Low Indigenous representation in the workforce, discrimination, and cultural barriers create more job instability for the stream compared to non-Indigenous service providers (Government of Canada, 2023). Strengthening relationships with Indigenous recruiters and community partners can help address this significant issue, in addition to supporting flexible work options such as telework. Working closely with Ontario colleges can raise awareness about job opportunities in Indigenous-led LBS organizations. In addition, creating more opportunities for career growth in the cultural streams can increase motivation to stay in roles long-term and reduce high staff turnover. By stabilizing the workforce, practitioners are more likely to invest in their career and skills development.

The Deaf/Blind stream emphasized critical gaps in the accessibility of PD programs and materials, which contribute to practitioner isolation and a diminished sense of belonging. This critical issue could be addressed by investing in simple tech solutions such as using more audio-based and self-paced PD and integrating closed captioning, as well as investing in more real-time interpretation. From the Francophone perspective, the sector lacks French-language resources and funding for translating PD materials, making some content less relevant to the stream's context and needs. Practitioners want to know how to apply the training they receive to their day-to-day context and view practical and applied training as fundamental to their success. The Francophone stream

recommended tailored sessions on topics such as digital literacy and mental health, which would have a bigger impact than generic theoretical PD.

What Solutions Are Most Viable?

No single solution is a silver bullet. However, maker spaces, a provincial hub, a mini-credentials program, and paid PD processes could work synergistically. Without targeted investments and compensation for practitioners who spend time on professional development and other resource development, no matter how well-designed PD programs are, the existing barriers are likely to continue.

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Paid PD

For practitioners who are part-time, non-unionized, or working multiple jobs, attending PD can be a burden, regardless of motivation to learn. Practitioners cited burnout, underfunding, and staffing shortages as barriers that make unpaid PD unviable. While a Paid PD program is an opportunity to create equitable access and receive consistent training across streams and sectors, the program is not currently recommended.

In theory, paying staff to participate in PD signals that their time is valued and encourages broader participation. However, paid participation doesn't guarantee quality or relevance of the PD itself. If available training is not aligned with real practitioner needs (e.g. teaching practice, accessibility, cultural contexts), then paying people to attend training programs they don't need, or need less than others, won't lead to better outcomes. The system first needs to improve its capacity to provide meaningful practice-based PD, improve capacity to coordinate virtual and in-person initiatives for

remote, small, and rural organizations, and ensure online materials are fully accessible, both technologically and linguistically.

Paid PD initiatives require consistent governance and oversight to oversee funding distribution and compliance, for example a steering committee or advisory council to develop policies and support the implementation of reporting, monitoring, and evaluation processes. The program would require a centralized fund with an equitable funding formula that accounts for organization size, geographic location, and staff numbers. Implementing such as program without increasing the current budget is unlikely to succeed. Therefore, grants to build capacity for participation would be essential. To track participation, outcomes, and disbursements, a central portal of database would need to be integrated across all sectors and streams and be compatible with existing payroll systems.

Without these foundational changes, a Paid PD incentive program could end up funding uneven or even low-impact experiences, missing its potential to drive sector transformation and higher engagement in professional learning. In short, it could be a viable option, but only once the right infrastructure is in place.

Provincial Hub

If the hub model is introduced, we recommend building on existing regional networks to consider sectoral, geographic, and cultural differences, imbedding a collaborative governance model such as an advisory or steering committee. This would enhance buy-in and responsiveness, particularly if representation across the diverse landscape of the LBS network is reflected. Potentially, the hub could lead projects such as a province-wide digital repository or an LBS credentialization program, an online forum for practice-based discussions, surveys and feedback tools, self-paced learning materials, a registration system, and a PD calendar, as well as lead discussions about content development, equity challenges, and the needs of community-based service providers. Existing PD projects and processes could be leveraged and integrated into the provincial hub, reducing duplication and improving efficiency.

This initiative could be rolled out in phases within a year; however, the cost of implementations is likely to include staffing, upgrading IT platforms, technical support, instructional designers or facilitators, and communications support. It may address some of the gaps by providing sector-wide infrastructure, aligned delivery, and equity-centered support and reducing the fragmented programs currently being used. A critical element to the success of a provincial hub would be access to funds covering translation from English to ASL/QSL or English to French.

The provincial hub was seen as a promising infrastructure solution by most participants, especially for community-based providers experiencing isolation. If co-designed and maintained with all delivery sectors and cultural streams' input, the hub could centralize digital resources, peer forums and discussion groups, and maker space toolkits. However, the cultural streams warned that a provincial hub risks reducing cultural relevance and cultural safety in favor of using a one-size-fits-all approach.

Maker Spaces

Maker spaces strongly align with practitioner desires for peer learning, experimentation, and reflective practice. Delivered virtually, with opportunities for in-person events at the regional levels, they can offer vital peer support and knowledge sharing across the province. LBS Maker Spaces operating within existing regional networks and utilizing a common technical approach could ensure participation province-wide and enable asynchronous sharing, especially for organizations that can't access physical spaces.

The maker space model requires assurances that the learning spaces meet diverse cultural, linguistic, and learning needs across delivery sectors and streams. A physical maker space could provide hands-on and in person opportunities such as Indigenous land-based learning. However, this may require investing in a virtual platform that integrates peer-to-peer communication, resource testing, event hosting, and learning resource storage and management. The spaces should align with existing curriculum development efforts and inform practitioner learning outcomes.

Micro-Credentials

Micro-credentials could be integrated once the other structures are established, offering recognition for contributions in each space and the COFA badging system could serve as a pilot project for understanding the impact. Paid PD and micro-credentials could work synergistically, compensating staff to earn credentials that then lead to recognition or advancement. Yet, several participants warned that the sector may not be ready to implement such a program at the provincial level, and a pilot project in one sector might provide additional data on the viability of this approach. In addition, maker spaces may not scale easily across all groups unless fragmented solutions to

online and hybrid learning environments are addressed or regional maker space models are introduced.

The COFA badge project emerged as a logical next step to developing a comprehensive competency framework. The project spanned over a year and reflected various practitioner roles and competency levels within the sector. The goal of the framework was to recognize the skills of practitioners and position their work as innovative and forward-thinking. The badges have helped facilitate transitions from other fields into LBS and offer practitioners a way to demonstrate new skills. To date, over 200 digital badges have been issued, and the project has been well-received, although momentum has slowed due to time constraints and the challenge of making the mini-credentials valuable and visible outside the field.

COFA is currently working to align the initiative with organizational goals and gain external recognition, including from Ontario's Ministry of Education. The project has relied on consultation with members and testing by expert contributors. The approach is resource-intensive, but phased-out building of the badges and support from COFA to service providers has made them a viable option. The vision is to promote a cultural shift from trainer to lifelong learner.

Final Thoughts

The solutions presented here should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. A hybrid approach could include several of the recommendations proposed in this report, or some approaches could be adapted to specific delivery sectors or cultural stream-specific, depending on the contexts and needs. This layered approach allows for flexibility and choice and supports cultural safety and accessibility, respecting the diversity of LBS education approaches across Ontario.

In closing, these quotes from research participants summarize the receptivity and interest in introducing new solution models and strategies across the province.

“We don't need another framework imposed on us. We already have the teachings ...we just need the space and resources to live them out.”

(Ideally), “... we decide what we teach, how we teach, and how we grow as professionals.”

“Sometimes what I need most is just to sit in circle with people who understand what this work really asks of us.”

“These spaces give us a break from performing for funders. We can just be real – and that’s when the learning happens.”

Support organizations can lead the charge in curating and developing accessible PD resources tailored to the current needs of the cultural streams by facilitating peer-to-peer learning and mentorship opportunities, advocating for inclusive and low bandwidth learning formats and best practices, and providing training on digital tools to practitioners who lack technical expertise and organizations that lack technological readiness. The regional literacy networks are in a strong position to continue being connectors and amplifiers that create spaces for shared dialogue and identifying common needs and gaps across sectors. They could play an important role in coordinating regional or provincial piloting of PD programs and pedagogical resources, while sharing and curating promising practice-based and compliance-based tools across the province.

Across all sectors, research participants called for a diversified approach to managing PD for the delivery sectors and cultural streams. To enable systemic change, we recommend the Ministry consider allocating dedicated, stable funding for PD translation, interpretation, and resource development that responds to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the LBS network and to the need for low bandwidth, accessible learning opportunities for educators.

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9. Additional Resources

Culturally Responsive Practice

[Weaving Ways Indigenous Ways of Knowing In Classrooms And School](#)

[Indigenous Ways of Knowing Course Design](#)

[Lesson Plans – Indigenous Ways of Knowing & Being](#)

Online and Blended Learning

[ETS Online Course Readiness Guide](#) (University of British Columbia)

ASL/LSQ Interpretation

[National Standards for Interpretation Services](#)

[National Standard Guide for Community Interpreting Services](#)

[Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters](#) (CASLI)

Non-Profit Capacity Building

[Measuring Capacity Level](#)

[Effective Capacity Building in NonProfits](#)

10. Appendix

Phase 1 – Interviews and Focus Group Questions

Barriers to PD Participation

In previous studies by AlphaPlus, Literacy and Basic Skills practitioners identified time and accessibility as the top barriers to participating in professional development (PD) activities. Practitioners don't have enough time to participate in training initiatives or implement new knowledge due to being over-extended, having part-time status, or having limited time to develop tools.

Some organizations have limited access to technology needed for online or blended learning environments, such as a learning management system. There is also a general need for more accessible PD across the province and/or translation resources, which is almost exclusively offered in English.

Question 1

How do practitioners in your sector typically access PD initiatives? For example, are there specific formats offered such as conferences, regional meetings, online self-study modules, or in-service sessions?

Follow Up Questions

What are some of the barriers you've encountered when accessing online, blended, or in person training intended for the work you do in the LBS network (e.g. language, technology, design, delivery mode)?

If you work in an online setting, do you feel you have the same access to PD opportunities as those who work in person?

If you work in a rural area of the province, do you feel you have the same access to PD opportunities as those working in urban areas?

Question 2

What strategies or changes are needed to increase accessibility to PD and/or provide practitioners enough time to attend, complete, and implement new training?

Follow Ups

If these strategies are unavailable to you, please explain why and what the Ministry can do to help improve access and/or time availability (includes both online, blended, and in person)?

Prior Experience/Learning & Goal Alignment

According to research, “attention should be paid to teachers’ prior learning experiences (Zhang *et al.*, 2021, p. 727). A study conducted by Zhang *et al* recommends tailoring PD activities for experienced participants by focusing on innovative pedagogies for the classroom and providing opportunities to mentor and giving guidance to new educators.

Organizational leadership plays an important role in motivating practitioners to participate in professional learning, including strengthening attitudes career learning and reinforcing commitments to the work by identifying a vision for teaching and learning (Zhang *et al*, 2021). Internalising organizational goals as personal goals can also increase motivation to participate in professional learning activities.

Question 3

Do practitioners in your sector have access to the right resources and support during the learning process and afterwards when implementing new knowledge and skills? If not, what is missing?

Question 4

Do you feel your prior learning experiences are recognized when it comes to participating in and/or completing PD initiatives?

Follow Up

Can you recommend ways of better aligning organizational goals with practitioner goals when it comes to professional learning activities?

Content Relevance

One study demonstrated that, to be effective, PD learning must benefit the individual, group, or organization and be a meaningful experience (Day and Lee in Wai-Yan, & Hak-Chung, 2010). Implementing realistic and relevant content and providing opportunities for participants to share ideas with others are critical to fully engaging in PD programs.

Previous AlphaPlus reports support this. For instance, practitioners report that some training programs lack cultural relevance. Compliance training activities are generally viewed as cumbersome and inefficient and there is a need for more effective training for providers on compliance systems (AlphaPlus report, p. 18). Cathexis and Made Manifest also recommend using a learner-centered approach that recognizes the diversity of learner needs and goals.

While typically this approach is used with LBS students/program participants, a similar approach could be useful for practitioner learning. The literature recommends soliciting feedback from educators to ensure PD programs meet their needs (Wai-Yan, & Hak-Chung, 2010; Zhang *et al*, 2021).

Question 5

What types of PD content are currently emphasized in your organization and/or sector (e.g., practice-focused, compliance-focused, or leadership-focused), and who is the intended audience?

Follow Ups

Is there a feedback mechanism in place for practitioners to ensure the PD programs they participate in meet their needs? If so, what is it?

Have participants identified any gaps in PD content or areas they feel are essential but currently missing? Describe the gaps and/or areas in need of development.

Question 6

In your sector, which best practices or strategies have proven most effective for determining the focus areas and the delivery modes of PD programs?

Knowledge Sharing

Reports from Cathexis and Made Manifest recommend giving practitioners opportunities to learn from their colleagues and providing a mechanism for knowledge sharing and networking [2]. “Educators want to learn from colleagues” and “need more training in adapting their teaching practices to various learners’ needs (Cathexis, Taking Stock..., p. 13).

In addition, bridging the digital divide requires accessible PD, a mechanism for sharing learning materials, curricula, and best practices, and support for acquiring equipment, IT support and software licensing (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2024).

Question 7

In your sector or stream, what mechanisms do you have for sharing learning materials, curriculums, and best practices around technical issues, access, and other PD-related issues mentioned here?

Follow Up

Are there other strategies, mechanisms, or solutions you would recommend for sharing best practices, receiving technical support, or sharing new knowledge? If so, what would it look like?

Government Support

The Government of Ontario LBS Guidelines (2023) is responsible for supporting LBS service providers by facilitating service planning and coordinating community-based processes. According to the guidelines, this may include:

- Linking service providers with professional development (PD) opportunities and developing tools and resources that assist them in providing quality instruction and assessment services (p. 16).
- Support the management of resources and business systems through resource development and PD opportunities (p.17).
- Provide stream specific PD opportunities to practitioners to support continuous improvement of service delivery. (p. 18).

- Coordinate stream specific professional development and training with regional networks and sectors. (p. 19).
- Support development of and access to professional development opportunities to develop trained and skilled literacy practitioners. (p. 20).
- Support improvement of use of digital technology for training purposes, such as PD and resources that increase the use of online courses, web-based resources and distance education programs (p. 22).

Question 8

Keeping in mind the current role of the Ministry, what are the most significant unmet funding needs affecting practitioners' ability to access, attend, or implement PD training (e.g. format, time, access, translation, travel/location, mode of delivery, learning resources, number of participants)?

Follow Ups

Have you observed any gaps in the support offered for teacher practice improvement, management competency development, or digital delivery methods?

Are there examples of training programs or initiatives you chose not to offer or participate in due to financial constraints?