

# Collaborative Practice

Building pathways to  
employment for youth  
with disabilities

Collaborative Practice: Building pathways to employment for youth with disabilities

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### Acknowledgements

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Writers: Karen Geraci and Marisa Mazzulla, inQuire consulting

Copyeditor: Trudy Kennell

Graphic designer: Denyse Marion, Art & Facts Design Inc.



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## Introduction

Looking for a job isn't easy at the best of times. But for jobseekers from underrepresented groups in the labour market, including individuals with disabilities, women and racialized persons, it can mean overcoming additional barriers in order to find and keep employment. PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs (PTP), a non-profit organization with two locations in Toronto, Ontario, understands the very real impact these barriers have on jobseekers. For more than 30 years, PTP has delivered training and employment services that create pathways to work for those facing literacy and other barriers to employment. Well over half of PTP's clients are women, and more than three-quarters are racialized.

Over the years, PTP has grown to offer a full suite of services and resources to assist diverse jobseekers en route to employment. Much of the organization's work is centred in the belief that targeted supports are crucial to ensuring equitable access to employment opportunities, and to assisting jobseekers from marginalized groups secure meaningful and sustainable work.

Recognizing there are always ways of improving service provision, PTP wanted to build its capacity to connect jobseekers with disabilities to employment. Similarly, George Brown College, with 30 years of experience delivering the College Vocational certificate program to youth with mild intellectual disabilities, wanted to improve participants' employment outcomes. In 2021, PTP and George Brown College decided to join forces to support jobseekers on their path to employment.

This report describes PTP and George Brown College's efforts to develop and implement the enhanced College Vocational program to serve neurodiverse youth, including those with mild intellectual disabilities. It then extends the learning to describe Integrated Employment Services (IES), a new approach to employment services that grew out of this collaboration. Lessons learned underscore the value of this supportive approach and reveal its potential for other contexts and populations.

## Enhanced College Vocational

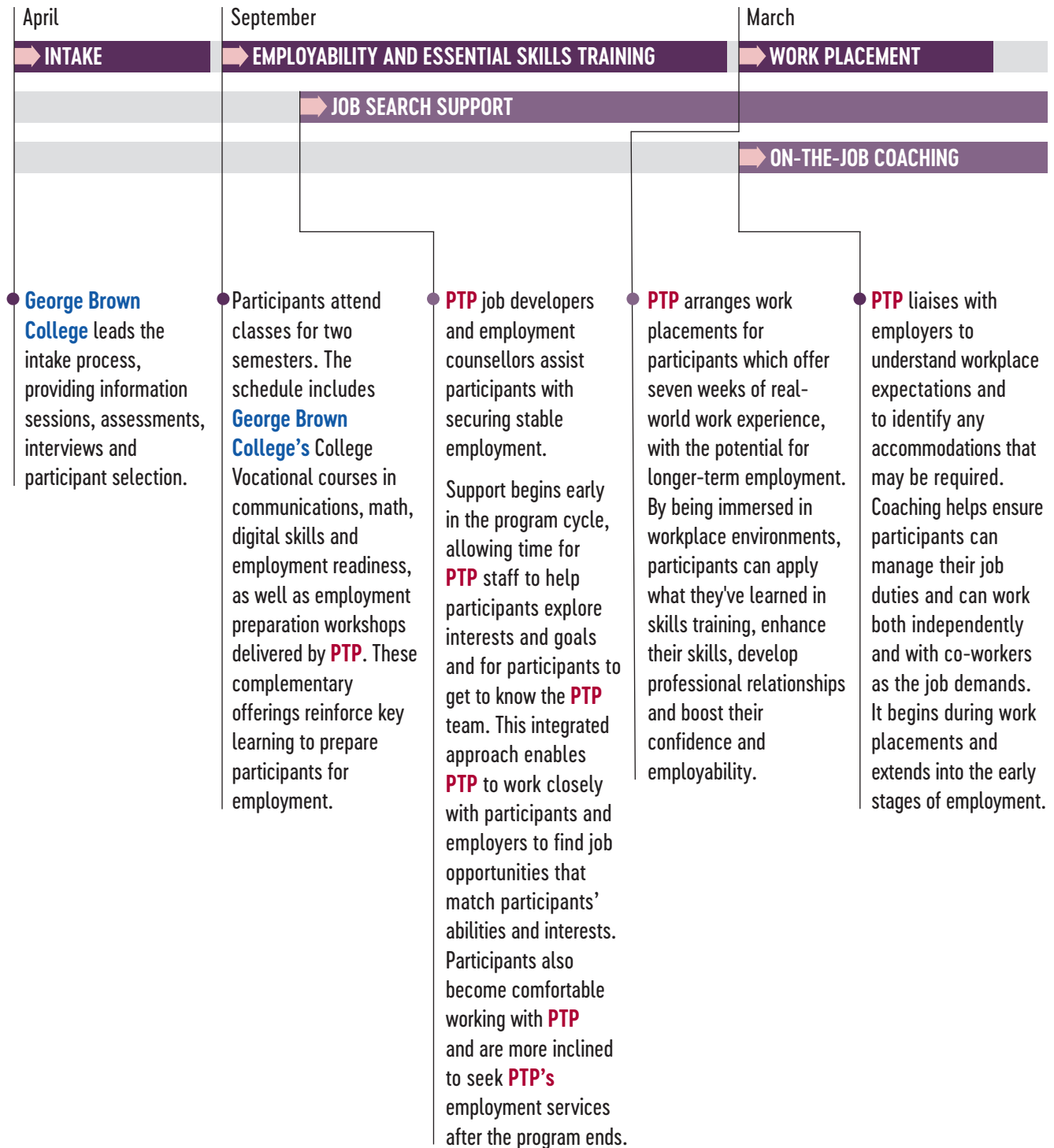
Enhanced College Vocational is a job-readiness program designed and delivered through a partnership between George Brown College and PTP. The program capitalizes on George Brown College's experience delivering the College Vocational program and PTP's experience offering employment services that empower adults to find work they value.

Tailored to youth who are neurodiverse, including those who have mild intellectual disabilities, enhanced College Vocational offers a supported pathway to employment for a population traditionally underrepresented in the labour market. Participants have an opportunity to connect with others and develop independence, resourcefulness and confidence within a college setting.

The first attempt to enhance the College Vocational program occurred in 2021-22 and was delivered without any additional funding for either partner. While initial outcomes were promising, both organizations recognized that substantial improvements for participants could only be achieved with dedicated resources. In 2022-23, PTP obtained project funding from Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. The funding allowed PTP to hire a team to provide supports tailored to the needs of the target group. The result is the enhanced College Vocational program, which offers participants the benefits of the two organizations' collective expertise.

George Brown College	PTP	
Brings expertise in educational services for the target population	Brings expertise in employment services for populations underrepresented in the labour market	
Delivers College Vocational certificate program through the School of Work and College Preparation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential and employability skills training, including digital and intra- and interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Career, interests and aptitudes exploration</li> <li>• Workplace expectations</li> <li>• Work-integrated learning experience</li> <li>• Goal setting</li> </ul>	Provides employment services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment preparation workshops</li> <li>• Individual case counselling</li> <li>• Resumes and cover letters customized to job opportunities</li> <li>• Interview skills</li> <li>• Job finding and application support</li> </ul>	Offers services through special project funding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer outreach to find work placements aligned with participants' interests and goals</li> <li>• Job coaching during the work placement and in the early stages of employment</li> <li>• Employer education to support inclusive hiring</li> </ul>

Enhanced College Vocational integrates services from two providers to offer participants a seamless program experience.



## Successes

The enhanced College Vocational program provides participants with high-quality workplace preparation that combines the expertise of adult educators and employment services staff. Integrating employment services into George Brown College's program led to positive results for participants, PTP, George Brown College and employers.

**Enhanced intake and preparation**

In the original College Vocational program, college staff faced the challenge of managing work placements for participants from one program cycle while conducting outreach and intake for the next program cycle. Having PTP manage work placements enabled George Brown College staff to complete participant intake earlier for the subsequent program cycle. With participants registered for enhanced College Vocational several months before the program start date, college staff could devote more time to preparing the program.

**Improved participant support**

By integrating employment services, an expanded team with a broader range of expertise provided participants with substantially more support. College staff could focus on getting participants comfortable in the program and building the relationships necessary to address learning challenges in a timely manner. PTP staff could lay the foundation for identifying suitable target employers and work settings by spending time from the beginning exploring participants' abilities and interests one-on-one.

*"We are now providing more of an all-around service for participants."*

**Better aligned programming**

Through the partnership, college staff set out to make the program more employment oriented. They revised skills-upgrading instruction and learning materials to better reflect workplace demands. The updated courses helped participants link classroom learning to practical workplace applications.

**Increased staff capacity**

PTP and George Brown College staff received relevant professional development through workshops on topics like disability awareness and worked collaboratively to improve service and supports for the benefit of participants. This resulted in valuable learning for staff, including a more expansive view of their roles and improved service delivery.

**More employer connections**

The initiative successfully expanded outreach efforts, which led to new employers being brought on board for placements and job opportunities. The broader network of employers made it easier to align work placements with participants' interests and to find employers within reasonable commuting distance. Outreach efforts included educating employers about working with neurodiverse individuals.



### Timely, effective work placements

Work placements offered a unique experience for participants, many of whom had no previous work experience. The practical exposure to the workplace not only reinforced their learning but also helped boost their confidence and readiness to transition to permanent employment.

Prior to the partnership with PTP, college staff managed work placements as an additional task; as a result, work placements could be delayed for some participants. Having dedicated employment services staff handle work placements meant that they all started on time.



### Better community connections

Under this initiative, PTP and George Brown College were able to develop relationships with other community organizations. One team member led outreach efforts to organizations, like Community Living Ontario, that work in the areas of disability awareness and inclusive hiring. Through these organizations, staff received professional development and access to resources and services for participants.



### Seamless program experience

In the past, few College Vocational participants had accessed employment services following the program, resulting in limited connections to employment. Service integration meant that during the enhanced delivery participants progressed smoothly from classes into work placements and other employment services. A project team member took on the role of helping to bridge access to services between the two organizations and address any problems as they arose. Importantly, participants continued to connect with PTP's employment services beyond program completion, increasing the likelihood they would find longer-term employment.



### More successful transitions to employment

Recognizing the time-intensive nature of job development, job coaching and employer communications, these activities were given dedicated resources under enhanced College Vocational. A PTP job developer was assigned to deliver workshops, work with participants to find skill-appropriate work of interest to participants and offer support to employers. A PTP job coach was available to support participants on the job. Having experienced and dedicated employment services staff resulted in timely work placements better matched to participants' interests and more successful transitions into sustainable employment.

*"Finding a job is a long process. Participants are much more likely to find work through a program like this."*



## Success Factors

Four factors contributed to program success.

### Willingness to learn and work together



The success of the enhanced College Vocational program can be attributed in large part to the willingness of staff members from both organizations to think differently about how to serve participants. Adopting a learning stance meant staff were willing to bring their strengths to the table and be open-minded in finding flexible approaches to achieve shared goals. This willingness to work and learn together is seen as a crucial element for long-term success.

### Dedicated funding



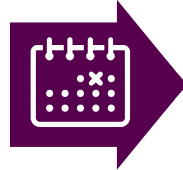
With committed funding in place following one year of working together, PTP was able to cover costs associated with integrated, partnership-based service provision. The additional funds enabled staff to collaboratively identify gaps and find solutions to better meet participants' needs. The funding also allowed PTP to hire additional employment services team members to support the program and to train team members. The results demonstrate that a modest investment can transform the lives of jobseekers who face multiple barriers to employment.

### Staff to carry out key functions



Having dedicated employment services staff for job development, job coaching and employer outreach contributed significantly to the enhanced College Vocational program's success. It allowed college staff to concentrate on the skills programming component while ensuring that work placements were handled by experts in that field. In addition to these roles, one team member, familiar with both organizations' mandates, played a crucial role in facilitating collaboration and seamless integration of services, while another team member led external relationship-building focused on outreach to community organizations.

### Time to plan, collaborate and execute



Shared goals and values were the starting points for the collaboration, but time was required for staff of the two organizations to understand each other's cultures and processes and carry out work in a collaborative fashion. They instituted regular meetings to reflect on work completed, share ideas and solve problems.

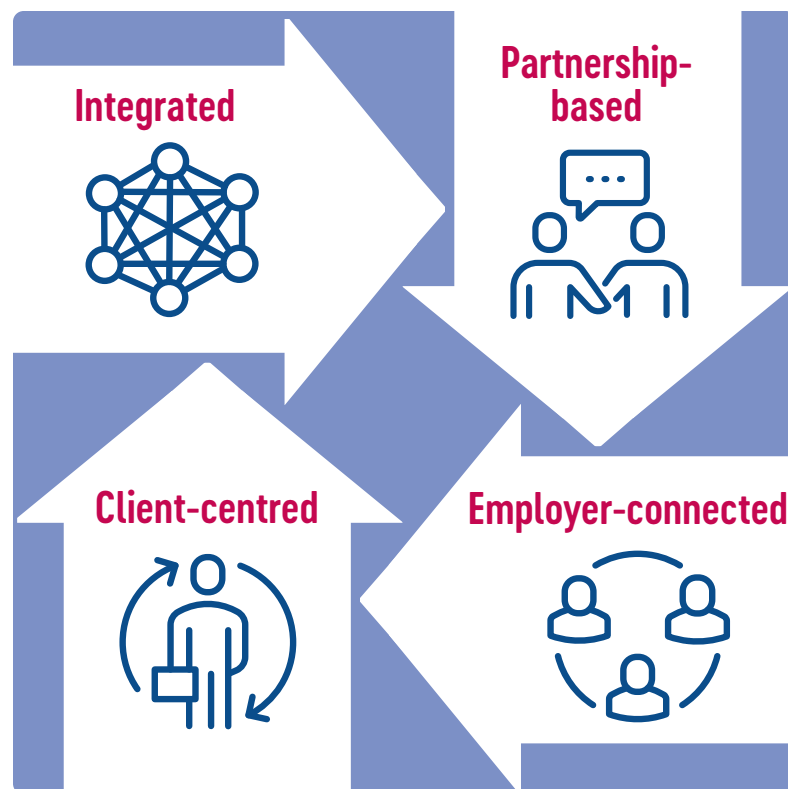
*"Building trust takes time, you can't do this overnight."*

## Integrated Employment Services

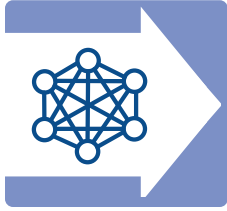
The collaboration with George Brown College led PTP to develop the Integrated Employment Services (IES) approach. The goal of this innovative partnership-based approach is to empower jobseekers who face multiple barriers to employment. The IES approach acknowledges that jobseekers from groups underrepresented in the labour market require more intensive support to transition to sustainable employment. For this reason, the IES approach provides a longer-term intervention and the continuity of service necessary for successful transitions.

IES provision begins while participants are in other programming and extends into the early and critical stages of employment. Participants attend workshops, and receive employment counselling, connections to employers and work placements. On the job, IES provides job coaching to help participants manage the transition, a stage that can be particularly challenging for multi-barriered jobseekers. The partnership-based approach relies on providers collaborating closely to understand participants' needs and on community organizations' expertise to meet those needs. Employer relationships are integral to IES's success. PTP dedicates resources to employer outreach and strives to increase employers' capacity and willingness to attract and retain target jobseekers.

The following four features define IES. Each feature is explored on the pages that follow.



## Integrated



The IES approach means that services are delivered from several providers to create a unified experience for clients. Employment services such as workshops and work placement preparation are delivered concurrently with any other training clients are receiving, whether that is skills upgrading, job skills training or life stabilization support. In contrast to traditional delivery models in which employment services *follow* other programming, the IES approach begins while clients are preparing for employment and extends into the first weeks of employment.

Service integration offers several benefits to clients. With employment services extended over a longer period, clients' more complex needs can be addressed without delaying their access to employment. Clients benefit from better aligned programming and an extended support network as they receive integrated services from multiple organizations. Clients move smoothly from learning settings through employment services and into work, resulting in more successful transitions to employment.

### IES in Action

The enhanced College Vocational program integrated PTP's employment services into George Brown College's existing one-year certificate program. During two semesters of in-class programming, PTP staff delivered weekly employment-related workshops. The workshops covered topics such as managing stress in the workplace. The workshops complemented content covered by the college and were integrated into the college curriculum rather than offered post-graduation.

PTP staff also spent time one-on-one exploring participants' interests and abilities. Participants were able to get to know PTP's employment services team while in class, which increased their comfort level with the work placement and job search process. These efforts translated into work placements and job opportunities that were better aligned to participants' interests and abilities, and therefore more likely to be sustained. The PTP job coach continued to provide support during work placements and once participants secured employment.

## Partnership-based



IES harnesses the expertise of multiple providers to deliver comprehensive supports for clients. It brings together organizations with the requisite expertise and services to address clients' full range of needs, and establishes a pathway to long-term, gainful employment. Reciprocity is key, with shared contributions and mutual learning driving successful partnerships.

While clients benefit from the expertise and services of multiple providers, the approach requires time to foster the necessary connections and to ensure roles and expectations are clear. Organizations that share similar values and a readiness to explore new approaches to client service are well positioned for partnership-based service delivery.

### IES in Action

The partnership between PTP and George Brown College formed the foundation of the enhanced College Vocational program and illustrates the reciprocal benefits of such a relationship. It afforded PTP the opportunity to learn how to better serve individuals with disabilities. For George Brown College, the partnership enabled them to enhance employment supports and improve workforce preparation for College Vocational participants. The partnership bridged differences in their respective systems, allowing for a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives and processes for the benefit of participants.

Further community relationships were cultivated by identifying organizations with complementary expertise and a shared willingness to enhance client offerings. Through their *Ready, Willing and Able* program, Community Living Ontario contributed resources aimed at inclusive hiring and helped identify employment opportunities, while the Ontario Disabilities Employment Network and the Centre for ADHD Awareness offered professional development.

The key to successful relationships was a readiness to explore innovative approaches and take incremental steps to develop and grow. These relationships were nurtured through ongoing communication, information sharing, training opportunities and participation in common events.

*"The importance of goodwill and commitment to the same goals cannot be overstated."*

## Client-centred



IES places clients' needs and goals at the centre of service delivery decisions and takes into account the programming context in which services will be delivered.

Employment services are designed and delivered based on the strengths and needs of clients in the target group. To understand clients' capacity, employment services staff collect information from clients and other sources. This includes engaging in discussions with partners and participating in targeted professional development opportunities. Through IES, PTP offers workshops, employment counselling, work placements, job search assistance and job coaching; the timing, duration and intensity of services reflect the client profile and the delivery context. This tailored approach ensures that employment support is both accessible and effective, maximizing the potential for clients' success and meaningful outcomes in their journey to employment.

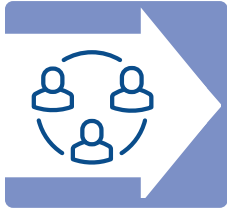
### IES in Action

PTP staff knew from experience that some clients need longer-term, more intensive support. By partnering with George Brown College on the enhanced College Vocational program, PTP was able to explore the needs of youth who are neurodiverse, including those who live with mild intellectual disabilities, and identify better ways to address their needs.

For a substantial proportion of program participants, their disability experience means that meeting new people can be overwhelming. PTP employment services staff learned to tailor both content and communication methods so participants could effectively retain information and make strides towards their employment goals. Involving PTP staff from the start provided time to establish relationships, which in turn encouraged youth to use services they might have otherwise avoided.

The client-centred approach carried through to job developers' efforts on work placements. Instead of beginning with a list of jobs generally considered suitable for individuals with mild intellectual disabilities, job developers first considered participants' interests and goals, then worked to find skill-appropriate work that met those criteria. Efforts were made on the employer side to identify employment opportunities that matched participants' abilities and interests. This represents a significant shift away from token work placements and instead focuses on integrating jobseekers into meaningful and fulfilling employment.

## Employer-connected



Strong employer relationships are a key component of IES, with the goal of finding suitable work placements and sustainable employment opportunities. IES requires dedicated financial and human resources to support employer engagement and ensure employers can offer quality jobs that align with clients' abilities and aspirations. Also included is the delivery of capacity-building education to employers. By providing employers with strategies and support to create inclusive workplaces, IES fosters a culture of diversity that welcomes individuals who are otherwise underrepresented in the labour market.

IES includes having a job coach liaise with employers to understand workplace expectations and to provide individualized support to clients during their work placements and early stages of employment. Support focuses on ensuring clients can manage their job duties. By supporting clients' transition into the early stages of employment, IES proactively addresses any challenges that may surface, thereby enhancing the prospects of long-term, successful employment for both participants and employers.

### IES in Action

Employer engagement played a key role in the enhanced College Vocational program. PTP devoted a significant amount of time connecting with employers who could offer work placements that were beneficial for both participants and the employer and would ideally lead to longer-term employment opportunities.

Finding employers open to diversifying their workforce was especially challenging in some job markets. Employers may receive hundreds of applications, making it difficult to convey to them the value of hiring from an unfamiliar group. Lack of awareness can translate to misconceptions about participants' abilities; employers may view providing work placements and employment opportunities as charitable acts rather than a benefit for their businesses.

PTP worked with industry and sector representatives, as well as with other organizations aiming to connect individuals with mild intellectual disabilities to employment. A formal agreement with Community Living Ontario's *Ready, Willing and Able* program was a product of these efforts. Through the agreement, PTP was able to leverage the organization's efforts to help employers become more aware of disabilities to find employers interested in hiring enhanced College Vocational participants.

## Looking Ahead

PTP and George Brown College's collaborative efforts resulted in the enhanced College Vocational program. The program's successes show the transformative potential of IES for jobseekers with disabilities. IES combines relevant staff professional development, services for the target population and employer education to assist multi-barriered clients in securing and maintaining employment. It acknowledges that clients who face barriers to employment benefit when service providers have a deep understanding of their unique needs and assemble resources and services to address those needs.

Team members and leadership not only witnessed the program's positive impact on participants, but also recognized the potential of this approach for jobseekers in other settings. The work to date reveals several opportunities for supporting jobseekers and creating more inclusive employment opportunities.

- ➔ Expand enhanced College Vocational to serve a larger number of participants. This could be achieved by increasing the number of participants accepted into the program or the number of locations where the program is offered, both to reach more jobseekers but also to mitigate commute times for participants.
- ➔ Implement the IES approach in other programs and settings that provide services to individuals who are neurodiverse, including those who have mild intellectual disabilities.
- ➔ Introduce the IES approach to jobseekers in other settings with barriers that are different from the ones in the enhanced College Vocational program.

While it is widely acknowledged that tailored, integrated services yield the best results for clients, in practice this can be hard to achieve. Building partnerships and integrating services from multiple providers takes time, and systems often favour a one-size-fits-all approach to client service. But the effort to move to an integrated services approach is worthwhile. Clients gain access to new pathways to work and successfully transition into meaningful and sustainable employment. Employers are able to attract and retain jobseekers whose skills and commitment contribute positively to their businesses. And the result is a more inclusive, equitable and resilient workforce.