

# BC's "new" curriculum

British Columbia is in an intensified period of curriculum change, but is it new?

By Andrée Gacoin, BCTF Research staff

1930s

**1935**—The Department of Education undertakes a "complete revision of all programmes" based on "a study of literature upon curriculum building and an **examination of modern curricula produced elsewhere.**"

—*Annual Report of the Public Schools of the Province of British Columbia, 1935–1936.*

The resulting **project method** "uneasily blended progressivist and social efficiency ideas, echoing contemporary US education trends."

—Catherine Broom in *Power, politics, democracy, and reform: A historical review of curriculum reform, academia and government in British Columbia, Canada, 1920 to 2000. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 2016.*

"While the basic **subjects** still must be given due prominence, not only the R's are needed today; the three C's are equally essential—**Citizenship, Character, and Culture.**"

—Letter in *BC Teacher, 1938.*

"Dr. King [in the Department of Education] **imposes the method and the curriculum without first adequately preparing the teachers.** In desperation, locals set up curriculum study groups. After school, teachers struggle to come to grips with the new system. In frustration, many leave the profession."

—Stanley Heywood, A short story of the BCTF.

1950s

**1954**—To guide the aims of education, the Ministry establishes a **Provincial Curriculum Advisory Board**, composed of "well-known and highly respected persons in business, industry, agriculture, labour, the teaching profession, and other important groups in the Province." The "**complexities of modern life** and their impact upon the pupil have brought about the need for new subject areas that will teach all pupils how to care for their individual and group needs."

—*Public Schools of the Province of British Columbia: Annual Report 1954–1955.*

1960s

**1960**—The Chant Commission recommends a **core of basic subjects** because "while basic education was always important, it was never more so than in our time because of **the increasing complexity** of the world in which we live."

—Chant Royal Commission on Education, 1960.

**1968**—Four teachers and BCTF staff travel across the province and receive hundreds of oral and written submissions about a vision for public education. The resulting book, *Involvement: The key to a better school* states that "education should be humanized and **personalized.**"

—*Involvement: The key to better schools, BCTF, 1968.*

"Today, nearly ten years after **the shake-up**, teachers in British Columbia can feel justifiably proud of the fact that their success in implementing the recommendations of the Chant Report has made it possible for our side to leap ahead in the space race. When an astronaut from Apollo 11 lands on the moon this summer, all teachers of the New Math will know in their hearts where most of the credit really belongs."

—Speech given by Alan Dawe as part of the "entertainment" for BCTF Golden Anniversary party, 1969.

1970s

**1976**—The Ministry establishes a **core curriculum** for all schools (defined as "that which must be taught" for success in "the world") and introduces "pilot projects" to "examine the possibility of providing secondary school graduates with **specific skills** in addition to their general education graduation."

—*Annual report of the Ministry of Education, 1976–1977.*

The BCTF critiques the implication that "all children are alike, can and should learn the same thing at the same time at the same rate." At the same time a large majority of teachers and the public agree with the intention of a provincial core curriculum.

—*Teacher, May/June 1977.*

"No one in the Ministry bothered to look carefully at the **many previous attempts** to establish core curricula in BC."

—William A. Bruneau, What's so new about CORE and PLAP?, in *BC Teacher, 1977.*

"Once again teachers may be left to pick up the pieces of expectations shattered by the **disparity between the promises of political announcements and the reality** of a program that is philosophically misguided and operationally confused."

—Larry Kuehn on the Career Preparation Program, Is the Ministry's newest program a mistake?, *BC Teacher, 1980.*

1980s

**1987**—The Sullivan Commission aims to determine the "most appropriate and cost-effective means" to meet the objective of a "population well prepared to meet the **rapidly changing challenges of everyday life in the 21st century.**"

—*The Sullivan Royal Commission on Education, 1988.*

**1989**—Statement of Education Policy Order sets out the vision of an "educated citizen" who will "think clearly and critically" and "adapt to change."

"The broad aim of the public school system should be to **foster the growth and development of every individual**, to the end that they will become and be a **self-reliant, self-disciplined, participating member with a sense of social and environmental responsibility** within a democratic, pluralistic society."

—*Members Guide, AGM resolution, 1994.*

1990s

**1990**—Drawing on the work of the Sullivan Commission, and in response to "**dramatic social and economic changes**," the Ministry proposes a wide range of educational reforms known as the **Year 2000**. The overall aim is to "enable learners to **develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes** needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy."

—*Year 2000: A framework for learning, 1990.*

"[The Year 2000] came across as a very progressive document, but the substantial issues that we eventually ended up having with it, had to do more with **implementation, and support for the process.**"

—Interview with Ken Novakowski, BCTF Online History museum.

2017

**And now... BC's New Curriculum**

**2011**—The BC Education Plan states the challenge facing education as "an education system designed in the very different circumstances of an earlier century can't possibly always meet the challenges students face—both now and in the future." While "staying solid on the **basics**," the plan sets out a vision for a more "**flexible**" system. The key focus, as seen in the 2015 updated plan, is on "**personalized learning for every student.**"

**2015**—The redesigned curriculum reiterates the same qualities of the **educated citizen** envisioned in 1989, stating that the "concept of the educated citizen will continue to guide education decisions for years to come." This is "**education for the 21st century.**"

—Ministry of Education, Introduction to British Columbia's Redesigning Curriculum (Draft), August 2015.

"For curriculum revision to succeed, government must provide **adequate funding to support real implementation.** And the Ministry must listen and consider teachers' feedback about revised changes, not just now, but as formal implementation takes place over the coming years. If not, curriculum **change could be destined to fail in ways similar to the past.**"

—Glen Hansman, Personalized learning: Back to the future? *Teacher, Jan/Feb 2016.*

"I have trouble finding the answer to a burning question: What is the **main purpose of making these changes?** When we know the purpose we can evaluate the changes to see if they suit the purpose."

—Feedback from a BCTF member on curriculum change, Spring 2016.

## Teachers are invited to join the conversation

Curriculum change is a multi-faceted and complex process that requires ongoing discussion and debate, not only on what is happening (the nuts and bolts of implementation), but also why. How do you negotiate curriculum change as a potentially risky **process**? What does **personalization** look like in the particular time and place of your classroom? How do you understand **flexibility** in relation to diverse student needs and experiences? How do you and your students make sense of **21st century learning**?

Raise your questions at your **School Staff Curriculum Committee** or in **Joint Education Change Committees** at local and school levels. Engage with colleagues through the **BCTF Teacher Inquiry Program** and explore curriculum change in and through your practice.

Share your thoughts and perspectives as part of a **multi-year research conversation** on teacher-led curriculum change in BC. Contact us at [livingchange@bctf.ca](mailto:livingchange@bctf.ca).

## Learn more

BCTF Online History Museum: [bctf.ca/history](http://bctf.ca/history).

BCTF Education Change Bulletins: [bctf.ca/EdChangeBulletin](http://bctf.ca/EdChangeBulletin).

*Members' Guide to the BCTF curriculum policies*, <https://is.gd/o5bzZg>. ■