

June 1, 2007

The Ministry's interest and commitment to maintaining and improving the quality of education in rural areas of the province is not surprising to anyone – it fits very consistently with my view that it is our role to improve the life chances of every child, every student in British Columbia. Demographic and economic changes in our province have had an impact on many rural communities. Trends towards urbanization will continue well into the future. That is why it is important to keep our attention on the health of education in rural communities.

Since the Task Force on Rural Education reported four years ago, we have been looking at strategies and structures to support the rural classroom. Many of you know Julie MacRae, seconded Superintendent from School District No. 72 (Campbell River). She has taken the lead on the rural strategy over the past two years but now is returning to her position with Campbell River. Many of you also know Dave Lee, seconded Principal from School District No. 22 (Vernon). He has worked with many districts and schools to build human networks and virtual networks to improve capacity and connectivity. Dave will continue in that capacity next year, and I thank both Julie and Dave for their work on behalf of rural schools.

I asked Julie to take stock of the events within this file over the recent past. Following are her comments as she reflects on the successes of the rural strategy.

An Update on the Plan for Rural School Renewal

It has now been four years since the Rural Education Task Force completed its work. The 17 recommendations from that report can be loosely categorized into four main areas:

- Ensuring Equity of Access, Outcomes, and Opportunities for Rural Students
- Investing in Instructional Improvement
- Harnessing the Power of Technology
- Achieving Efficiencies and Improving Awareness of Funding Issues

So what has been accomplished with respect to these recommendations? And what is planned for the future?

First, we have improved the ability of rural students have access to a full range of educational programs and support services by creating the Virtual School. The number of students who are accessing some form of distributed or blended learning in the province has increased from 17,000 a year ago to more than 27,000 today. And these students can access support services such as tutoring and academic advising as well.

Technology has figured predominantly in another of the projects which has helped improve access to learning opportunities for rural students. The Rural Network's Classroom Connections project has connected students and teachers from all around the province in 16 on-line sessions held each Thursday morning from 9:30 to 10:30 on topics ranging from music and art instruction to Aboriginal story-telling. Again, classes have signed in from all over the province to take instruction from teachers or guest presenters located anywhere from Vanderhoof to Vancouver to Port Hardy. This series will continue next year, with the specifics of the October through May program to be available on the website by September 30th. Check out the archived sessions from this past year through the newly-created Rural Educators Section of the LearnNowBC website at http://www.learnnowbc.ca/educators/Rural_Education.

As part of the investment in instructional improvement, we have created a Rural Educators Network to provide a forum for deep and ongoing dialogue about planning, instruction, and assessment in rural classrooms, schools and Districts. Twenty-four on-line learning sessions have been delivered through the use of Elluminate Live, with a further 48 under development for the 2007-2008 school year. Already more than 240 separate individuals and groups have accessed these sessions from locations ranging from Echo Bay to Old Crow to the Quatsino Lighthouse. These sessions have been archived and can also be accessed through the Rural Educators Section of the LearnNowBC website at [http://www.learnnowbc.ca/educators/Rural Education](http://www.learnnowbc.ca/educators/Rural_Education).

Instructional improvement and improving the life chances of students will also be the focus of the 2007 Rural Renewal Conference, to be held in Richmond from October 10-12, 2007. With room for 450 participants and sessions designed specifically for trustees and parents as well as educators, this year's conference entitled "It Takes a Village: One Learner at A Time", will also be web-cast live into Smithers, Fort St. John, Nelson, Campbell River, and Prince George. The Ministry will once again subsidize the costs of team attendance at this event, with registration to be completed through your local Superintendent's office. More information about the conference program and will be available shortly on the Rural Educators Network website.

Another important indicator of our commitment to instructional improvement has been our continued refinement of the elements of the Accountability Cycle, ensuring that parents and other non-educators have a role in determining priorities, creating plans, and monitoring progress. And we have created a new Achievement Division which will assist all school districts with achieving success for all students. We have and will continue to focus on and target resources towards the educational performance, cultural needs, and learning styles of Aboriginal learners. And we continue to support and require the use of assessment data for all levels of educational planning: classroom, program, school, and district.

The Ministry remains committed to the improving both the sustainability and effectiveness of small rural schools, as well as improving the efficiency of their operations. Recent legislative changes have been designed to encourage Boards to work collaboratively with other community agencies to ensure a seamless approach to literacy and achievement from early childhood through adulthood. By planning together and pooling resources and expertise, it is hoped that both effectiveness and efficiency can be improved.

Cause for Celebration!!!

While the challenges facing our rural schools are many and varied, there are just as many reasons for celebration. There is a level of personalization of educational processes, programs, and services in many rural schools that deserves to be both celebrated and replicated... and all over the province, there are success stories, both large and small, that deserve to be shared. I'll include just two examples here.

In School District No. 19 (Revelstoke), an analysis of their Grade 4 and 7 FSA results shows a steady year-to-year improvement for the past five years, with participation rates consistently in the high nineties, and performance consistently higher than the provincial average. Superintendent Anne Cooper also reports that the same high performance trend for Grade 3 reading as measured by district level assessment (PM Benchmarks).

To what do they attribute their success? The hard work of their teaching and support staff, the targeting of educational assistant time, and a Board that has been prepared to align their decisions and resources with the goals they are trying to achieve. The continued development of community relationships and programs to support literacy ensures that everyone in their community knows that student learning is a priority.

And now some good news

I mentioned in my introduction that Julie was returning to her school district after establishing a sound foundation of rural focus. I am now pleased to announce that provincial leadership for the rural strategy will be undertaken by School District No. 74 (Gold Trail), where Superintendent Pat Pearce and her team will take on the important challenge of making theirs a demonstration district for other rural schools and communities. Pat, her Board, and her team are a natural choice for this role as they have been experiencing success in addressing the challenges associated with student diversity, declining enrolment, and dispersed schools. They have also been major contributors to the work done thus far to support their rural colleagues. Please join me in both congratulating and expressing appreciation to the Board and district staff of School District No. 74 (Gold Trail) for their willingness to fulfill this important role.

We heard a great story two weeks ago from Vancouver Island West, a very rural district. You have just read of Revelstoke's success in an elementary school. Pat Pearce provides this story of inter-district cooperation to make a difference in Ashcroft.

Ashcroft Secondary School has joined with School District No. 22 (Vernon) to offer a number of Grade 12 students a high quality educational opportunity through the use of interactive technology. As a small rural school and community, Ashcroft has been experiencing the familiar challenge of diminishing enrolment and the resultant difficulties offering a wide range of rigorous academic courses. Formalizing a collegial relationship between the two Districts was simplified with the assistance of Bruce Weitzel, Principal of Alternate/Online Programs at SD No. 22, and Karen Savage, Vice-Principal at Ashcroft Secondary. With District support, a new Distributed Learning lab was created, and students were selected to participate in the pilot project; studying either Physics 12 or Chemistry 12 through Synchronous or Asynchronous online instruction, supported in

Ashcroft by their school-based science teacher, Graham Rainey. Through this delivery model, students in Ashcroft are able to take advantage of innovative strategies to help bridge the rural-urban gap, work with students 300 kms away, and earn credit in important courses.

After numerous consultations between districts in the fall of 2006, Ashcroft Secondary was able to provide the connectivity, necessary computers, and supporting technology to allow nine students to take Chemistry 12 and/or Physics 12 with experienced and enthusiastic teachers from Lumby, Peter Kozin – Chemistry, and Tor Nenzen – Physics. Both teachers, Gary Wong, Technical Support, and Bruce, traveled to Ashcroft the first week of Semester two and were able to meet face to face with their students. This started to develop the necessary rapport and human contact needed to build the relationship crucial in any classroom but most importantly, in the virtual classroom. Ashcroft students and staff reciprocated the visit a short time later and enjoyed meeting in Lumby with their online peers. A final visit was scheduled for May 30th. The collaboration between the teachers from the two Districts has really stimulated some good learning conversations and has been the impetus for developing and sharing other online course offerings. A BCEd Online film crew visited both districts and produced a short film highlighting the work of the students in Lumby and Ashcroft that well depicts the benefits of the collaboration.

Ashcroft students have expressed a high degree of enjoyment with the process, and the majority of the students have achieved excellent academic results. The resultant scores have been of huge benefit to a number of the DL students. Thompson Rivers University recently awarded six Entrance Scholarships of \$3,000 each to A.S.S. students, four of whom are taking SD 22 DL courses. Without the cooperation between Districts and their staffs, the inability to take rigorous sciences would have seriously affected the students' ability to access such financial support. Within Gold Trail District No. 74 there is an increasing interest and commitment to further

explore a greater variety of course offerings within district, and to share around the province.

It is with great optimism that we move forward to support rural education. Welcome School District No. 74 (Gold Trail), and thank you for taking on the challenge.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Dossdall', written in a cursive style.

Emery Dossdall, Ed D
Deputy Minister of Education