

February 15, 2007

Speech from the Throne

The Throne Speech on Tuesday was the big news of this week for our province. Premier Gordon Campbell made the priorities clear in saying "...we have a responsibility to do better – to reach higher in education, to reduce the impact we have on the environment, to provide more choices for students and patients, and to help those who cannot help themselves." Pretty clear, I think – so how can we as educators weave those pieces together to protect our world and make the best life chances possible for all our citizens, particularly our youth?

It is truly important to see Premier Campbell and many leaders around the world take aim at environmental issues. In our beautiful province no one can argue with the need to protect our surroundings now and for generations to come. Environment, health and education figure prominently – what does the Throne Speech say about education?

- BC schools are among the best in the world. We perform among the top few education jurisdictions anywhere – but results have leveled off, and we need to continue to improve for the sake of our students.
- We still have 11,000 students each year who are not completing Grade 12. Many of these are Aboriginal students. Less than one half of our Aboriginal students complete grade 12 within six years of entering grade 8.
- Over 9,000 students enter Kindergarten without the skills necessary to succeed. We need to provide these youngsters with a better start to guarantee success.
- Student health is a major area of concern. This is the first generation of children whose life span may not exceed that of their parents. Active life styles and healthy living must be central to our interests.

So where does the Throne speech point us?

- School Boards will have the opportunity for a broader area of responsibility. School Boards will be named Boards of Education to signal their work beyond K-12 and into early learning, community literacy and healthy living.
- School district Superintendents will be given expanded roles and made explicitly responsible to Boards of Education for improving student achievement. Superintendents already own this role but, as Ford says, this is now "Job 1" (or did they say, "Built for life in Canada"?).
- There will be new provincial Superintendents of Achievement appointed to support school districts and schools in their improvement efforts. Rick Davis and Jacquie Taylor are the first two well known educators appointed to these roles. There will be others shortly.
- The Education Guarantee provides new access to adults to enhance skills and employability to participate fully in BC's booming economy – and the economy needs each citizen and graduate to maintain and improve its health.
- Boards of Education and schools will become central to the literacy goals of the province through development of District Literacy Plans that align efforts with the literacy plans of communities within school districts.
- There will be even more choices for students and parents. Provincial demonstration schools developing and showcasing best practices will be established. Promotion of schools of choice will be supported.
- BC schools will play a major role in improving student health. Junk food will be banned in schools. Schools will become tobacco free. Increased focus will be given to preventing bullying.

- School Districts will be supported in their entrepreneurial endeavors with business companies but held to a higher level of accountability and transparency in the conduct of this business.

And there is other important business that the Throne Speech promises will be addressed.

- A teacher discipline registry will be established to provide for accessible reporting of teachers guilty of serious misconduct – a safeguard for all of our students.
- Disciplinary reporting requirements for teachers guilty of misconduct will be strengthened.
- A teacher employment registry will be established to assist employers in selecting the best teachers possible to work with our students.

There is the promise of a positive and respectful relationship with teachers. After all, we in education know that the most important factors in a student's success are the teacher and the relationship between the teacher and the student. Our teachers are doing a phenomenal job – that is why we have one of the best systems in world. How can we support them to get even better? Our competition is getting better, so we must too if we are to keep up and become “the best educated and most literate jurisdiction on the continent” (or in the world).

To accomplish this, we need strong teaching and strong leadership. The Throne Speech also recognizes the key role principals play and offers the possibility of voluntary certification of principals and teachers who aspire to be principals.

We have heard in many places that teachers want to be more connected and have greater engagement with

the Ministry and setting policy and direction for student learning. This year, a Teachers' Congress was hosted by the Premier and the Minister. It is important to hear from teachers directly. The Throne Speech talks about more direct and frequent communication with teachers; like that communication the Minister has already had in visiting 40 school districts and many schools in those districts. The Learning Roundtable will continue to meet and inform the student achievement agenda.

The last area the Throne Speech addressed was that of school fees. It is challenging to strike the delicate balance between equity/access for all and choice for those with special interests in particular programs of study. Many have expressed concern and worry that programs will disappear. The Throne Speech signals that this is also an area of concern to government and will be addressed.

The Throne Speech strikes a challenging and exciting agenda for those of us dedicated to providing our students with their best life chances. We need to work together in a strong coalition to promote student success, healthy life styles and greater life opportunities for all of our children and youth. I look forward to the session of the Legislature to see “wheels” put under the Throne Speech so we can move forward to improve the learning of all students, one student at a time.



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