

September 8, 2006

Implementing Bill 33 – On Everyone’s Mind

Last June, Bill 33 was introduced in the Legislature and passed unanimously. Among other things, Bill 33 amended the *School Act* provisions governing class size and composition and introduced some new processes regarding the manner in which schools are organized. There have been many detailed questions arising regarding implementation of Bill 33. Ministry staff are preparing a set of Q&A’s that will be sent to you shortly. I would like however, to take a step back from the details and review the higher purposes these amendments are intended to accomplish.

As you will recall, the Learning Roundtable met through last winter and spring to discuss learning conditions. Much of what appears in Bill 33 is a result of the input from the education partners represented at the Roundtable. The members of the Learning Roundtable include the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF), the British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC), the British Columbia Principals’ and Vice-Principals’ Association (BCPVPA), the British Columbia School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) and the Ministry of Education. The Learning Roundtable was co-chaired by the Honourable Gordon Campbell, Premier, and the Honourable Shirley Bond, Minister of Education.

In general terms, the purposes of Bill 33 and the amendments to the class size and composition provisions of the *School Act* can be summarized as follows.

- To provide balance in decision-making and to guarantee provision of an appropriate voice for all who have an interest in learning conditions.
- To address concerns with existing class sizes grades 4 – 7 and reduce the school district average limit on these classes.
- To ensure thoughtful integration of students with special needs with due attention to the learning conditions of all students.
- To increase accountability for compliance with the class size limits in legislation.
- To increase transparency and access to information through new reporting requirements.
- To continue the dialogue regarding learning conditions in order to provide the best for our students.

Allow me to expand on some of these themes.

Learning conditions for students are important for all of us. Decisions regarding learning conditions and the organization of schools are made primarily by principals, but teachers, parents and, in many cases, students, provide advice on how best to support learning through the organization of classes in a school. One of the main purposes of the amendments was to introduce the clear expectation that decisions be made in an inclusive and informed manner. Obviously, a school staff is central to these decisions. The School Planning Council (SPC) was also ensured a voice as it is consulted by the principal

regarding the school organization plan. The District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) is informed regarding the Superintendent's report to the Board. Teachers can be assured that they are consulted regarding learning conditions in their classes under specific circumstances outlined in the amendments.

The processes set out in Bill 33 did not arise in a vacuum. Many excellent practices with respect to consultation and decision-making already existed within schools throughout the province. One purpose of Bill 33 was to enshrine these practices in legislation so as to increase the accountability for these practices in all schools.

The members of the Learning Roundtable studied class size reports resulting from data collection in the fall of the last school year. The size of intermediate classes, grades 4- 7, was one issue that drew the attention of the members of the Roundtable. It appeared that class size pressures at the intermediate levels were high. Hence amendments to the *School Act* created a new intermediate cohort of classes and separated grades 4 – 7 from grades 8 – 12. The maximum district class size average for grades 4 – 7 was reduced from 30 to 28 as a clear signal that class sizes at this level should be reduced.


The amendments provide teachers a greater voice regarding intermediate classes. The teacher's consent is required if any single intermediate class is to exceed 30. Teachers know that in some cases acceptable learning conditions exist in larger classes but in others, dependent on the children assigned to the class, learning conditions suffer unacceptably in a large class. Sometimes one intermediate class over 30 can be the key to the organization of divisions throughout an entire school from which many can benefit.

The class size reports reviewed by the Roundtable also showed the distribution of students with special needs. Several classes existed that included a number of students with special needs, and questions arose regarding the learning conditions in these classes. Several examples were examined and in almost all cases, we found that very thoughtful decision-making and resource allocation resulted in good learning conditions for all members of these classes. The Minister asked how we could ensure that these best practices could be guaranteed to occur in every school. Amendments were introduced that require consultation with teachers involved where more than 3 students with special needs are integrated – and the superintendent and principal must express their confidence in the resulting learning conditions. We know that meaningful consultation also naturally occurs in many other circumstances than those outlined in the amendments.

The Learning Roundtable also was informed that some school districts had classes in violation of the required limits in the *School Act*. The amendments introduced the Special Administrator who must be appointed by the Minister in such circumstances to resolve violations.

Finally, last year was the first time ever that a comprehensive report showing the number of students in every class in every school in the province was completed. Bill 33 introduced amendments that require reports from each school district to the Minister that not only show class size, but state the rationale for each class over 30. These reports will further guide policy decisions regarding learning conditions for B.C. students.

The Minister and Premier listened carefully to the discussion at the Learning Roundtable. They set the direction and course for providing the best learning



conditions possible in the most thoughtful way for all B.C. students – but the work is not yet complete. Bill 33 requires that a review of the amendments and the impact of implementation be undertaken by the education partners. The dialogue regarding learning conditions will continue.

The details and questions around implementation are important. However, keeping an eye on the higher purposes of the amendments will aid smooth implementation. The details will be more likely to take care of themselves when a solid dose of common sense is applied and the collaborative practice evident in many schools continues.

The partner organizations will be collecting evidence regarding the effect of the amendments. Please keep track of your evidence so as to inform this important policy area.

I trust your first week was successful and exciting. I will try to provide timely information that will assist you with new challenges throughout the year.