

Policy Brief

Closing the Education Gap for Immigrant Women in Saint John, New Brunswick

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Issue

According to report [Education, Equity and Belonging: Immigrant Women's Pathways in Saint John, NB](#), immigrant women in Saint John, particularly those with limited or interrupted formal schooling, face systemic exclusion from adult education due to misaligned federal and provincial funding rules, restrictive language benchmarks, and inadequate gender-responsive supports. These barriers undermine labour market participation, social integration, and long-term economic growth.

Why This Matters

Immigrant women without high-school credentials and official language proficiency are less likely than men to participate in the labour force in New Brunswick. Adult education for immigrant women yields high public returns, government savings, improved family outcomes, and long-term fiscal sustainability. Current policy structures exclude women at the greatest need, especially mothers, refugees, and post-citizenship learners.

Key Findings

Structural funding gaps exclude immigrant women. Federal (IRCC) language programs fund learning only up to CLB 4 and are cut off entirely after citizenship. Provincial adult education programs (CALP/CAEC pathways) generally require CLB 6 in all four competencies. There are not funded pathway for women between CLB 4–6, especially those needing literacy, numeracy, and foundational schooling. This gap is jurisdictional and leaves service providers without viable funding options.

Elementary and middle-school Level education is unavailable. Saint John, New Brunswick has no adult education programs designed specifically for immigrant women without elementary or middle-school

education. Existing programs (King's Learning, Learning Exchange, John Howard Society) are not immigrant-specific, and are language-restricted (CLB 6).

Information and access barriers are severe. Information on programs is scattered and hard to locate. Immigrant-Serving Organizations (ISOs) absorb the burden of navigating fragmented systems without adequate resources.

Gendered responsibilities intensify exclusion. Immigrant women, especially mothers, experience heavy unpaid care work, trauma from conflict or displacement, language barriers compounded by low literacy, inflexible program schedules and lack of childcare. These factors systematically limit choices.

Policy impacts of inaction can lead to persistent labour shortages despite an available workforce, intergenerational poverty and educational exclusion, loss of immigrant women's economic and civic contributions. This is particularly important in the current context of demographic challenges in the province and lower immigration levels due to recent changes to immigration rules by IRCC.

Benefits of Investing in Immigrant Women's Adult Education

Social Returns

- Children of educated mothers are more likely to complete post-secondary education
- Stronger social networks and community participation
- Improved mental health, confidence, and autonomy

Economic Returns

- Increased labour-force participation
- Higher earnings and local spending
- Expanded provincial tax base

Fiscal Returns

- Reduced social assistance and healthcare costs
- Adult education programs become cost-neutral within 10 years
- Net positive fiscal impact over time

Policy Recommendations

1. Extend federal language access post-citizenship. IRCC should allow access to certified language programs for up to four years after citizenship, especially for learners below CLB 6.

2. Adjust provincial funding rules to fit local needs. Government of New Brunswick (PETL) should allow flexibility in CALP/CAEC eligibility for immigrant learners, fund adult elementary and middle-school education without CLB 6 requirements, support literacy-first, trauma-informed, and community-based delivery models

3. Fund a Saint John pilot program for immigrant women. Support a gender-responsive pilot led by UNB Saint John (Promise Partnership), Saint John Newcomers Centre, PRUDE Inc. With advisory input from YMCA Newcomer Connections and Envision Saint John for two cohorts (24 women total). The pilot includes: pre-CLB, CLB 1, and CLB 5–6 literacy-focused pathways; morning classes aligned with school schedules; childcare, transportation support, and case management; and certified portfolio-based CLB assessment.

Estimated Pilot Cost (10 months): \$285,000

Conclusion

Immigrant women with limited education are not a policy afterthought. They are a high-return investment. Closing the CLB 4–6 gap and funding gender-responsive adult education can strengthen New Brunswick's labour force, reduce public expenditures, and advance equity and inclusion.