



Report on Education

from the Deputy Minister of Education

May 5, 2006

British Columbia's rural schools and communities are quite diverse and have much to offer in terms of quality of life and varied learning experiences. Yet the challenge of providing quality educational programs and services in rural districts in our province is a recurring theme in conversations with education partners. The Ministry's commitment to meeting that challenge will be the focus of my report this week.

First, some background. The Rural Education Task Force, commissioned by then Minister of Education, Christy Clark, delivered its report entitled "Enhancing Rural Learning" in the fall of 2003. The report's 17 recommendations focussed on the creation of equitable opportunities and achievement outcomes for students in rural areas. The report explored the impact of changing demographics and declining enrolments, as well as the inter-relationships between community economic challenges and the sustainability of quality learning environments for students.

Among the initiatives and activities already undertaken to address the recommendations of the Task Force report are:

- The creation of a Rural Renewal Steering Committee consisting of two members of the Liaison Team and six rural superintendents to provide direction and general oversight for rural education initiatives. Julie MacRae, Superintendent of Liaison, is taking the lead on developing and implementing the Rural Strategy.
- The joint consultation process undertaken with the Ministry of Children and Family Development last fall to seek community input into desired futures and responses to our Ministry's expanded mandate.
- The pilot project opportunities created for Districts to explore the concept of shared services.
- A seminar session presented jointly with BCPSEA to explore shared approaches to teacher recruitment.

- The introduction of legislative and funding changes that will improve access for rural students to all available Distributed Learning opportunities, regardless of where they live in the province. The changes mean that Distributed courses designed for grades 10 -12 are free for BC students. Schools may incorporate Distributed Learning courses into student timetables as a way to meet unique student needs.
- The creation of a virtual school to provide a common point of access to on-line courses, programs, and student support services.
- Launching a common point of access to Distributed Learning courses www.mybcschool.gov.bc.ca. This website provides links to Distributed Learning courses and services offered by BC educators. Students, principals and teachers can now use the site to seek courses and specialized offerings.
- The provision of Connected Learners grants to support the development of e-learning options.
- Ongoing dialogue with education partner groups about the challenges associated with declining enrolments and increasing urbanization throughout the province.

In the months ahead the following initiatives and activities are planned:

- The creation of a professional network for rural educators to mitigate the effects of professional isolation and diverse teaching environments.
- A provincial conference aimed at the improvement of instruction by focussing on the needs of Aboriginal learners, the inclusion of special needs learners, working in multi-age classrooms, and the use of e-learning. Look for information on "Quality Instruction: The Great Equalizer!" on the Ministry and partner group websites by June 1.

- A series of regional in-service events during the 2006-2007 school year on these same four themes.
- The provision of grants to Districts for action research into “the teacher effect” in the areas of Aboriginal education, inclusion of students with special needs, planning for multi-aged groupings, and electronic learning.
- Continued liaison with Districts, Education Partner Groups, and community leaders to encourage the integration of services and supports to students and their families.

What About the Funding?

The money is the money...but many rural and small districts believe that the provisions of the current allocation system appear to be having a disproportionate impact on the smallest districts due to the absence of economies of scale. The Ministry has a standing funding review process. Through the Technical Review Committee, with input from districts, the allocation system is refined each year. Funding for rural areas will be part of this review process for future school years.

Did You Know?

About 86,000 students or 15% of B.C.'s public school students attend rural schools.

A rural community is defined by Statistics Canada as one having a population between 1,000 and 9,999 and where less than half of the employed individuals commute to work in a community of more than 10,000. (But for our working purposes, we refer to districts serving rural schools and as long as there's one school in your district in a community that meets the definition, you're rural to us!)

Approximately 20% of all preschoolers need some form of intervention prior to entering Kindergarten, and Early Development Instrument (EDI) indicators suggest that many of our most vulnerable learners live in rural areas.

Of the 60 school districts in B.C., there are now 18 enrolling fewer than 3,000 students and 4 enrolling less than 500.