

GETTING AHEAD WORKSHOP

Transitioning Out of Poverty: Exploring impacts on stability, self-sufficient living and perception of self.

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 **Simcoe County**
District School Board

Your Future... Our Priority

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Executive Summary

Getting Ahead (GA) is a 48-hour workshop over multiple sessions during which individuals experiencing poverty develop a personal plan for transitioning to financial self-sufficiency. Twelve workshops were held through a partnership between the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) and the County of Simcoe Ontario Works (OW) at the North Simcoe Learning Centre in Penetanguishene over the period of April 2017 through December 2019 for a total of 81 individuals. Participants were surveyed pre- and post- workshop on demographics, ethno-racial background, employment, income, shelter, community engagement, food security and perceptions of self.

GA is one of three foundational programs that make up the Circles framework. The workshop, through guided exercises, facilitated discussion and conversation, supports the creation of a personal plan to transition to a more stable financial situation for individuals experiencing poverty.

This project was funded by the Local Poverty Reduction Fund (LPRF), Phase 2 and administered by the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF).

Insights from data analysis using survey responses show that GA workshops had a positive impact for participants. There were positive changes across many variables that were grouped into two overall outcomes: stability, and self-sufficient living. The greatest impacts for participants are shown within the third overall outcome called perceptions of self. The overall outcome, perception of self, represents a group of eight variables from the survey. An analysis that compared pre- and post- participant responses on these eight variables showed increases on each variable of perception of self. In comparison, results from the OW group did not show these positive changes within the overall outcome, perception of self. In comparing OW clients' pre- and post- survey responses there was a decrease in results on four of the eight variables for perception of self, two variables were unchanged, and two variables showed minimal increase. Due to the smaller number of participants in the OW group that completed a pre- and post- survey (18 OW clients) the results are shared without a statistical significance test used. However, despite the reduced number in the control group the differences between the GA group and the OW clients for the overall outcome, perception of self, are worthy of consideration and future discussion.

There is a benefit to continue offering GA workshops in Simcoe County.

Section 1: Introduction

1. Background of Project: Circles® is a poverty alleviation framework that works to build relationships across socio-economic classes to empower people and communities to thrive. The framework was developed by Ruby K Payne Ph.D. a leading American educator and author of A Framework for Understanding Poverty (1995). The focus is on four main strategies for people experiencing poverty: crisis management, life-stabilization, education and job placement and job retention.

Circles helps people transition out of poverty by building intentional, supportive, reciprocal, befriending relationships comprised of a Circle Leader (Leader), an individual working to get out of poverty and Allies, middle class people who befriend the Leader and support their journey out of poverty.

The framework has three components:

- 1) Bridges Out of Poverty workshops,
- 2) GA workshops and
- 3) Circles weekly sessions

Component 1: Bridges Out of Poverty workshop

The Bridges Out of Poverty (BOP) workshop is a daylong opportunity to explore and learn from one another. The basis for the workshop is the belief that everyone has some experience, knowledge or skills when looking at the issues of poverty. For some participants this will be their own experience living in poverty, for others it is years of work with clients or learners to assist them and the community to create change in the lives of those living in poverty. This workshop has been offered in Simcoe County since 2009 and more than 5,000 participants have attended.

Component 2: Getting Ahead workshop

During the Getting Ahead (GA) workshop participants examine where they are now and where they want to be. They develop a plan for prosperity broken down into manageable and achievable steps. The facilitator led workshops are 52.5 hours long and guide the participants through an assessment of their own resources that can be the foundation of a move to financial self-sufficiency.

Component 3: Circles weekly sessions

The Circle is the final component of the framework. These are weekly sessions that are gatherings for food, sharing, support and learning. The group creates intentional relationships between Leaders who have completed GA and developed a self-sufficiency plan and Allies who have completed a BOP workshop and have volunteered to support the Leader's life transition. Regular group interaction supported by a trained Circle coach, create opportunities to share and build on each member's strengths, community knowledge, compassion and energy. The Circle creates a community of support and social capital for the Leaders.

2. Stakeholder Groups: From the decision to submit a grant application this project has been a partnership between the SCDSB and Ontario Works (OW). The grant application planned for

a dedicated project coordinator for the first 12 months and then the transition of responsibility for the program to OW.

The most important stakeholder group of this project are the people served. For individuals experiencing generational or situational poverty, a framework to support transition to a more stable life can have overwhelming and immediate impact.

3. Program Structure: The GA workshop is a series of three and a half hour sessions three times a week for five weeks for a total workshop time of 52.5 hours. An experienced instructor leads the workshops and is supported by a second facilitator with poverty lived experience. The model allows the experienced instructor to plan the individual sessions and relieves the stress of a single facilitator bearing the emotional strain of this intensive life-planning workshop.
4. Project Outlook: The GA workshops were a foundation for establishing the supportive Circle. The project aimed to provide six workshops for 15 participants each with the hope that up to 20 who completed the workshop would be interested in continuing on to the Circle.

The target audience for participation in the GA workshops were adult students of the North Simcoe Learning Centre. With 75 percent of students participating in OW programs and with anecdotal knowledge that a student with a plan was more likely to complete school, the aim was to recruit participants already enrolled at the Learning Centre. The comparison group was to be from the Orillia Learning Centre.

With the aim of GA workshops to create an individual transition plan and recognizing that individuals without a high school diploma are restricted with job opportunities and pathways to post-secondary education and apprenticeships, adult students were the target audience for this program.

The focus of this report is the effectiveness of the GA workshops.

Section 2: Data Analysis

A survey was distributed to participants in the GA program and also clients of OW between April 20, 2017 and March 10, 2020. The survey was distributed using a unique project identifier to protect the identification of participants. There were 81 participants in the GA program that completed an entrance survey. There were 52 clients of OW that completed the same survey but were not participants of the GA program. This report presents results from quantitative analysis in three areas:

- Demographic Analysis: includes participants in the GA program who were SCDSB adult learners and OW clients;
- Exploratory Analysis: uses five indicators (employment status, income level/income source, food insecurity, shelter arrangements, and social or community engagement; and,
- Impact Analysis: 56 participants from the GA program and 18 OW clients had completed both a pre- and post-survey.

The impact analysis includes 15 key variables from participants who had both pre- and post-survey results. The impact analysis informs three overall outcomes, as follows:

- Stability;
- Self-sufficient living; and
- Perceptions of self.

1. Demographic Analysis: The following demographic information has been gleaned from an entrance survey that both GA participants (81) and OW clients (52) completed. There were six demographic questions that participants responded to on the survey: gender, age, ethno-racial background, education level, family structure (adults in the home and children in the home), and relationship with partner. The demographic analysis is important because it provides an overview of the participants in the GA program and those served through OW.

i. Age groups and gender: The breakdown of age groups for the 81 participants in the GA program are as follows:

- 19 to 29 years of age, 27%;
- 30 to 37 years of age, 20%;
- 41 to 49 years of age, 20%;
- 50 to 59 years of age, 26%; and
- 60 to 64 years of age, 6%.

The breakdown of age groups for the 52 clients of OW are as follows:

- 18 to 28 years of age, 50%;
- 32 to 39 years of age, 24%;
- 41 to 48 years of age, 17%;
- 50 to 58 years of age, 9%; and
- 60+ years of age, 0%.

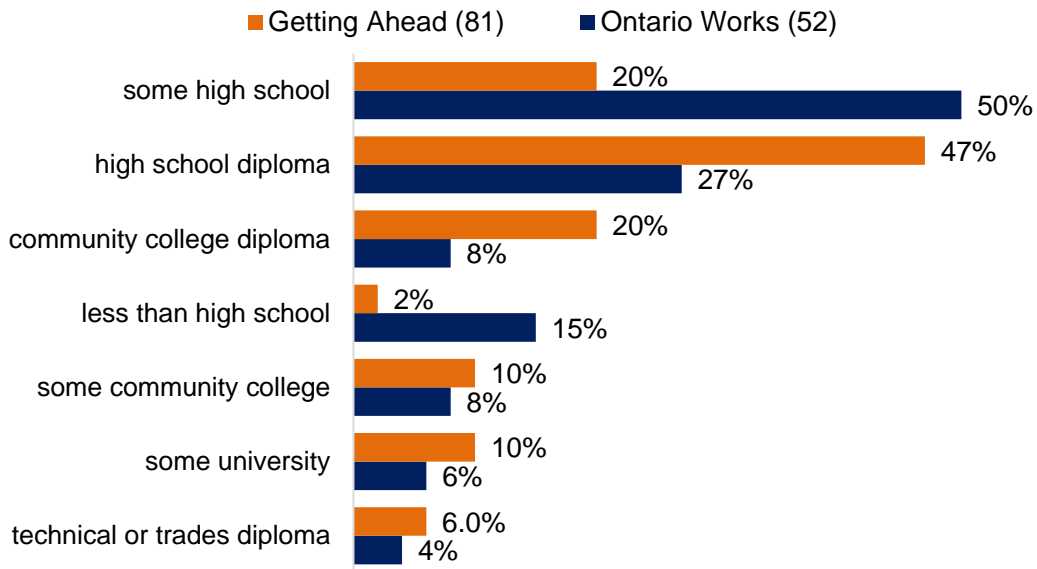
Comparatively, a higher proportion of OW clients were in the lowest two age groups (accounting for 74 percent) while in the GA program, there were similar proportions across all of the age groups; with the exception of 60 to 64 years of age (5 percent representation).

The gender breakdown for the 66 participants in the GA program is 60 percent female and 40 percent male. The gender breakdown for the 52 clients of OW is 54 percent female and 46 percent male. There was a higher percentage of males in the OW group.

ii. Ethno-racial background: Of the 81 participants in the GA program there were seven who selected the following ethno-racial backgrounds: Southeast Asian (2), and Northern/Eastern/Southern European (5). There were 16 participants (21 percent) from the GA program that self-identified as Indigenous and 11 OW clients (21 percent) who self-identified as Indigenous.

iii. Education level: The GA program had nearly double the proportion of participants with a high school diploma compared to the OW group. The OW group had more than double the proportion of clients that had not completed high school. Fifteen percent of OW clients had less than high school, please see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Highest Level of Education, GA Program and OW



Not shown in the graph above, there was one participant from each GA and OW that had a university graduate degree and another GA participant with an undergraduate degree.

iv. Family structure (adults in the home and children in the home): The GA group had the highest proportion (67 percent) within the category of 2 to 3 people living in the home followed by 17 percent between 4 to 7 people in the home and 16 percent lived alone.

The OW group had twenty percent reporting four people living in the household and 54 percent having two or three people in the home. Twenty percent lived alone.

Families with Children: Forty-three percent of households in the GA program had children. Of those households with children, 63 percent were one-parent families. The majority of those one-parent families had one or two children while two of the one-parent households had three or more children.

Within the OW group, 51 percent of households had children. Twenty-seven percent of those families were one-parent families.

2. Exploratory Analysis: Information for the following five (5) main indicators are presented in this section of the report.

- i. Employment status
- ii. Income level/income source
- iii. Food insecurity
- iv. Shelter arrangements
- v. Social or community engagement

i. Employment status: Eighty-eight percent of the GA group were unemployed, 8 percent were employed part-time, 3 percent full-time and 3 percent were self-employed. In the OW group, part-time employment was much higher at 19 percent and unemployment was lower at 73 percent. Full-time employment and self-employment were similar between the two groups.

ii. *Income level/income source:* Ninety-two percent of GA participants reported having an income and 3 percent had no income (representing 3 participants) in the OW group. The income source for 75 percent of GA participants was social assistance, 9 percent reported receiving ODSP and 6 percent received CPP.

From the 63 of 81 participants in GA, that provided their level of annual income, approximately one-third received less than \$8000 per year, another third received between \$8000 and \$15,000 per year, about 10 percent received between \$16,000 and \$25,000 and 15 percent receiving between \$26,000 and \$30,000 per year. Two participants in GA reported receiving over \$50,000 per year.

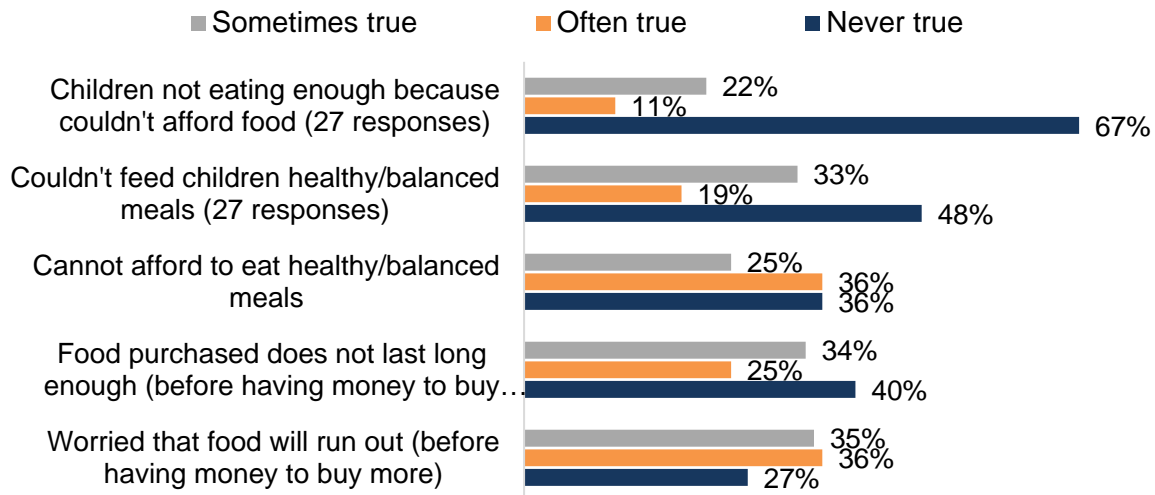
From the 40 of 52 participants in the OW group, 65 percent reported receiving \$10,000 or less, about 25 percent between \$12,000 and \$25,000. Three participants, about 5 percent, reported an annual income between thirty and forty thousand.

Approximately half of participants responded to a question concerning poverty and the results were as follows: 15 GA participants and 19 OW clients felt they had experienced generational poverty. A greater number, from each group, felt they had experienced situational poverty; 36 people in the GA group and 26 people from the OW group.

iii. *Food security:* Of the 78 participants in GA that responded to questions about food security in their home, 45 percent had enough to eat while the remaining 55 percent experienced some form or frequency of food security. Within the OW group, this proportion was lower and only 35 percent reported having enough to eat.

Fifty-five percent of GA participants (or 44 participants) had skipped meals because they could not afford to buy food. From this group of 44 people that had skipped meals, nearly a quarter did so every month. Other information regarding food security is included in Figure 2.

Figure 2: GA Participants, Food Security



Within the theme of food security, GA participants also reported:

- Eating less (59%);
- Being hungry but not eating at all (48%);
- Losing weight from hunger (32%); and,
- Not eating for an entire day (21%).

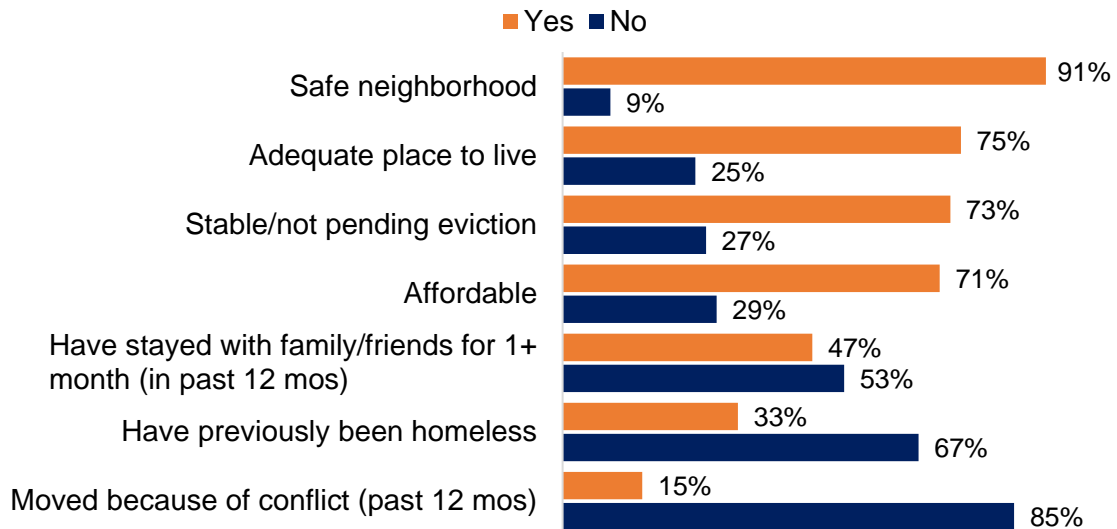
The 52 OW clients showed similar results as the GA participants across all variables of food security. One exception is as follows: a 10 percent higher level of food insecurity was reported amongst the GA participants with children: Thirty-four percent of GA participants could not afford food for their children compared to 23 percent within the OW group.

iv. Shelter arrangements: Seventy-six of the 81 participants from GA reported having a place to live and only six people were the owners of that home (7 percent). Sixty-seven percent were the primary tenant, if renting. Of those that responded to a question regarding rent subsidy availability in their community, 52 percent did not know if this was available to them, 13 percent reported it was not available and 34 percent reported 'yes' it was available. Results from the 52 clients of OW were very similar on all questions related to shelter arrangements.

Thirty-one percent of GA participants had been homeless in their past. Reporting of homelessness was higher for OW clients with results at 54 percent. Also, within the OW group, there was a much higher frequency of moves in the past 12 months where 75 percent of GA clients had not moved in the past year (from the time they had completed their survey).

Other information collected from GA participants regarding their shelter is provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Shelter Descriptions from GA Participants



v. *Social or community engagement (including religious/spiritual services or groups)*: There were high levels of community disengagement on five (5) of the eight (8) activities presented to participants. Approximately 40 percent of participants had not been to a home of a different race/culture or to a home within a different neighbourhood, please see Figure 4.

Figure 4: Percentage of GA Participants that ‘had never done this before’...



Section 3: Impact Analysis

The previous sections of this report used information collected from the 81 participants in the GA group as well as the 52 in OW. This section of the report explores impacts from 11 combined cohort groups that include 56 GA participants who provided information at two points in time: entrance to and exit from the GA program. There were 18 OW clients who also completed a pre- and post- survey.

Table 1: Participant Numbers, Total per Cohort and Pre- Post- Survey Participants

	Cohort Number	Count of GA Participants in Each Cohort	Total Per Year
2017	1	3	11
	2*	6	
	3	1	
	4	1	
2018	5*	8	30
	6	7	
	7	6	
	9	9	
2019	10	4	15
	11	5	
	12	6	
	Total	56	

*Cohort 2 and Cohort 5 each had one participant that had completed 3 stages of GA.

Recall, from previous sections of this report, the five indicators which grouped alike variables by theme from the entrance survey:

- Employment status;
- Income level/source;
- Food security;
- Shelter arrangements; and,
- Social or community engagement.

In the sections to follow, overall outcome results are shared from an impact analysis that used 15 selected key variables from the pre-and post-survey. The impact analysis looked at changes in participant responses on these 15 key variables which informed overall outcomes for participants in the GA program. Three overall outcomes were explored from the GA program:

- Stability;
- Self-sufficient living; and,
- Perceptions of self.

The organization of the 15 key variables informing these three overall outcomes for the impact analysis is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Impact Analysis, 15 Key Variables by Three Overall Outcomes

THREE OVERALL OUTCOMES →	Stability (includes 3 key variables)	Self-sufficient Living (includes 4 key variables)	Perceptions of Self (includes 8 key variables)
Survey Statements/ Questions	Employment status.	Income source.	Satisfied with myself.
	Primary tenant status.	Able to pay rent/mortgage without difficulty.	I have a number of good qualities.
	No pending evictions.	Food purchased didn't last until more money came in.	I am able to do things well.
		Eating less because not enough money for food.	I have a positive attitude.
			I feel I am a person of worth.
			I have feelings of failure.
			I have feelings of uselessness.
			I have a belief that I am no good.

1. Overall Outcome, Stability: All three of the variables analyzed for differences between pre- and post- survey results in the overall outcome of stability saw improved results.
 - i. *Employment Status*: There was a decrease in the number of participants who were unemployed and an increase in the number who were employed part-time.
 - ii. *Primary tenant status*: There were four additional participants who were the primary tenant in their home upon completion of the post-survey.
 - iii. *No pending evictions*: There was a drop in the number of participants who reported that they had eviction pending from their home or unstable living arrangements. The participants who changed from unstable to stable living arrangements were also the participants that reported a positive change in their employment status.

2. Overall Outcome, Self-sufficient Living: There were positive changes in this overall outcome that explores self-sufficient living. The largest changes were in the variable of income source as well as small changes to the variables representing payment of rent/mortgage and food security. Although the positive changes to food security are worthy of noting it is important to recall that food security remains a key challenge for more than the majority of all participants (see page 8, Figure 2 earlier in this report).
 - i. *Income source*: Thirteen participants reported a change to their income source and of this group five now had income from employment, two had income from employment (along with their ODSP) and six participants no longer had their primary source as social assistance.
 - ii. *Able to pay rent/mortgage without difficulty*: There was an increase in the number of participants (5) who reported having less difficulty in paying their rent or mortgage on their post-survey.
 - iii. *Food purchased didn't last*: There was a decrease in the number of participants (3) who reported they 'often' found that the food they purchased did not last until more money was available. These participants now reported this happened 'sometimes'.
 - iv. *Eating less because not enough money for food*: There were two participants that reported they no longer ate less due to a shortage of food.

3. Overall Outcome, Perceptions of Self: There were positive improvements on all eight variables within this overall outcome of perceptions of self. All increases on this overall outcome are discussed below.
 - i. *Satisfied with myself*: There were improvements on self-satisfaction levels for three participants in the GA program. Self-satisfaction levels did not show a decline for any participants.
 - ii. *I have a number of good qualities*: There were positive changes for 19 participants who upon their post-survey now recognized they had good qualities.
 - iii. *I am able to do things well*: There were nine participants that showed positive change when reporting on their ability to do things well. This variable did not show any declines.
 - iv. *I have a positive attitude*: There was an increase in positive attitude for four participants. There was no decline in any results for participants on this variable.
 - v. *I am a person of worth*: There were nine additional participants who reported feeling they were a person of worth.
 - vi. *I have feelings of failure*: Nine participants showed a positive change on this variable and reported not having feelings of failure on their post-survey.
 - vii. *I have feelings of uselessness*: Seven participants showed a positive change on this variable and reported not have feelings of uselessness on their post-survey.
 - viii. *I have a belief that I am no good*: 14 participants showed a positive change on this variable and reported not having feelings where they believed they were no good.

4. Additional Findings: Variables within the theme 'shelter arrangements' did not show change over time when explored in the impact analysis. The two variables, my home is adequate and my home is affordable did not show improved results in this analysis.

Section 4: Concluding Remarks

1. Overall outcomes: In the GA workshop, participants bonded over shared tasks and shared stories empowering each other to develop an individual life transition plan. Activity toward execution of the plan identifies an individual as a candidate for the Circle.
2. Workshop schedule: Feedback from GA participants was essential for building the mid-week, 3-day schedule.
3. Workshop size: The ideal size of the workshop is between ten and twelve participants. This results in a group that will have varied experiences to share.
4. The importance of food: The participant data supports that food security is an issue with the target group and the inclusion of snacks and meals, communal food preparation and food planning are all important to the success of the participants. This also prepares participants for the shared meals of the Circle.

With the success of the workshops, OW had incorporated GA into the options for a life stabilization workshops program offered throughout Simcoe County. Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SCDSB was awarded a two-year contract to facilitate these workshops. The focus of this effort will be to ensure that OW clients interested in pursuing financial independence have mechanisms to do so. The plan includes the establishment of Circles in communities throughout Simcoe County.

Learning from this project will be utilized to enlarge the geographical area served by the Circles framework.