

STRENGTHENING  
RURAL  
CANADA



RENFORCER LES  
COMMUNAUTÉS  
RURALES DU CANADA

*Our people. Our communities. Our future.*

# **STRENGTHENING RURAL CANADA:** Summary of Rural Ontario Community Visits



Prepared for the Strengthening Rural Canada initiative by Essential Skills Ontario and RESDAC

This project is funded by the Government of Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program

Canada 

ROADMAP FOR CANADA'S OFFICIAL  
LANGUAGES 2013-2018

EDUCATION  
IMMIGRATION  
COMMUNITIES

# INTRODUCTION

**Strengthening Rural Canada-Renforcer les communautés rurales du Canada** is a comprehensive study on the human and social capital dimensions of rural, small town and remote communities in Canada. Using the latest Census and National Household Survey (NHS) data, the initiative is examining the socio, cultural, economic and organizational attributes of the community and population of 28 communities in select provinces across Canada (Ontario, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador).

## *Funders/Partners*

Strengthening Rural Canada is funded by the Government of Canada's Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program and in part by the Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-18: Education, Immigration and Communities. Partners on the project include Essential Skills Ontario, Decoda Literacy Solutions, Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador, the Saskatchewan Literacy Network and Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences (RESDAC).

## *How Communities Were Selected*

Due to the diversity of rural areas, a common set of criteria was developed across all provinces to select a diverse group of communities for the purpose of this initiative. The criteria examined the following factors: population size, demographics and degree of rurality. For more detailed information please visit [www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/the-initiative/selecting-communities/](http://www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/the-initiative/selecting-communities/)

## *Ontario communities selected:*

- Bancroft
- Brighton
- Champlain (Francophone)
- Chapleau (Francophone)
- Fort Frances
- Hearst (Francophone)
- Kapuskasing (Francophone)
- South Bruce Peninsula
- West Elgin
- Bancroft

## *Communities Visits*

Over the past eight months, Essential Skills Ontario and RESDAC visited nine rural and small communities across Ontario. During our visits we interviewed a wide range of individuals: mayors, municipal representatives, economic development officers, service club members, employers, employment services providers, principles and local residents. Through these visits we were able to gather the information necessary to paint a picture of each community, including its strengths, opportunities and challenges. Each person we met with welcomed us into their community and provided insights we would not have been able to gather without their help.

## BRIEF HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF RURAL ONTARIO COMMUNITIES

All rural and small town communities across Ontario are inherently unique, with different histories, cultures, residents, industries and political backgrounds. Based on our visits, there were however, some common factors between these communities that play a large role in shaping these communities:

- Single industry communities (resource industries: primarily lumber, minerals and/or manufacturing)
- Traditional agricultural communities
- Seasonal tourism and/or summer residents communities
- Emerging 'bedroom' communities that are close to larger urban centres and/or are located close to a major transit connection
- Small service hub communities that provide regional services to surrounding rural and remote communities (government, health and retail services)
- Artisans and small boutique employers who may also have remote working professional consultants
- Retirement destination communities
- Amalgamated communities
- Communities with large aboriginal populations and/or population's intergenerational poverty

For the most part in Ontario, the story of rural and small town communities was typical of the broader patterns of urban growth, small farm and manufacturing decline, and resource industry boom and bust cycles. Some of the communities have lost major industries, or their industries have been significantly declining over the years. The industries in other communities seem to be somewhat stable, but the population was aging and declining.

Yet while some communities were facing challenges, we visited many that were thriving. For some, this may have been primarily caused by external influences, such as resource industry growth and/or urban sprawl, which was causing these communities to become 'bedroom' communities and/or retirement destinations. In other communities, community members themselves were charting new directions -growing small businesses as well as changing strategies to revitalize their towns. Community development in these areas is often a complex process that takes years to occur, and is dependent on a variety of factors. Based on numerous conversations with rural residents, business owners and representatives, it was said that some of the larger 'cookie cutter' visions for their communities, be it a big box store or manufacturer, may not be a viable option for their community. The general sentiment we heard was that each community would need to come up with their own individual vision and strategy suited to their communities' needs.

### *Francophone Communities*

Based on our visits, there were some common and interconnected factors between these communities that play a large role in shaping rural Francophone Ontario communities:

- Francophones are a group more often in decline due to mixed marriages between Francophones and Anglophones.
- In predominantly Anglophone communities, Francophones speak the language of the majority for work as well as socially, and French is often only spoken at home. There is a new phenomenon that has been identified by researchers that was conducted with high school students on identity. It was

discovered that most of the younger generations don't necessarily identify themselves as Francophone or Anglophone, but rather identify as bilingual.

- There are less educational opportunities for Francophone youth than Anglophone youth, therefore Francophones often must leave their communities to pursue education and career opportunities.

## COMMON THEMES AND LEARNINGS

There were a number of issues that recurred through our visits to rural communities across Ontario. Of major prominence was the outmigration of youth, with many relocating to larger urban centres to pursue post-secondary education, employment, or both. Based on our visits and interviews, the high level of youth migration was creating what we believe to be a 'hollowing out effect' in many communities - where more the most skilled ones are leaving and the ones with the skills least are staying. Furthermore, in most of the communities we visited, there seemed to be few immigrants that were choosing to reside in these rural areas - which could possibly offset the effects of youth migration. In the few communities where we saw some immigration, immigrants tended to be from other small towns or were retirees. In the very few cases where we saw foreign-born or ethnic immigrants in rural and small town communities, the communities were generally larger. In some communities we visited, that were close to larger urban centres, there had been an increase in the number of retirees.

There were also some other issues that were expressed by community members, including:

- Sustaining a large enough tax base to keep up with providing existing services and infrastructure costs
- Municipal amalgamations decisions
- Resistance for community change
- Decline school enrolment, school closings and lack of available education and training opportunities.
- Lack of technology and internet services
- Lack of activities from youth and/or young adults
- High levels of substance abuse
- Lack of health care and transportation services

Across all the communities we visited, many residents and representatives felt that the rural and small town voices were rarely heard at the provincial level of government, and that policy decisions that were made often had major implications on their economic sustainability for municipal government and employers.

Other learnings that occurred through our visits and interviews:

- Communities can be revitalized: small actions and initiatives can have big impacts
- Human capital is important for rural communities: it is critical to have people with the skills, ideas and experience to come up with creative solutions to solve and address local issues
- Communities can create larger impacts if they work with neighbouring communities in their regions

- Newcomers and/or people who have left the community and come back can be crucial assets for communities they often bring different skills, have different perspectives about the community, and can often bring about change

### *Francophone Communities*

There were a number of issues that recurred through our visits to rural Francophone communities across Ontario, which included:

- Ensuring the future viability of businesses (family businesses or family farms)
- Lack of qualified manpower (mines, forestry, etc.)
- Limited efforts to attract immigrants
- It is often difficult in communities where there are a large number of fly in-fly outs for the earned wage by these groups to be reinvested in these communities.
- Lack of public transportation makes it difficult to attend school, training, work, etc. for low-income individuals
- Limited funding for adult basic training opportunities
- Finding volunteers in these small communities is becoming more and more difficult. distribution.
- Building capacities is a challenge. When people leave these communities they also leave with their knowledge and best practices.
- Lack of employment opportunities
- Lack of affordable, medium-sized housing is a challenge
- Small businesses suffer from nearby larger businesses in larger towns or from online shopping
- Finding bilingual qualified personnel is difficult for more specialized jobs

Other learnings that occurred through our visits and interviews:

- Francophone communities have begun sharing their services with smaller municipalities, and are including them in their strategic plans.
- Some towns/cities are diversifying their sources of income.
- Some communities are putting policies in place to encourage local purchases.
- Some communities are turning to telemedicine and nurse practitioners to deal with challenge of remoteness of these communities. Doctors with many specialities are often sought after in remote communities.
- Of those Francophone universities that do exist, there is an advantage for students in that they are part of smaller groups and have more access to their professors than larger universities do.

## **RURAL SUCCESS STORIES**

Lorie Boychuk, founder and owner of Mrs. B's Country Candy, is a former military worker turned successful business owner in Brighton. Building Mrs B's from scratch, Lorie has faced her share of hurdles over the past 15 years, successfully managing to stay afloat during the recession. As someone who only started her business in her forties, Lorie specifically hires older workers who typically have trouble finding work. Her

business continues to flourish - not only does she have her own brick and mortar shop in Brighton's downtown core, Lorie has also expanded her business into an industrial site in the area's industrial park.

#### *Francophone Community*

As many rural communities are isolated, residents have had to be resourceful – with many starting their own enterprises. La Maison Verte in Heart is one such enterprise that grows small trees for replanting as well as vegetable gardens in the summer. Originally La Maison Verte began as an organization that employed single mothers and vulnerable women, and is now a viable organization that provides opportunities for both men and women to reinsert themselves into the labour market.

## **KEY CONSIDERATIONS MOVING FORWARD**

Through our community visits and interviews, we have concluded that the following key considerations be taken into account when moving forward in these rural communities:

- Economic development plans need to tie in human capital strategies at local and regional levels.
- Ways of creating viable education and training opportunities for youth and adults that includes training for older adults with low levels of educational and training, small business training and apprenticeship training. In many communities we saw that the existing apprenticeship quotas are forcing people to leave their communities and small trade employers to close down.
- An increase in technology: high speed internet is a must for these communities in order to help retain youth and attract new businesses.
- Initiatives in place to attract new immigrants to these rural and small towns.

#### *Francophone Communities*

- Tie in the Canada Job Fund with employer-institutions offering programming to add funding for vocational training
- Offer and provide access to more leadership training and entrepreneurship programs to youth and adults
- Mobilize all resources in the community when working with minority groups
- Offer 'one-stop shops' – colleges, employment centres, literacy agencies and economic development agencies should work together to offer training opportunities.

To read the profiles of the rural Ontario communities we visited, please visit:

[www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/communities/ontario/](http://www.strengtheningruralcanada.ca/communities/ontario/)