

Protecting Access to Rural Post-Secondary and Skilled Trades Training in Northern British Columbia

Rural and northern communities in the Cariboo North Central region face persistent labour shortages across multiple sectors, most notably in health care. Communities continue to experience challenges recruiting and retaining Health Care Assistants, nurses, and allied health professionals. At the same time, shortages in skilled trades, early childhood education, education support services, and resource industries are limiting economic growth and service delivery. Mill closures and economic transition have further increased the need for retraining and workforce diversification within the region.

Access to locally delivered post-secondary education is critical to addressing these workforce challenges. Satellite campuses operated by institutions such as the College of New Caledonia in Quesnel and Williams Lake and Thompson Rivers University in Williams Lake provide training aligned with regional labour needs. Programs include Health Care Assistant, Practical Nursing, early childhood education, education assistant training, skilled trades, adult upgrading, and workforce development courses.

Evidence consistently shows that individuals who train in rural communities are more likely to remain and work in those communities after graduation. Local training pathways strengthen health care recruitment efforts, support trades and service sector employers, and reduce reliance on external recruitment.

However, rural campuses operate within smaller population bases, which can make enrollment minimums difficult to meet. Funding models designed for larger urban centres do not always reflect the realities of rural delivery. When minimum thresholds are not achieved, programs may be delayed, offered less frequently, or cancelled. This disrupts training continuity and limits the ability of rural communities to respond to identified labour shortages.

For many rural residents, relocating to access training in larger centres is not financially or socially feasible. Local delivery reduces barriers, supports mature learners and career transition, and increases long-term retention within the region.

Stable, long-term provincial funding that recognizes the realities of rural delivery — including smaller cohorts and fluctuating enrollment — is essential to ensuring equitable access to post-secondary education and to supporting rural health care recruitment, skilled trades development, and economic resilience.