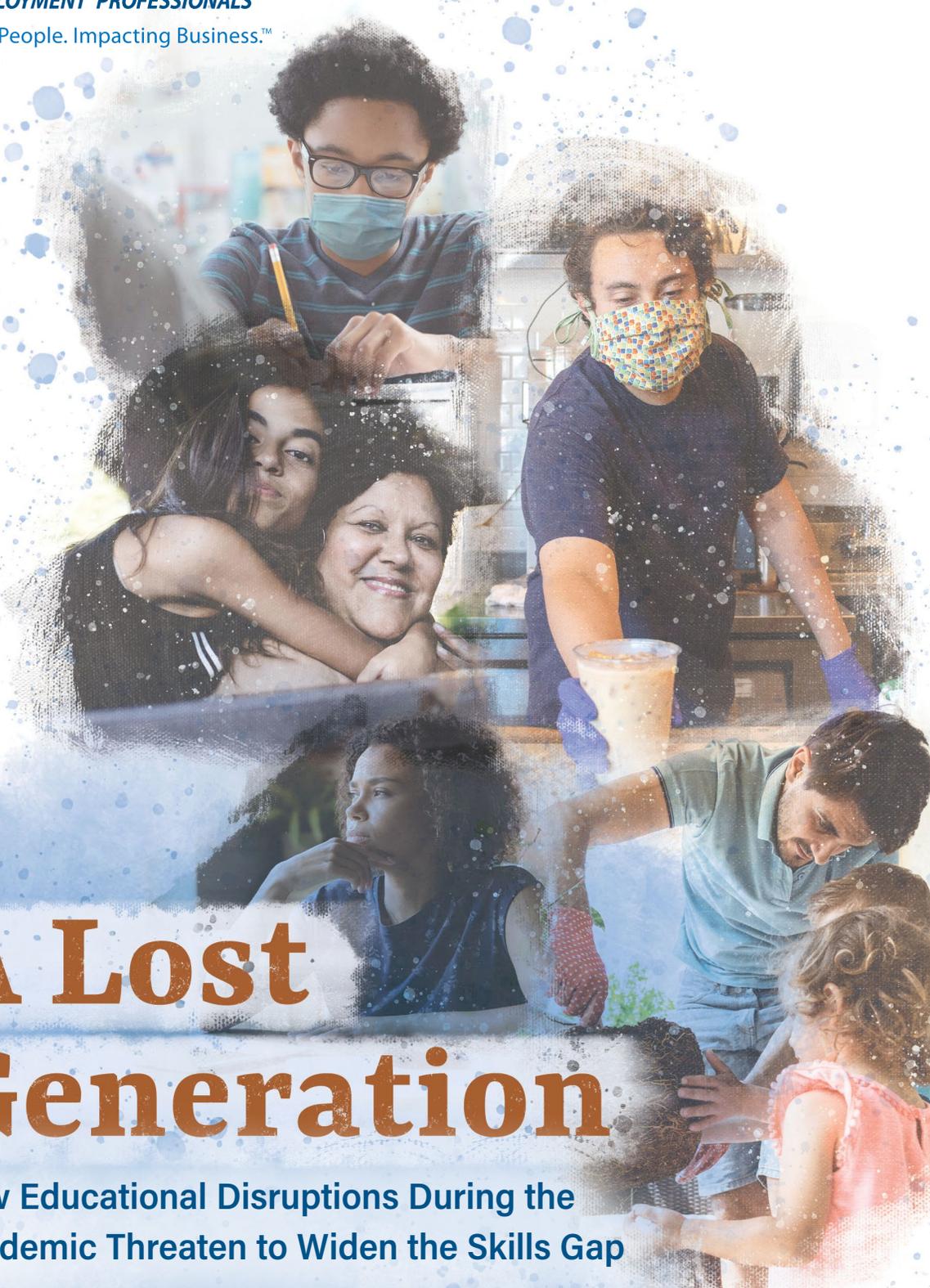




Respecting People. Impacting Business.™

A collage of diverse people in various settings, including a student, a woman hugging a child, a person in a mask working at a counter, and a man with a child. The collage is set against a background of blue and white splatters.

A Lost Generation

How Educational Disruptions During the
Pandemic Threaten to Widen the Skills Gap

*An Express Employment Professionals White Paper
October 2021*

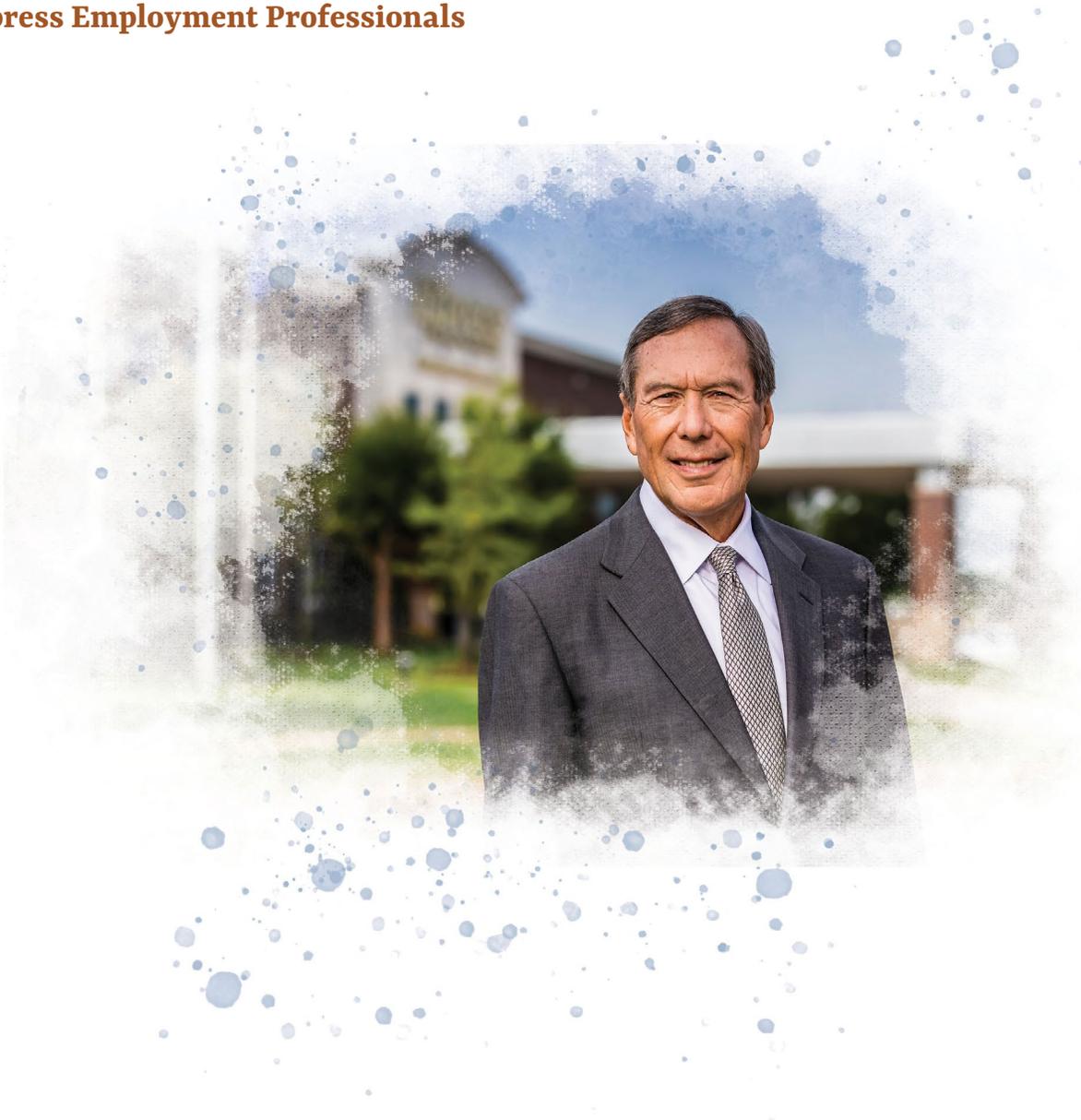
ExpressPros.com/CA



“For years, Express has been sounding the alarm about the skills gap and the many ways it’s holding back the Canadian economy. Now the pandemic has made it worse—likely for many years to come.”

“The disruptions to education will mean a whole generation or more is falling further behind. Getting back to the pre-pandemic status quo won’t be enough. And Canadians are in general agreement: we’re witnessing the creation of a ‘lost generation.’”

**– Bill Stoller,
Chairman and CEO,
Express Employment Professionals**





A Lost Generation Of Future Workers

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic began, employers were ringing the alarm on the growing disconnect between the skills needed for the jobs of today and the future and what students are learning at school. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the closure of schools, leading to more than a year and a half of on-again-off-again remote learning. As a result, the problem of skills shortages already threatening Canada's economy has now become an even more dire situation.

Canadians are very worried about the consequences of school disruptions. More than 4 in 5 (82%) think a “lost generation of students”—one that does not have all the skills necessary to be successful in the workforce—will be a problem for employers in Canada. In addition, two-thirds (66%) of Canadians agree that between the rapid retirement of the baby boomers and the emergence of a lost generation of students, “the workforce is in trouble.”¹

In the years leading up to the pandemic, employers lamented the lack of qualified applicants for open jobs. In recent surveys, nearly one-third of companies (28%) say they have open positions they cannot fill. Among the top reasons companies say they have unfilled open positions are a lack of applicants with hard skills (46%) and soft skills (33%).²



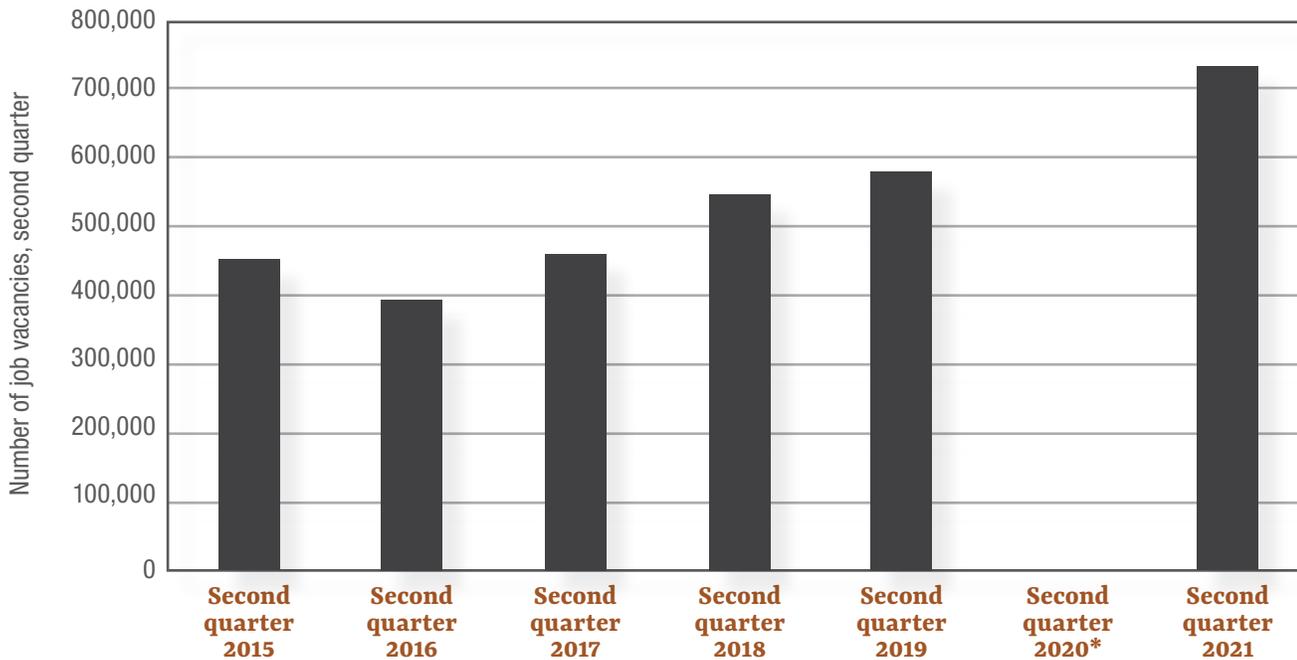
The number of job vacancies in Canada is at a record high, increasing in every single province across the country despite increasing wages and more Canadians regaining employment in recent months.³ This skills gap will only get worse over time as young people who lost valuable chances to hone their skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic make their way into the workforce.

Canadians have become very concerned with the consequences of school closures, with 8 in 10 (78%) saying these disruptions pose long-or short-term challenges to young people's performance at school or, later on, in the workplace. In addition:

- **81% say it will harm their ability to socialize with others**
- **81% say it is harming their mental health**
- **77% say it is hurting development of soft skills**
- **76% say it is hurting development of hard skills**

The consequences of school disruptions could have devastating impacts on the Canadian economy if action isn't taken quickly. But as it stands, only a slight majority (57%) believe Canada is taking the right steps to help students recover from pandemic school closures.

Record high number of job vacancies in the second quarter of 2021



*Data not available for a specific reference period.

Note(s): Job Vacancy and Wage Survey data collection was suspended from March to September 2020; therefore, data for the second quarter of 2020 is not available. Data is not seasonally adjusted.

Source(s): Job Vacancy and Wage Survey (5217), table 14-10-0325-01.

“Even prior to the pandemic, there was a pronounced gap in both the hard and soft skills of graduating students and professional workplace expectations. There was a noticeable shift in the years before the pandemic in employer perception of the next generation’s ability to succeed in the workforce, as many graduating students seem to be universally deficient in the necessary workplace soft skills.”

—**Daniel Purdy,**
Express franchise owner,
Abbotsford, British Columbia

Nearly one-quarter (24%) of Canadians know someone who left the workforce entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴



Survey Details

The survey was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals between August 4 and August 9, 2021, among 1,008 Canadian adults ages 18 and older. Data was weighted where necessary by age by gender, education, region, race, household size, marital status and language to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

82% of Canadians think a lost generation of students will be a problem for employers in Canada and 66% agree that, combined with the retirement of baby boomers, “the workforce is in trouble.”⁵

“The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly exacerbated the skills gap and labour shortages.”

**—Jessica Culo,
Express franchise owner,
Edmonton, Alberta**

This has more than just implications for individuals or for employers in certain industries. The ripple effects of disrupted education are predicted to be a drag on economic growth for a generation—if lawmakers, employers and educators do not act swiftly to rethink and improve the education system, not just in the short-term but for the long haul.





Seas Of Unpreparedness: The K-12 Crisis

There is little data on the impact of school closures in Canada, but the few studies that have been undertaken show troubling results.

The Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table report on the impact of education disruptions reviewed Canadian studies on the issue and concluded that “[t]he social and economic costs of education disruption in Ontario are potentially devastating, and as evidence shows, can far outlive the immediate period of the COVID-19 pandemic.”⁶

1 in 10 Canadians know someone who dropped out of primary or secondary school during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

A large-scale study was completed by the Toronto District School Board, the largest school board in Canada, during which reading assessments were administered in October 2020 to students taking in-person schooling, and in January 2021 to students in virtual schooling. The study found grade 1 students taking in-person schooling in October 2020 (who had been affected by school closures in the spring earlier that year) were 3 percentage points behind compared to grade 1 students one year earlier in October 2019 (prior to the start of the pandemic). But students in online schooling in January 2021 were a staggering 9 percentage points behind where grade 1 students were a year earlier in January 2020.⁷

“It is well-established that face-to-face communication is the richest form of interpersonal interaction. There is no substitute for observing non-verbal cues and posture, hearing voice tone and intonation and reading facial expressions. Our considerable dependency on texting, abbreviation, short-video and electronic communication reduces our understanding, appreciation for and empathy towards others. These skills were already severely lacking pre-pandemic.”

**—Daniel Purdy,
Express franchise owner,
Abbotsford, British Columbia**

In addition to Canadian data, the studies on pandemic school disruptions from the United States and Europe all lead to the same conclusions. Although they have varying education systems, school closures, even if short, have negative impacts on student outcomes.

For example, several international studies on the impact of school closures have found that students were even further behind on math than they were on reading.⁹

A July 2021 analysis from McKinsey on school closures in the U.S. found “the impact of the pandemic on K-12 student learning was significant, leaving students on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year.”¹⁰ High schoolers were more likely to drop out altogether.¹¹ And that did not yet account for disruptions in the 2021-2022 school year, which began with many Delta variant-fueled closures.



Some lessons can't go virtual.

There are some lessons that simply cannot be replicated even in the best virtual environments—specifically, hands-on vocational training.

Long before the pandemic began, employers and many others warned that Canada was facing a growing shortage of tradespeople and it is harming our economic growth. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation much worse.

The number of new registrations in Red Seal trades decreased by more than 30%, with an even steeper decline in the number of completions. On top of this, more than 80,000 Red Seal-certified tradespeople are expected to retire over the next five years. As a result, the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum estimates more than 160,000 new journeypersons will be required to complete Red Seal certification by 2025.¹²

But the news gets worse, as these numbers only apply to Red Seal trades. When the more than 200 provincially regulated trades are included, the number of skilled tradespeople needed grows exponentially.

Bruce Hein, an Express franchise owner in Sarnia, Ontario, has seen the impact of skilled trades shortages on his local economy. “Skilled trades positions were difficult to fill even before the pandemic, but the pandemic has made it even harder.”

School closures create domino effects.

School closures also lead to domino effects that further strain the workforce. When children have to stay home, parents need to arrange childcare. If childcare is unavailable or unaffordable, parents must stay home from work—or delay returning to work. This means even fewer people to fill available jobs.¹³

A December 2020 Harris Poll survey, commissioned by Express Employment Professionals, found more than 1 in 4 companies (28%) report employees left due to care obligations, either for children (20%) or other family members (14%). When it comes to employees with children, 1 in 4 Canadian companies (23%) said the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their ability to retain working parents.

Moreover, one-third of companies surveyed said that their employees who remained have changed their work schedule (36%) and/or reduced the number of hours they work (33%) due to family obligations.¹⁴

Jessica Culo, an Express franchise owner in Edmonton, Alberta, has seen this firsthand. “Many of the women we talk to agree that, even in situations where both parents are working remotely, the mother most often still is the one who manages children, the business of the home, online schooling if necessary, and their full-time job. In some cases, the workload becomes unmanageable.”





Minority and disadvantaged students are hardest hit.

Research shows that children from low-income families (who are disproportionately visible minorities)¹⁵, who have a disability and/or are neurodiverse are falling furthest behind as a result of school disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Students from low-income families are less likely to have electronic devices required for online schooling, reliable internet service, access to tutoring and mentoring and access to extracurricular activities outside of school.

In addition, breakfast and lunch programs were no longer available during school closures. There is a substantial body of research that shows hunger negatively impacts learning outcomes of students.¹⁶

A study in the United States found that, while the average student at the end of 2021 was five months behind in math and four in reading, students in majority Black schools ended the year with six months of unfinished learning, and students in low-income schools with seven.¹⁷

Cumulative months of unfinished learning due to the pandemic by type of school, grades 1 through 6:

LEARNING GAP	BY RACE Schools that are majority...	BY INCOME Household average, per school	BY LOCATION School site
Math 5 months behind 	Black 6	>\$25K 6	City 5
	Hispanic 6	\$25K-\$75K 5	Suburb ¹ 5
	White 4	>\$75K 4	Rural 4
Reading 4 months behind 	Black 6	>\$25K 6	City 4
	Hispanic 5	\$25K-\$75K 4	Suburb ¹ 4
	White 3	>\$75K 3	Rural 3

¹Town or suburb
Source: McKinsey study¹⁸

When it comes to students with disabilities, Canadian research shows that disruptions to services for these students and neurodiverse students has been significant. School closures and online learning have impacted access to technology and adaptive equipment, educational assistants, and other important learning resources, among other things. Accordingly, school disruptions have a disproportionately negative impact on these students.¹⁹



Disruption today means lost earnings tomorrow—and lost GDP.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has quantified the economy-level disruptions from lost learning through fall 2020—predicting a loss of future GDP that could total \$14.2 trillion.²⁰

The OECD report explains that an additional year of schooling tends to increase a person's lifetime income by 7.5% to 10%, so a loss of just one-third of a year's worth of learning would cut a person's lifetime earnings by 3%.²¹

When it comes to Canada specifically, the numbers are staggering. The Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table report on school disruptions points to research that estimates that each month of skill loss is predicted to cause an approximately 1% drop in lifetime earnings for affected students and is estimated to decrease the national income by 0.5% per year.²²

This means a total long-term GDP loss of approximate \$1.6 trillion (which was the entire GDP of Canada in 2019) for Canadian students affected by the spring 2020 school closures and associated skills loss.²³ This number will grow if school disruptions occur again in the coming months.

“The social and economic costs of education disruption in Ontario are potentially devastating, and as evidence shows, can far outlive the immediate period of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

—Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table report, June 2021²⁴

Future salary expectations may not be based on education—and change with the generation.

Employers should also understand their prospective employees' pay expectations—and how that interacts with the skills they bring (or don't bring) to the job.

Canadians most commonly say the top attribute on which an employee's salary should be based is their performance on the job (38%), which is followed by the skills they bring to the job (26%). If those skills are lacking due to education deficiencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, wages and overall lifetime earnings could be negatively impacted.

When it comes to deciding an employee's pay, a large majority (71%) believe it is an employer's responsibility to decide what a fair salary is. Notably, this increases with age, with Gen Z the least likely to think this is the employer's responsibility (57%) compared to Canadians ages 55 and over (82%).

Percentage saying it is the employer's responsibility to determine a fair salary.²⁵

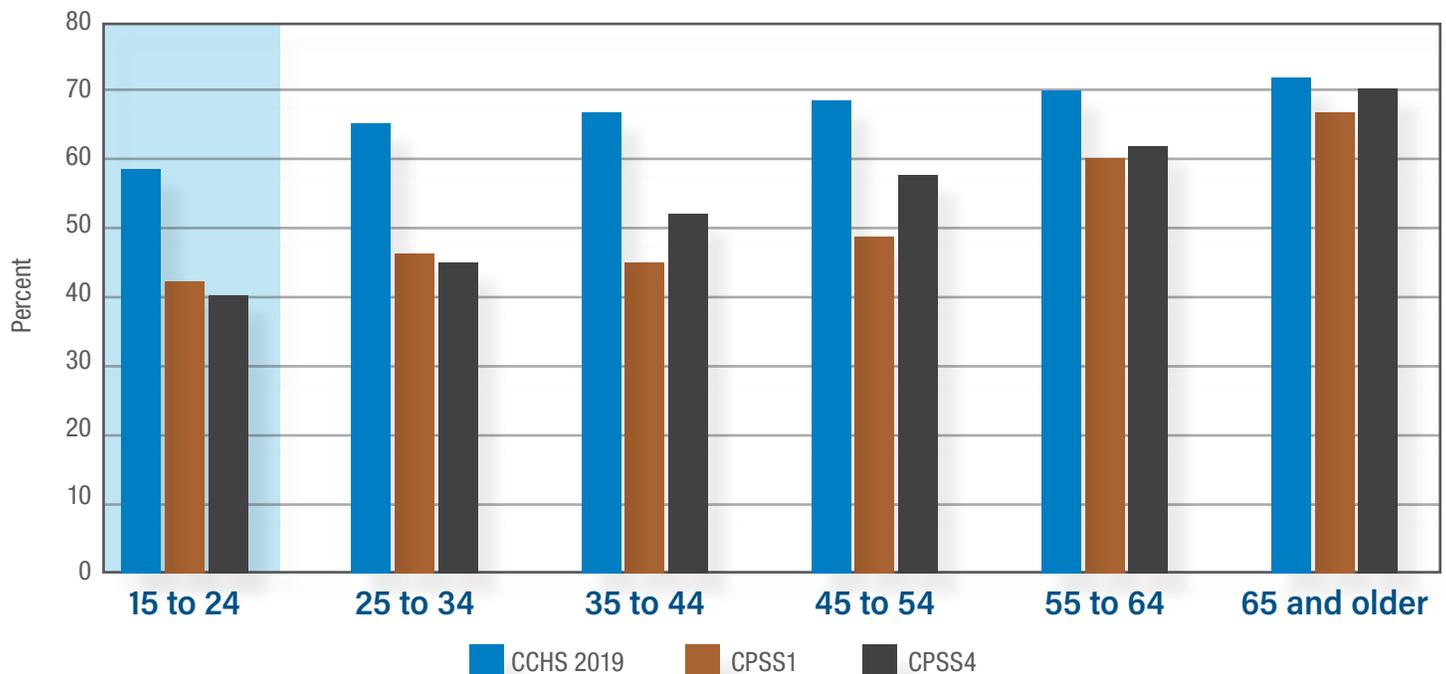


It's not just academics.

It's not just academics that have suffered due to school closures and disruptions, the social well-being and mental health of students has also been significantly affected.

Since COVID-19, there has been a significant decline in the number of Canadians who report having excellent or very good mental health, down to 55% in July 2020 from 68% in 2019. Youth ages 15-24 have seen the steepest decline, dropping to 40% in July 2020 compared to 60% pre-COVID.²⁶

Proportion of Canadians reporting excellent or very good mental health pre- and post-COVID by age group, 2019, March and July 2020





A study from Sick Kids found a large majority of children experienced a deterioration of their mental health due to school closures and found a strong association between time spent online learning and depression and anxiety in school-age children ages 6 to 18 years old.²⁷

The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control identified concerns associated with decreased ‘school connectedness,’ which is associated with a number of major positive impacts on well-being. For example, “higher self-esteem and life satisfaction, lower rates of substance use and violence, participation in fewer risk-taking behaviours, increased likelihood of completing secondary school, and greater feelings of positive mental health.”²⁸

Most schools in Canada offered no sports, clubs and extra-curricular activities at elementary and secondary levels in the previous school year, even during in-person schooling. There is a solid body of evidence showing the positive impacts of school extra-curricular activities on social skill development, more physical activity and higher levels of engagement in school.²⁹

Eighty-one per cent (81%) of Canadians believe school closures and disruptions are hurting students’ mental health, and half of Canadians (48%) believe these challenges to mental health will be long-term.³⁰

Until the possibility of widespread COVID-19 transmission at school subsides, these academic and psychological effects—which only compound each other—will continue, if not worsen.





Post-Secondary Education Interrupted

K-12 disruptions may grab more headlines, especially with debates over health protocols, but the disruptions in post-secondary education have also been severe, leading many to forego or delay higher education altogether—also raising doubts that young people will be prepared for the workforce.

Only 52% of Canadians believe that “current students will be prepared to enter the workforce after completing their highest level of education.”³¹

Nearly a quarter (22%) of Canadians know someone who delayed school during the pandemic, and 13% know someone who dropped out of higher education.³²

Enrollment in universities dropped in 2020, as some students did not want to attend school online.³³ Some may have chosen to delay their studies and will enroll in future, while others (including those who found well-paying employment during the pandemic) may not enroll at all in the future.

College enrollment also took a hit due to the pandemic, especially for courses that require hands-on learning. For example, Fleming College in Peterborough, Ontario, saw enrolment decline 30% last fall.³⁴

There has also been a decline in international students enrolling in Canadian colleges and universities, with estimates between 10-30% fewer enrollments.³⁵ Many international students who study in Canada choose to stay after graduation and fill jobs in in-demand sectors like health care and information technology.

Post-secondary education is not a requirement for a successful career, but it can provide many of the skills that are in demand or make up for the shortcomings of primary and secondary schooling. That is just one reason why these delays are a troubling sign for employers.

Nonetheless, some people used time during the pandemic to further their education. Around a quarter (24%) of Canadians know someone who went back to school or signed up for continuing education beyond degree programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁶



Accelerating a Preexisting Demographic Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create the skills gap or the worker shortage. Employers were regularly struggling to find talented workers years before the pandemic began. COVID-19 did, however, exacerbate the problem—a problem that is rooted in demographics.

For the past several years, there have been more Canadians over the age of 65 than those 15 and under. Baby boomers make up almost twice as much of the total population as they did two decades ago.³⁷

As the number of Canadians reaching retirement age is rapidly increasing, the opposite trend is occurring when it comes to births.

In 2019, Canada's total fertility rate (the number of children that a woman would have over the course of her reproductive life) hit an all-time low.³⁸ The number of live births continued to decrease in 2020, as it has each year since 2016. There were fewer births in 2020 than in 2019, the greatest year-over-year decrease, and the lowest number of births in any year since 2006.³⁹

It is predicted that this number will decline even further this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With baby boomers retiring in growing numbers and Canadians having fewer children, Canada has tried to make up for these demographic trends by accepting immigrants, but the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic quickly reduced the number of immigrants Canada has accepted.⁴⁰

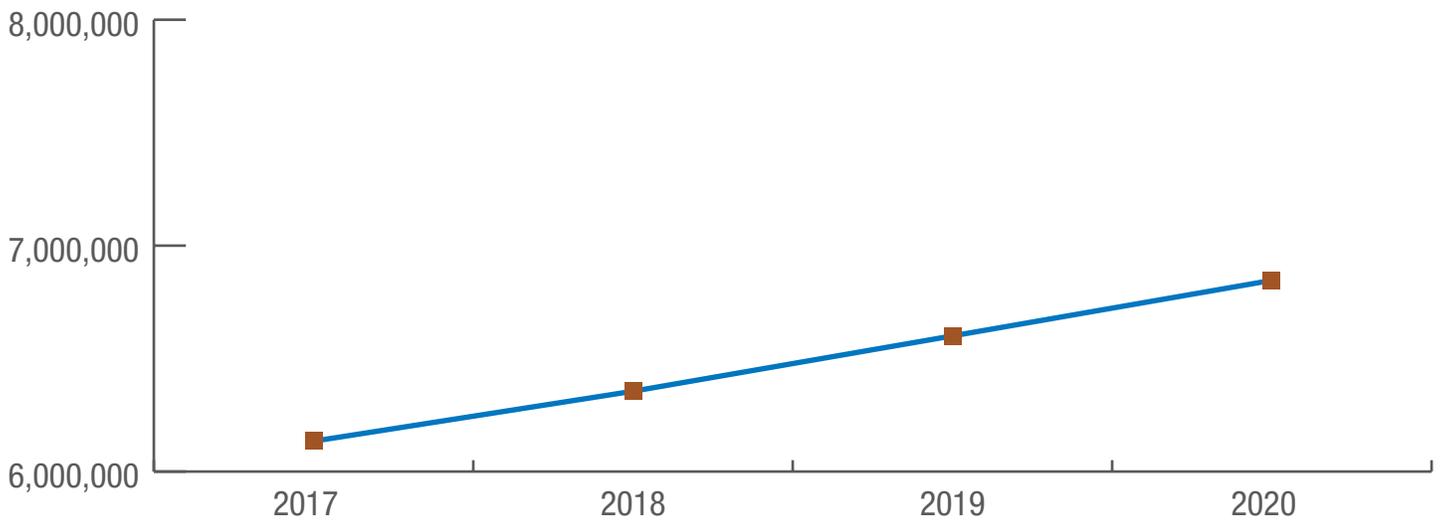
As a result, Canada recorded the lowest population growth rate since 1916 because of COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹

That adds up to a worst-case scenario: a smaller proportion of the Canadian population being made up of young people, and those young people having a diminished skill set.



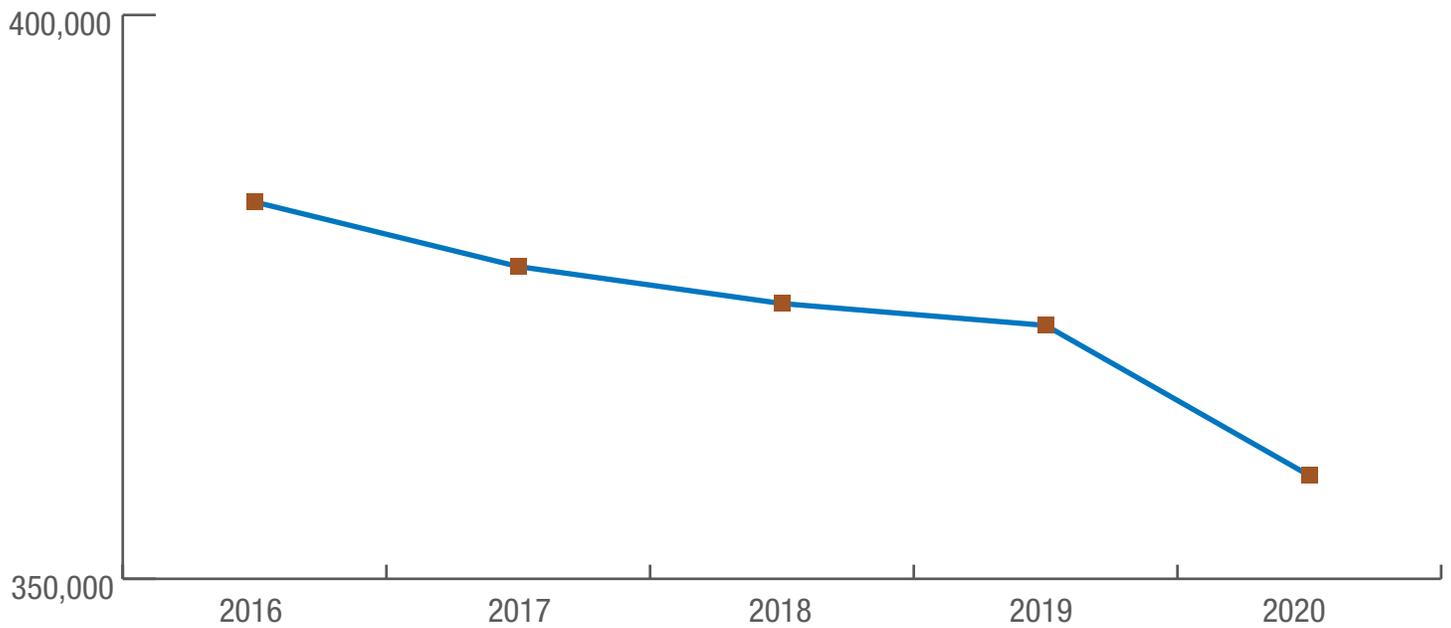


Number of Canadians Ages 65 and Over



Source: Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710000501>

Live Births in Canada



Source: Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310041401>

Education Revolution

It's time for a revolution.

The Canadian education system was already seen as failing students before the pandemic. According to a December 2019 poll fielded by The Harris Poll for Express, 9 in 10 employees (89%) agreed a whole new approach to education, skills training and learning—an “education revolution”—is needed to prepare people for the workforce. And 33% “strongly agreed” with that sentiment.⁴²

In 2019, 65% of employed Canadians said they felt prepared entering the workforce after their highest level of education. That has since dropped significantly as now only half (52%) of Canadian adults think the current generation of students will be prepared, and only 7% say they will be very prepared.⁴³

Education Revolution:
Read the 2020 Express white paper,
“A Canadian Education Revolution:
Aligning Classrooms and Careers”



Students will have to catch up from even further behind.

Three-quarters (75%) of Canadians agree the education system hasn't caught up with the skills needed for today's workplace and that the education system has failed to evolve to meet the needs of the workforce (73%). The vast majority (89%) believe there needs to be more of a balance in education to match learning to actual career options.⁴⁴

Students were already falling behind. Now they have even further to go to “catch up.”





Fixing the Situation

When thinking about who is responsible for fixing the “lost generation of students,” Canadians most commonly say the individuals themselves are responsible (54%). This is followed by the Ministry of Education (49%), educators (e.g., teachers, school administrators, etc.) (39%), parents of the individuals (33%) and employers (33%).⁴⁵

Who is responsible for fixing “the lost generation of students”?⁴⁶



Employers must play a role.

Even if Canadians do not hold employers responsible, employers will need to take action. It won't be enough for employers to lament the state of the education system or its shortcomings. Employers will need to be prepared to offer more on-the-job training if they want to fill open positions.

More than 9 in 10 Canadians (92%) say employers will need to make changes in order to accommodate this emerging generation of workers. The most common recommended changes include offering more job-specific training (59%), flexibility in work hours (49%) and allow employees to work from home (48%).

It's always time for a “refresh.”

Most Canadians (88%) believe employees in general must “refresh” their hard skills to stay competitive in the current workforce and anyone who doesn't continue to learn in their career (e.g., staying up to date on new techniques, advancements, etc.) will be left behind in the workforce (82%).⁴⁷

While there is a general consensus on the importance of continual learning, Canadians are split on who is responsible. Around half (53%) say it's the employee's responsibility to find training programs to refresh one's skills, while others think it's the employer's responsibility (47%).⁴⁸



There are some recent innovations worth keeping.

The pandemic disruption has fueled some innovation that could help close the skills gap. The lessons in the past year and a half could help improve access to education and training, especially for students in remote parts of the country or those who require more flexibility in learning.

Many post-secondary education institutions were already beginning to offer some online options, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to expand this more quickly and make it permanent. For example, Laval University is enabling students to choose between attending a live lecture or participating at the same time from home/remotely.⁴⁹

The shift to online could also improve online training and education for adult Canadians, both employed and unemployed, who want to upgrade their education and skills but require flexibility (due to work schedules and/or familial responsibilities) and need to learn at their own pace and on their own schedule.

Synchronous learning, online tutoring, virtual workshops, online courses and online guest speakers are all adjustments that are likely to stay post-pandemic.

A few new technologies, though, will not be enough to fix the larger structural problem.

Express offers words of advice.

Express continues to offer much of the same advice we have previously, but now with greater urgency for educators, reformers and employers in particular:⁵⁰

For Students

Change is needed. But reform often moves slowly. Students who will enter the workforce in the coming years should work to identify careers that are in demand.

They should consider doing the following:

- Seek out opportunities in school or outside of school to hone job-seeking skills, as well as in-demand “soft skills” and technical skills.
- Research skills and qualifications that are required for in-demand jobs.
- Recognize that having a degree or certification in a given field does not guarantee employability in that field.

“During the lockdowns, many Canadians upgraded their computer and typing skills, improved their video presence and became more familiar with newer technology and online resources, which is positive.”

**—Daniel Purdy,
Express franchise owner,
Abbotsford, British Columbia**

Resources

Job Genius
ExpressPros.com/JobGenius

Express has crafted Job Genius, an educational program designed to teach young adults how to successfully enter the workforce. The program includes guidance on resume writing, interviewing, soft skills and money management.



For Job Seekers

Finding work is a challenge, especially if you're told that you don't yet have the right skills or experience after completing your education. Keep in mind the following:

- You are not alone. This frustration is shared by many job seekers.
- You can find opportunities to gain tangible skills outside of a formal classroom setting.
- Demonstrating a willingness to learn when interviewing can help reassure a prospective employer about any skills you may lack.

For Employers

- Provide structured opportunities for improving soft skills in the workplace, as this can be more effective than expecting employees to learn them on their own.
- Help local education officials understand the gaps in their curriculum.
- Offer to partner with local high schools and college to offer work-study opportunities.
- Raise awareness among current employees about the opportunities they have for employer-sponsored education.

Resources

Get Ahead

[ExpressPros.com/GetAhead](https://www.expresspros.com/GetAhead)

Through a video series and blog articles, Express offers tips on improving a resume and preparing for an interview.

Job Journey

[JobJourney.com](https://www.jobjourney.com)

In addition to articles on how to land a job, this blog offers help with how to handle a job offer, information on getting along with co-workers, ways to deal with a tough boss, retirement guides and more.

Express Certifications

[ExpressPros.com/Certifications](https://www.expresspros.com/Certifications)

Express offers a Business Office Technology Certification and a Career Preparedness Certification, both of which are designed to verify individuals are fully prepared to enter the workforce.

For Educators and Reformers

- Adjust curriculum to match career realities.
- Partner with local employers to understand what skills students need to refine before entering the workplace.
- Advocate reform with state and federal leaders.
- Partner with businesses to create opportunities for work-study, apprenticeships or other “earn and learn” models.

For Career Counselors

- Help job seekers recognize their growth opportunities.
- Help job seekers understand what jobs will be in demand in their area before they consider additional education.
- Provide referrals to resources to hone their skills.
- Reassure job seekers that they are not the only ones whose education may not have fully prepared them for the workplace.
- Coordinate with local educators and reformers to develop apprenticeship opportunities or work-study options.
- Investigate opportunities for grants that would support the development of apprenticeships or similar programs.



Lost and Found

The pandemic will likely one day become far more manageable, and sudden school closures and disruptions less frequent. But the damage has been done, and the pre-existing worker shortage will not fade away.

To ensure we do not indeed “lose” a generation due to learning failures, we will need a commitment to serious change. Returning to the pre-pandemic status quo is insufficient. No one should believe that returning to some old “normal” is the only goal. Normal was not good enough.

The situation demands new innovation—driven by a sense of urgency and awareness of the present and future crisis.

That’s how we save a generation.

“Despite the fact that unemployment has been high during the pandemic, companies continued to struggle filling their open jobs. Even with vaccinations rolled out, recruiting remains a substantial challenge across all sectors, with no end in sight.”

**—Bruce Hein,
Express franchise owner,
Sarnia, Ontario**





Endnotes

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