

October 27, 2006

## Rural Conference – A first of its kind

Congratulations to the organizers of and participants in the highly successful Rural Schools Renewal Conference held last weekend in Richmond. 260 delegates attended the conference in Richmond and were joined by 80 others by webcast from Nelson, Nakusp, Oliver, Smithers, and Campbell River. Participants reported the conference to be a relevant and engaging professional learning experience. A keynote by Faye Brownlie emphasized the important ways in which teachers have a positive impact on student learning, and plenary sessions explored the power of technology as a tool to supporting and assisting teachers in providing quality instruction.

I am pleased to note the involvement of the B.C. Rural and Small Schools Provincial Specialist Association in the planning and delivery of the Rural Schools Renewal Conference. This partnership can serve as an excellent example of the positive results possible when the Ministry and teachers work together to explore and address issues of mutual interest. We are coming to understand the power of the “vertical slice” that includes parents, trustees, teachers and administrators in professional learning.

The conference included two very important announcements with the launch of the Rural Education Network and B.C.’s new Virtual School, LearnNow BC. Our Minister, the Honourable Shirley Bond, joined the conference on Saturday morning to unveil LearnNow BC. She was ably assisted by five students who are engaged in online learning. Check out [www.learnnowbc.gov.bc.ca](http://www.learnnowbc.gov.bc.ca) to choose from the hundreds of courses available, to register online, and to access tutoring and academic advising services.

The Rural Education Network will go live in December at [www.BCrualeducationnetwork.com](http://www.BCrualeducationnetwork.com). A series of online discussion forums will begin in early January.

These will feature further discussion on the topics explored at the conference - Working and Learning in Multi-Grade Classrooms, Supporting Special Needs Learners, Successful Strategies for Engaging Aboriginal Learners, and Creating Communities of Learners. Other discussion forums will be developed and hosted in response to the feedback from both conference participants and our education partners. More information about the Network will be posted on the website or can be obtained by emailing Julie MacRae at [julie.macrae@gov.bc.ca](mailto:julie.macrae@gov.bc.ca)

Training sessions for the use of Illuminate, the web tool to be used in conducting these forums, will be held in November. More information on these training sessions is available from Dave Lee by contacting [dave.lee@gov.bc.ca](mailto:dave.lee@gov.bc.ca)

CDs of the conference plenaries and learning guides to accompany them will be distributed to districts by the end of November. These resources will be made available free of charge and will provide for ongoing application of conference presentations.

## Virtual School – New choices available for students

As reported above, the Minister officially launched the Virtual School. The launch marks the beginning of a new education model, one that supports the existing classroom model and provides our students with the flexibility to tailor their education to meet their needs.

Distributed learning (DL), through the Virtual School, creates new opportunities for students by eliminating geographic barriers and time constraints. Students have the ability to start school at any point throughout

the calendar year. It is flexible for working students, mature students and travelling athletes as it provides access to learning outside classroom schedules. It prepares students to go on to post-secondary education or careers where they will be expected to learn in a similar environment.

The new virtual school website, located at [www.learnnowbc.gov.bc.ca](http://www.learnnowbc.gov.bc.ca), will enhance student achievement by providing support services such as tutoring, academic advising, an online assessment pilot, and information for parents, students, and educators. As well, it provides access to online learning resources for educators, ones that can be used in either a “virtual” classroom or as a support to their regular classroom environment. The website includes an easy-to-access course finder that allows students in grades 10 to 12 to find any available public school DL course.

Last year, over 17,000 BC students took courses from 44 public and independent distributed learning schools. We expect further growth this year, because 47 boards have signed agreements with the Ministry to operate 53 public distributed learning schools. There will also be at least 10 independent distributed learning schools.

If you have students in grades 10 to 12, these changes may provide opportunities for you to help them increase their range of options while remaining enrolled in your school. Because the Ministry will fund dual enrollment, it is possible for a student to be funded full-time at your school while also funded for distributed learning courses in another district. The dual enrollment funding also means that for students in grades 10 to 12 you may no longer charge for courses taken in another district -- those courses will already be paid for. You should also note that it is no longer necessary for a student to have the approval of their home district before enrolling in distributed learning

courses in another district. For more information about the details of these changes and contact information, see [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist\\_learning/](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist_learning/)

Through the virtual school our students have more choice, choice that enables them to grow and learn at any pace, at any time and from any place.