

## Strategic Conversation



strengths-based  
planning for learning  
hopeful

# Pathways to High School Graduation

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**At our Learning Centre in Whitecourt, we often meet adult learners who want to complete their high school diploma or get an equivalency like the Canadian Adult Education Credential (CAEC).**

These learners find us in different ways. Some hear about us from friends, coworkers or family members. Others find us online through Google searches or social media. Most come to us by way of direct referrals from employment agencies, community organizations and our local high schools.

Every learner who walks through our doors brings a unique story, a personal goal and hopes for their future. Building trust, being curious and having strategic conversations, we can help them find the pathway that's right for them and build a plan that will get them there.

## Understanding the Pathways to High School Completion

There's no single path to finishing high school as an adult. That's why it's important for learners to understand their options so they can choose the route that will work best for their life and future goals. That means we, as CALP staff, need to have a good understanding of the possible pathways.

- **Traditional High School Diploma**

This is the same diploma many people earn by completing "regular" high school. Some adults choose this path to graduation, but this can often be challenging. It can be costly and time-consuming to meet the Alberta High School Diploma requirements of having at least 100 credits, including specific core courses.

- **High School Equivalency Diploma**

Like the Alberta High School Diploma, learners need 100 credits to earn their Equivalency Diploma. Adult learners who choose this route may be able to earn credit for adult education taken outside of high school, for things like reading or for their life experience, by applying to their high school principal.\* That said, a minimum of 60 credits must be earned through classroom instruction, including taking specific core courses. \*Colleges offering Academic Upgrading are also "high schools" and will have a person designated as Principal.

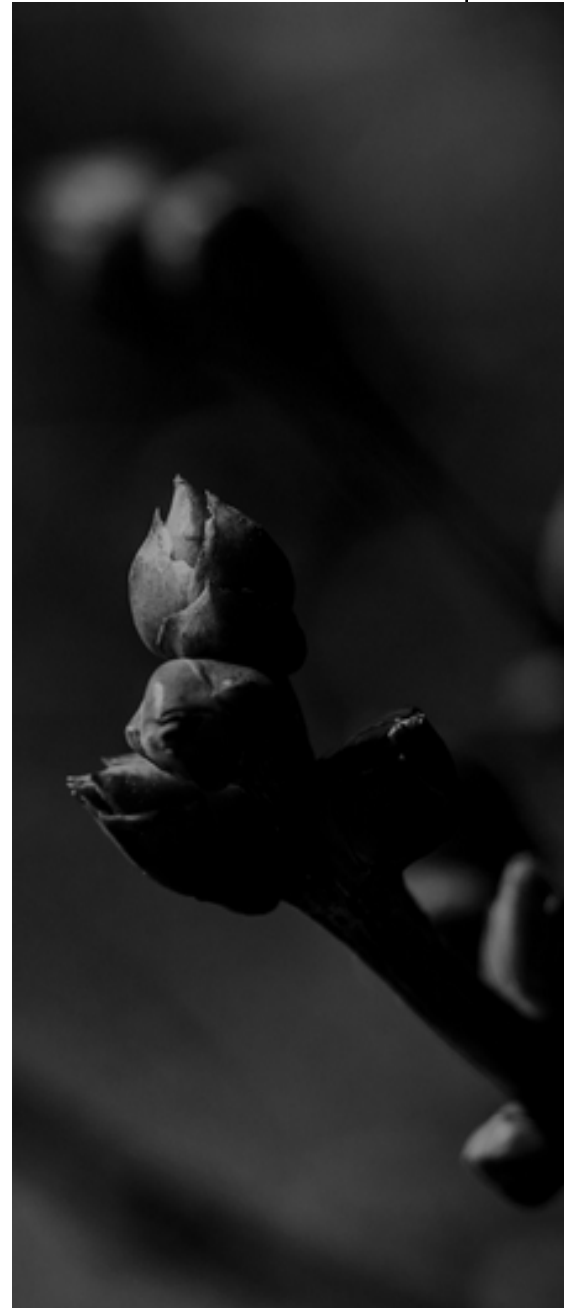
- **Canadian Adult Education Credential (CAEC)**

The CAEC is the Canadian high school equivalency option, which has replaced the GED here in Alberta. The CAEC is a series of five tests (reading, writing, math, science and social studies). Depending on the end goal for a learner, this route can be one of the more affordable and faster options, while providing a lot of flexibility.

The Government of Alberta has much more detailed information about each of these pathways on their website at <https://www.alberta.ca/academic-upgrading-if-you-are-20-or-older>

Choosing the best option all depends on the learner's specific goals.

That is where our "Strategic Conversations" come in.





## The First Conversation:

When learners first connect with us about getting their High School Diploma, we always start with a very casual meeting with them. The first conversation is really more of a coffee date than an intake interview, where we can start to get to know each other a bit better. These friendly chats are key to helping us understand the learner's goals, strengths and gaps.

It's not uncommon for a learner to come to us and say, "So-and-so told me I need to get my GED." Getting their CAEC might be a great option for them, but sometimes a little gentle exploration with the learner might lead us down a different path that will better support their future plans and goals.

Our first conversations focus on building a relationship and getting to know more about an adult's past learning experience and future goals. We ask kind and curious questions like:

- **How long ago was the last time you were in a structured school or training program?**
- **What did you like the most about when you were in the K-12 system?**
  - » Learners sometimes surprise themselves when they tell us about something they enjoyed at school. We leave it open-ended at first, but if they struggle to come up with something positive, we may prompt them with suggestions like thinking about the social aspects, maybe they loved a "less academic" course like Shop or PE, or maybe they had a really cool play structure at their elementary school!
- **Did you ever have a favourite teacher? What did you like about them?**
  - » Even learners who didn't enjoy school can usually recall one adult in the school system who had a positive impact on them. We like to work these pieces into our initial conversations so that even someone who struggled or had a negative experience in school will have some positive associations with their first connections to our program.
- **Do you want to get your High School Diploma for work, to go to post-secondary or is it more about personal satisfaction?**
  - » Finding this out early helps us make better recommendations or suggestions to learners. As we'll discuss, different end goals can often take very different roads.

## Digging Deeper: Exploring Strengths, Gaps and Supports

Now we have an idea of what the learner wants to accomplish and why. So now we will build on the trust we have established to explore with them to identify strengths, and see where we can help them build their skills or connect them to community supports to reduce any barriers that might create roadblocks (or even little speed bumps) on their road to success.

Initially, this begins as a conversation. Building on the trust relationship we are intentionally cultivating, we encourage learners to reflect first on their strengths. We talk about "hard" skills, like reading, writing and math, and we discuss "soft" skills like skills for learning, including study skills, time management and more.

This is where more curious questions come into play. For example:

- **What's one new thing you learned or learned to do this month?**

- » Some learners may need prompting, but with a little help they can always come up with at least one new skill or fact that they have learned recently. This is important to help them build confidence and see themselves as successful learners.

*One single mother who came to our program believed she was “terrible at math.” But when we talked, we learned she was managing the household budget for rent, bills and groceries, and often helped her young children with homework. She already had much stronger math skills than she thought.*

- **What helps you learn something new? It might be different for everyone. Do you like just trying it on your own, talking it over with someone, watching someone else do it?**

*A young shop hand wanted to get his high school diploma so he could get promoted but struggled with writing. After trying a few short, low-pressure writing activities, we saw he did well when he spoke ideas out loud first. So we added voice planning into his writing practice.*

In some instances, we do conduct skills assessments, though we don't generally do it on the same day as our initial meeting. We will book a time on another day for them to come in. We assure them that the paper-based assessments we use will remain confidential, just between us and them. We explain that this is how we can figure out where we are starting from, so we can make a great plan. Completing the assessments separately gives learners the opportunity to prepare and focus on the task at hand, without feeling overwhelmed by any of the conversations we have had so far. In our experience this goes a long way to alleviate any test anxiety, as we have already established a relationship and provided them the time and space to do their best on the “hard” skills assessments. Regardless of what skill level we assess, we follow up with them to reinforce that they already know lots of things and bring lots of skills to the table. We assure them that we will help them make a plan to meet their goal, and we will stick with them throughout the entire process.

*“I love that when I come here, I never feel judged for not knowing something.”*

## **Making the Plan: A Roadmap for Success**

Once we know the goal and some of the learner's strengths and skills gaps, we help the learner choose the pathway to high school completion or further learning that makes the most sense in their own individual circumstances. We've got the big goal and the “why”, so next we move on to the “what” and the “how”.

Based on an individual learner's goals, here are some considerations when discussing the “what” and the “how”:

- **Employment and Employability:**

Generally speaking, most employers now require a minimum of a High School Equivalency Diploma for the educational requirements of any positions they are recruiting for. For many adult learners, the CAEC is an ideal solution for them if finding work, or finding better work, is the main goal. It is generally much more affordable than upgrading or achieving a traditional diploma. Based on a learner's skill level, it can also be quite fast to complete.





- **Trades Entrance or Apprenticeship:**

Regulated trades in Alberta are grouped into categories or “clusters”, with each group having different entrance requirements. For example, Group A Trades require Math 10-3, while Group B Trades have a minimum math requirement of Math 20-3. If an adult learner doesn’t meet the minimum academic requirements, they can either complete their CAEC or they can challenge the Trades Entrance Exam at no cost. Learn more about Trades Entrance requirements at <https://tradesecrets.alberta.ca/get-started/become-an-apprentice/eligibility-and-entrance-requirements/>.

- **Post-Secondary Pathways:**

Because our CALP is part of NorQuest College, we also speak to a lot of learners who want to pursue formal post-secondary at NorQuest or another college or university. Many adult learners think that if they did not finish high school, they will have to complete a diploma before they can even consider a college education. The good news is that there are other options:

- » **Academic Upgrading:** Most post-secondary programs do have academic requirements that include specific courses and minimum grades, but these can be achieved by taking courses through academic upgrading, or in some instances by challenging a diploma exam.
- » **Placement testing:** Many colleges also offer placement testing to mature students who may not have the required credits or marks from high school. In Alberta, Accuplacer is commonly used in the college system. Learners can try practice assessments online at <https://accuplacer.collegeboard.org/students/prepare-for-accuplacer/practice> (free account required).
- » **Open Entry:** This is becoming more common among post-secondaries. Open Entry, or Open Admissions, can be a pathway for adult learners who are missing credits, courses or don’t meet English Language Proficiency requirements. Essentially, this pathway is when a post-secondary allows you to start your studies before you have met the standard requirements. (Here’s how it works at NorQuest <https://www.norquest.ca/programs-and-courses/learning-at-norquest/open-admissions-pathways/>)
- » **Other considerations:** Learners should check with the institution offering the program they would like to take to see if there are any special considerations that may help them (i.e. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition—PLAR—for mature students, supports or programs for Indigenous, Métis, Inuit participation, etc.)

Once we have explored the different pathways, including the credentials and opportunities they lead to, we work closely with each individual learner to co-create a personalized learning plan. They lead the process, and we offer suggestions, structure and tools.

Here are a few examples of how plans come together:

- A **retail worker** told us, “I want to work in Early Learning or get a job as an Educational Assistant, but I barely passed English in High School.” With her clear goal, we focused her plan on upgrading her mark in English 30. This is a common entry requirement for the college programs she is investigating. She told us that she loves reading for fun, and

writes a blog, so felt confident that she could get a good grade, but just didn't know how to get started. We helped her apply to the Academic Upgrading program at the College and connected her with the Student Navigator team for help identifying and applying for potential funding opportunities.

- An **underemployed man** in his late 30s wanted to start a trades apprenticeship, but needed to improve his reading comprehension to pass the entrance exam, and to be successful in the classroom components of his apprenticeship. His plan included working one-on-one with a tutor, focusing on reading and other document use skills based on trades-related materials like safety manuals and diagrams to keep things practical.
- A **retiree** shared with us that she had left high school in Grade 9 and always wished she had finished. Her personal satisfaction was the driving force. We talked about the differences between getting a High School Diploma or getting her CAEC. Although she didn't finish high school, she felt her reading, writing and math were all pretty strong, based on the skills she gained through her years of work experience. She decided to write the English Reading, English Writing and Math CAEC exams right away, and then study for Science and Social Studies, to prepare to write those exams a few weeks later.

Once we have a solid plan, we also build in **backup plans**. Life throws curveballs, so if someone's job schedule changes or a family member gets sick, we adjust timelines together. Flexibility is key.

## Identifying Supports

Another key part of these strategic conversations is figuring out what kind of supports a learner may need as they pursue their goal:

- Information about any financial supports that may (or may not) be available for the different routes to High School completion and an individual's particular circumstances
- How they would like us to support and encourage them along the way
- Referrals to other services such as social services, government support programs, health or mental health supports, etc.

## Continuing the Conversation: Adapting Support Over Time

As learners move forward, we check in regularly. Their needs change, and we stay with them every step of the way.

Some learners just need a little direction and a few resources. Once they have a plan, they work confidently on their own.

*A person wanted to upgrade their math to get into a Polytechnic program. We provided him with some workbooks to use at home. He emailed us with one question and completed the materials in just three weeks. He told us, "I didn't need much help—just someone to show me where to start." He was able to challenge the diploma exam for Math 30 and improve his grade from high school to meet the entrance requirement for his chosen trade.*





Other learners come to us with more complex needs. They may be dealing with juggling their job, family, financial stress or other barriers. We work with them to identify supports in our community that are available to them, and make direct connections and referrals where appropriate.

*A learner was struggling to manage balancing her job with an unpredictable shift schedule, three kids at home and her partner working out of town for long stretches. She wanted to earn her CAEC fast so she could get a better job. She came in for weekly tutoring, used paper-based lessons and workbooks independently at home, and completed the online CAEC practice tests once the kids were in bed. We love getting text messages from her with updates like "I aced that one!"*

## Celebrating Success

Success isn't always just about getting a diploma or passing a test.

We ask:

- Did the learner move closer to their goal?
- Did they gain a new skill or learning habit?
- Do they believe in their ability to learn?

We help learners recognize their own progress and successes along the way. We celebrate all the wins, both large and small. It might be:

- Finishing a workbook
- Sticking with a study plan
- Asking for help
- Trying again after a setback

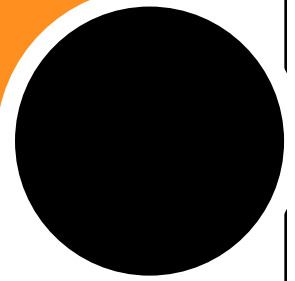
*"I feel like I'm finally moving forward instead of standing still."*

Sometimes learners change direction—what they thought they needed may shift as we explore new possibilities. And that's okay. Our role isn't to tell them what to do; it's to guide, support and walk beside them on their learning journey. Whether someone earns their High School Diploma, gets their CAEC, completes upgrading to start a post-secondary program, or simply builds confidence and new skills, we call that a win! ♦

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*Note: learners and quotations are composites of folks we have supported here in Whitecourt over the last few years.*

## Adult Learner Pathways to High School Graduation



<b>Traditional High School Diploma (100 credits)</b>	<b>High School Equivalency Diploma (100 credits)</b>	<b>Canadian Adult Education Credential (5 exams)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English 30-1 or 30-2</li> <li>• Social 30-1 or 30-2</li> <li>• Math 20-1 or 20-2</li> <li>• ANY 20-level Science</li> <li>• 3 credits in Phys Ed</li> <li>• 10 credits in Career and Technology Studies, Arts, Languages, Phys Ed, or Apprentice</li> <li>• 10 credits in any other 30-level courses</li> </ul> <p>Adult learners can take any high school course they wish, but they are not funded through Alberta Education like most students under the age of 18.</p> <p>Whether they have completed prerequisite courses or not, an adult learner who receives credit for a course automatically gets credit for any prerequisite courses.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English 30-1 or 30-2</li> <li>• ANY Math (5 credits)</li> <li>• ANY Science (3 or 5 credits)</li> <li>• One additional 30-level course</li> <li>• A minimum of 60 credits must be obtained through classroom instruction</li> </ul> <p>Adult learners may qualify for a high school equivalency diploma if they went to high school in Alberta and already have some credits accumulated from that time.</p> <p>In addition to the requirements listed above, a Principal can assign up to 15 extra credits for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult education courses</li> <li>• Age credits</li> <li>• Travel credits</li> <li>• Reading credits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English Writing test</li> <li>• English Reading test</li> <li>• Social Studies test</li> <li>• Science test</li> <li>• Math test</li> </ul> <p>CAEC exams are available through testing centres approved by Alberta Education.</p> <p>Fees for the exams are set by each testing centre, so they do vary depending on where a learner writes.</p> <p>Adult learners may also request that they take the same five CAEC exams in French.</p>

**Community Adult Learning Program**

