

## WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE: PREPARING BC'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR THE FUTURE

### *Executive Summary*

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The BC Progress Board, established by Premier Gordon Campbell in July 2001, is an independent Panel of 18 senior business and academic leaders. The Board benchmarks BC's economic, innovation, education, environment, health and social performance over time and relative to other jurisdictions. The Progress Board also provides advice on ways to improve provincial performance.

Since the Progress Board's inception, education has figured prominently in its benchmarking and advisory work. An early report of the Progress Board, "Learning to Win", surveyed the provincial education system from early childhood through to life-long learning and, among other things, made suggestions for broadening pathways to high school graduation. A key performance indicator is the high school completion rate for those students who begin secondary education in grade eight and complete within six years. At 79 percent in 2004/05, the provincial average high school completion rate has improved from a level of 75 percent in 2000/01. There is, however, significant variability in student outcomes between school districts and among various sub-populations within the public education system. This report provides some suggestions on how the various components of the provincial education system can make further progress toward improving student outcomes.

In recent years a number of important changes have taken place in the management of K-12 education in the province, most notably the introduction of the Accountability Framework. The processes relating to this framework provide a structure and system for iterative planning, for setting educational priorities, for measuring results and identifying successes and problems, and for implementing new programs with an aim to improving overall results. These processes are open and transparent and invite parents and others, including Aboriginal communities, to engage with the schools and school districts to improve education for their children and youth.

The Accountability Framework could become an even more powerful tool for continuously improving public education in BC if enhanced by expanded and improved data analysis and interpretation and supported by effective follow-up actions to triennial school district reviews. For improvement to occur, it is essential that problems be appropriately identified and addressed, effective intervention strategies developed, and results recorded and analyzed. To assist in this process, specialist teachers organized into intervention or turnaround teams, either at the school district level or through a third party agency funded by government, could work with principals and teachers to enable them to develop the skills and implement the programs required to address the challenges they face in a long-term and sustainable manner.

A commitment to continuous improvement requires leadership at all levels, but within the structure of the public education system currently in place, leadership must come from school district supervisors and elected trustees. Together they need to be, and be seen to be, the education leaders in their communities, communicating to parents and the public about the challenges they face and the successes they achieve, working with other educators in their regions to

identify local gaps in a broad system of lifelong education that extends from children newly born to adults seeking improved literacy skills, or looking for new educational opportunities and interacting with government to ensure the excellence of the services they provide.

Given emerging economic demands for highly educated and skilled workers, the demographic forecast of a decade or more of declining enrolments in schools, and the intensification of competition for public and human resources, it is timely to examine the capacity of our educational organizations to meet the challenges we face. The provincial government needs to consider new institutional arrangements and structures to create greater opportunities for students, as well as to foster educational synergies that will ensure our social well-being and economic prosperity. In BC, the regional diversity of the province, not to mention its vast and challenging geography, dictate that new structures to better integrate secondary with post-secondary education should be established at the regional level. Moreover, these regional structures should make sense in terms of existing jurisdictional boundaries and community interactions. The college and university college regions could serve this purpose and provide an appropriate context for broader, regionalized educational planning and program delivery.

In fostering a closer interaction between secondary schools and post-secondary institutions priority attention needs to be given to promoting trades training. Given the enormous costs of equipping high school shops and keeping them current with rapidly changing technologies, school and school district partnerships with colleges and university colleges — where trades training should flourish and where teaching, facilities, and equipment should be state-of-the-art — would provide a wonderful opportunity to expand trades training and to develop the programmatic context within secondary schools to orient interested and appropriately talented youth to explore the trades as a career choice.

Partnerships between secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, however, should not focus exclusively on trades training. BC needs, and will continue to need, highly educated citizens – educated to advance the frontiers of knowledge through leading-edge research and to fill vacancies in the professions as teachers, physicians, and social workers, to give but a few broad examples of university-based programming. In fostering a closer interaction between the secondary and post-secondary levels of education in the province, the aim should be to promote education of the highest quality to the greatest number of students in accordance with their interests and aptitudes and to the betterment of their personal lives. If we do this, the economy will be served well as a by-product of achieving individual student success. It will also give qualified students the opportunity to fast-track their public school education.

A more encompassing approach to education aimed at maximizing student success and targeted to address current problems of educational underperformance needs an appropriate level of government support and funding. If BC is to become “the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent” public education must be seen as a priority investment: an investment for the future; an investment for a sustainable knowledge-based economy; and, an investment for a well-educated, democratic, and tolerant civil society. When investing in education, however, governments should not write blank cheques. Government should demand accountability and

apply scientific rigour to determine if priority expenditures are producing intended outcomes and improving the educational system overall. It should also ensure that monies are being efficiently spent and that new administrative processes, enabled by the advent of information technologies and software-enabled management systems, are not being avoided simply for the sake of maintaining traditional ways of managing the public school system.

Society is dynamic. There have been notable changes in British Columbia's K-12 system as well as in BC's economy and society since the tabling of the Royal Commission report on education in 1988. BC's K-12 educational system needs to change and momentum and direction for change is already evident. Change is not necessarily good and resistance to change is not necessarily bad. Change without careful consultation is probably doomed to failure and resistance to change without a sincere consideration of the case for change is indisputably detrimental to societal growth and improvement. By building systematically upon the creativity that is being displayed at all levels by educators applying their knowledge and skills to address the challenges of a complex and changing society, positive change can be achieved and educational outcomes improved. It will take working together for BC to become the most educated and literate jurisdiction on the continent. Working together, rather than at cross-purposes, is something that we, as British Columbians, can do to ensure a better future for our children, our schools, and the province as a whole. After all, it is "for the sake of the kids."

The report identifies six positive suggestions for change in British Columbia's public education system. These follow:

- 1) The Accountability Framework and its component parts – school growth plans, school district accountability contracts, triennial reviews, and Aboriginal education enhancement agreements – have become vital tools to develop education in BC. We urge the Ministry and the Government to stay the course and to expand upon the system of using information in an open and public way to improve education in the province.
- 2) Through the Accountability Framework, BC has established strong foundations for the development of intervention strategies to improve classroom performance. Such turnaround strategies need to be strong, sustained and appropriately resourced. We recommend that such strategies, possibly delivered through a third party agency independent of the Ministry of Education, be developed and implemented as soon as possible.
- 3) The Ministry of Education now carries primary responsibility for the literacy agenda recently adopted by the province. To ensure effective implementation of a broad range of initiatives to promote and improve literacy at the local level, school districts should be given primary oversight responsibility for educational programming for the pre-school years, K-12, and adult education within their districts, the latter jointly with their regional college or university college board.

District boards should be mandated to perform this educational oversight role for the purposes of identifying educational service gaps, working in partnership with both public and accredited private educational providers to fill gaps in educational provision and,

where necessary, to augment standard K-12 programming in order to provide services that their districts sorely need and lack. They should also strive to make schools into multi-purpose facilities that engage the community as a whole.

- 4) Following the release of this report and the completion of the Campus 2020 process, we recommend that the Ministries of Education and Advanced Education consider the development of new organizational structures to integrate secondary and post-secondary educational programming in the interest of easing transitions for students from secondary to post-secondary programs, as well as expanding post-secondary programming options available to eligible secondary school students – especially those interested in the trades and technical careers – at earlier points in their secondary schooling. In particular, the Ministries should examine a closer integration of school districts and college or university college regions for the purpose of achieving a better integration of secondary and post-secondary educational programming.
- 5) The systematic use of test results will assist in the development of a consistent, continuous, coherent, and contextual long-term approach to educational improvement in BC to the benefit of the province and to individual learners alike. We encourage the government to continue its efforts to integrate data collection, sharing, and analysis across government departments and within the public education system and to develop the relevant expertise for data to be effectively utilized for service improvement.
- 6) Government should review current fiscal arrangements relating to the funding of K-12 education in the province in order either to enhance existing funding mechanisms or to introduce new mechanisms to fund strategic initiatives intended to achieve better student and system educational outcomes. To this end, the government should review the roles of school districts and their administrative responsibilities to determine where savings might be achieved so that any savings identified are retained within the public education system and used to fund strategic initiatives on a priority basis.