



## *From Acorn to Oak: Virtual Learning Strategist Program*

# Virtual Learning Strategist Program

Apprenticeship and Occupational Certification Branch of the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour

## Overview:

Highly skilled tradespersons come from many backgrounds, and learning disabilities, essential skills gaps, or language barriers can prevent top talent from entering or remaining in the skilled trades workforce. To address these obstacles, New Brunswick has become a leader in innovative solutions to meet training needs. Customized learning plans for trade apprentices with learning disabilities or essential skills gaps, have enabled many talented individuals to remain in, or transition to, the workforce. The success of the model has led to federal funding to provide services *virtually* in New Brunswick and five other jurisdictions across Canada.

New Brunswick boasts having one of the most thorough learning support models for apprentices. Apprentices with learning disabilities or essential skills gaps may be highly skilled in their chosen trade yet struggle to complete training because of difficulties with classroom-oriented components and written examinations, resulting in marginalization and poor outcomes. By developing customized learning plans and implementing accommodations and interventions tailored to each individual's circumstances, New Brunswick's learning strategist model assist at-risk skilled trade apprentices with successfully navigating training, testing, and the transition to the workforce.

## Background:

In August 2012, the Department of Post-Secondary Education Training and Labour's (PETL) Apprenticeship and Occupational Certification Branch of the Government of New Brunswick created an in-depth support protocol named the Learning Strategist Model. It is targeted toward apprentices who demonstrate challenges to success, such as those who fail one of the annual in-class training blocks or certification exams or have a previously diagnosed learning disability. The protocol provides learning supports to apprentices as a means of decreasing barriers to success. Unlike programs in other Canadian jurisdictions, entrants into an apprenticeship program in New Brunswick begin with a mandatory essential skills assessment.

The Learning Strategist model is well regarded and is promoted to other jurisdictions by Employment and Skills Development Canada's (ESDC) Office of Literacy and Essential Skills. ESDC approached the Department and requested that they submit a proposal to expand the Learning Strategist Model to other jurisdictions. PETL submitted a funding application for a proposal in June 2018.

This proposed virtual extension saw the development of a four-year research program



that would extend the Learning Strategist model to four other jurisdictions: Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Yukon. A steering committee comprised of a member from each jurisdiction would oversee the program. The four partnering jurisdictions do not currently provide learning support services directly to apprentices, thereby reducing the chance that apprentices are able to access services needed to overcome essential skills gaps and learning disabilities.

### **The VLS Program Overview:**

The VLS has the capacity for virtual program delivery with the goal of delivering a cross-jurisdictional learning support model that embraces an online format yet bridges the self-directed learning barrier so often associated with online learning. Apprentices who require special assistance in order to be successful on the classroom-based learning may also find it difficult to complete training that is provided solely online and that requires them to access, use, understand, and complete the training on their own. To help apprentices overcome this barrier, Learning Strategists are available to help facilitate their learning, done over an online Zoom room platform and via our VLS online Portal.

Learning Strategists provide targeted informal assessments which have been built by our team and offered online. These assessments help to identify essential skills gaps, digital skills gaps, and risk of learning disabilities. Results provide information to help address individual needs and implement interventions to address these needs directly. Work with the Learning Strategist may cover a wide range of areas and include the identification of skills gaps, possible learning disabilities, test anxiety, and individual factors affecting performance, such as deficits in study skills and motivational factors, and interventions to accommodate sensory disabilities. Based on this work, Learning Strategists develop customized learning plans to address identified needs. These plans can include support services provided directly, or referrals may be made for formal assessments and academic supports, as necessary.

Working with jurisdictional contacts, Learning Strategists are also responsible for ensuring that recommendations for accommodations and services that are made as a result of formal evaluations are put into place. Apprentices are typically referred to the program by the jurisdictional apprenticeship authority when they have identified challenges on exams. In New Brunswick, referrals are based on the mandatory Essential Skills Assessment, thereby creating a pro-active model. Because the ESA is not a mandatory assessment for all apprentices in other jurisdictions, referrals usually come after a failure unless the apprentice has self-disclosed a need for assistance early on.

### **Expansion of the VLS:**

In summer 2020 Newfoundland expressed interest in joining the VLS, and a fifth jurisdiction was approved by ESDC.

## The VLS Model:

The diagram below provides a visual expression of the VLS model and the partners required to attain the full wrap-around service for success. Components of this model may be modified slightly as we work to create a VLS plan with your jurisdiction. However, the overall model provides a blueprint of the types of services and partnerships that will be required to be maintained to replicate the VLS model.

While the VLS Learning Strategists', positions are key to the success of this service, another factor for success of this model is apprenticeship staff dedicated to ensuring the background client information regarding contact information, training history, exam and test scores, number of exam attempts, etc. is shared effectively and efficiently. This factor cannot be understated for it is the smooth working engine of the model.



Accommodations and interventions are changes that remove barriers to learning, they change how a person learns, not what they learn. The way we take in information impacts all areas of our lives not just the traditional academic setting of a classroom. Apprenticeship training is a perfect example of learning that is both experiential and traditional. Many apprentices find the learning that happens through experience, or doing, much easier than the traditional academic, theory based, portions of their training. The accommodations, interventions and learning strategies listed below work to remove barriers to learning caused by the varying ways individuals take in information and learn. Interaction with the VLS provides information and direct instruction based on the individual needs of the clients which can be used in and outside of the classroom to everyday life and work.

Each strategy and resource below is paired with skills that are transferable to everyday life and work.

Assistive technology includes ipads, MP3, keyboard, apps, etc., and others such as low-tech tools like coloured paper/coloured transfer sheets or a reading guide to decrease visual stimuli. The techniques taught to accommodate classroom learning such as using an app for reading can help with on the job reading requirements. Notetaking apps can help with organizing material as photos can be taken and added to the notes on work that needs to be completed. Simple apps for taking down lists can be used on the phone as well as a recording features for multistep directions. There are a multitude of applications to decrease barriers caused by learning differences that can be tailored to the individual.

