

TEACHER

Newsmagazine of the BC Teachers' Federation

The ministry's 21st century obsession

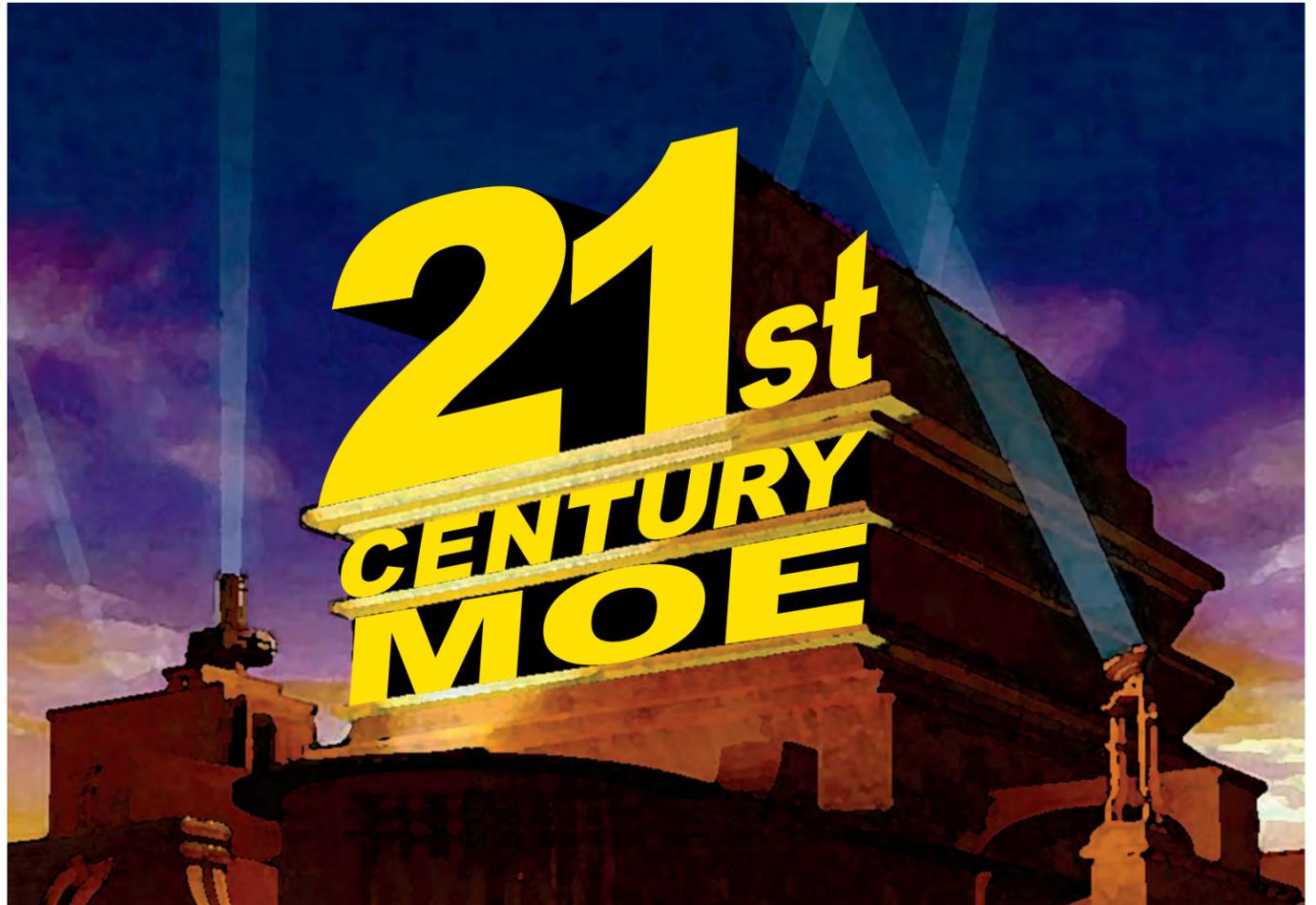
By Emily O'Neill

Since the throne speech in February promised significant changes to the BC education system, education news in BC has been peppered with hints to the potential direction for education reform in the province. There have been mentions from the Ministry of Education of "a 21st century learning agenda," "personalized learning," "hands-on programs" in secondary schools, and a shift in the role of the teacher from director to "facilitator." As the year has progressed, we have been able to draw from various sources, to flesh out the picture.

On September 17, Rod Allen, superintendent of student achievement for the Ministry of Education, gave a presentation to the BCTF Executive Committee about these new directions. Allen outlined the ministry's vision for the future of education in BC—personalized learning and greater choice for students, increased student engagement, moving beyond teaching factoids to students who come to class "with Google in their pockets," to teaching a greater understanding of how things relate, and "teacher-facilitated" rather than "teacher-instructed" learning. Allen acknowledged that these models already exist in some parts of the province; the question is simply how to propagate these ideas.

One slide in Allen's presentation

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BC Teachers' Federation
100-550 West 6th Avenue
Vancouver BC V5Z 4P2
E-mail: newsomag@bctf.ca



laid out a number of "21st Century Foundational Skills." In addition to reading, writing, and numeracy, which the ministry still considers as important as ever, these skills include what some have been calling the *Seven Cs*:

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Creativity and innovation
- Collaboration, teamwork, and leadership
- Cross-cultural understanding
- Communications, computing and ICT literacy
- Career and learning self-reliance
- Caring for personal health and planet earth.

While much of the provincial discussion around these ideas has been very short on details, 21st century learning initiatives from other provinces and other parts of the world have been referenced by the ministry, and it is worth taking a look at some of these in an attempt to understand what might be coming down the pike in British Columbia.

Back in June, *Vancouver Sun* reporter and blogger Janet Steffenhagen pointed out a connection between the UK-based 21st Century Learning Initiative and the BC Ministry of Education. She reported in a blog post that John Abbott, president of the 21st Century Learning Initiative, met with Ministry of Education representatives at St. Anne's Academy in Victoria in March. The initiative's summary of the event states that the meetings were intended "to show how the ideas developed with

the initiative relate directly to the plans that British Columbia might be making for its future education policy." Abbott's presentation, which can be downloaded from the

The influences of John Abbott and the 21st Century Learning Initiative on Margaret MacDiarmid and the Ministry of Education—with their calls for increased student engagement through personalized, hands-on learning, guided rather than dictated, by teachers—are clearly evident.

initiative's website, drew heavily on his 2010 book, *Overschooled but Undereducated*.

In both the book and the presentation, Abbott argues for a new view of adolescence. "In countless instances over the generations," he writes in his book, "it has been adolescent muscle linked with a determination to break any limitations that others may put in their way that have pushed forward the boundaries of civilization." If teenagers cause trouble, he argues, it is only because they have lost their purpose in a modern world that insists on sequestering them in schools and stripping them of the opportunity to use their energy to learn by doing.

Other major concerns outlined in Abbott's *Overschooled but Undereducated* are the weakening of civil society, the rise of specialization in

both school and work at the cost of the ability to see the big picture, and the negative ramifications of our switch to a service economy, in which "satisfaction in a job well done has been replaced by the motivation to earn more money." He also takes aim at the accountability culture, asking if, "In their efforts to improve their examination results, have schools been forced into so over-teaching their pupils (so as to get the grades...to get the jobs...to get the good salary) that the pupils rarely learn how to work

things out for themselves?"

In order to harness the energy and potential of the adolescent brain, Abbott and the initiative are pushing for some major education reforms. In April of this year, the initiative put together a document specifically for British Columbia, called *Schools in the Future: What has to change and why*, which also draws heavily on the themes in *Overschooled but Undereducated*. Elements of change required are

See 21st CENTURY page 3

On the inside

For many teachers, October is PD month. The provincial PD/PSA day is October 22 and in tune with this event the magazine devotes a number of pages to articles that explore issues ranging from PD as a political activity through professional autonomy, methods, resources, and technology. In company with this theme, BCTF President Susan Lambert and BCTF Information Specialist Emily O'Neill weigh in on the ministry's latest obsession with 21st century/personalized learning and Alfie Kohn provides his light-hearted,

sarcastic take on the hyperbole that infects this rhetoric. The controversial topic of Wi-Fi in schools is pursued in part 2 of an article that was included in the September edition of *Teacher*.

The devastating impact of poverty is the subject of a key study conducted and reported by our Research Department. The trials and tribulations of BCeCIS get an airing, and other articles cover a wide array of topics uppermost in the lives of teachers and the world of education.

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President's message



Susan Lambert

We have heard many hints this fall of a coming major policy announcement. The minister speaks about the need to focus on 21st century skills. Janet Steffenhagen and Vaughn Palmer are talking about "significant reforms" and a major "shake-up" in education. While the BCTF has been assured by ministry officials that nothing has been formalized, it is clear that

something is in the wind. Conversations have happened, visionaries are "envisioning." There is a "big picture" commitment to make curriculum and instruction more "personalized," engaging, and relevant. At first blush, this sounds like good news, but as they say, the devil is in the details. For years teachers have struggled to "personalize" learning in schools in BC. We've struggled to inform education policy and to create learning environments that are meaningful and student-centred. And we've struggled against significant and mounting odds: ministry policies and practices that form real barriers to student engagement.

If the profession was asked, we could readily tell the minister what's necessary to tailor schooling to the individual learning needs of students.

First, teachers must have professional autonomy—the respect and the authority to design instruction and student assessment that allows

us to create for each child, a learning program unique to that child's needs. Provincial standardized testing is in direct contradiction to personalized learning because it assumes every child learns in the same way at the same rate, that there are "best" instructional practices; that you can implement these best practices by teacher proofing instruction and by using scripted programs. In a true 21st century personalized-learning world, there would be no provincial standardized tests and teachers would be trusted and encouraged to deliver and assess child-centred learning programs.

Second, class sizes must be reduced. No teacher can truly be expected to personalize learning with a large class size. Establishing class-size and composition limits through collective bargaining would ensure the profession a central role in determining what is "appropriate for student learning." In a true 21st century learning world, teachers would be respected enough to have

their opinion on class size and composition count.

Third, the system must have sufficient resources to allow all children to flourish. Children with special needs must receive the individualized attention they deserve. Learning specialist teachers must have case loads that allow them to teach rather than simply collect data and fill in forms. Every school must have ESL teachers, counselling and psychometric services, a teacher-librarian and an up-to-date collection. In a true 21st century personalized-learning world, public education would be adequately financed.

Fourth, and in any century, teachers must be the first consulted when education policy change is contemplated. Teachers are the experts. Teachers are the program deliverers. A true 21st century personalized-learning world would expect and encourage teachers to be the drivers of educational change.

Of significant concern is that the Federation has not been asked. We have only recently been invited to enter a conversation that has already begun, to come in and pick up loose threads and try to understand a direction that has already been determined.

It is interesting to consider that when such a "reform" is proposed, it sounds like the ideas are new. They are not. Of course teaching should be student-centred. Of course students should be engaged. Of course education should be relevant and meaningful. This is what we've been saying all along. If there is a commitment, through this "reform" to respect the professional voice and autonomy of teachers, to focus child-centred schooling on building engaged citizens, and to retrieve the necessary resources and funding that have been stripped from public education; if it is not just empty rhetoric, we will embrace this change—it's what we've been striving for all along.

Readers write

The TTOC debate

This is in response to a letter "Respect our retired teachers who are TTOC," *Teacher*, September 2010.

It is unfortunate that the author of the above article views some colleague's remarks as critical and intimidating and that, "It is not appropriate in times of financial crisis or devastating government policy to turn inward to the teachers in our profession who choose to work after they have retired." I feel certain what the author really means is that name-calling is never appropriate. However, having said that, the author then proceeds to describe the assumption of others who hold differing opinions, in terms such as petty and short-sighted, before presenting the arguments in support of the position on the employment of retired teachers. It is also difficult to determine from the letter whether the author's view embodies the notion that retired teachers have a right to a TTOC position even if displacing a non-retired person is the consequence. For example, the author says "there is an assumption being made that a retired teacher is taking away employment from a younger colleague." If unemployment of non-retired people is not the issue then what is the debate all about?

It is my view as a retired teacher that TTOC jobs should go first to the unemployed or underemployed non-retired teacher, and if the position can not be filled in that manner, it

should then be offered to those who have chosen to retire and could possibly be experiencing those hardships outlined by the author.

Bob Aitchison
Coquitlam (retired)

Wi-Fi speculation

In the latest issue of *Teacher*, there is an article on WiFi that contains rampant speculation and amounts to fear-mongering. I refer you to a Q&A on this topic put together by the BBC: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6677051.stm>

I don't know if WiFi is 100% safe, but I'm going to trust the World Health Organization, before I listen to a random person with no apparent qualifications. Lynn Quiring used to run a website called cellphoneradiationsos.com and has articles in all sorts of sketchy places on the Internet about this. How about leaving science to the scientists?

I look forward to your article on alien abductions in the next issue.

Colin McLellan
Richmond

Bullying still rampant

In response to "Bullying won't stop any time soon" (*Teacher*, May/June 2010), I share Deb Taylor's contempt for Christy Clark's abuse of her public position as a commentator for CKNW. Her hatred of teachers and public education are notorious and blatant. But I take issue with the idea that real inroads are being made against bullying. As

far as I can see, it is as rampant now as it has ever been. In fact, it is worse, due primarily to well-meant but largely ineffective "antibullying programs" that rely on an unfounded view of human nature that takes as its foundational premise that people will respond positively to positive treatment. True for some, but decidedly not the case for many. All teachers know that students come from diverse home circumstances. Moreover, children, like adults, have innate personality traits that are often highly, or even completely, resistant to any change or modification. For some, counselling, restorative justice, and many of the other techniques and approaches for reducing and mitigating aggression will work and so they must be tried. But the question arises, what happens when these don't work? What is to be done with a child who sees such efforts merely as weaknesses to be exploited in order to engage in further depredations among their peers (or even against teachers, as we all well know)? Because we have constructed a largely consequence-free environment in schools, these questions have taken on a degree of urgency but are not being given the serious consideration they require.

A child who is sufficiently determined can simply weather all the interventions, suspensions, and reasoning and continue to wreak havoc. Eventually, school authorities are forced to give up and simply try and manage the risk to other

students as best they can. Even district level discipline committees, once able to discharge an incorrigible student, are now being overruled by yet another level of "oversight" designed to "keep them in school" at any cost, no matter the consequences for other students. Couple that with parents who are either in denial about the behaviour of their own children or whose attitude and behaviour is even worse than that of their child and you have the recipe for the unfettered abuse of students by bullies.

There needs to be serious and swift consequences for bullying, which means those consequences have to be spelled out and the amount of due process has to be reduced. By all means try the gentle persuasion approach first. But if that doesn't work, persistent bullies have to be removed and remanded to the custody of their parents, permanently if necessary, for the sake of the rest of the students.

Scott Goodman
Courtenay

Education news from down under

This summer I was lucky enough to spend eight weeks with my family travelling around Australia. While in the country, a federal election took place, and it was interesting to see the contrast between how important public education is to Australian politicians versus British Columbian politicians. Politicians from all parties from the right-wing Liberal/National coalition to the Greens and the ruling Labour party all made significant policy promises to an electorate increasingly concerned with the ability of the education system to meet the future needs of Australian children.

During the global financial crisis, Australia spent much of its stimulus money building and refurbishing school buildings as part of its commitment to improving public education. Even after this multi-billion dollar capital investment, politicians across the spectrum pledged millions to improve learning conditions. The Labour Party pledged to give every school a \$70,000 grant to provide release time to new teachers and mentors to help retain new teachers. The Liberals pledged a \$10,000 grant to entice professionals with math and engineering degrees to switch to teaching, in order to address the skills shortage. The Green Party pledged that they would use their Senate stronghold to rollback private-school tax funding to 2003 levels and redirect the funds to public schools.

In the end, all three parties received support and a governing coalition consisting of Labour, Greens, and two independents, formed government. One certain thing will come from this government if it lives to fulfill its three-year mandate, and that will be continued investment in the education of children. Australians understand that as a small resource-based economy, it will be investments in education and innovation that allows them to compete internationally with their giant neighbours in India and China. We see precious little of that same understanding at both the provincial and federal levels in Canada, despite also being a small resource-based economy with a giant neighbour.

Matt Pearce
Prince George

Raise awareness on the culture of gendering

I want to thank David Butler for his article on gender ideology (*Teacher*, September, 2010).

Differences go beyond sexual identity, but are personal traits variable in time regardless of gender. We want our students to live up to their own potentials, not to the ones we prefer.

One strong example is the fact that in primary level, we have gender-assigned toilets. Some of our Kindergarten classes still have their own toilet in the classroom for every student to share.

I remember seeing in small rural primary schools in France, schools with only one washroom for all the students. It didn't seem to pose any problem. I even remember witnessing a boy passing toilet paper under the separating wall to a girl next door. (In fact, the washroom was situated in an area that seemed like stalls in a porch.) I thought it funny because it seemed nothing but natural to them, when I felt boys and girls in Canada would be uncomfortable in such a situation. Why should it be? What is the sound explanation even to have gender assigned toilets in our primary schools?

The gendering culture is still as strong but it is expressed differently in Canada. More toys and clothes in stores are genderized and grouped by gender than before. Teachers can help make a difference, but the gendering pressure is strong.

We need to still raise awareness on the culture of gendering.

Vicky Grenier
Mission

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100-550 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 4P2
604-871-2283, toll free 1-800-663-9163, Fax 604-871-2289
E-mail: news@bctf.ca Web: bctf.ca/news

Editor

David Denyer

Assistant editor

Kathleen Smith

Design consultant

Betty Sommerville

Copy editor

Bev Humphries

Staff writers

David Denyer

Larry Kuehn

2010-11

BCTF Executive

Rick Guenther

Glen Hansman

Jim Iker

David Komljenovic

Susan Lambert

Irene Lanzinger

Jill McCaffery

Denise Moffatt

Teri Mooring

Christine Stewart

Kip Wood

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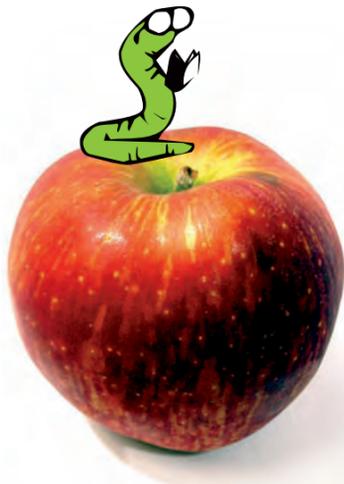
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Dear Oprah Winfrey



On September 20, I had occasion to watch your show, which focused on the educational problems with the public schools in the United States. Undoubtedly, you are well intentioned in your condemnation of the present system and your willingness to advocate for change. It is, in my estimation, indisputable that the American public school system is in dire need of saving. Studies that compare the United States with other countries around the world support this belief by showing declining literacy rates and academic performance in the US. I agree that the American public school system does indeed need a drastic overhaul; unfortunately it is here where our agreement on this matter completely ends.

I am a high school teacher in Canada, a nation that incidentally has consistently placed above the United States in most education rankings. In the course of my academic career and later teacher education, I have had the opportunity to study a broad range of educational systems from around the world. As a teacher, with some knowledge of public education, I can say unequivocally that you and your guests are completely wrong in both your diagnosis of the problems with your school system and your recommended actions to fix these problems.

Your belief that teachers are the central problem in the US public school system quite simply does not have any evidence to back it up. The 2007 World Educational Index placed the United States 20th in the world in education, behind countries like Australia, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Canada, and the Netherlands. These countries have higher literacy rates and higher secondary and post-secondary enrolment rates. They all, quite simply, have better education systems than the United States. All of these countries are heavily unionized and have union-garnered job security that equals or surpasses that of an American teacher. Yet, does their unionization and job security create complacent, ineffective teachers as you and your guests suggest? Apparently not, as their systems far surpass yours despite their unionization and job security.

The simple truth is that American public schools are underfunded and American classrooms are overcrowded. In California alone, there have been massive funding cuts to public education. This past March, 19,000 Californian teachers were laid off in an effort to reduce spending. Actions like this only create bigger class sizes and put further strain on an already strained school system. Across the US, similar cutbacks of different scales are taking place as prevalent thinking endorses the tightening of belts and the lowering of taxes.

Your anti-union and anti-teacher rhetoric only harms the cause of education in your country. I did notice your slight disclaimer at the beginning of your show, saying that

there are some good teachers in the country and that you were not talking about them. However, this minor disclaimer prior to a show, that places the blame for your broken school system squarely on the shoulders of teachers in America, takes none of the sting or hurt of your words away from what you and your guests said. Contrary to what was inferred on your show, I am willing to say that the vast majority of teachers in the US are good teachers. The examples of poor teaching you and Ms. Rhee spoke about in your program are the minority. Most teachers in your country are underpaid and overworked. They are men and women who often must slave away in crumbling schools, with out-of-date textbooks, competing, sometimes vainly, with chronic poverty, drugs and crime, for the attention and future of their students. They care for these kids immensely. Far from being the problem, Ms. Winfrey, they are the only solution available. If instead of arbitrarily categorizing some teachers as effective and some as not, firing the latter and ignoring the former, governments could fund these educators, giving them the resources, the support, and the training they need.

I find it both ironic and tragic that people like you, Mr. Gates, and Mr. Guggenheim, all people of immense privilege, will openly condemn the public school system and tell underprivileged Americans how it is failing them when the source of these problems most likely lies with people of wealth and privilege like you and your guests. It is many of the wealthy in your nation, after all, who use their influence to ensure

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that corporate and higher income taxes stay low. It is these influential people of privilege who would rather see cuts to education and essential services than increases in taxes during tough economic times. And it is these people of privilege, much like Gates and Guggenheim, who put their kids in private schools, making sure that they have no vested interest in ensuring that their elected officials keep public schools well funded.

In conclusion, I will say that I am both disappointed and saddened by your ill-informed portrayal of American teaching. I feel sadness for my hardworking brother and sister teachers across the border who have to deal with yet another obstacle when teaching their students. Yet most of all, I feel sadness for the children of America, many of whom will never break free from the cycle of poverty they were born into because their elders continue to refuse to properly fund and support their education system.

John Decaire, Vancouver, BC

P.S. Incidentally, whether you agree with my position or not, the quality of my letter writing will be obvious. It was taught to me, along with all the other skills this working-class kid needed to become a university graduate and professional, by a host of reasonably paid, hardworking, unionized, public school teachers.

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summarized at the end of the paper, and include:

- Individualized learning paths versus preprogrammed paths from which students choose their course of study.
- A much greater emphasis on experimental and situational learning, especially as students get older.
- The evolution of the teacher from the role of instructor when children are young, to a much more complex and professional role of learning facilitator as children get older.
- Rich assessment and reporting based on competencies rather than courses or disciplines, and that uses language and artifacts rather than scores to show achievement.
- A sliding scale of student dependency on teacher and school-as-place that decreases with age, so allowing growth in student choice and responsibility.

The influences of John Abbott and the 21st Century Learning Initiative on Margaret MacDiarmid and the Ministry of Education—with their calls for increased student engagement through personalized, hands-on learning, guided rather than dictated, by teachers—are clearly evident.

In addition to John Abbott, the province seems to be following the lead of Alberta and New Brunswick; in a back-to-school teleconference with reporters on August 31, 2010, Margaret MacDiarmid pointed to both as models for education in British Columbia. Both provinces are looking to remake their education systems in order to prepare their students to compete and thrive in 21st century society.

In June, the government of Alberta published a discussion paper titled, “Inspiring Action on Education,” which came out of the government’s Inspiring Education initiative, and which lays out a vision for the transformation of the education system in Alberta. The crux of the matter seems to lie in the following statement:

“Governments, business leaders, researchers and communities in Alberta, Canada, and around the world, investigating the requirements of 21st century learners, have identified the need for competencies to be more central in the education of young people if they are to be active participants in an increasingly knowledge-based and globalized society.”

New Brunswick is moving down the same road. Their Department of Education’s “NB3-21C: Creating a

21st Century Learning Model of Public Education,” is the foundational document for that province’s 21st century learning initiatives. Like Alberta, the government of New Brunswick makes a direct connection between global societal change “in the age of knowledge and innovation” and the importance of learning as the “major socio-economic driver of the 21st century.” In order to keep pace and compete in “emerging knowledge- and innovation-based economic sectors,” the province must overhaul its educational system.

There is a disconnect between the vision that the ministry is putting forward and what is actually happening on the ground—where pervasive underfunding, fewer electives, larger classes, a lack of teacher autonomy, the constrictions of the accountability agenda, and the realities of child poverty all would seem to conspire to hamstring the ministry’s proposals.

Both documents list competencies which, in addition to literacy and numeracy, are all components of a 21st century education. The seven Alberta competencies and five New Brunswick competencies are essentially the same as the BC Ministry of Education’s Seven Cs. Both provinces also emphasize personalized learning, student-centred education, and teachers as facilitators.

Interestingly, much of the language surrounding these 21st century learning plans is not new to BC. Most recently, the Ministry of Education’s Year 2000 Program, which emerged from the recommendations of the Sullivan Royal Commission on Education in the late 1980s, called for major education reforms in British Columbia. Parts of the 1990 ministry paper, “Year 2000: A Framework for Learning,” sound as though they could have been written today. According to the ministry in 1990, major social and economic changes in BC were placing new demands and expectations on schools:

“These changes include an explosion in knowledge, coupled with powerful new communication and information processing technologies. The structure of the economy is shifting from being primarily resource-based to becoming a mixed economy with increas-

ing emphasis on the information and service sectors. Society itself is changing and becoming much more diverse.”

The new competencies required for BC students are elucidated in another paragraph from the Year 2000 paper, which sounds remarkably like the 21st century learning language that is floating around today:

“In view of the new social and economic realities, all students, regardless of their immediate plans following school, will need to develop a flexibility and versatility undreamed of by previous generations. Increasingly, they will need to be able to employ critical and creative thinking skills to solve problems and make decisions, to be technologically literate as well as literate in the traditional sense, and to be good communicators. Equally, they will need to have well developed interpersonal skills and be able to work co-operatively with others. Finally, they will need to be lifelong learners.”

The only surviving component of the Year 2000 plan is the Primary Program, which covers students in BC from Kindergarten to Grade 3. The Intermediate and Graduate Programs were ultimately scrapped, but the principles behind the entire Year 2000 Program appear to linger in the proposals of the Ministry of Education. The ministry’s major reform effort was unsuccessful 20 years ago; whether or not a different outcome awaits the 21st century learning plans remains to be seen.

While the idealism of the ministry’s 21st century learning proposals is certainly admirable, it is still unclear how all of these laudable goals will be achieved in today’s economic and political climate. There is a disconnect between the vision that the ministry is putting forward and what is actually happening on the ground—where pervasive underfunding, fewer electives, larger classes, a lack of teacher autonomy, the constrictions of the accountability agenda, and the realities of child poverty all would seem to conspire to hamstring the ministry’s proposals. Unless fundamental, systemic changes are made, do the ministry’s reform plans stand a chance? You can expect to hear a great deal more about this in the coming months as the ministry fills in the details.

Emily O’Neill, BCTF Information Services Department.

For more information, see the BCTF Information Services Research & Reports blog at bctf.ca/blogs/research.aspx.

Looking back

70 years ago

At the last convention in Vancouver at Easter, 1940, there came into existence an organization for which there has been a crying need ever since teaching began in this province. I am referring to the formation of the Rural Teachers’ Association. No body of teachers in British Columbia has ever existed, which has worked for less remuneration, and under such difficult conditions as the rural teachers of this province; and no body of teachers has ever been less vocal than this same group. Can it be that this group are all endowed with a martyr complex, and regard the conditions under which they work as a just reward and adequate recompense for their toil? This I doubt very much.

– October 1940, *The BC Teacher*

50 years ago

At retirement the teacher receives a Retirement Allowance consisting of two parts, the Service Pension and the Annuity. The amount of the

Service Pension depends solely upon the teacher’s length of service in British Columbia public schools. Present rates are \$3 per month (\$36 per year) in recognition of each year of service up to 20, and \$4 per month (\$48 per year) in recognition of each year of service beyond the twentieth.

– Sept./Oct. 1960, *The BC Teacher*

30 years ago

Since the nutritional value of a food varies inversely with the amount spent on advertising it, one must look askance at the “sponsors” of nutrition education. Teachers can obtain McDonalds Action Packs on Nutrition, which have mimeograph stencil masters with the McDonalds arches on every page. The Planter’s Peanuts Guide to Physical Fitness and Nutrition states that “Boys need to be physically fit so they can compete in sports and later can compete in society. Girls need to be physically fit because it makes them more attractive.” On the lighter side, the National Soft Drink Association

credits the major nutritional contribution of soft drinks to pop’s high water content. However, it is still possible to get unflavoured, un-sugared, un-additived and un-dyed liquid from the tap.

– Sept./Oct. 1980, *The BC Teacher*

10 years ago

There has been a lot of talk in the media that the provincial class-size language does not allow for flexibility in class-size numbers and that school administrators have to move students to different classes or different schools, which can be disruptive. The fact is that any class-size number would create that same problem as long as administration keeps staffing schools in June with every class filled to the maximum or very close to the maximum, leaving no room for new students when they arrive in September.

– October 2000, *Teacher newsmagazine*

Compiled by Chris Bocking, Keating Elementary School, Saanich

When 21st century schooling just isn't good enough: A modest proposal

By Alfie Kohn

Many school administrators, and even more people who aren't educators but are kind enough to offer their advice about how our field can be improved, have emphasized the need for "21st-century schools" that teach "21st-century skills." But is this really enough, particularly now that our adversaries (in other words, people who live in other countries) may be thinking along the same lines? Unfortunately, no. Beginning immediately, therefore, we must begin to implement 22nd-century education.

What does that phrase mean? How can we possibly know what skills will be needed so far in the future? Such challenges from skeptics—the same kind of people who ask annoying questions about other cutting-edge ideas, including "brain-based education"—are to be expected. But if we're confident enough to describe what education should be like throughout the 21st century—that is, what will be needed over the next 90 years or so—it's not much of a stretch to reach a few decades beyond that.

Essentially, we can take whatever objectives or teaching strategies we happen to favour and, merely by attaching a label that designates a future time period, endow them (and ourselves) with an aura of novelty and significance. Better yet, we instantly define our critics as impediments to progress. If this trick works for the adjective "21st-century," imagine the payoff from ratcheting it up by a hundred years.

Essentially, we can take whatever objectives or teaching strategies we happen to favour and, merely by attaching a label that designates a future time period, endow them (and ourselves) with an aura of novelty and significance. Better yet, we instantly define our critics as impediments to progress. If this trick works for the adjective "21st-century," imagine the payoff from ratcheting it up by a hundred years.

To describe schooling as 22nd-century, however, does suggest a somewhat specific agenda. First, it signifies an emphasis on competitiveness. Even those who talk about 21st-century schools invariably follow that phrase with a reference to "the need to

compete in a global economy." The goal isn't excellence, in other words; it's victory. Education is first and foremost about being first and foremost. Therefore, we might as well trump the 21st-century folks by peering even further into the future.

You may have noticed the connection between this conception of education and the practice of continually ranking students on the basis of their scores on standardized tests. This is a promising start, but it doesn't go nearly far enough. Twenty-second-century schooling means that just about everything should be evaluated in terms of who's beating whom. Thus, newspapers might feature headlines like: "U.S. Schools Now in 4th Place in Number of Hall Monitors" or "Gates Funds \$50-Billion Effort to Manufacture World-Class Cafeteria Trays." Whatever the criterion, our challenge is to make sure that people who don't live in the United States will always be inferior to us.

This need to be number one also explains why we can no longer settle for teaching to the "whole child." The trouble is that if you have a whole of something, you have only one of it. From now on, therefore, you can expect to see conferences devoted to educating a "child-and-a-half" (CAAH). Nothing less will do in a 22nd-century global—or possibly interplanetary—economy. To cite the title of a forthcoming best-seller that educators will be reading in place of dusty tomes about pedagogy, *The Solar System Is Flat*.

In addition to competitiveness, those who specify an entire century to frame their objectives tend not to be distracted by all the fretting about what's good for children. Instead, they ask, "What do our corporations need?" and work backwards from there. We must never forget the primary reason that children attend school—namely, to be trained in the skills that will

maximize the profits earned by their future employers. Indeed, we have already made great strides in shifting the conversation about education to what will prove useful in workplaces rather than wasting time discussing what might support "democracy" (an 18th-century notion, isn't it?) or what might promote self development as an intrinsic good (a concept that goes back thousands of years and is therefore antiquated by definition).

The final distinguishing feature of education that's geared to the next century is its worshipful attitude toward mathematics and technology. "If you can't quantify it or plug it in, who needs it?"

How can we redouble our commitment to business-oriented schooling? If necessary, we can outsource some of the learning to students in Asia, who will memorize more facts for lower grades. And we can complete the process, already begun in spirit, of making universities' education departments subsidiaries of their business schools. More generally, we must put an end to pointless talk about students' "interest" in learning and instead focus on skills that will contribute to the bottom line. Again, we're delighted to report that this shift is already underway, thanks to those who keep reminding us about the importance of 21st-century schooling.

This is no time for complacency, though. Not everyone is on board yet, and that means we'll have to weed out teachers whose stubborn attachment to less efficient educational strategies threatens to slow down the engine of our future

economy. How can we rid our schools of those who refuse to be team players? Well, we can insist that all classroom instruction be rigorously aligned to state standards—a very effective technique since most of those standards documents were drafted by people steeped in the models, methods, and metaphors of corporations. We can also use merit pay to enforce compliance by stigmatizing anyone who doesn't play by the new rules. (Come to think of it, here, too, we're already well on our way to creating 22nd-century classrooms.)

The final distinguishing feature of education that's geared to the next century is its worshipful attitude toward mathematics and technology. "If you can't quantify it or plug it in, who needs it?"

Of course, the reason we will continue to redirect resources toward the STEM subjects (and away from literature and the arts) isn't because the former are inherently more important but simply because they're more useful from an economic standpoint. And that standpoint is the only one that matters for schools with a proper 22nd-century mindset.

One last point. We will of course continue to talk earnestly about the need for a curriculum that features "critical thinking" skills—by which we mean the specific proficiencies acceptable to CEOs. But you will appreciate the need to delicately discourage real critical thinking on the part of students, since this might lead them to pose inconvenient questions about the entire enterprise and the ideology on which it's based. There's certainly no room for that in the global competitive economy of the future. Or the present.

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Alfie Kohn has recently completed a book called *Crime and Punishment*. He expects to begin reading another one shortly.

Know your place

A recent e-mail on physics resources from UBC had this somewhat ambiguous comment:

"Physics teaching for the 21st century," is a resource for teachers who are interested in teaching physics concepts in real world contexts.

"The great problems of the 20th century were solved by a few incredibly smart people. The great problems of the 21st century will have to be solved by billions of moderately smart people. This is where teachers come in..."

Check it out:

<http://c21.phas.ubc.ca>

Summer conference speakers inspire and encourage

By Nancy Knickerbocker



Michael Molina

Be encouraged!

Even as he and fellow citizens of New Orleans mark the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Michael Molina's upbeat message to the adults and children who suffered the catastrophe is: "Be encouraged!"

Despite the "shock doctrine" style takeover of New Orleans public schools, the spirit of community and dedication to quality public education remains encouragingly resilient, said Molina, a teacher, Yale-educated lawyer, award-winning rapper, and founder of *New Roots*, a program for youth displaced by Katrina.

In a moving presentation to 600 BC teachers at summer conference, Molina recalled the natural, human, and political disaster that left 80% of the city destroyed, more than 1,800 people dead, and one million people homeless. "I lost my childhood home and my first school, but that was a lot less than others lost," he said.

In the immediate wake of Katrina, the pro-privatization forces moved swiftly to take over the public schools in New Orleans, which they seized upon as a prime opportunity for education entrepreneurs.

Only two months after the hurricane struck, while teachers and their families were still scattered and rescue workers were still pulling bodies from the water, all 8,500 public school teachers and administrators were fired. Why? To break the union, he said, because it provided the core of resistance to the privatization agenda.

The state then took over the locally elected school board and moved the centre of power miles away to the state capital in Baton Rouge. The federal government dumped \$24 million into charter schools, this in a city with no electricity. As a result, today, more than half of all New Orleans schools are charter schools—the highest in the United States.

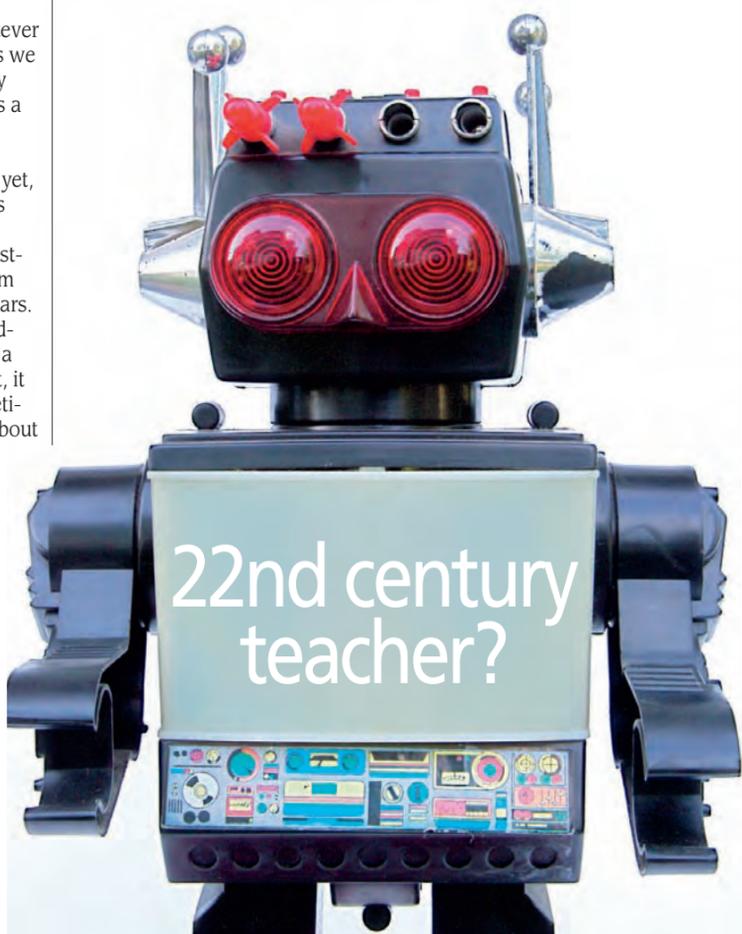
To learn more about Michael Molina's work, visit his website: www.momolina.com.

Public education and the politics of voice

Michael Apple, eminent scholar and "a guru for us," as BCTF President Susan Lambert described him, offered a keynote address to at the BCTF summer conference held at UBC.

Apple began by expressing his happiness at being among friends. "It's nice to be in a place where unions are articulate and teachers fight back."

By contrast, he said, this summer a big billboard in New York's Times



Square offered people \$10,000 to identify the worst teacher in their city.

Education is deeply political, whether we like it or not, he said. And the politics often centre on the hidden curriculum: what we teach and what we omit to teach.

"Whose knowledge is taught?" he asked. "Some knowledge is taught and others is considered illegitimate or unpopular.... It's about the politics of voice. Who is heard? That's why I love BC—because here you [the teachers] are heard."

He threw out a challenge to anyone who might claim that standards are low, or that teachers are overpaid: "Let them come into any classroom, spend a week, and then we can talk."

But the problems facing public education are not only due to neo-liberalism: it's more complicated than that, Apple said. "For dominant groups to win, they must change our common sense." (Immediately Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" sprang to mind, along with its attendant losses and cuts.)

Apple described a new alliance of education reform groups coming together to say "It's raining in education," and to invite everyone in out of the wet. He listed four groups under the one umbrella:

Neo-liberals: Private=good, public=bad, the world as a vast supermarket, it's all about choice, merit pay, "the fiction of a weak state," etc.

Neo-conservatives: Strong state, patriotism, national curricula, standardized testing, less funding to schools, more to prisons and the "injustice system."

Authoritarian populists: Home schoolers are creating the biggest trend in the US, with about 2 million children pulled from public schools in search of "gated educational communities."

New managerialists: "If it moves in classrooms, then measure it!" They have carved out new spheres of authority in government with so-called "value-added testing," etc.

"Markets reproduce the conditions for advantage," Apple said, noting that voucher schools and other choice programs based on test scores produce no decline in inequality, more racism and oppression, and less respect for teachers.

In this depressing context, where does one look to for hope?

Education is deeply political, whether we like it or not, he said. And the politics often centre on the hidden curriculum: what we teach and what we omit to teach.

Apple pointed to Porto Alegre, Brazil, where, despite deep poverty and almost no education funding, teachers and communities built an entire school system from the bottom up. Students have a voice, teachers and parents build knowledge that speaks back to the national curriculum, and the entire transformation was led by the teachers' union.

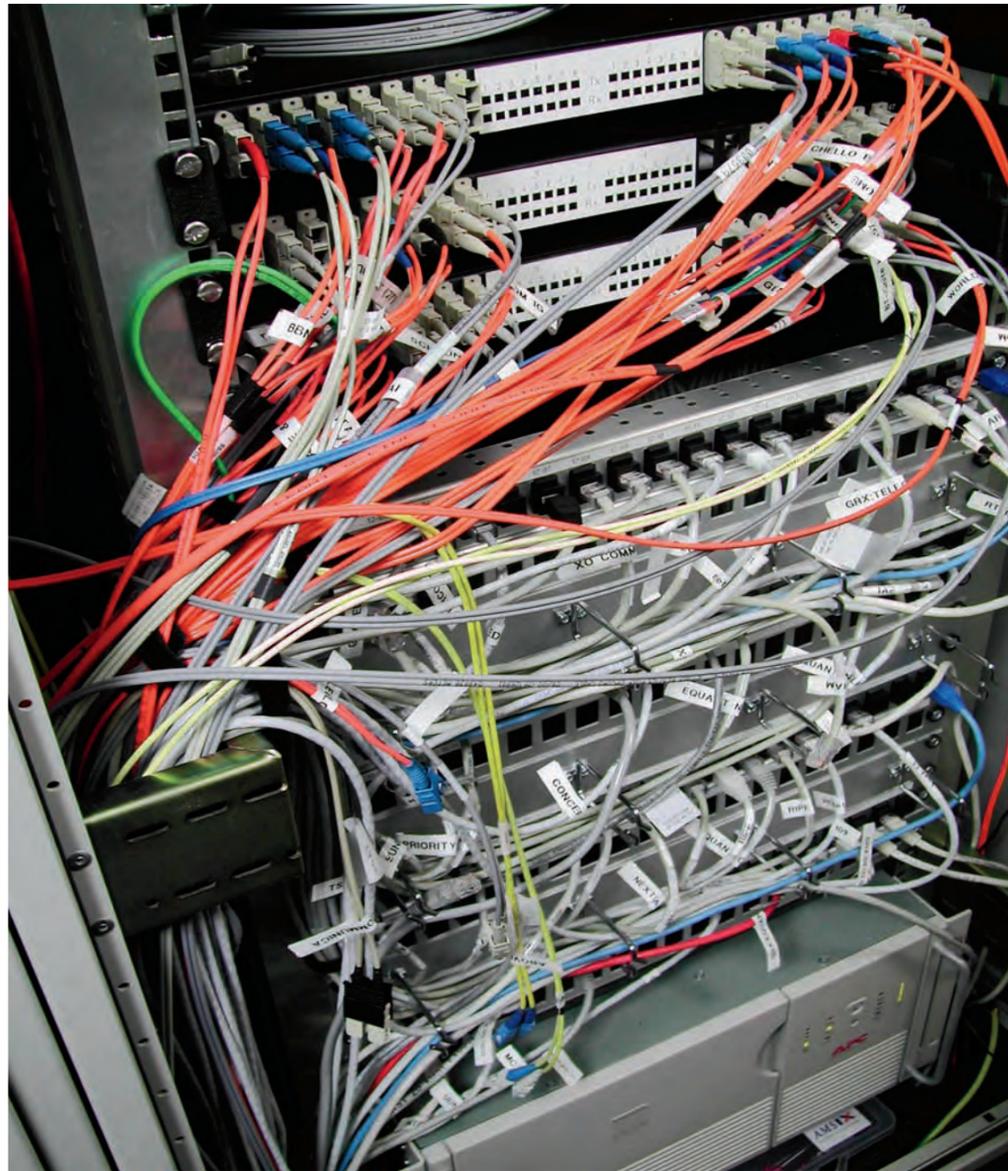
"It's a story of continuous struggle, of the teachers working with the children and fighting back," Apple said.

Nancy Knickerbocker is the BCTF's media relations officer.



Michael Apple

The solution to the BCeSIS problem is not more BCeSIS



By Larry Kuehn

One response to the current disaster would be to throw a lot more money—lots more money—at fixing it. That would be more bandwidth, more data storage, more access for more people who can be on the system at one time.

That is not a sensible solution. The problem with *British Columbia enterprise Student Information System* (BCeSIS) is in its centralized design, which requires 40,000 people to put all their data on one central database that they link to directly through a web browser.

When BCeSIS was being created, an alternative was put forward. It would have been based on having software and data at a school and district level, with a roll-up only of necessary information to the provincial level. In other words, the central database would only hold what is needed at the central level and would not be the place where all the processing happens.

Take a look at an example of secondary counsellors to see the difference. Counsellors need to have access to the data of who is in the school and what courses they want to take. They then need to run scenarios to see how assignments to classes can be made that balance out with class-size limits and other factors.

With BCeSIS, they have to do all this work online on the central database and servers. While they are on doing this, they are using up bandwidth for the connection, they are taking up one of the limited connections to the central servers, and they are using computing power. At the same time, every other secondary counsellor is trying to do the same thing, every teacher or the support staff are supposed to be putting in attendance, and many are trying to put in marks on daily assignments.

Obviously, the more districts that are on BCeSIS, the more pressure there will be on every element of the system. The "success" of forcing nearly every district to use BCeSIS has pushed an already overloaded system over the edge.

In fact, BCeSIS has failed at nearly every key time when lots of people have to be on in a short block of time, such as with student programming and preparing report cards.

Obviously, the more districts that are on BCeSIS, the more pressure there will be on every element of the system. The "success" of forcing nearly every district to use BCeSIS has pushed an already overloaded system over the edge.

Why centralize all data in BCeSIS?

When the request for proposals went out to industry for the data system, the ministry received proposals that would have allowed for much of the online activity to be on computers at the school and district levels, with frequent updating to the central database of that information that needed to be available centrally.

Why would the ministry choose a centralized system that in its very design would be likely to fail? Does the minister really need to find out every day what students are in class in every classroom in the province? Does the minister really need to look into every classroom to see what marks any particular student has received on assignments that day?

Why, then? One possible explanation is to look at the government's overall data plans. Other ministries,

such as healthcare, are developing databases to hold the health information on every person in the province. When all this data is held at a provincial level, data matching and data mining will be possible. Have we been asked whether we want a society where all of this information about us can be combined?

Another explanation might be that the ministry wants to check up on teachers by looking for patterns in the data. Data-driven decisions are the trend that has accelerated in the US under the *No Child Left Behind* approach and the new *Race for the Top* funding sweepstakes. And AAL, the Ontario company that developed BCeSIS, has the US as its main market and we have a tool designed more for the US reality than the Canadian reality in schools.

Who is making the decisions?

BCeSIS belongs to the ministry, although they say the data belongs to the districts. They have created a management system that has representatives from districts, along with ministry representatives, as decision-makers. A steering committee is the real decision-making body, with regional representatives selected by the district representatives.

Outside of the people on the steering committee, and the software and service companies (AAL and Fujitsu), no one seems to have much influence on the decisions. They have refused to provide the BCTF with information about their plans, let alone have any teacher influence on the decisions that are made.

What's the alternative?

Opening up the data to a third-party program is one possibility. This would be a program that the student data is loaded into for that school alone. The counsellor could use the program to do all the sort-

ing they needed to on the school computer and work out the timetable and student assignments without competing with every other counsellor in the province needing to do the same thing at the same time. If that information is needed centrally, then it could be uploaded to the provincial system.

Why would the ministry choose a centralized system that in its very design would be likely to fail? Does the minister really need to find out every day what students are in class in every classroom in the province? Does the minister really need to look into every classroom to see what marks any particular student has gotten on assignments that day?

Similarly, for student grade books, a separate program could be used for the teacher to maintain online records with all the advantages of more flexibility than exists in BCeSIS. When it comes to report-card time, just the report-card information could be uploaded directly to BCeSIS. There would be no need to spend all the time competing for computing resources and doing data entry on a clunky system. Some districts have already done this—adopted a real grade-book program, and written a program for the uploading of report-card grades to BCeSIS when it has to be.

Even if the current problems with BCeSIS are reduced, that will be only a temporary fix to a system that is flawed in its design.

Larry Kuehn is director of the BCTF Research and Technology Division.

BCTF Executive Committee calls for ministry action

The BCTF Executive Committee passed several motions calling for solutions to the problems:

1. That the BCTF demand that information, and the decisions about the directions and funding of BCeSIS, be opened to the public and to the BCTF.
2. That the BCTF call for a change in direction on data management to allow for BCeSIS to be open to third-party software that allows uses for attendance, gradebook, course scheduling, IEPs, and other essential elements to be carried out at the school and district level, not at the central level.
3. That the BCTF ask locals to pressure their boards to call for a change in direction and to give instructions to their representatives to BCeSIS to open up information and consider a change in direction that would allow third-party local usage.
4. That the BCTF call for the ministry to provide funding for districts to be able to adopt third-party software that will serve the needs of teachers and districts, rather than the ministry and the vendor corporations.

The province-wide implications of the Vancouver report

Part 2

Bumpy road ahead with aggressive and unpredictable education minister

By Noel Herron

Stepping gingerly around the comptroller general's report on the Vancouver School Board, the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) in its initial reaction to the controversial document stated: "Although the majority of the report is specific to the Vancouver School District, several of the recommendations have implications for all boards of education."

As an objective review of the financial performance of the VSB this report failed. As a review of the educational needs of one of this province's most complex and diverse urban school systems the report was a total bust. It studiously, and amazingly, avoided, for the most part, any mention of education programs and services, and equally as important failed to look to the future.

In identifying nine recommendations directed at the other 60 boards it was very clear that the Ministry of Education team working with Cheryl Wenezenki-Yolland, the province's comptroller general, at the behest of Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid, had other fish to fry, apart from their attempt to isolate the Vancouver board.

Wenezenki-Yolland's report was generally recognized within the Vancouver education community as a political document, with the sole exception of two minority VSB trustees on the nine trustee board (both members of Gordon Campbell's former NPA municipal party) who criticized the board for antagonizing the minister, thus underlining the partisan nature of the report.

As an objective review of the financial performance of the VSB, this report failed. As a review of the educational needs of one of this province's most complex and diverse urban school systems, the report was a total bust. It studiously,

and amazingly, avoided, for the most part, any mention of education programs and services, and equally as important failed to look to the future.

The muted reaction from the BCSTA and this association's avoidance of any direct commentary—even a mild supportive gesture—on the financial crunch facing the VSB, when all of the other 60 school districts were in similar straits, was regarded by many trustees as a missed opportunity.

Consider the following six issues emerging from this report—some addressed, some not, (the last two being regarded as too hot to handle) by the provincial trustees' body whose stated primary role is, "to support boards in improving student achievement" while also arguing that boards must have "the ability and autonomy to appropriately fulfill their legislative and representative duties."

1. An arm's length, independent, financial review

By announcing, at the request of the minister, that: "specifically excluded from the scope of our work was the structure of the provincial funding model for education" this report forfeited its overall credibility.

A call from BCSTA for an outside or external evaluator would have been helpful to an embattled but unbowed Vancouver board. By not doing so, an opportunity for leadership accompanied by a call for fairness and objectivity as well as a look to the future in a contentious climate was lost.

It was also very clear why the BC Liberals would not dare request the services of the office of John Doyle, the provincial auditor general. This is an office specifically mandated and equipped for this task, but given the ongoing series of critical reports on the functioning of the provincial government over the past four years, this was a non-starter.

2. Co-governance with the Ministry of Education

Sweep aside the bold principles in the BCSTA's analysis of this specific recommendation there is an astounding naiveté, if not outright avoidance, of the political realities that dominate the co-governance "partnership" between school boards and Victoria since the BC Liberals came to power in 2001. Instead of shared responsibility based on mutual trust and respect, Victoria's top-down model has been

characterized by distrust, lack of consultation, and outright arrogance. Forget about board "autonomy" or ability to adapt to local situations. Failure to communicate, surprise announcements, abrupt withdrawal of funding, plus a shameless provincial strategy of downloading on boards at every turn make this recommendation untenable. The Vancouver report reinforces centralization at every turn.

3. Long-term strategic plan for education

If this particular recommendation in the Vancouver report were set to music it would appropriately and cynically be titled: "We've heard that song before." Volatile provincial funding, unilateral imposition of policies, undermining of local capital and operating programs, lack of clearly articulated strategies, coupled with the repeatedly promised, but never delivered, plans to facilitate a long-term planning agenda for school boards, mock the validity and sincerity of this document.

4. Mandatory trustees participation in Ministry of Education training

Given the patronizing, and indeed insulting, nature of this recommendation—it elicited the strongest reaction from the BCSTA—with the provincial organization bluntly responding that "all office holders, be they school trustees, city and regional councillors or MLAs should have appropriate orientation and professional development." BCSTA in the past has organized and presented exceptional workshops, in-service courses, and forums for the province's 450 trustees. The provincial organization justifiably stands by its record. Look for deterioration in service if Victoria becomes involved.

Apart from the early childhood fiasco, if this minister persists in her aggressive and confrontational ways, as she has evidenced in her dealings with the Vancouver board, and fails to reach out in a cooperative manner to the various groups in the education community, this government will sink even lower in public opinion polls—something the BC Liberals dread.

In diminishing the role and work of school trustees by denigrating their qualifications for holding public office, this report crossed a line in trustee-ministry relations. In fact this recommendation coming from a group of non-elected civil servants reaches a new level of arrogant provincial intervention.

5. Role of the deputy and assistant deputy minister

Flowing from the above four *faux pas* are the questionable roles of Victoria's two leading "advisers" to the comptroller general, namely, the deputy and the assistant deputy ministers of education, in helping formulate recommendations and in vetting the final report. Alex Himelfarb, Canada's former senior civil servant, put it well when he stated that senior Canadian civil servants are expected "to operate on code of fearless advice and loyal implementation."

And so it is in this case. The Victoria senior staff involved in writing the Vancouver report urge that every service, where possible, in a public education system be

maximized for generating revenue. The latter recommendation would be the death knell of reasonable rentals to before-and-after school care by various community groups. Clearly, what we have here are two ideological "advisers" whose main goal was to advance the BC Liberals' blinkered education agenda.

6. Role of the minister of education

Lastly, we come to the role of the BC Liberals' fourth minister of education in nine years, namely Margaret MacDiarmid. This is the minister who will direct educational affairs in this province for the next two-and-a-half years. Based on her first year in office, and given the current mindset in Victoria, we can anticipate a bumpy road ahead.

Arrogant, unpredictable, gaffe-prone, this is a minister who will brook no dissent. Her disdain for local government is equalled only by her penchant for shifting blame again and again on to the shoulders of school trustees. Retired superintendent Geoff Johnson in *The Vancouver Sun* characterized her as being a "provincial bear now, well and truly, in attack mode" during the height of the Vancouver controversy.

Charged with fronting for the BC Liberals' flawed integrated and comprehensive early childhood agenda, one gets an idea of the approach MacDiarmid uses when she stated she wished to create "a splash" (note her wording) with the partial introduction of the underfunded full-day Kindergarten this September. Leaving half the Kindergarten population out—literally thousands of kids on waiting lists across the province—at the start of the current school year seems incidental to this minister.

Despite the much-hyped announcements by current and past ministers, the BC Liberals' promise to introduce programs for "three- and four-year-olds" is not only illusory but laced with cynical, one-off stunts such as booster seats for preschoolers, book handouts to their parents, plus a mischaracterized "Strong Start" initiative—the latter a part-time, drop-in program. Not to mention the shutting down of three daycare centres alone in Vancouver during the summer months, thus deepening the city's daycare crisis. The fact that thousands of preschoolers, lacking readiness for school (as documented over the past decade), have been left behind for nine years due to foot-dragging and failure to address widening early childhood educational chasms in BC is unacceptable.

Apart from the early childhood fiasco, if this minister persists in her aggressive and confrontational ways, as she has evidenced in her dealings with the Vancouver board, and fails to reach out in a cooperative manner to the various groups in the education community, this government will sink even lower in public opinion polls—something the BC Liberals dread.

The Vancouver report, as written, framed, and presented publicly by Victoria prior to the end of the last school year is but a symptom of a wider provincial problem.

As for MacDiarmid's expressed wish to BCSTA executive members, in a late June meeting, that her ministry would like to "move forward with a 21st-century learning agenda, focusing on meeting the educational needs of every student," the chances of this happening, given the current levels of distrust and the ongoing underfunding of school boards, are about as remote as the repeal of the HST tax by the BC Liberals.

Public education in this province has never been so badly served.

Noel Herron is a former Vancouver trustee. This is the second of two articles on the Vancouver report.

AGM bargaining survey responses



Jason Proulx, Langley

What would you like to achieve in the next round of bargaining?

We haven't had any real increases in benefits, so I would like to see improvements in a broad range of benefits. I would also like to be remunerated more closely to what our Ontario colleagues enjoy given that the cost of living in the GVRD and surrounding areas is among the highest in the country. Finally, regaining REAL enforceable class-size and composition limits across BC.

Most important issues for you?

As a staff rep, I find it difficult to get teachers involved in union issues. I think that getting back to local bargaining will re-energize teachers and get them to reconnect with the decision-making process at the local level. Issues I feel we need to pursue are:

1. using "days in lieu" offered up to teachers as pacifiers or as band-aids for class-size and composition violations to using those funds to hire SEA for real support in classrooms on a daily basis.
2. ensuring TTOCs are used to support teachers wanting to participate in school-based team meetings during the school day.



Alex Peters, Burnaby

What would you like to achieve in the next round of bargaining?

- seniority hiring for temporary and continuing contracts
- improved benefits package
- return to local bargaining
- class-size and composition improvements
- leave for union business for TTOCs.

Most important issues for you?

1. seniority hiring for temporary and continuing contracts
2. an improved benefits package.



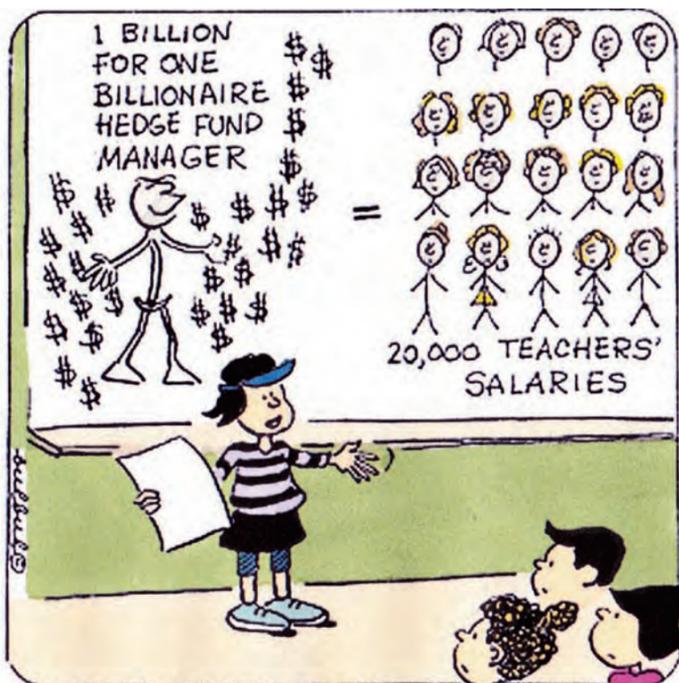
Deanna Ritchie, Greater Victoria

What would you like to achieve in the next round of bargaining?

My hope is that a mutually respectful meeting will occur and that both parties will have the opportunity to share their views fairly and peacefully.

Most important issues for you?

1. reinstating our right to local collective bargaining
2. finding more effective solutions to oversized classes and ineffective class compositions
3. increasing salary rates for all teachers, including TTOCs, by shortening the salary grid.



"Now I ask you, is this a plan for the future of a civilized, rational society?"

REFLECTIONS ON PD

The changing face of PD

By Jinny Sims

Teachers join the teaching profession for a variety of reasons, and stay in the profession as their passions are engaged in teaching students. Teachers are lifelong learners and know that the love of teaching and learning are inextricably intertwined. As a profession, we must focus on keeping the joy of teaching and learning alive in our classrooms, and use our voices to advocate for the students we teach, our profession, and a just, civil society.

This is the time to open classroom doors and for teachers to engage in a public debate about the necessity for a quality public education system that meets the needs of all students, for public services, for a social safety net, and for a just and humane civil society.

As teachers struggle with class size, class composition, and lack of resources it is very easy to close classroom doors. However, our students bring the impact of poverty, violence, racism, sexism, and the growing economic divide into classrooms. This is the time to open classroom doors and for teachers to engage in a public debate about the necessity for a quality public education system that meets the needs of all students, for public services, for a social safety net, and for a just and humane civil society. As teachers, we have to force, and engage in, a public discourse about the impact of neoliberal policy decisions that are devastating our communities and society. As a profession, we cannot afford to be bystanders in this much-needed political debate.

At the same time as schools are being underfunded, there is fixation with data and test scores. The testing agenda is narrowing teaching and learning, and is a barrier to engaging students in meaningful learning experiences. Elementary and secondary schools are bombarded with school-wide writes, and district-wide tests, FSAs and provincial examinations. Teachers and students feel the pressure, and this leads to teaching to the test rather than addressing the needs of students in the classroom. In other jurisdictions this has led to packaged lesson plans, imposition of teaching methodologies, and connecting teacher salaries to student test scores. It is imperative for teachers, individually and collectively, to use our professional voices to articulate our concerns with the testing agenda and its negative impact on teaching and learning. Teachers cannot afford to be complacent and must assert and exercise our professional autonomy to determine the methods of instruction, student assessment, and evaluation and selection of learning resources to meet the needs of students.

There are the so-called "reformers" who want to distract the public and teachers from the

deliberate underfunding, and the agenda to privatize public schools and public services. The reformers rhetoric is about greater parent choice, flexibility, individual learning, new technologies, fixing and retooling the teacher. As professionals, we must take the time to reflect on the dissonance between what the reformers say, and the policies they implement. Teacher voices must be inserted into a much-needed public debate about the value of a well-resourced quality public education system with quality teaching. Teachers have to focus the debate back to the needs of the students, the resources needed for a quality education program for every student that develops a love for learning, and which nurtures civic responsibility.

Teachers are professionals, and too often we have allowed our voices to be silenced. The traditional definition of a professional has been someone who has a high level of education that has resulted in a professional credential, and a commitment to lifelong learning to maintain professional knowledge and skills, to rise to challenges and do better than before. Teachers in BC are highly qualified when they enter the teaching profession because BC has the highest and most comprehensive requirements for certification in Canada. BC also has a high number of teachers with academic and professional credentials beyond the requirements for certification. Throughout their careers, teachers engage in professional development activities that include workshops, conferences, courses, action research, inquiry, and collaboration and reflection. Teachers are committed to keeping current and as active learners update their skills and knowledge, and engage in a wide range of professional development activities to enhance student learning and strengthen teaching practice. We have to advocate for the importance of teacher-centred and teacher-directed professional development that focuses on pedagogy and skills. At the same time, our vision of professional development cannot be confined to what happens in the classroom.

In order to meet the needs of the students we teach and to keep the joy of teaching and learning alive in our classrooms, teachers have to open their classroom doors and be part of the larger public discourse to critique and formulate public policy to build a better, just, and civil society for our students and children around the world.

Jinny Sims is director of the BCTF's Professional and Social Issues Division.



Teaching is a political act

By Jane Turner

John Dewey was an early proponent of the importance of public education. He knew that literacy and numeracy skills were needed if the United States was to become a truly democratic society. The populace needed to know how to read, write, add, and subtract if they were to engage in the public discourse of the country. Dewey was supported in his democratic goals by industrialists who needed workers with these skills so they could engage in productive work in their factories and businesses. It was not an accident or an oversight that black Americans, the slaves, were not allowed to learn to read. Keeping a group in ignorance was one important aspect of exercising total control.

Subsequent generations, and the governments that have ruled them, have known about the importance of what is being taught to students. Every time curriculum revisions are contemplated, interest and lobby groups line up at the government's door trying to ensure their perspective is included. Why do they do this? Because what is taught and how it's taught matters.

Paulo Freire understood this. He looked at learners and saw they could occupy one of two positions. They could be objects or subjects. An object in an educational setting is someone who is taught to, the proverbial empty vessel who is filled with a few facts. Objects are done to; they do not do for themselves. Freire observed that in his homeland there was a culture of silence and that the whole educational system was one of the major instruments for the maintenance of this silence.

Subjects, on the other hand, engage in their education, using it to become self-aware, critical thinkers and "agents of change" either for themselves or their community. Teachers in British Columbia's public schools make choices every day as to whether they teach their students as objects or subjects.

When we ask students to reflect on their learning, what it means for them and how they might use it in their lives, we are encouraging them to take charge of their own education.

When we ask students to reflect on their learning, what it means for them and how they might use it in their lives, we are encouraging them to take charge of their own education. If we offer extra-curricular activities that allow students to grow, expand their skills and view of the world and self-knowledge, we are supporting their sense of self and as people who can change the world. However, if we demand that they blindly obey the rules, take in the information without question and regurgitate it on a test, then we are encouraging passivity and conformity. In other words, we are treating our students as objects.

Freire said there is no neutral in the education process. We are

either recreating what is, conformity, or critically evaluating our world and knowledge, agency. Teaching a child to read and understand what the words mean is not neutral. Neither is teaching them how to phonetically sound out a word, but not how to understand its impact. Both are political acts; one supports independent thought and action, the other supports compliance.

Just as what we do as teachers has an impact on our students, what and how we learn has an impact on us. If we are presented with information and not allowed the time to critically engage with it on a PD day, are we being treated as objects? Is the expectation that we will unquestioningly take it all in and conform to the actions and norms that are being urged upon us?

Teachers have fought for decades to be in control of their own professional learning. Setting our own PD agenda is an integral part of exercising professional autonomy, which in Freirean parlance means we are demanding to be subjects, not objects.

Just as what we do as teachers has an impact on our students, what and how we learn has an impact on us. If we are presented with information and not allowed the time to critically engage with it on a PD day, are we being treated as objects? Is the expectation that we will unquestioningly take it all in and conform to the actions and norms that are being urged upon us?

I have often joked that teachers take on the role of PD chair in their locals because it is the least "political" of all the jobs available. Then they get into the role and find out everyone is trying to get control over teachers' learning. Just like those who lobby for curriculum that reflects their point of view, many have a vested interest in controlling teachers' learning. The past decade's focus on literacy, numeracy, and assessment supports a political agenda.

Teaching is a political act and many try to sway the political agenda in favour of their interests. Fortunately, teachers are committed to the interests of children, public education, and the community at large. That's why we teach using the methods of inquiry and critical reflection. That's why teachers resent using precious learning time to prepare students for tests, be they FSAs or Grade 10/11 exams, that focus on recall, not higher-level thinking. That's why teachers want to protect their professional autonomy. That's why our PD chairs are so important. They are the main interface between an agenda that sees teachers as objects, to be done to, and the teachers in the local who want to be subjects, engaging in learning that is meaningful to them.

Jane Turner is an assistant director, BCTF Professional and Social Issues Division.



Not another professional day!

By Lynne Bouchard

This is a sentence I have heard many parents and even, occasionally, my colleagues say. There are two strands of thought that come to mind when I hear this comment—one is understanding what a professional day is, and the other is why we attend professional development days.

I believe that many parents and students are unaware of what we do on these days. However, I know that the BCTF has worked hard to explain professional days to the public. I do believe it has helped a lot, but I also believe that schools should be equally proactive by explaining and involving parents in partial sessions or in the planning of topics.

This summer, I visited the self-indulgent city of Las Vegas and I was determined to come away with some constructive thoughts about the city. A comment by Penn Jillette from Penn & Teller, the magicians, stuck with me. Penn mentioned a few times that "...the magic was in our heads." Those words resonated with me. What I took away from his comment was that we make it what we want it to be. My connection to professional development is the same—we make it what we want it

I see a correlation between our students and ourselves as learners. If we are inspired to learn then we can hopefully transfer the same enthusiasm to our students and perhaps equally inspire them to learn.

to be. A desire to learn more is what helps us get the most out of professional development days.

Conceptually, I think most teachers believe in PD days and provide many opportunities for their students, but has everyone really sat down to truly apply the concept? Are we really allowing for each student to bring their individuality to the classroom or are we trying to make them all fit and jump into our box? I wonder about the creative child who sees the world differently than most, the child who seeks a joke in all matters, and the child who needs to stand or move to learn. I believe that learning is infinite, not a final destination. Why not involve the students in their learning journey and have them be aware of their learning continuum? Can we make sure all students are learning; can we properly assess and report it? Yes, is my answer. The concept may seem onerous at

Continued on page 8

REFLECTIONS ON PD

first, so start small and look toward other teachers who are on the same journey and learn from each other.

Make suggestions to your professional development team to bring in people who reflect your learning and teaching journey.

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I see a correlation between our students and ourselves as learners. If we are inspired to learn then we can hopefully transfer the same enthusiasm to our students and perhaps equally inspire them to learn.

I think it is important that we remember to learn alongside our students, families, and colleagues.

Lynne Bouchard teaches Kindergarten and is the Early Learning/Vulnerable Children district co-ordinator, SD48 (Sea to Sky).

From tech-dummy to tech-savvy

By Samantha Lambright

Let's get this straight. I've never been tempted to spend my free time under the glow of my computer screen—not when I could be hiking, biking, or paddling instead. I've always thought techies had an otherworldly knowledge I just couldn't "get."

The moment I walked into my first teaching contract and saw three massive computers at the back of my classroom, I relegated them to "good copywriting." So why am I now a teacher who uses Web 2.0 applications with a laptop, Smartboard, and student computers every day?

It started without much choice: my district introduced a 1:1 laptop program. It's not that I was resistant, but I was definitely new to it all and didn't have all the skills necessary (I still don't). But I was hooked once I realized that, finally, it's about *education technology*, instead of *technology education*. These days it's a means to an end, not the end itself.

Though geared up for my first attempts in the classroom by in-service from my district, I still wasn't completely converted to the "tech side." After all, we've all attended workshops that we've never put into practice. No, the real key to why I've converted my practice is because of the connection I've made with the students. All those years I believed tech

culture would turn me into a paler, more solitary version of myself huddled in a dark room, and I discovered that it had the opposite effect!

Picture it—I started my lesson nervously, with my PC hooked up to the projector, and the students each following on their iBooks. I feared my lesson would end midway due to system failure, or my inexperience. I didn't know much about Macs, and I knew my students did. This forced me into my most important decision. I asked the students for help. An 11-year-old casually offered us the needed command on a Mac, and we moved on without interruption. Once we were in motion, and I was over my first hurdle, my attitude changed. The students and I became learners together. In every lesson, someone offered a gem of a shortcut, or insight into a software tool as it was discovered. Learning and teaching roles in my classroom took on more flexible, sometimes even interchangeable processes.

Now I have the courage to do more with my computer and any software I find intriguing. Like all teachers, I don't have the time to become an expert overnight, especially these days when new

The moment I walked into my first teaching contract and saw three massive computers at the back of my classroom, I relegated them to "good copywriting." So why am I now a teacher who uses Web 2.0 applications with a laptop, Smartboard, and student computers every day?

software is old in a matter of months. Nevertheless, I play with a program over the weekend, and introduce it to the class on Monday. The best part is, I always tell the students that I only know enough to get us through the assignment, but I need them to share tips and tricks they learn as they go, to finesse our knowledge and skill-base, and increase our efficiency.

The more I play around with the media of my students' world, the better I get. I attend workshops and conferences about education technology when I can. Now I am even reading teacher blogs, watching TeacherTube for inspiration, and discussing ideas with colleagues, whether they're techies or not.

Experts provoked me to reflect on the quickening pace of technological change since my father was born (1934), heck, even since I was born (1976). Then it hit me how much more quickly communications will change—not when my students graduate from high school, but by the time they leave elementary school. Might paper and pencil eventually become obsolete?

My sense of urgency to teach using tech tools peaked once I realized that, someday, even learning English may not be as high a priority as learning computer languages.

Take the next step in your *education technology* journey by joining the Computer Using Educators of BC (CUEBC) Provincial Specialist Association (PSA).

Samantha Lambright teaches at Gitwinksihkw Elementary School, Gitwinksihkw.



BC teachers' education and professional development

A chapter from the BCTF worklife of BC teachers in 2009

The *Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009* survey asked respondents about their education and professional development in three areas—formal education in universities, participation in, and perceptions of, professional development, and interest in mentorship, either as mentor or mentee.

Most respondents held a Bachelor's degree, with teacher training program (48%) or a university certificate or diploma above Bachelor level (26%), while 25% had completed a Master's degree. Eighty-seven percent were not enrolled in formal education programs, which likely reflects the high proportion of teachers with qualifications beyond Bachelor level. The survey findings indicate that female teachers who wish to undertake a graduate degree may have difficulty doing so. Almost half of those not planning to enrol in an education program stated family obligations (27.3%) or financial restraints (26.8%) as impediments, with more women facing barriers than men.

Teachers had much to say about professional development (PD):

PD is and should continue to be of paramount importance. It is through PD over the years which has changed, influenced, and improved my teaching practice. This is a time for colleagues to share knowledge, talk, learn new ideas, and implement into classrooms. Variety of delivery is key to appeal to as many teachers as possible. Some will never participate, some will be sick, but the vast majority benefit. PD is time well

spent. Planning is imperative. We need to reinforce the concept that the more you interact with a learning community the easier your job, the more support you receive, the better you become." (survey respondent)

In terms of quantitative data, the chart below depicts respondents' generally-positive perspectives on professional-development options and experiences. Teachers reported

The overall sense from these data is that while some teachers are opting for self-directed professional development, many still appear to consider professional development from the perspective of a consumer, choosing from options rather than creating PD experiences with peers. A possible direction for the BCTF may be to further explore ways to increase autonomy through self-directed PD by expanding initiatives and approaches such as teacher inquiry, collaborations, and professional conversations.

high levels of autonomy and enjoyment of both school and district-based PD. Yet, in apparent contrast, respondents indicated that they want to see expanded options available to them.

From analysis of the qualitative data, respondents stated both positive and negative perspectives on their PD experiences. PD preferences differed depending on career stage, with earlier-career teachers opting for more practical strategies, while more experienced teachers preferred a wider range of PD:

So much of PD becomes redundant for teachers who have been working for more than five years. It would be nice to have PDs geared for different seniorities for different specialities. Also, based on my experiences with illness these past few years, proactive health and wellness strategies, in the entire health spectrum, seems prudent for the majority of teachers and non-teaching staff. (survey respondent)

A significant number of respondents had ideas on changes they'd like to see, mainly in terms of:

- more opportunities to observe and collaborate
- more funding and time to make PD accessible
- a greater focus on and access to self-directed PD.

Influences on PD from district- and school-based administration were significant, eliciting some positive respondent views, but a greater number of concerns. It was also of some concern that professional development opportunities offered by the BCTF were rarely mentioned, and then not always favourably. Almost two-thirds of respondents indicated that they would like to participate in mentoring, as either mentors or mentees. This suggests a very high level of interest in mentoring, yet there are few mentoring programs accessible to teachers in BC, and no provincial mentoring or induction programs, such as the ones developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The overall sense from these data is that while some teachers are opting for self-directed professional development, many still appear to consider professional development from the perspective of a consumer, choosing from options rather than creating PD experiences with peers. A possible direction for the BCTF may be to further explore ways to increase autonomy through self-directed PD by expanding initiatives and approaches such as teacher inquiry, collaborations, and professional conversations. But it is also clear from the data that many teachers are actively engaged in professional development, and that the vast majority consider PD to be essential to their work.

As a way to make the research more accessible and more widely used by teachers, a series of one-page vignettes will be prepared to encourage discussion among members. The following questions are posed in our first vignette:

- How do you view your experiences and needs in terms of professional development?
- What is autonomy in PD and how important is it for you?
- Where would you like to see the BCTF move in terms of supporting teachers' professional development?

—Charlie Naylor, BCTF Research

Check out the full series of reports at: bctf.ca/TeacherWorklife.aspx

We welcome any comments or questions about this research. Contact us at: researchteam@bctf.ca

Big dreams and bigger plans for the best ProD

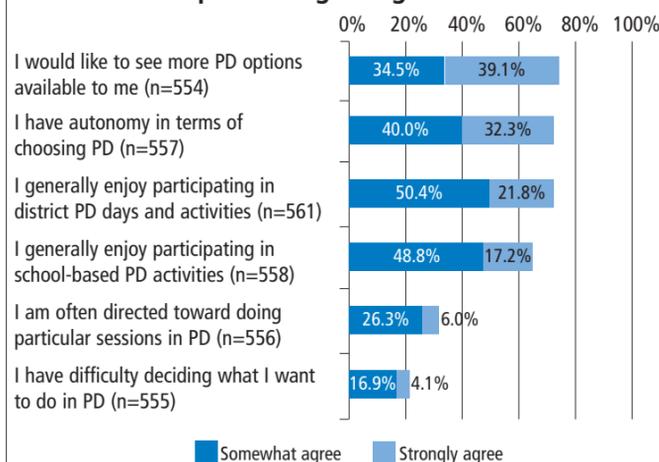
Professional autonomy district-wide, Nanaimo style

By Jane Turner and Mary Filleul

You know the old saw—"Everyone talks about the weather but no one does anything about it"? We could say the same thing happens around professional autonomy. Everyone is in favour of it but, year after year, teachers find it a challenge to implement collectively. Recently, Nanaimo teachers grew a huge idea when they mused about how to create a range of opportunities for all district teachers so they could make professionally autonomous decisions on a PD day.

In a "share your dreams out loud" moment, the Nanaimo District Professional Development Committee asked, "Why don't we try an open space conversation to

Opinions regarding PD



engage all our teachers?" If you have ever participated in an open space activity, you will know how large that question is. If you have never experienced open space, keep reading to find out how courageous they were to even pose the question.

In a "share your dreams out loud" moment, the Nanaimo District Professional Development Committee asked, "Why don't we try an open space conversation to engage all our teachers?"

First we need a little history. A small and passionate group of Nanaimo teachers participated in a BCTF Learning Inquiry (see *Teacher*, March 2010) during the 2008–09, 2009–10 school years. They became tremendously excited about the entire experience. This was a professionally autonomous process that engaged them in deep learning opportunities and built cross grade, school and subject area community, yet all the while pursuing their own learning questions. Teacher inquiry was (and is) the epitome of teacher professional autonomous learning.

Recognizing the power and relevance of this process, Nanaimo teachers began thinking about finding a way to make available for all district teachers, if they so desired, a chance to participate in an inquiry experience. So the "dream big" conversation ensued and the "Imagine!" day was born. As a first step, all PD reps in the district came together for a SURT (School Union Representative



Training), conducted using the open space discussion method. Briefly, open space is a process in which attendees set the agenda, establish the areas, topics or questions that are of interest to them, then go and dig a little deeper into what they know, need, or want to know, and do under each of those interest headings. It is a process that trusts in the ability of participants to be their own leaders, followers, notetakers, discussers, or whatever else needs doing. Teachers, you will not be surprised to learn, are really good at this.

During their SURT, Nanaimo PD reps identified nine broad topic areas or questions. These ranged from "classroom technology use to help students learn" to "bridging the gap between grades." Social justice was there in a real way—"meeting the diverse needs of students academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviourally" and "creating a welcoming school community." Rather than wanting to explore more global goals like literacy and numeracy, teachers were keen to discuss topics closer to their classrooms, such as how to motivate their learners and develop meaningful assessments for learning.

These topic areas and questions were taken back to the schools throughout the local. Teachers were invited to spend their September 27 PD day together talking in one or more of these areas. All but four schools replied in the affirmative. The time was to be paid half from

teacher PD funds and half from the district. It is important to note here that this was a completely voluntary activity. Neither the PD committee nor the district demanded participation from anyone. Clearly, there was an intense eagerness to learn more about both the process and the various topics.

"Be careful what you wish for" was in the minds of the Nanaimo PD committee. Now they had to figure out how to engage the 1,000 signed-up teachers in an open space process and how to make it a grand success. A call went out for volunteer facilitators (training to be provided) and over 40 keen replies were received, many of whom attended their first open space discussion at their SURT training in the spring.

On September 15, we went to Nanaimo to "train the trainers," as these volunteers would each be leading an open space group on

...open space is a process in which attendees set the agenda, establish the areas, topics or questions that are of interest to them, then go and dig a little deeper into what they know, need or want to know, and do under each of those interest headings.

September 27. We designed and led an experiential learning opportunity by combining a modified open space group discussion and facilitation training with the over 40 volunteer participants. It was an amazing session.

The energy in the room, the commitment to the process and the analytical skills of the group resulted in developing the skills needed to facilitate what might just be the largest PD day open space discussion ever tried in the province. The group also planned the details for the day, problem solving and generating creative ideas on how to have the day flow seamlessly from start to finish.

As of the *Teacher* submission deadline, the Nanaimo open space PD experience, aptly named *Imagine!*, has not yet occurred. Stay tuned for the next issue of *Teacher* to find out how it worked. Whatever the outcome (we're pretty sure it will be fabulous) the Nanaimo teachers are to be commended for taking a fundamental right and powerful tool of teachers—professional autonomy—and finding a way to bring it to reality in a meaningful, relevant, and innovative context.

Jane Turner is an assistant director in the BCTF Professional and Social Issues Division and Mary Filleul is a community schools team teacher (mfileul@vsb.bc.ca) at Windermere Secondary, Vancouver, and a BCTF inquiry facilitator.

If your local has found a way to bring professional autonomy to life, please e-mail Jane Turner at the BCTF (jturner@bctf.ca) with the details. They will be shared with the PD chairs around the province.

Professional development: Reclaiming our territory

By Ilse Hill

The arena of professional development is becoming a hugely contested space for teachers. Administration and district personnel are encroaching relentlessly with "best practice" content and pushing for more standardized practice and assessment across the province. Pressure is mounting for teachers to buy into district-wide

professional development programs and administration is increasingly directing professional development committees, content, and planning.

Lost in all of this is the acknowledgment of our professionalism. We are the true professionals—each of us with numerous years of university education and life and classroom experience, in a wide variety of settings.

In my seven years of teaching, I am about to teach the same grade level for only the second time. I have taught primary, intermediate, high school, and almost everything in between! I am surrounded by master teachers who have been honing their craft over any number of years. And yet, there is an increasing disconnect between the content being offered as professional development and the needs and realities of classroom teachers, our students, and our larger communities and society.

It would be easy to dismiss this disconnect as "just one of those things," but I believe that there are more insidious forces at work. It is my belief that many of our current professional development initiatives are being used to undermine and discredit teacher professionalism.

By creating situations where teachers are being constantly questioned about our credibility and abilities, our opportunities to unite and face the larger issues of social inequality and underfunding of public education, healthcare, and social services are very limited.

In a bargaining year that coincides with a time of global economic crisis, we need to make sure that we remain united and keep the larger picture in mind. In order to achieve this, I believe that we not only need to reclaim professional development, but we also need to transform it.

The principles of adult education provide a great starting point for changing PD. Adult education is a vehicle for transformative and emancipatory change. Adults in control of their own learning experience develop an increased sense of agency and learn advocacy skills. That results in an ability to effect societal transformation at the community and global level. Imagine the power created by using professional development as a vehicle of collective transformation for teachers!

The constant focus on perfecting our classroom practice and streamlining student data into numbers for the Fraser Institute takes the focus away from how we might "fix" the problems we are presented with daily in our classrooms and communities. Real solutions will only come if we are able to unite as activists and demand change at the larger level.

The constant focus on perfecting our classroom practice and streamlining student data into numbers for the Fraser Institute takes the focus away from how we might "fix" the problems we are presented with daily in our classrooms and communities.

In a focus group that I conducted in my community last year with BCTF researcher Margaret White, we asked teachers about the effects of poverty that we are observing in our classrooms and communities. Part of the exercise was to imagine the resources needed to have the "perfect" situation for our classrooms, schools, and communities. None of the responses offered could be considered unreasonable. Experienced teachers talked about the supports that used to be in place and the increasing burdens placed on children and families. It is time to use our professionalism to unite

together and develop a plan of action to create systemic change. At the very least, it will invigorate our democratic process as a union and invite more participation and dialogue—at most, it will bring about greater equality for all.

Now imagine if we devoted some of our PD time to working through the impact poverty is having on our students' learning. It won't help the Fraser Institute rank schools, but it may just help our students and our ability to teach them. That is one way we might reclaim our PD to advance our professional needs as classroom teachers.

Ilse Hill teaches at Wood Elementary School, Port Alberni.



The benefits of descriptive feedback

By Carl Walker

Our efforts to challenge and resist the provincial government's standardized testing agenda have yielded some modest successes; however, much work remains and we are still faced with harmful testing instruments such as FSAs in Grades 4 and 7, and provincial exams in Grades 10, 11, and 12. Nonetheless, a very significant and perhaps unforeseen benefit of our campaign is the heightened awareness and understanding that teachers have of assessment techniques and practices, and the impact of this awareness on changing individual practice. In both formal and informal settings, including professional learning communities and PD, teachers across the province are now far more engaged in professional conversations about different types and purposes of assessment, including both formative and summative assessments, and appropriate feedback in these various assessment types. In reflecting on the purposes of assessment, we gain powerful insights that can transform our teaching practice in profound ways.

My colleagues at Howe Sound Secondary School have had many professional opportunities over the past few years to reflect on our assessment techniques and this has definitely impacted our assessment practices. I have begun to put into practice some of these new understandings, but still have much to learn about formative assessment. Perhaps the most significant insight for me is the paramount importance of formative assessment in improving student learning. An essential component of authentic formative assessment is feedback, specifically descriptive feedback.

Descriptive feedback is generally in the form of direct comments on student work, rubrics which can be developed with student input, or both. This criteria can be presented in the form of a performance standard template or rubric, and should be written in student-friendly language. Descriptive feedback should be positive in tone; it identifies what has been done well and provides specific suggestions for improvement. It is vitally important that comments stay in a descriptive, rather than judgmental or personal, mode. Comments, both positive and constructively critical,

should be aligned to the criteria of the assignment. Allowing students multiple opportunities, within reason, to rewrite and edit their essays will maximize the benefits of descriptive feedback and also promote intrinsic motivation and increased student engagement in their learning. When feedback takes the form of both descriptive comments and performance standard rubrics, which allow students to monitor their work on a continuous basis, learning becomes more efficient and internalized.

Furthermore, descriptive feedback that focuses on process rather than task or specific content, has been shown to be far more beneficial to student learning. While errors and misconceptions should be addressed in our feedback to students, these may not easily transfer to other assignments because they are specific to a particular task. Feedback on process provides students with information on how they have completed the task and promotes transfer to other tasks. In assessing social studies essays, I align my feedback to the performance standard rubric and emphasize "process" areas such as effective thesis statement and development, effective use of historical evidence to support thesis statements, essay organization, and effective transition between paragraphs. While time constraints of our courses do not always allow for rewrites of assignments, I have observed that process, rather than content, comments have noticeably improved subsequent student work, especially multi-paragraph assignments. I will remind my students to review their previous essays and feedback before starting their next assignment.

While teachers may have a clear understanding of the distinction between judgmental and descriptive feedback, students may not. Therefore, it is vital that we provide our students with many opportunities to use descriptive feedback without a formal grade attached to the assignment. This exposure will strengthen students' sense of control, or self-regulation, over their work, and will promote intrinsic

Descriptive feedback is an essential component of a broader formative assessment process that also includes student involvement in assessment and a decreased reliance on summative evaluation.

motivation. It will help them understand that feedback which allows them opportunities to practice and improve, and is then followed by a test or assignment, will benefit their learning and raise their achievement based on the inevitable formal summative measures.

Descriptive feedback is an essential component of a broader formative assessment process that also includes student involvement in assessment and a decreased reliance on summative evaluation. Our professional conversations have increasingly focused on the importance of formative assessment and its impact on improved student learning. As we continue to expand our formative assessment strategies, students will gain greater autonomy over their learning and acquire lifelong habits of mind that develop higher-level critical thinking skills, engaged in a process of continuous review and reflection of their knowledge and understandings. This may well represent the greatest benefit of formative assessment.

Carl Walker teaches at Howe Sound Secondary School, Squamish.

REFLECTIONS ON PD



Database of health and wellness information at your fingertips

By Suzanne Hall

Stressed? Feeling overworked and overwhelmed? Looking for ways to improve your quality of life? You are definitely not alone!

Charlie Naylor shared some recent BCTF research at the Professional Issues Advisory Committee meeting this September (bctf.ca/TeacherWorklife.aspx).

Some alarming statistics emerged; teachers are clearly concerned about their health and wellness. Over 60% of teachers report an increase in their work-related stress over the last five years. Twenty-five percent of the teachers on leave cite a stress-related illness or disability as the cause, and approximately one in eight teachers is typically on some kind of leave. Only about one-third of teachers feel they had a good balance between their work and personal lives. Finally, 55% of teachers feel that it is important for the BCTF to provide programs supporting wellness and work/life balance.

Of course, individuals can also take the initiative to seek solutions and the answers may be as close as your computer. One helpful resource that is widely available but almost unknown to most teachers: Ebsco's Consumer Health Complete database. Designed for the layperson, this comprehensive resource provides current, accurate, trustworthy information. It draws from over 170 medical encyclopedia, current reference books, popular magazines, and medical dictionaries. You can research mainstream medical topics and complementary, holistic and integrated medicine as well. A very wide range of subjects are covered—work life, wellness, children's health, parenting, aging, medications, nutrition and diets, exercise and sports, substance abuse, beauty, and children's health.

Ask your teacher-librarian if yours is one of the many school districts that has a subscription. If not, try the public library as they often have access to a wide range of online resources. Sound complicated? Don't worry; this resource is very user-friendly. The librarians will show you how to log in to this valuable resource. A short, informative tutorial can help to get you started. Click on the "help" link and a pop-up screen will appear; the tutorial link is to the left. Invest four minutes for a great overview of the site's content and organization.

Want to know more about an herbal remedy? Search the section on drug and herb info. Looking beyond mainstream medicine? Search the section of alternative

sources. Wondering about a drug advertised on TV? Check the medical dictionary.

Looking for information on a specific illness, condition, or medication? Need a teaching resource for a particular science, home economics, or health and career education topic? You can search in a variety of different formats—reports, articles, pamphlets or fact sheets, images/diagrams, or animations/videos.

Some alarming statistics emerged; teachers are clearly concerned about their health and wellness. Over 60% of teachers report an increase in their work-related stress over the last five years. Twenty-five percent of the teachers on leave cite a stress-related illness or disability as the cause, and approximately one in eight teachers is typically on some kind of leave.

Browse through dozens of magazines. Interested in yoga? Read the latest issue of *Yoga for Women*. Pumping iron? Look for tips in Joe Weider's *Muscle and Fitness*. There is something for everyone: *Parenting School Years*, *Tennis*, *Vegetarian Journal*, *Shape*, *Men's Health*, and more. If you get really motivated, you can even set up a journal alert; you receive an e-mail every time new issues of your favorite magazines are added to the database. At the very least, your inbox will have a better life/work balance!

Even just one good thing...

I've often heard teachers say that they consider a workshop or presentation valuable if they get at least one good idea to take back to their schools. By that criterion, Summer Conference was very worthwhile! Here are three things—one for each day of the conference—that I have taken back to my work this fall.

I changed supermarkets

No more Real Canadian Superstore or Extra Foods. Why? Donald Gutstein spoke in depth about the neoliberal agenda during the opening plenary session. His paper "Reframing Public Education: Countering school rankings and debunking the neoliberal agenda," made fascinating reading. It clearly outlined the philosophy and history behind the work of the Fraser Institute. More interestingly, he writes that the W. Garfield Weston Foundation is a significant source of funds for that organization. You'll likely be familiar with family head Galen Weston, who in commercials so eloquently assures us that his brands are "worth changing supermarkets for." His contributions to the Fraser Institute seems to me "worth changing supermarkets for," too. He won't notice the difference, but I will.

I will be speed dating...

in a manner of speaking! During the discrete PD session, the PD chairs had about 15 "speed dates" with spokespeople from various local specialist associations and

other related organizations. The rep from each one had five minutes to promote to a few PD chairs the services or programs they could offer. At the buzzer, each set of PD chairs moved on to the next station. In a very short period of time, a lot of interesting and valuable information was shared. This is a fabulous format that can be used in a variety of creative ways for teachers to share great projects or ideas during a PD event, to introduce key union staff and services at a new employee orientation, to share information about curriculum, teaching methods, and resources at a parent fair—I am limited only by my imagination!

I look at all executive members differently...

both from the BCTF Executive Committee and my local executive. Who knew that these respected and learned colleagues would let loose to dance up a storm wearing glow-in-the-dark jewelry? I felt a real sense of camaraderie at our first local executive meeting this fall, which will help sustain me through what is certain to be a challenging year!

Summer Conference—more than one good thing!

Suzanne Hall is a district helping teacher, Maple Ridge, and a member of the BCTF Professional and Social Issues Committee.

Build ProD to build public education and thrive like VW

By Ray Myrtle

In 1982, the Volkswagen car company's most famous car was a low-cost, uncomfortable car nicknamed the Beetle. However, now VW has an image of quality and is successful. Rather than downsize, VW is expanding through its recent acquisition of Porsche.

In contrast, in 1982, General Motors had 50% market share within the US.

Its hundreds of thousands of employees were among the highest paid and most secure union workers in America. Today, GM employees have faced an entirely different reality, including "contract give backs" and the threat of reduced pensions. Both GM and VW are highly unionized companies. Why do these two companies and their employees face such different realities?

I believe this is because GM has gone bankrupt, partly because of perceptions of low-quality products that led to poor sales. Will public education thrive like VW or dive like GM?

VW has a strong apprentice and training system, which over time built productivity and quality, enabling the company to grow and prosper while GM's quality faltered.

How did VW do it? VW's unions created apprentice and ongoing training programs so that the workers are well trained and therefore productive and difficult to replace. In the same way, our union should build strong professional development programs to build the quality of public education.

More than ever before, parents are taking a market economy approach to education. People "shop" for the best schools and in

many cases this means many more people will pay extra (in private schools) to get it.

In the long run, allowing private schools to build the perception that they have better programs is the greatest threat to public education.

The key to the successful survival of public education is to improve the quality and the perception of quality of public schools. The best way to do this is to ensure that public school teachers have superior professional training that continually builds our quality, as

In the long run, allowing private schools to build the perception that they have better programs is the greatest threat to public education.

VW has done. In addition, we need to promote the facts about public education's advantages as we confront the ranking of schools.

Public schools do demonstrate superior results. Many are unaware that we outperform private school results when corrected for income. We provide "green-close to home" education with universality that produces podium-level results.

We need to protect public education by promoting and exploiting our advantages and expanding upon professional programs, such as the Program for Quality Teaching and the Year of Professional Support for early career teachers. These are examples of the kinds of Federation programs that help teachers teach, and make a real difference to the lives of our students, and to the satisfaction and rewards from our jobs as teachers. Let's build ProD!

Ray Myrtle teaches at South Slope Elementary School, Burnaby, and is president of the Provincial Intermediate Teachers' Association, however this piece is a personal opinion.



The importance of play

By Carol Johns

Silken Lauman has an insightful quote: "Play is the lifeblood of childhood—it brings children joy, it nurtures creativity, it builds social skills, and it strengthens their bodies." Play is not only vital for children, all of us benefit when learning is approached in a playful way.

The BC Kindergarten to Grade 12 system is guided by the "Principles of Learning," established by the ministry in the 1990s. The principles recognize the importance of active learning. Learning requires the active participation of the student, children learn in a variety of ways and at different rates, and learning is both an individual and a group

process, are all statements from the Principles of Learning.

As we enter into implementing full-day Kindergarten, the importance of understanding the value and importance of play is critical. Project-based or inquiry learning that is child initiated, play that is child initiated, and teacher scaffolded play are important and essential for positive brain development and self-regulation. In fact there is much evidence to suggest that a play-based approach heightens academic achievement. Dramatic play is a key aspect of developing self-regulation.

In the full-day Kindergarten program guide, the research directions on learning and play state: "Play, when choreographed thoughtfully, is one of the most powerful learning contexts available in the hands of a skilled Kindergarten teacher, play is a rich laboratory that can be used to teach multiple concepts simultaneously in a way that differentiates instruction. Through its less formal structure, play provides children with chances to choose their own level of challenge and to be stretched by others in a low stress opportunity. This is truly differentiation in action."

The question isn't "Why are they playing?" The more important

As we enter into implementing full-day Kindergarten, the importance of understanding the value and importance of play is critical.

question should be "How can I incorporate play-based learning into my program to engage and motivate student learning?"

The Primary Program document issued by the ministry to support the Primary Program introduced in the 1990s is being revised by the ministry. The original document emphasized the importance of play in the primary grades, not just in Kindergarten. Unfortunately, the shift to a testing agenda around students' literacy, numeracy, and social responsibility skills has deterred teachers from staying true to the principles of the Primary Program and the Principles of Learning. To date, the draft of the new Primary Program document continues the emphasis of literacy, numeracy, and social responsibility. The importance of play is in the document, yet the emphasis is clearly more toward the "fundamentals," in spite of all the evidence available about children's need to explore their world in a variety of ways.

The BCTF and the BC Primary Teachers' Association are offering workshops to support the positive implementation of full-day Kindergarten. The Primary Program is in draft on the ministry website and can be reviewed and responded to until October 15, 2010. We will be offering workshops to support a play-based approach for all our primary learners and to highlight the positive features of an updated Primary Program.

We have a wonderful opportunity to make learning engaging, motivating, and fun for both the student and the teacher—have fun out there—play, play, play and they will learn, learn, learn!

Carol Johns teaches at Highlands Elementary School, Cranbrook.

Poverty: How it affects students in the school community



Teachers comment on its effect on learning and participation in class

By Margaret White

BCTF Research and teacher representatives of the BCTF and Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association poverty action committees decided to find out what teachers thought about poverty and how it affects students in the school community by conducting focus groups with teachers in Vancouver, Surrey, Penticton, and Port Alberni. This article presents Part 1 of the study findings for the research project *Poverty and Education: A teacher's perspective*.

The many ways poverty can affect students in the school community

Child poverty is both hidden and visible and knows no boundaries. Child poverty means not being able to concentrate due to hunger and lack of sleep or not having warm clothes when the weather turns cold. Or it can mean being teased for not having things, or being treated differently. Child poverty means coming to school worried or anxious, making it harder to learn. Child poverty is unfair and unjust. These are some of things teachers told us.

Teachers observed many ways in

students and parents faced the additional challenge of language barriers, especially in Vancouver and Surrey where over 40% of students speak a primary language at home other than English.

Families living in poverty also seemed to have more difficulty getting young children to school consistently. The focus group discussion revealed that the reasons for low attendance are complex with resources needed to address barriers parents face (e.g., transportation, family illness, having other small children) as well as being sensitive to cultural issues and involving parents in such a way that they feel more positive about and connected to their child's school.

Teachers noticed that as students get older they often become more independent in terms of getting themselves to school, although older students sometimes missed school to look after younger siblings while the parents are at work. And some students work in paid employment to help support their family. A middle school and a secondary school teacher both commented on the stress students are under from trying to keep up with homework after working long

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hours, or when their work schedule conflicts with their school schedule.

Because I teach at the secondary school level, frequently older kids get asked to babysit or help out in whatever context is required at home, yeah, and so they're missing a lot of school and it puts them behind.

Well because having a job affects attendance I think their stress level would go up, anxiety around missing school, becoming farther and farther behind the other students and then it's just a negative kind of spiral.

Students often appreciate what school has to offer

Attendance was not an issue for all students dealing with poverty. For some, school appeared to be a safe haven with teachers observing that low-income students tended to appreciate what the school had to offer, often arrived early and stayed late, rarely missing a day of school. Some of these schools received extra funding to provide meal programs, after-school activities, and other programs that helped to build a strong sense of connection among students in the school community.

Teachers observed individual strengths in students dealing with poverty. Examples of strengths observed in some younger students included being able to verbalize their needs, showing sensitivity to the needs of other students, and recovering more easily from setbacks. Examples of strengths observed in some older students included students supporting and advocating for each other at school, showing resourcefulness, and having greater experience with and awareness of nature.

Some of these little kids who come, that in my view, are living in

poverty have some pretty good resilience skills ... they probably don't know they've got these resilience skills and they most certainly have not been taught how to develop them but they just seem to bounce back from some situations that other kids just don't bounce back with that well.

Anxiety builds toward the school break

Teachers in both urban and rural areas noticed that anxiety starts to build in students dealing with poverty as the school break approaches. This may be, in part, due to losing access to regular school meals (where available), and access to the staff and school activities that form an important part of their social safety net during the school year. Some teachers suggested that some of this anxiety may also be due to discomfort when listening to more affluent students talk about exciting trips planned and/or expensive gifts they expect to receive during the school break.

When you start to get to the end of June or Spring Break is coming—it's just hard for them because school is almost their safe place and they know they've got our support and they're not quite aware of what they're going to be walking into.

Exclusion from field trips

School field trips can provide important enrichment opportunities for low-income students. But teachers noticed that some low-income students did not participate, either staying home the day of the field trip or making up a reason for not going. While schools offer subsidy for low-income students, teachers told us that parents may avoid applying for subsidy if the process is hurtful or humiliating for them, or if they fear their child will be judged. Sometimes the student does not have the required equipment or clothing or the money to purchase what is needed, even though the fee is covered.

The only thing with the money issue is that often times it requires the parent to contact the school. And I'm finding that there are a lot of parents who are not willing to do that. They somehow feel that just making that phone call is creating a stigma for their child.

Strategies teachers found helpful

Teachers described many strategies they found helpful in supporting students and families dealing with poverty-related issues. Primary teachers emphasized the need to build social connections with parents so they feel welcome and involved and so teachers are more aware of resources most needed to support students. Caring, connecting, and showing empathy for students was also emphasized by teachers. Strategies that primary teachers use to address learning gaps include offering a structured approach with clear expectations, small-group learning, responding to emotional issues at the start of the day, confidence-building tech-

Strategies to support students at risk of dropping out include identifying who these students are, asking how we can help them to stay in school, and building a sense of hope through finding concrete ways to help a student meet their goals.

niques, and positive reinforcement for attendance.

Making education meaningful and relevant to students was emphasized by middle/secondary students. Strategies include teaching meaningful content on classism, understanding the causes of poverty, creating an inclusive community, teaching to a student's strengths and interests, increasing

awareness of resources available to students, and empowering students to take control over their learning. Strategies to support students at risk of dropping out include identifying who these students are, asking how we can help them to stay in school, and building a sense of hope through finding concrete

Some students came to school with unmet health needs for vision care, treatment of ear infections, and poor nutrition, and families faced many barriers to accessing healthcare services to address these needs.

ways to help a student meet their goals.

Challenges encountered

Teachers encountered many challenges in supporting students and families dealing with poverty-related issues. Some students came to school with unmet health needs for vision care, treatment of ear infections, and poor nutrition, and families faced many barriers to accessing healthcare services to address these needs.

I've noticed, especially this year we've come across quite a number of kids in our Kindergarten program with speech problems. And if we look back, the kids have ear infections that have not really been dealt with properly... maybe some of the families are not having the medical attention that they need.

Teachers told us that cuts to educational services means there are fewer educational assistants, youth/family workers, and learning specialist teachers available to support vulnerable students, making it more difficult to implement strategies to address learning gaps. Some teachers also reported difficulty getting "grey area" students assessed. Increasing class size lessened their ability to offer small-group learning. Some teachers expressed concern about how cuts to food programs in some schools will affect students' well-being, their ability to learn, and their attendance.

Another challenge was dealing with the negative attitude of some members of the school community toward families in poverty. One teacher noted that the effects of labeling and stigmatizing can stay with students for life. Some teachers pointed to systemic problems in the way schools think about poverty, taking a "deficit" approach to poverty and education that focuses too much on what students lack instead of building on their strengths.

Building social connections and a sense of trust with parents whose childhood experiences in the education system were negative or damaging was also a challenge. Some schools offered programs to involve parents in positive ways but found it difficult to get families to attend. Some teachers expressed the view that much of what the school system does to support students and families living in poverty is a "band-aid" approach and is not getting at the underlying causes of poverty. As one teacher put it, Where does the role of the teacher stop? What is out there beyond our walls to help?

Margaret White, BCTF Research, in collaboration with Ilse Hill, Stacey Kemp, Julia MacRae (Poverty Action Group of the BCTF Committee for Action on Social Justice) and Linda Young (VESTA Anti-poverty committee).

Part 2 of the study findings, in the Nov./Dec. Teacher, will describe what teachers told us is needed in the classroom, school, and community to support low-income students to succeed at school.

Book reviews

The master of happy endings

Jack Hodgins
Thomas Allen Publishers

By Brent Reid

When I took some students to a high school creative writing workshop in Nanaimo over 30 years ago, I was impressed by the energy, expertise, and commitment of the organizer, a curly-haired young teacher named Jack Hodgins. Most of the participants were Hodgins' students, and it was clear that his personality and expertise had won their respect and admiration.

In addition, Hodgins had just published his collection of short stories, *Spit Delaney's Island*, to considerable critical acclaim, gaining him the credibility that only publishing successfully can bring to a teacher of writing. Although he soon moved on to teaching creative writing at the university level, Hodgins seems to remember clearly what it takes to succeed in public school teaching.

It follows that credibility is also one of the many virtues of *The Master of Happy Endings*, Hodgins' eighth novel, particularly regarding his main character, a 77-year-old retired high school English teacher. Hodgins draws upon his deep understanding of the life of a teacher, particularly one who is passionate about his discipline and cares deeply about his students, to make Thorstad believable as he struggles to regain direction after the death of his vivacious wife and soul mate, and the loss of his beloved 43-year teaching career to forced retirement.

After these two blows, Thorstad had retreated to his ramshackle beach cabin on Estevan Island in the Strait of Georgia, a fictional setting that seems to be several parts Lasqueti Island, with a dash of Hornby and a pinch of Cortes. Hodgins populates the tiny community with a brace of the entertainingly eccentric and just-barely-plausible characters he draws so well, including an officious but soft-hearted postmistress, an overbearing ex-symphony conductor, a likeable drug-involved draft-dodger, and a seductive earth-mother called Gwendolyn Something, who has named each of her growing tribe of daughters, all sired by different fathers, after a flower indigenous to Estevan.

Thorstad's growing sense of unrest and his longing to teach again motivates him to place an advertisement in newspapers across the province asking that a family "adopt" him in exchange for his services as an English tutor. The arrival of replies, from heartfelt to bizarre, punctuates the remainder of the novel, including some from former students who tell us much about the memorable impact Thorstad's teaching and support had on their lives.

He accepts the offer of a high-powered real estate developer and her dentist husband to prepare their son for his school-leaving exams, and is whisked away from the terminal of the passenger-only Estevan ferry for a breakneck ride down Vancouver Island in the realtor's Mercedes to their posh home in the provincial capital. Once there he learns that the couple, who are too busy making money to go, would like Thorstad to accompany his pupil, Travis, to Los Angeles where he has landed a minor role in a TV series, ironically, playing a homeless youth. Hodgins' animation of Travis shows that he still understands the motivations,

behaviours, and dialect of teenagers.

When teacher and student arrive in LA, it becomes clear that the many distractions Travis faces will make tutoring all but impossible. Facebook, unlimited texting, iTunes, excessive TV, electronic games, the mall, partying, family discord, and part-time jobs undermine the academic progress of many teens today. Hodgins' portrayals of the characters, dynamics, and events around the TV studio and entertainment industry scene, presumably based on research rather than first-hand experience, also ring true.

While in LA, Thorstad reconnects with two former teaching colleagues: his first love, the beautiful and witty Oonagh Farrell, now a gracefully aging actress, and Andrzej Topoloski, his once-dynamic friend and mentor. He also unravels the mystery of his father, a one-time Hollywood stunt man, who disappeared early in Thorstad's life.

As Thorstad moves through the novel's three settings, Hodgins sprinkles gentle social commentary into the narrative, taking pokes at

The novel's recurrent theme, though, is Hodgins' illustration through Thorstad's personality and career of just what it takes to be truly successful as a teacher, and how the effects of inspirational, caring teaching can resonate throughout some students' lives.

the development-before people-attitude that is shaping current-day Vancouver Island, juxtaposing the poverty Travis encounters at the homeless shelter where he volunteers with the lavish lifestyle of his parents, and illustrating how even idyllic Estevan Island is not immune from the violence of drug traffickers.

The novel's recurrent theme, though, is Hodgins' illustration through Thorstad's personality and career of just what it takes to be truly successful as a teacher, and how the effects of inspirational, caring teaching can resonate throughout some students' lives. We learn that the students at Thorstad's school presented him with multiple "teacher of the year" awards for being "...imaginative, innovative, courageous, and fiercely loyal to his students." He also seems proud of his reprimands for "overstepping the bounds of normal teaching practice in a conservative school district." With mild sarcasm, Thorstad's wife had named him "the master of happy endings" because of his profound concern for students.

Thorstad expresses his passion for great literature frequently, quotes from it aptly, and shows inventive teaching strategies in classroom flashbacks and in his eventual tutoring sessions with Travis. He also gets in a few swipes at the dumbed-down triviality of Travis' upcoming tests, musing that "Preparing someone for government exams was not teaching so much as nagging, drilling, anticipating, and of course pretending that the exam has something to do with education." At one point, he plans to "...see whether he could interest Travis in the 20th century's list of horrors and the abundance of best-answer questions they might spawn."

In his reply to Thorstad's newspaper ad, one former student compliments him profusely, writing, "There was always such an air of frankness, trust, and genuine

affection in your every lesson." He goes on to express his "...gratitude for your generosity, inside the classroom and out." Like many young high school teachers, Thorstad had to tiptoe through the minefield of student crushes, particularly the woman who writes to him many years later to confess her schoolgirl obsession, and to express appreciation for his treating her "...with a distanced respect that somehow avoided hurting my feelings or making me feel rejected. I believe I would have killed myself if you had rejected me cruelly, yet I know very well that if you had taken advantage it would have been a disaster for us both." Clearly Hodgins wants us to see that Thorstad's competence was matched by his ethics and character.

The Master of Happy Endings provides readers with an entertaining and thought-provoking journey, one that will be especially meaningful for those whose lives have been enriched by an inspirational teacher, or who have taught in public schools or worked in other helping professions. Those readers will recognize that Hodgins possesses an accurate and nuanced understanding of what is required to improve the chances that students or clients will achieve "happy endings," and how contemporary societal attitudes and government policies can undervalue and undermine the work of mentors.

Brent Reid taught English, journalism, and new media in BC high schools for 27 years, and spent 12 years mentoring student teachers at

The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education

Diane Ravitch
New York: Basic Books, 2010

By Glen Hansman

Dr. Diane Ravitch uses *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* to explain the complete 180° she has taken in her thinking around public education reform in the US. As an eminent American educational historian, former United States assistant secretary of education in the George W. Bush administration, and New York University professor, Ravitch is also a former proponent of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, standardized testing, charter schools, and market-based school reform. Now, in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* she thoroughly condemns policy decisions that she not only advocated for but helped to design and implement during her tenure at the United States Department of Education.

The book begins on a personal note, with Ravitch explaining how her views changed as she saw how *No Child Left Behind* and associated approaches were working out in reality. She admits that she had "jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets" thinking that these would close the achievement gap between rich and poor students, empower poor parents, shine the spotlight on low-performing schools to inspire change at those

schools, and cut down on educational bureaucracy. "All of this seemed to make sense," she explains, "but there was little empirical evidence, just promise and hope. ...The more I saw, the more I lost faith."

Focusing on extremely influential educational overhauls in New York City and San Diego, Ravitch thoroughly debunks the claims of effectiveness attributed to standardized testing, charter schools, choice programs, merit pay, and other market-based mechanisms for school reform, *No Child Left Behind*, and its successor, the Obama-championed *Race to the Top* program.

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Along the way, Ravitch also describes the consequences of large-scale philanthropy by the likes of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Eli Broad Foundation—venture philanthropy, as she puts it, where donations of unprecedented size totaling tens of billions of US dollars are treated as an investment that is expected to produce measurable results. Gates, Walton, and Broad have come to exercise vast influence over American education because of their strategic investments in school reform—in particular, initiatives that promote charter schools, de-emphasize teacher training, and reward jurisdictions that embrace merit pay for teachers. Meanwhile, the Obama administration has warmly embraced these philanthropists' agenda, despite the lack of data to support it.

The policies are unlikely to improve schools, Ravitch argues, "[i]ndeed, much of what policymakers now demand will very likely make the schools less effective and may further degrade the intellectual capacity of our citizenry."

Coherent curriculum in the liberal arts and sciences, Ravitch posits, and instruction by well-trained and well-supported teachers—in every neighbourhood school—is far more important than choice and accountability. The most durable way to improve schools, she concludes, is to improve curriculum and instruction and to improve the conditions in which teachers work and children learn. Rather than continuing to diminish the quality of public education and thus endangering its very survival, she concludes, Americans must turn their attention to improving the schools "by infusing them with the substance of genuine learning and revising the conditions that make learning possible."

Teachers in BC should find *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* informative. While the US governance structure for public education is different than what we have here, the BC Liberal government has also used the language of accountability, standards, and choice while also taking concrete steps over the past nine years that have

undermined public education and eroded the profession of teaching. And unfortunately, during the last provincial election, the BC NDP had a platform that looked only marginally more supportive of public education than the party it was trying to topple. Regardless of who is in power in BC, we remain only a few small decisions away from what has unfolded south of the border. Given the influence that the changes in the US are having on politicians and policymakers here, we should be paying attention.

Further reading

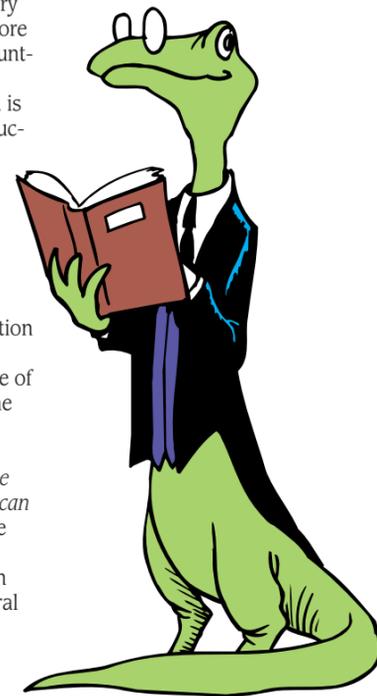
The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future

Linda Darling-Hammond
New York: Teachers College Press, 2010

Darling-Hammond's new book examines similar themes addressed by Dr. Ravitch in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, with a particular focus on the effects of *No Child Left Behind* and market-based reforms on immigrant and ethnic minorities in the US.

"Enormous energy is devoted in the United States to discussions of the achievement gap," she says. "Much less attention, however, is paid to the opportunity gap—the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and at school." Darling-Hammond highlights much of the recent research and statistics in these areas, and looks to innovations in Finland, South Korea, and Singapore, all of which emphasized well-prepared, well-supported teachers, fulsome curriculum (developed by teachers) across the subject areas, and well-resourced schools to improve student learning. Governments need to invest, not just test, she says—ultimately, our collective future depends on ensuring all people have the opportunity to learn to their full potential.

Glen Hansman is BCTF second vice-president.



2010 l'année des négociations

Par Mohamed Chelali

Cette édition du journal arrivera chez vous alors que vous avez depuis au moins un mois retrouvé vos élèves avec cette immense joie et cette grande passion qui vous ont toujours habités. Après tout, l'enseignement est et sera toujours le métier le plus noble du monde et c'est un vrai bonheur d'être enseignant !

Quoique l'automne soit assez exigeant avec le début des classes, la mise en marche des programmes d'études et les premières rencontres avec les parents, réservez-vous de l'énergie et du temps pour vous relaxer et vous reposer, vous en aurez besoin.

Cette année est l'année des négociations tant au niveau provincial qu'au niveau local ou votre syndicat aura son mot à dire au sujet des conditions de travail qui sont bien spécifiques d'une région à une autre. Nous nous réjouissons d'une participation plus grande d'enseignants du français, en plus des élus du syndicat francophone, le comité consultatif des programmes et services en français de la FECEB vient de déléguer deux de ses membres en l'occurrence messieurs Daniel Bélanger et Denis Drapeau pour représenter les enseignants ayant le français comme langue première ou langue de travail à la conférence provinciale sur la négociation qui se tiendra les 29 et 30 octobre 2010.

Le comité consultatif des programmes et services en français fera aussi une importante présentation cet automne à tous les délégués de l'assemblée des représentants des enseignants sur l'enseignement en français en Colombie-Britannique et sur les défis que vivent ces enseignants.

Le groupe des négociateurs de la FECEB vient d'être désigné et nous sommes heureux d'annoncer qu'un francophone, ancien président du syndicat de Prince Rupert Gabriel Bureau fait partie du groupe des négociateurs en chef.

Vos représentants syndicaux se sont réunis pendant l'été à l'université de Colombie-Britannique pour discuter d'un plan d'action au sujet de vos conditions de travail, de la composition des classes, ainsi que pour contrer l'agenda des tests standardisés qui sont devenus la norme pour les décideurs politiques à Victoria. Les classements du Fraser Institute continuent de créer encore une fois une division artificielle et injuste entre les écoles des divers quartiers, régions de nos villes et villages.

Cet automne sera un automne important pour tous les membres de la Fédération compte tenu des échéances des négociations notamment au niveau des conditions de travail, de la composition des classes et du nombre d'élèves par classe et par niveau. Savez-vous que les enseignants de Colombie-Britannique sont pratiquement les moins bien payés comparés notamment aux enseignants de plusieurs provinces du pays comme l'Ontario, l'Alberta et le Manitoba, alors que le coût de la vie pratiquement partout en Colombie-Britannique est l'un des plus élevés du pays? Le salaire et les bénéfices aux membres seront une partie importante des négociations également.

Au niveau de la formation professionnelle, en collaboration avec le ministère de l'Éducation, le conseil scolaire de Surrey et de Coquitlam, deux sessions de formation ont été organisées :
- une session pour certifier 60

enseignants au diplôme d'enseignant de langue française (DELFP)

- une session pour former trois équipes de facilitateurs dans l'enseignement du français langue seconde, l'enseignement du français en immersion et l'intégration du DELFP en salle de classe.

Le comité consultatif des programmes et services en français fera aussi une importante présentation cet automne à tous les délégués de l'assemblée des représentants des enseignants sur l'enseignement en français en Colombie-Britannique et sur les défis que vivent ces enseignants.

Nous venons aussi de finaliser deux importants ateliers pour les enseignants :

- Histoire et culture des Premières Nations et la déclaration des Nations Unies sur les droits des peuples autochtones
- Rompre le silence sur les questions de l'homophobie

Nous venons de lancer en partenariat avec l'association des professeurs d'immersion et de programme francophone un nouveau site que je vous encourage vivement de visiter fréquemment en lisant les bulletins et alertes disponibles en ligne en français et aussi à vous abonner à notre liste de diffusion. L'adresse de notre nouveau site est : www.fecb-appipc.ca

Enfin sur le plan des services en français nous avons de très bonnes nouvelles à vous annoncer en ce

début d'année scolaire :

• La disponibilité maintenant en plus des 2 nouveaux ateliers mentionnés ci-dessus de 15 enseignants formateurs à votre disposition pour venir dans vos écoles et offrir des ateliers sur divers sujets et aspects pédagogiques, linguistiques et de justice sociale.

• Le développement de diverses ressources pour aider les enseignants du français langue de base.

• La reconduction du projet pilote de soutien aux pairs destiné aux enseignants de français à tous les niveaux.

• La reconduction du projet de recherche sur la qualité d'enseignement (Quality of Teaching) portant sur divers aspects de la pédagogie d'enseignement.

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La liste de ce que nous faisons dans ce bref aperçu n'est pas bien sûr exhaustive, mais j'espère surtout que vous aurez une idée sur le travail que nous accomplissons pour l'intérêt et le bien-être de tous les enseignants. Il me fera plaisir d'avoir de vos nouvelles et de savoir ce qui se passe dans vos classes et vos écoles.

N'hésitez surtout pas à nous appeler ou nous écrire si vous avez besoin d'aide, de conseils ou d'informations. Moi-même ainsi que mon assistante Cécilia sommes ici à votre service!!

Moh Chelali, Responsable des Programmes et Services en français de La Fédération des Enseignants de Colombie-Britannique.

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Being an Active Citizen is a sequential five-year program with 10 lessons per year through Social Studies Grades 7-11. Visit www.BCCitizenship.ca for more information.

Though the Heavens Fall

A DVD and teacher's guide were produced to mark the 100th anniversary of the Court of Appeal for BC. This program describes what the court is, what it does, and how

it upholds values that are cornerstones of a free and democratic society. It also highlights important changes, such as the introduction of Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and gay marriage.

LawConnection.ca

This website provides information on current legal issues for teachers and students. Each issue includes background information and teaching resources. Check the website throughout the school year for new topics.

YCJA.ca

This site teaches youth and teachers about the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*—the law that applies to anyone aged 12-17. Students can read articles, take quizzes, and complete assignments. Teachers can read lessons, take a final exam, and obtain professional development credit.

Legal Independence: It's Your Right

Three students are arrested under a controversial new law in a fictitious 10-minute vignette. The program focuses on three issues that are at the very core of our justice system: the rule of law, judicial independence, and lawyer independence.

This program is designed for use in Social Studies 11, Civic Studies 11, and Law 12 classes. A DVD and teacher's guide is included. View the video at www.JusticeEducation.ca/Teachers-Youth.

Legal Journeys

Legal Journeys gives teachers the background information necessary to teach the basics of our legal system and expose students to the concepts and principles that

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Topics include rules and laws, the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Downtown Community Court videos

The society also recently produced three informative videos on Vancouver's Downtown Community Court. Celebrating its first year in operation, the court takes a problem-solving approach to dealing with offenders who have issues with health, homelessness, and drug addiction. The videos detail how the court works and its role in the community.

Keep up-to-date with the society's projects and news by subscribing to its bi-monthly newsletter at www.JusticeEducation.ca or following it on Twitter (www.Twitter.com/JusticeEd) and Facebook (www.Facebook.com/JusticeEducation).

— Kevin Smith, JES communication and events co-ordinator.
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The BC Retired Teachers' Association has developed a workshop for those of you about to retire.

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Principals and vice-principals should contact their HR department to inquire if they are members of the BCTF SIP or the disability plan offered through the BCPVPA. The BCPVPA plan will have its own withdrawal guidelines.

Applications are available online at: bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SalaryBenefits/SIP/LT-withdrawalForm.pdf or call the BCTF Income Security Division at 604-871-1921.

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If you are interested, please contact Anne Field (ajfield@bctf.ca) or Amber Yaciw (ayaciw@bctf.ca) in the international program.

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PD Calendar

NOVEMBER 2010

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JANUARY 2011

21-22 Vancouver. Adult Educators' Provincial Specialist Association (AEPSA) 15th Annual Conference and AGM. Dealing with Neurodiversity, Addiction and Mental Health Challenges in Adult Students. Keynote: Robert Aitken, VCC. www.bctf.ca/aepsa or contact psac74@bctf.ca

MARCH 2011

17-18 Vancouver. The Special Education Association (SEA) is proud to present the 36th Annual Crosscurrents Conference at the Westin Bayshore Hotel. Keynote: Dr. Paula Kluth plus a variety of quality sessions and

exhibitors for regular and special education. For information, contact or visit the website at www.bctf.ca/sea or contact conference chair Leann Buteau, lbuteau@gmail.com.

Future October PSA days

(BCTF procedure statement 30.A.14) 30.A. 14 That for the purposes of a province-wide PSA day, the BCTF supports the third Fri. in October as the day on which all districts hold a professional day, except in years in which Thanksgiving Monday falls in the same week, in which case the fourth Fri. would be the designated day.

2011-12: October 21, 2011
2012-13: October 19, 2012
2013-14: October 25, 2013
2014-15: October 24, 2014
2015-16: October 23, 2015

PSA PD Day
October 21, 2011

PD Calendar website:

bctf.ca/ProfessionalDevelopment.aspx

Additions/changes:

sdrummond@bctf.ca

Should Wi-Fi be used in classrooms?

By Lynn Quiring

Part 2

Effects of wireless radio frequency radiation

Although no studies have been done on Wi-Fi *per se*, there is a generous amount of research that has been carried out on cell phones, cell-phone towers, and masts. Since the Wi-Fi signal is the same type of radiation (only the frequency is different) one can assume with reasonable assurance that the effects of exposure to Wi-Fi will follow the same pattern of exposure to cell phones and cell-phone towers.

Here's an example of what can happen. Let's say one works in a classroom or office where wireless access, or Wi-Fi, is used. In other words, we are continually exposed to a constant bombardment of electromagnetic radiation waves. Over time, sitting or working in this classroom or office, the cells of the body gradually lose their energy and consequently their ability to communicate. What if the function of a particular group of cells was to maintain the integrity of the blood-brain barrier? The blood-brain barrier is an intricate membrane that keeps harmful substances and toxins from contacting sensitive brain tissue. But what if the cells of the blood-brain barrier can't communicate or don't work any longer? The barrier would break down and this would allow harmful substances to enter. Those substances would then come in contact with sensitive brain cells. The result would be injured and damaged brain cells. This is just one example of how a particular group of cells can be adversely affected by electromagnetic radiation. In fact, studies have shown that placing a call on a cell phone for just two minutes can disable the blood-brain barrier. The same case could be made for the immune system and any other major "system" of the body since different cellular groups perform different functions to keep us healthy.

There are more than a dozen studies linking an increased risk for brain cancer and acoustic neuroma (tumor of the auditory nerve) to radio frequency radiation from cell phones and cordless phones.

Even the World Health Organization (WHO) is concerned about the effects of radio frequency radiation on children's health. In a recent WHO publication they wrote:

"The possible adverse health effects in children associated with radio frequency fields have not been fully investigated."

"Because there are suggestions that RF (radio frequency) exposure may be more hazardous for the fetus and child due to their greater susceptibility, prudent avoidance is one approach to keeping children's exposure as low as possible."

"Further research is needed to clarify the potential risks of ELF-EMF and radio frequency fields for children's health."

Neurobehavioural effects of inhabitants living near a cell-phone tower base station have also been studied. The following neuropsychiatric complaints were reported: headache (23.5%), memory changes (28.2%), dizziness (18.8%), tremors (9.4%), depressive symptoms (21.7%), and sleep disturbances (23.5%). In addition, tests of attention and short-term auditory memory were significantly lower in the exposed participants than in control groups.

Obviously, people living close to cell-phone towers have an increased risk for developing

neurobehavioural problems.

If indeed neurobehavioural symptoms are produced by radio frequency radiation, and these frequencies are continually emitted throughout our schools, what might this suggest about the abnormal behaviour of students in the classroom? Might parents be inclined and persuaded to medicate their children so that these undesirable symptoms can be controlled? If so, how many of these children would be medicated unnecessarily? Studies now show that the frequencies such as those emitted by cell phones cause abnormal brain hyperactivity. Such artificially induced hyperactivity would cause an unnecessary risk and expense to students who would be placed on some form of pharmaceutical intervention to aid in controlling these symptoms.

But what about the teachers and staff members who continue to work in the same building for many, many years? For these workers and teachers, the exposure in their building from Wi-Fi networks and radio frequency radiation is continual.

Learning issues

When the disruption of cell communication occurs, cells can't "talk" to each other. When cells can't communicate, cognition is affected, the ability to learn is affected, the ability to retain information is affected, and behavioural problems can occur.

Radio frequency radiation is also a stressor to the body. When the stress response occurs from exposure to electromagnetic frequencies, the body responds by releasing stress proteins, also known as heat shock proteins, to minimize the ensuing damage. The release of heat shock proteins is just one stress response mechanism that has been identified. Other mechanisms include the triggering of adrenal hormones like adrenaline. Continual stress is not healthy as it can eventually fatigue the adrenal gland, suppress the immune system, and lead to fatigue causing difficulty in concentration. Sleep disturbances may also occur.

Evidence also exists that radio frequencies produced by such devices as cell phones, Wi-Fi, computers, televisions, etc., can trigger skin reactions. Microwave frequencies can trigger the release of chemicals from mast cells. Mast cells in the skin will break open and release chemicals that cause the symptoms of allergic skin reactions. One of the chemicals released by

mast cells is histamine. Histamine is often responsible for the symptoms of allergies such as runny nose, watery eyes, inflammation, and difficulty breathing. Histamine also constricts the airway, leading to or worsening, the symptoms of asthma. It is of interest to note that the rate of asthma in children has doubled since 1980 and asthma now affects one in ten children. The cell phone was introduced in 1983 and has seen explosive growth in use in the last decade. Could there be a correlation between the rising rates of asthma, an immune system problem, and the escalating use of cell phones and wireless technology? Certainly, one could anticipate that chronic exposure to these radio waves over time can lead to chronic inflammatory responses.

Electromagnetic radiation connected to autism

A recent study has now suggested a direct link between autism and electromagnetic radiation. It appears that EMR may accelerate autistic spectrum disorders. It is noteworthy that the increasing rates of autism parallel the growth of the cell phone and wireless industry. This appears to occur as a result of the trapping of heavy metals within the cell and the inability of the body to excrete the toxic metals present that are often introduced into the body through vaccinations. Heavy metals are neurotoxic. When this excretory process is prohibited, these heavy metals, such as mercury, lead, beryllium, and aluminum, damage nerve structures and interfere in inter-cellular communication. This leads to neurological problems and conditions like those found in autism spectrum disorders. This particular study has shown that when electromagnetic radiation is largely eliminated, the efficiency of heavy metal detoxification and removal was dramatically increased. In other words, the body was able to excrete and eliminate heavy metals when it had not been able to do so previously. This leads to the suggestion that (1) we need to reduce or eliminate electromagnetic radiation from any child's environment, and (2) measures need to be taken to repair the damage that has already been done by electromagnetic radiation. Although this study looked specifically at autism, the same case could be made for attention-deficit disorders and related conditions.

Occupational hazard for teachers and school staff

Children will attend school in a particular building for a finite number of years and then move on. For a child, the length of time spent in a particular building or location is predetermined. Therefore their exposure levels to this form of radiation will probably change. But what about the teachers and staff members who continue to work in the same building for many, many

years? For these workers and teachers, the exposure in their building from Wi-Fi networks and radio frequency radiation is continual. What are the effects of this exposure after years and years of time? Will teaching in a Wi-Fi enabled school become an occupational hazard like that of an electrician? These are questions that must and should be answered before, rather than after, any installation of radiation-generating equipment is placed in service.

Wi-Fi in European schools

The European Environment Agency is calling for immediate steps to be taken to reduce exposure to Wi-Fi, cell phones, and cell phone towers and masts. Recent international scientific reviews have concluded that electromagnetic radiation safety limits are "thousands of times too lenient" and one official British report came to the conclusion that the development of cancer from cell phone use could not be ruled out.

Sir William Stewart, chairman of the Health Protection Agency in the UK, is calling for a formal investigation into the hazards of using wireless networks in schools. He's asking that students be monitored for health problems from the networks. Joining him in health concerns over Wi-Fi installations in schools, the Professional Association of Teachers, is calling for the Secretary of State for Education in the UK to begin an official inquiry into the issue.

"...Quite justifiably, the public remains skeptical of attempts by government and industry to reassure them that all is well, particularly given the unethical way in which they often operate symbiotically so as to promote their own vested interests."

Dr. Gerd Oberfeld, head of environmental health and medicine in the province of Salzburg, Austria, calls the installation of Wi-Fi "dangerous." In fact, the government in Salzburg has been advising schools not to install Wi-Fi for well over a year now and is considering a complete ban on Wi-Fi networks.

In 2004, the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) voiced its opinion on cell-phone towers and antennas by opposing the installation of cell-phone antennas on or near fire stations until a credible study can be done to establish their safety. In studying the available science, the IAFF found over 49 references that led them to conclude that they should oppose the placement of cell-phone antennas on fire stations.

What about Wi-Max

The latest development in the world of digital communication is something called Wi-Max. Wi-Max is intended for use as a network for

large metropolitan areas. Where Wi-Fi is limited to a range of about 100-300 feet, Wi-Max can provide broadband wireless access up to 30 miles from fixed-base stations and 3-10 miles from mobile base stations. It's been described as Wi-Fi on steroids. It's used in much the same way as Wi-Fi and will soon become the standard for Internet access. Imagine the implications. Whole metropolitan cities blanketed with Wi-Max wireless coverage. How convenient and "connected" do we really need to be?

Conclusion

We currently have no studies that are specific to Wi-Fi. However, when assessing the safety issue, we can and should look at technologies that are similar and relevant to Wi-Fi to draw our conclusions. This would seem appropriate since Wi-Fi operates in the same manner as other more heavily studied similar technology and the basic mechanism of harm from all wireless technology is the same.

There are countless reports and studies raising caution signals about the effects on human health from exposure to cell-phone radiation, cell-phone towers, Wi-Fi, and wireless technology in general. The fact remains that wireless technology is a potential carcinogen. So was tobacco. So was asbestos. So were X-rays.

What can you do?

Don't let your children use a cell phone. Don't live near a cell-phone tower. Don't use wireless Internet connections or cordless phones in your home. Provide good nutrition to your children in the form of lots of fruits and vegetables. Everyone needs lots of antioxidants to protect themselves from the free radicals being produced by these high levels of radiation. Good quality water is a must, too.

Get involved in your child's school. Get on the school board. Ask questions regarding the use of Wi-Fi in the school. Object to the installation of such equipment if and when the possibility is discussed.

School districts today are under ever-increasing financial pressures. Lease money is being provided by the wireless industry to install cell-phone antennas on school buildings. Once again, this is an unneeded and unnecessary exposure risk for our young people.

Two-time Nobel Prize nominee, Dr. Gerald Hyland, a physicist, had this to say about cell-phone towers. "Existing safety guidelines for cell phone towers are completely inadequate. Quite justifiably, the public remains skeptical of attempts by government and industry to reassure them that all is well, particularly given the unethical way in which they often operate symbiotically so as to promote their own vested interests."

Lynn Quiring currently owns and operates Logical Health LLC. He can be contacted by e-mailing to lynquiring@msn.com.

References available on request.

Coming in November...

- "Call for immediate hardwiring of schools," Una St Clair-Moniz, Citizens for Safe Technology Society.
- An article by Jim Waugh, *Living Safely with Electromagnetic Radiation: A Complete Guide for Protecting Your Health*, Castle Mountain Publishing, North Vancouver.

