

March 26, 2007

Moving Ahead to Improve Student Achievement

We have been illustrating the work of teachers and principals in their schools to improve student achievement through “stories” leading up to Education Week. We have some very effective innovations happening in some schools that are meeting with results. However, British Columbia does not have systemic change where improvement that affects student achievement is happening in all school districts, all schools, all classrooms and for all students. If we keep doing things in the same way we can expect the same results – bright spots of innovation and creativity but, overall, a system that does not improve one year over the next. For that reason, legislation has been introduced that is intended to open new doors for how we support student achievement.

The legislation introduced today is intended to give us the opportunity to do things differently and make a greater difference in the life chances of every student. The amendments to the *School Act* are designed make changes that accomplish two things that allow us to move ahead.

- Increase the accountability for all of us to improve student achievement and reach new goals for student performance in literacy and numeracy.
- Improve support for teachers, schools and school districts to build the capacity of all of us teaching and working with students so that achievement results improve.

What are the amendments introduced today in Bill 20? These descriptions follow the Bill and order of

amendments. The actual Bill can be found at http://www.leg.bc.ca/38th3rd/1st_read/gov20-1.htm.

1. The first change has been signaled for over 2 years. The role and responsibility of school boards is made broader. School boards have traditionally been responsible for K–12 programming. They retain this responsibility and now expand their responsibility into early learning and literacy in communities throughout the province. School Boards become Boards of Education to reflect this new role, which expands their influence beyond the traditional “bookends” of Kindergarten and Grade 12. Many districts are already deeply involved in early learning through traditional measures, and a number are working to implement new StrongStart Centres. At the other end of the K-12 continuum, many are already cooperating with community agencies and colleges on life-long literacy initiatives. This change builds on these activities.
2. The new role of Superintendent of Achievement is set out in legislation. These are Superintendents, lead educators, appointed by the Minister to support schools and districts in their capacity building initiatives and to enhance accountability for improvement. These Superintendents will report to the Deputy Minister operationally and may be directed by the Minister to report on school district matters. The Superintendents of Achievement will work closely with District Superintendents to lend support to improving student achievement. For example, the Superintendents of Achievement will have an inventory of best practices. When a school is identified as struggling with its literacy results, the superintendents will be able to connect the school with a best practice or source of staff development that connects teachers with teachers and principals with principals. When a promising innovation is spotted,

the Superintendents can initiate some action research in that school to capture the innovation's promise for all in the province.

3. The role of the District Superintendent is the subject of these amendments. District Superintendents have long been the lead educators monitoring student achievement. Now, for the first time, it is spelled out in legislation that the Superintendent is responsible to the Board of Education for learning and achievement in the school district. The Superintendent is required to report to the Board each year on student achievement within the district for the previous school year. Once approved by a Board, this report is provided to the Minister and it is made publicly available. These measures will assist superintendents on focusing on the main thing and setting the "distractors" aside.
4. Accountability Contracts change as well under the amendments. First, they are renamed Achievement Contracts and include district specific goals for student performance and plans for student achievement, literacy and early learning. The deadline for Achievement Contracts will be July 15 of each year. This deadline will be facilitated by changes to the FSA program as outlined elsewhere in this report.
5. The amendments provide parents with another avenue of appeal. Many concerns have been expressed that the principles of administrative law and natural justice have not been applied fully to appeals under Section 11 of the *School Act*. Once all processes have been exhausted at the classroom, school and district level including an appeal under Section 11 of the *School Act*, parents will be able to raise matters with a Superintendent of Achievement that they believe have not been fairly heard elsewhere. The Superintendent may dismiss the appeal or refer it to mediation or adjudication. The decision of the Superintendent of Achievement regarding referral is final. When referred, the decision of the adjudicator is final and cannot be in conflict with any other provision of the *School Act*. The adjudicator has a number of options. He or she can refer the decision back to a Board of Education with or

without instructions, can vary the decision or can uphold the decision of the Board.

6. Boards of Education are required, each year, to develop a District Literacy Plan. The Ministry of Education is the lead ministry in government on improving literacy for all British Columbia citizens. In fact, British Columbia is the lead province in the Pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy developed by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. Boards of Education will have a key role in establishing Literacy Plans in all their communities through community development, facilitation and coordination. These plans will go beyond the traditional K-12 focus to include early learning and community literacy services for those at either end of the K-12 continuum. Boards of Education will be expected to broaden their focus and to work with all community parties with an interest in literacy to develop District Literacy Plans that will have impact on all community members.
7. The Minister, too, has new responsibilities. The Minister is empowered to provide administrative direction to Boards of Education. When administrative direction is given, a Board remains in place and can continue to exercise its powers but must take certain actions in specified ways. If, for example, a board is not aligning its resources to improve student achievement and build the capacity of its teachers and is not getting improving results, the Minister may direct that capacity building be initiated and that necessary resources are allocated to that area.

It was mentioned above that the new Achievement Contract will coordinate with some changes in the FSA program. More details on this will follow, but the changes that will be made include:

- The FSA administration date will be moved to an earlier point in the year.
- The individual FSA results will be available to parents and teachers by mid-May to facilitate discussions of student progress and pave the way for planning for

student needs in the subsequent year.

- FSA tests will be marked locally by teachers, like the grade 10 and 11 graduation program examinations. This will increase the knowledge of individual student achievement and embed the standards and curriculum more broadly among teachers.
- Guidelines for administration, including circumstances for excusing students from the FSA, will be stated and communicated more clearly.
- Other changes will be made to areas like item analysis and curriculum links to enhance the value of the FSA in steering system performance.

This represents some significant change – more accountability – more support – support in the form of capacity building for teachers, principals, district staff and trustees as we implement these changes and improve student achievement. I expect to continue to highlight promising practices and success stories in improving student achievement through my weekly Education Report.

Michael Fullan recently said that every failure to improve student achievement should be regarded as a capacity problem. All of us want student achievement to improve – politicians, parents, teachers, administrators and, most of all, students. When student achievement does not improve or worsens, it is not because someone sets out to make students learn less. Every absence of success should be viewed as a capacity challenge. Support in terms of building capacity to improve will be our response.

One further change is included in today's Bill amending the *School Act*. Choice has been a theme that I have promoted over the past six years. I believe that when parents and students have choice they are more satisfied with our system. Choice improves engagement, and when students are engaged, they achieve more. School districts and schools have responded by increasing

choices available to students significantly over the past few years. Our legislation on school fees needed amendment to facilitate some of the programs and maintain choices for students. Today's amendments are intended to enable schools wishing to offer "specialty academies" like hockey schools, soccer schools and even horsemanship schools that have been implemented over the past few years. The amendments address fees as they relate to trade programs and music programs. In order to maximize accessibility and equity, the amendments also require that school districts develop hardship policies so that students are not excluded from choices because of financial circumstance.

The changes I have outlined above provide the direction and opportunity for us to harness our collective energy, creativity and expertise to work differently in the best interests of students. We, as a provincial learning community, need to put our shoulder to the wheel to build and enhance provincial capacity supporting improved student achievement. The amendments set a new framework within which we can work together to be accountable for building capacity and supporting improved student achievement wherever needed – in every school and every classroom for every student, one at a time.



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