

Rural Routes

Support for ESL Providers in Rural Alberta

By Diane Morrison

New Canadians, immigrants and foreign workers, are vital to the economic and social growth of Alberta and Canada. Many adults new to Canada need to acquire language skills, so they can assimilate into their new homes and take part in employment opportunities. However, many rural communities are struggling to provide the quality English as a Second Language (ESL) training newcomers need.

The Rural Routes program based at NorQuest College has offered support to community adult ESL providers for the past 10 years. Services include professional development workshops, needs assessments, customized training, mentoring, resource development and networking.

“Building capacity to meet ESL needs is often a whole new thing for many communities,” said Lorene Anderson, project manager for the Rural Routes Initiative. “Every community has different levels of support and different needs. Staff with the necessary skills can be scarce and programs are not always adequate; many communities don’t have the needed resources and expertise.” Rural Routes works primarily with the coordinators of local Community Adult Learning Councils (CALCs) and Volunteer Adult Tutor Literacy Programs (VTALP) to meet rural ESL needs. The program’s five consultants are currently working with more than 130 organizations in over 72 communities.

There are many challenges in smaller communities, Anderson said. Coordinators, often working part time, are juggling multiple responsibilities such as recruiting volunteers, training, administration, advocacy, strategic planning and reporting to boards. Volunteer tutors may be difficult to find, they may not have ESL training or experience and there is often a high turnover.

The needs of learners are different as well. They will be dealing with settlement and integration issues, ESL literacy and preparing for a Canadian workplace. They may also be going through the process of being ticketed and certified in workplace programs or preparing for post-secondary education.

Rural Routes helps train coordinators, tutors and instructors, and develop resources; serves as a sounding board for issues and problems; and provides ongoing support and networking. For more information, contact lorene.anderson@norquest.ca.