

Case Study

Developing an Education System for the 21st Century – British Columbia, Canada

Summary

An explicit programme of citizen and stakeholder engagement over two years has resulted in a broad consensus around the need to transform education in BC and the nature of the changes required.

BC's Education Plan is ambitious both in its scope and in its timeline for implementation. Personalized curricula and pedagogy, a reduction in the number of specified learning outcomes and greater flexibility in where and when learning takes place all feature. Collaborative, interdisciplinary working groups are responsible for making the changes set out in the Plan. The Ministry for Education is transforming itself to model the learning environments and practices that schools will need to develop, if the Plan is to succeed.

Background

British Columbia, with other Canadian provinces and territories, continues to score well in PISA tests. The 2009 scores showed that standards for 15 year olds in reading, mathematics and science changed very little from the consistently high levels maintained since 2000. BC continues to perform at significantly higher than the OECD average and at, or slightly above, the pan-Canadian average in all three areas.¹

But other countries are improving at a faster rate and pushing Canada and BC down the PISA rankings² and there is a continuing concern in BC about the achievement gap experienced by Aboriginal students³. In 2009, these issues rose up to meet a growing consensus that strength in basic skills by itself was a necessary but insufficient ingredient in a 21st century education. A new sense of urgency emerged in the province, that it was time to review and radically overhaul education to make it fit for purpose for the future.

At an international conference⁴ held in Vancouver in 2009, a team from the Ministry connected with Valerie Hannon, a director of Innovation Unit and a consultant in the Global Education Leaders' Program (GELP). Her presentation, 'Only Connect'⁵, struck a chord with the BC Ministry and under the leadership of Gordon Campbell, then Premier in the Province, a series of high level meetings took place which resulted in a radical vision for transforming education in British Columbia.

¹ <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/254/PISA2009-can-report.pdf>

² http://www.gov.bc.ca/premier/attachments/PTC_vision%20for_education.pdf

³ http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reports/pdfs/ab_hawd/public.pdf

⁴ The International Congress for School Effectiveness and improvement (ICSEI) holds an annual, international conference <http://www.icsei.net/>

⁵ Valerie later write up her presentation as an occasional paper for the Centre for Strategic Education in Australia <http://www.innovationunit.org/sites/default/files/Only%20connect%20-%20a%20new%20paradigm%20for%20learning%20innovation%20in%20the%2021st%20century.pdf>

Co constructing 21st Century Education

The leadership group realised that the shift they envisaged was so significant that they would require support from every part of the system to make it happen. In BC there is a commitment to and history of citizen engagement; a partnership of stakeholders coming together around complex problems, which government by itself cannot solve. Stakeholders in education in BC include students, parents, teachers, academics, business people and leaders in the science and technology sectors.⁶

So senior public servants from the Ministry of Education toured the province to meet with stakeholder groups and share with them their concerns about the need to transform education. What were the things it was important to hold on to? And what would a radical new model for education in BC look like?

As the conversation progressed around the province, the ideas that stakeholder groups were proposing became part of the conversation, so that it grew and developed over time. Online interactive resources⁷ were developed to capture ideas and proposals as they firmed up and to gather the views and contributions of people unable to make the meetings. Rod Allen, Superintendent of Learning at the BC Ministry of Education alone completed around 100 such meetings.

The BC Education Plan

Out of this broad and deep consultation came the BC Education Plan⁸. Launched in 2011 the Education Plan builds on the secure foundation of continuing success in reading, writing and mathematics to introduce a series of deep and wide reaching development strands intended to overhaul the education system in BC and make it fit for the future:

“Inspired by innovative change already taking place in BC communities... BC’s education plan responds to the realities and demands of a world that has already changed dramatically and continues to change.”

George Abbott, Minister of Education, BC.

At the heart of the Plan are five key elements. They are:

1. Personalized learning for every student
2. Quality teaching and learning
3. Flexibility and choice
4. High Standards
5. Learning empowered by technology

For each element, there is a set of action steps. For example for personalized learning, the action steps are:

- Work with our education partners to identify the attributes of an educated citizen and how that will be articulated throughout the education program culminating in graduation.
- Curriculum will be redesigned to reflect the core competencies, skills, and knowledge that students need to succeed in the 21st century.

⁶ http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/pubs/tt-plan/2012bced_tt_plan_vid.swf

⁷ <http://www.personalizedlearningbc.ca/>

⁸ <http://www.bcedplan.ca/theplan.php>

- A curriculum with fewer but higher level outcomes will create time to allow deeper learning and understanding.
- Increased flexibility will be key to making sure that student's passions and interests are realized, as well as their different and individual ways of learning.

And for flexibility and choice, they are:

- Allow Boards of Education to set their own school calendars to better meet the needs of their community.
- Ensure parents and students still have choice and opportunity to decide which school their child attends within the public and independent school systems.
- Create better opportunities for parents to engage in their child's learning with more flexibility and choice with respect to what, how, when and where their child learns.
- Expand our current learning credential program to better recognize learning that takes place outside of the classroom – like arts, sports, science and leadership programs – so that students are fairly acknowledged for this work.

Delivering the Education Plan

Key to delivering BC's Education Plan within the ambitious timescales set for it (by 2014) will be striking the right balance between valuing and building on existing success and great practice and challenging schools and practitioners to be creative and confident in seizing the opportunities that the Plan offers.

A critical first step will be to simplify significantly the number of learning outcomes currently specified for ages and subjects. Originally devised by teachers and offered to schools as an option, learning outcomes have been taken up with enthusiasm by schools, are rigorous and consistent, and are seen as having made a good contribution to the high performance of BC education to date. Reducing the number of learning outcomes will build on this success and maintain confidence in a refreshed curriculum framework, which will begin to emphasise skills and competencies over knowledge.

The Ministry has assembled a team of around 20 curriculum experts chosen by school superintendents, principals and vice principals to develop the new curriculum framework and in Spring 2012 is in the closing stages of consultation/co construction meetings as described earlier, this time focused on the kind of curriculum that stakeholders believe can deliver their shared vision for 21st century education.

Redesigning the Ministry

One of the most interesting and unexpected features of BC's process of change is the profound impact it has had on the way the Ministry works and is organised. Early in the process, under the leadership of Rod Allen, senior officers and Ministry staff were invited to reflect on the extent to which the Ministry itself was a 21st century learning organisation, fit to lead the transformation across the Province? The implication of course was that, like many

public service organisations, *“we were essentially a bunch of bureaucrats, who hadn’t changed in 50 years.”*⁹

In response, the entire structure of the Ministry was revised, including a significant shift from other departments to a newly formed Learning Division, which went from a team of one to a team of eighty.

The working space was remodelled. Individual offices were removed to create space for collaboration and sharing ideas and working arrangements changed from individual responsibilities immutable over time to inter disciplinary teams working together on time limited projects.

The Learning Division also began hiring differently. Job roles became relatively unspecified and competencies valued over experience and knowledge. The rest of the Ministry, initially sceptical, is now gradually adopting many of the working arrangements and practices modelled in the Learning Division. Which, of course also model the changes that the Plan aims for in the system overall.

What next for BC?

Far from pausing for breath, the next wave of reform is already taking shape in BC. Three priorities in the next period will be:

- **Decategorisation of special needs education.** In the words of Rod Allen, there will be *“no labels and no medical model. In a 21st century personalised world, I’ll tell you what a special education looks like if you can tell me what a ‘normal’ education is.”*¹⁰
- **A focus on reading.** A province wide initiative to support teachers to rethink their reading instruction, for instance introducing collaborative teaching, conferencing with parents and students and peer-peer approaches rather than a specific programme or set of resources.
- **Reviewing and redesigning assessment.** Science 10, is a knowledge based assessment notorious amongst practitioners and the ‘worst of its kind’. It’s the focus for the first foray into assessment linked to the transformation programme. The Ministry proposes to invite the British Columbia Teaching Federation, the biggest teaching union, to take part in the review, as they have been amongst its most vocal critics of the assessment.

British Columbia in Numbers

British Columbia’s land area is 944,735 square kilometres (364,800 sq. mi). The rugged Pacific coastline stretches for more than 27,000 kilometres (17,000 mi), and includes deep, mountainous fjords and about 6000 islands, most of which are uninhabited.

British Columbia is bordered by the Pacific Ocean; by the U.S. states of Alaska, Washington, Idaho, and Montana; by the Yukon the Northwest Territories and by the province of Alberta. The current southern border of British Columbia was established by the 1846 Oregon Treaty, although its history is tied with lands as far south as California.

Just over 4 million people live in British Columbia, 13% of the total population of Canada. BC is ethnically diverse. Of the 4 million, 196,075 are aboriginal people, just over 1 million

⁹ Interview with Rod Allen March 2012.

¹⁰ *ibid*

belong to minority groups and a further million are immigrants. 77% of students speak English at home with Punjabi, (4.8%); Mandarin (2.7%); Cantonese (2.6%); Korean (1.8%); Chinese (1.5%); Tagalog (Pilipino) (1.3%); Spanish (1.0%); Vietnamese (0.9%); and Persian (0.6%) the next 9 most commonly spoken languages.

The provincial public school system is a free, universal, non-sectarian system covering all grades from kindergarten to grade 12. There are 1,953 schools including 1,610 public schools and 343 independent schools. 579,094 students attend public school and 70,272 are in independent schools, bringing the total number of students in all schools to 649,366. In addition, StrongStart BC early learning programs provide school-based early learning services for adults and their young children, aged birth to five, at no cost to families. Spending on education in 2011 was \$4.63 billion.

British Columbia's Ministry of Education is responsible for governance, legislation, policy, and standards in primary and secondary education. The Ministry monitors performance through superintendents of achievement, who provide guidance and support to help school districts respond to students.

The Ministry works closely with boards of education and independent school authorities, professional education partners, community literacy organizations, First Nations representatives, provincial ministries and agencies, the private sector, and public libraries. Roles and responsibilities are set out under the *School Act*, the *Independent School Act*, the *Teaching Profession Act*, the *Library Act*, the *First Nations Education Act*, the *Community Care and Assisted Living Act*, the *Special Accounts Appropriation and Control Act* and accompanying regulations.

Sources

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