



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS REVIEW

A Brief to the

Ministry of Education

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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President

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Graduation Requirements Review Brief 2012

BC Teachers' Federation

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Preamble

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation is the union of professionals that represents the 41,000 teachers in the public education system in British Columbia. The BCTF is committed to success for every student in a strong and stable public education system.

In reviewing the current graduation requirements for the province of BC, the BCTF encouraged discussion and input from all members, and specifically requested teachers who sit on BCTF committees and Provincial Specialist Associations to provide advice.

Recommendations for consideration

The BCTF recognizes that the ministry will receive input from many sources suggesting amendments to the graduation requirements. It is a priority for BC's teachers that any changes made to the graduation requirements for students continue to foster the growth and development of every individual, to the end that she or he will become a self-reliant, self-disciplined, participating citizen with a sense of social and environmental responsibility within a democratic, pluralistic society. This is the sacred trust of public education, which prepares all students to engage in a world each generation will shape and build. The public education system must provide students with knowledge and wisdom; the system must protect and nurture their natural joy of learning, encourage them to become persons of character, strength, and integrity, infuse them with hope and spirit, and guide them to resolute and thoughtful action.

Public education plays a pivotal role in providing opportunities for those students who are disadvantaged in their wider, general communities. Children who live in poverty, who are marginalized because of their physical or mental challenges, or who are not of the dominant culture must be able to enter and graduate from public schools on the same basis as all other children. Schools must therefore provide support systems to mitigate the inequities of society as a whole. Specifically, schools in BC must address their historic failure with Aboriginal students.

All education partner groups share responsibility in this. The BCTF strongly urges the ministry to include, as part of its graduation requirements, that all students must successfully complete one course in Aboriginal history and/or culture before leaving school at the end of Grade 12. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada stated in its interim report,

“There is a need to increase public awareness and understanding of the history of residential schools. This will require comprehensive public-awareness efforts by the federal government and in-school educational efforts by provincial and territorial governments and educational institutions.”¹

In addition, all appropriate K–12 Integrated Resource Packages (IRPs) should embed Aboriginal content. The ministry will need to provide additional funding for an adequate array of resources to support embedded Aboriginal Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOs). We believe that this may begin to rectify the historic failings of the public education system with Aboriginal students, and help further the goal of reconciliation in society as a whole.

“Marginalization is the social process by which individuals and groups are relegated to the fringe of society. It is closely tied to the concepts of social exclusion and social disadvantage, which refer to processes by which people are systematically blocked from rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available in a society.”²

The issue of marginalization is of central concern to teachers. To provide a quality public education to all students, no matter their life circumstance and regardless of their geographic location, socio-economic status, and language of instruction, the ministry should ensure that all students have equitable access to all core and elective courses offered within the province. Students who live in remote locations should be able to enrol in core and elective courses on the

¹ Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Interim Report. (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Committee of Canada, 2012), p. 7

² The Honourable Wally T. Oppal. Forsaken: The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry. Executive Summary. (Victoria: Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, November 19, 2012), p. 12.

same basis as those who live in dense urban areas. Boards of education should not have to choose which courses to offer students because of a scarcity of funds.

In summary, the Federation recommends that:

1. Any changes include support systems to mitigate the inequities of society to provide all students with the opportunity to graduate from high school.
2. All students in BC's public schools be required to successfully complete one course in Aboriginal history and/or culture before graduation.
3. All K–12 courses in public schools embed Aboriginal perspectives and content as appropriate.
4. The ministry should ensure that all students, no matter their life circumstance, their geographic location, socio-economic status, or language of instruction, have equitable access to all core and elective courses offered within the province.

Students throughout the province should be able to graduate with a proficiency in a second language in the course of 12 years of formal education. To that end, the BCTF recommends that second-language instruction begin in Kindergarten, and be supported throughout a learner's public education experience. French, one of the two official languages in Canada, should be offered to students at the outset of their school careers and continue throughout the elementary years so that by graduation, students are proficient in the language.

In addition to second-language proficiency, the BCTF believes that students must graduate as well-rounded individuals who have had the opportunity to achieve success in both the Fine Arts and Applied Skills areas. Therefore, we recommend that the ministry include the requirement that students take both a Fine Arts and an Applied Skills course as part of their graduation program.

Public education in British Columbia has been available to children between the ages of 5–19, and adults who want to complete their Grade 12 graduation. We recognize that not all students learn at the same rate, and that some leave school before completion and then return to finish their studies. We recommend that the ministry provide quality, publicly funded education,

including self-paced programs, to students over the age of 19 who are still completing or upgrading their Grade 12 diploma. In addition, the ministry should support those adult learners by ensuring that extra learning support services, including adequate access to counselling, psycho-educational testing, and learning-support specialists be available for adult students.

The BCTF supports the acknowledgement from the ministry that students should obtain cross-curricular competencies. Therefore, we recommend that the term “social justice” be included as part of those competencies under the domain of Personal and Social Competency. These students are going to inherit a world grappling with war, gridlock, climate change, gun control, discrimination, the legacy of colonialism, poverty, and a variety of other critical long-term and emerging problems. Central to all the work that we do in schools, and central to any reconceptualization of curriculum and graduation requirements, must be a commitment to enabling students to create systemic change.

Students have to develop the skills, understanding, and responsibility to analyze and take on these issues. The province and the teaching profession are responsible for creating such active citizens who work for social change for the betterment of humanity. We must act in the interests of the children we teach, so they may live in a world that has enhanced equity, security, and sustainability.

Cross-curricular competencies should be integrated across the curriculum through various and appropriate IRPs. Rather than becoming an “add on,” thus resulting in fewer contact hours for students enrolled in courses needed for graduation, cross-curricular competencies must be embedded within existing and future IRPs. Teachers are challenged to complete the PLOs in required courses needed for Grade 12 graduation. Teachers have specifically requested that more time not be taken away from the current contact hours they have with students.

In short, the Federation recommends:

5. Students throughout the province should be able to graduate with a proficiency in a second language.

6. Graduation requirements should include the successful completion of at least one Fine Arts and one Applied Skills secondary course.
7. The ministry provide quality, publicly funded education programs to students over the age of 19 who are still completing or upgrading their Grade 12 diploma, including support services such as psycho-educational testing and learning support.
8. A social justice cross-curricular competency be included under the domain of Personal and Social Competencies to acknowledge the need to graduate students with the skills and attitudes of engaged citizens.
9. Cross-curricular competencies should be embedded across the curriculum in appropriate IRPs rather than be added to graduation requirements.

One competency not currently being addressed before a student graduates from Grade 12 is that of sexual health education. Throughout K–12, students should receive age and developmentally appropriate education that allows them to become aware of the issues and facts connected to their sexual health. In particular, LGBTQ youth, who have traditionally been marginalized and often bullied within our schools, must have their needs considered and addressed by ensuring that sexual-health curriculum and learning resources are relevant to their relationships and lives.

Of course, sexual health must be taught within a safe and supportive school environment, whether in a discrete course, or embedded within existing curriculum.

Another recommendation to address systemic marginalization and its attendant effects of exclusion, harassment, bullying, and disenfranchisement, is for the ministry to provide an elective at the Grades 11/12 level in Women’s Studies. Social Justice 12 was a course set up to address all areas of discrimination, but sex discrimination is still a pervasive and pernicious problem within our society that directly affects half our population and indirectly affects all of us. For example:

“Violence against women continues to be a serious and pervasive social problem despite years of concerted effort. Aboriginal women experience higher levels of violence in terms of both incidence and severity and are disproportionately represented in the number

of missing and murdered women across Canada... In British Columbia and around the world, vulnerable and marginalized women are exposed to a higher risk of violence including sexual assault, murder and serial predation.”³

Violence against women, economic disparity, and the dual responsibilities of wage-earner and homemaker still plague women throughout the developed and developing worlds. The importance of the status of women to the emotional, economic, and physical health of a society has been documented for decades by the United Nations and a host of academic and political bodies. Yet, in 2012 there is no provincial, elective Women’s Studies course for students to take before they graduate.

In summary, the Federation recommends:

10. Throughout their K–12 school years students should receive age and developmentally appropriate sexual health education that considers and addresses the needs of all students, including LGBTQ youth.
11. Women’s Studies 11/12 be an additional elective offered to students.

To keep as many students in our schools to the point of completion of their program of study, the BCTF recommends that Grade 10 be removed as part of the Graduation Program. Students who are 15 and 16-years-old are often not mature enough to make wise decisions about their future needs. Facing barriers to graduation, such as the Grade 10 Science exam, may be just enough to convince immature thinkers that school is not for them. Experience and data shows that many of our Aboriginal students leave school before finishing Grade 10, often during their Grade 10 year. It is incumbent on the province to find as many pathways to success for all of our learners, especially our Aboriginal students. Removing Grade 10 from the Graduation Program is one such step.

All students deserve the opportunity to graduate from Grade 12 with the requisites necessary for any post-secondary program.

³ Ibid. p. 7

Recognition of the diverse range of literacies, such as numeracy, fine arts, ecology, science, applied skills, information technology, physical, and communication literacy in existing or revised IRPs will help create more pathways to successful graduation. In our diverse and rapidly changing society, a graduate needs the ability to adapt quickly. Possession of a range of literacies will help students face their future work and personal lives.

For those students supported with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for learning disabilities, graduation pathways should be offered that allow for completion of a Dogwood Certificate or the Adult Dogwood Program. Alternate pathways should be explored that would allow such students to complete a Dogwood Certificate so they may enrol in a post-secondary institution of their choice.

In summary, the Federation recommends:

12. Remove Grade 10 from the Graduation Program.
13. Maintain program requirements such that all students graduating from Grade 12 have the necessary requisites for any post-secondary program.
14. Recognize diverse literacies such as numeracy, fine arts, ecological, scientific, and communication literacies as pathways to successful graduation.
15. Offer alternative pathways, in particular for students with special learning needs, to completion of graduation requirements for the Dogwood certificate.

Strong library programs support students' individual pathways and choices. Teacher-librarians are able to provide the ultimate personalized learning for students. Today's school library is a thinking laboratory that must be properly funded, staffed, and supported. Dr. Ken Haycock and others have repeatedly documented a strong correlation between student achievement and the presence of a well-stocked, properly funded, and professionally staffed school library.⁴

Teacher-librarians are skilled at finding and evaluating information from print, digital, and electronic sources. They are experts in assessing information for currency, accuracy, authority,

⁴ Ken Haycock. *The Crisis in Canada's School Libraries: The Case for Reform and Re-Investment*. (Toronto: Association of Canadian Publishers, 2003).

relevance, and bias, and in the teaching of these skills to students who must become critically aware of the authority of information they access and cite. As a result, the collaboration of teacher-librarians and classroom teachers enhances the teaching and learning environment.

Children have opportunities in well developed school library programs to acquire, develop, and use the important skills of lifelong learners. The ministry needs to ensure the development and maintenance of strong library programs in every school in British Columbia.

In short, the Federation recommends:

16. Ensure that every school is supported by a properly funded, professional staffed school library.

No matter what alternate pathways are created to aid students' pursuit of graduation, it must be clear that those pathways are to be provided by certified teachers. While it is often appropriate and warranted to bring in community members to augment students' understanding or complement their learning, those special guests must always be under the supervision of a certified teacher. Teachers ensure that the IRPs are followed and know the best way to introduce PLOs to their students. Members of the external community may be useful at certain times and for specific activities, but they are not teachers and should not be used as a replacement for a certified professional. In British Columbia, teachers are highly trained and qualified. The BC public education systems' quality is due in large part to the strength of its professional teaching staff. Efforts to reduce costs in their jurisdictions by introducing lay personnel to teaching roles is short-sighted; it robs whole education systems of their quality and students of critical learning opportunities.

For several years, the BCTF has supported the use of a wide variety of assessment and evaluation practices. Along with the ministry, faculties of education, and pedagogical experts, the BCTF has encouraged teachers to engage in assessment practices that inform students' learning as well as provide them with feedback on their learning. The Graduation Program in British Columbia must continue to support teachers' autonomy to use assessments for, of, and as learning, in ways teachers deem appropriate.

If there are any substantive changes to the reporting/communicating process in the Graduation Program as a result of this review, the BCTF urges the ministry to work with the BCTF and its locals to provide any needed in-service for teachers. That in-service must not be provided as mandated teacher professional development. Teachers must remain in control of their own professional-development needs, which must be integral to their individual practice. New methods or systems in the workplace, require the employer, be it the ministry or the individual board of education, to provide the time and money needed to retrain the workforce. Whatever changes are brought to the reporting/communication process must also be manageable by teachers. The overwhelming bureaucracy of the current system is crippling. Teachers' time must not be spent filling out forms and producing data and reports, rather than working directly with, and offering service to students.

In summary, the Federation recommends that:

17. Do not replace qualified teachers with lay personnel.
18. Encourage the use of a wide variety of assessment and evaluation practices that inform student's learning.
19. Work with teachers through their union, the BCTF, in the development of reporting and communication process and policies and other education change initiatives of the ministry.
20. Provide in-service for teachers expected to implement change.
21. Insure that change addresses and reduces the current burdensome requirements for data collection and reporting that are robbing teachers of instructional time.

Conclusion

Public schools are places where all students are welcomed and supported in their learning. Making changes to the Graduation Program should reinforce and support students' opportunities to learn and grow. The BCTF has made several recommendations that we believe will enhance students' growth and help them realize their full potential. With regard to Aboriginal education, we must address the system's failings and contribute to the reconciliation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in BC. We must continue to foster the growth of all children, regardless of

their socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, or geographic location. Their future and the future of our province depend upon it.

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