




BCTF100
Celebrating a century

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Discussion paper:
Diverse perspectives of BCTF members on the redesigned BC curriculum

This discussion paper is based on feedback on the redesigned curriculum received by the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) from members between January 27, 2016, and May 15, 2016.

Built around the view that curriculum change is a process, not an event, this discussion paper has three key aims:

- 1. Provide an accessible summary of member feedback received to date by the BCTF.*
- 2. Foster ongoing discussions on curriculum change that recognize the diversity of perspectives among BCTF members.*
- 3. Shape an ongoing research project on education change that the BCTF will be conducting from 2016 through 2020.*

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Diverse member perspectives on the redesigned BC curriculum

What is going well

Members are generally positive about the inquiry and cross-curricular approach promoted in the redesigned curriculum, including the framework of “big ideas” and “core competencies.” For example, one member said this framework was “concise and broad enough to allow teachers to choose what they can do best.” Members also welcome flexibility as an opportunity to adapt subjects to meet the needs of particular groups of students, and value opportunities for collaboration with other teachers. This includes the two non-instructional days (NIDs) in the 2015–16 school year that focused on the redesigned curriculum.

At the same time, members are struggling to bring together this “vision” for curricular change with the “realities” of their schools and classrooms. For example, one member commented, “I like personalized learning, in theory, but think class size and composition issues will make it impossible.” This gap between “vision” and “reality” underpins many of the tensions between what are seen to be positive aspects of the curriculum and how the curriculum has been redesigned and is being implemented. For example, some members feel like they are being forced into an inquiry-based approach, and see this in tension with their professional autonomy regarding pedagogical choices. Others, such as a member who teaches science, are concerned that there are inadequate time and resources for an inquiry-based approach: “All we have time for is giving them facts to memorize.”

Another area of tension is around flexibility and collaboration. While flexibility is generally appreciated, some members feel it has led to course content that is too vague. Likewise, the general appreciation for collaboration was coupled with the concern that collaboration requires time and resources, and that the structural support for collaborative processes is lacking.

Overall, the realities of particular schools and classrooms underpin many of the comments regarding what members find challenging in the process of education change to date: “The ideology and the reality don’t intersect.”

What is challenging

Broadly, members have expressed seven key areas of concern: (1) resources, (2) curricular content, (3) implementation time frame, (4) provincial assessment and graduation requirements, (5) reporting, (6) consultation process, and (7) education change.

1) Resources—The most prominent concern coming from member feedback was in relation to resources: the need for adequate educational resources to support curricular change as well as funding for those resources. As one group commented, “teachers are overwhelmingly concerned about the lack of resources.” While curricular changes might be an opportunity to “clean out outdated supplies” or “find new current resources,” members are in many cases “spending their own money and using lots of time to plan and implement units.” This is both unrealistic and unsustainable, leading to frustration and “teacher burnout.” From the need for updated textbooks to other educational supports (such as laboratory equipment), members strongly felt that the Ministry of Education should be responsible for funding these resources in order to successfully implement the curriculum. Furthermore, the need for resources is exacerbated by how curricular content has been redistributed across grade and subjects levels, leading one member to comment, “it makes no sense to keep throwing out the resources baby with the curricular bathwater.”

2) Curricular content—This was the broadest area of feedback from members. Key concerns within the feedback are as follows:

Distribution of content across grade levels within particular subject areas: Some members are critical of how some content has been distributed across grade levels within particular subject areas, particularly where there is a lack of resources. For example, members providing feedback specifically on the science curriculum were largely critical of how content has been moved between grade levels. As one member said, this content “may not be age-appropriate and it makes current resources obsolete.” Other members have expressed frustration that they feel content has not changed, but rather “topics are moved around from one grade level to another” and they question the “benefit to the students” of these changes.

Challenge of combining previously separate curricular areas: Members have highlighted a number of challenges within curricular areas that have been combined (e.g., physical health and education; applied skills, design, and technologies (ADST); arts). For example, a member commenting on the physical health and education curriculum said that a key challenge is that there are “two traditionally separate curricular areas meshed together with very little direction in terms of how to make the implementation work.” According to another member in this area, “without careful consideration” these subjects may “end up competing for time, therefore potentially watering down both areas and ultimately leading to a less meaningful and impactful delivery of these areas.” Similarly, in arts, members expressed concerns around combining four disciplines under the broader umbrella of fine arts. They raised questions such as: would certain disciplines end up being chosen or valued over others? Does the broad language give the impression that anyone can teach in this area?

Tension between breadth and depth in curricular content: This area received a substantial amount of feedback, although member perspectives on it are quite diverse. For some members, the curriculum offers increased “options for teachers to decide what they teach and how they teach it.” This can provide opportunities for “taking on a topic and delving into it thoroughly (as opposed to trying to cover several themes),” leading to “deeper comprehension and appreciation” among students. At the same time, one recurrent critique of the redesigned curriculum is that it is too “vague,” and that there are gaps in content. For some members, such as those providing feedback on the ADST curriculum, flexibility comes at the expense of providing particular skills and knowledge. Others, such as those focused on social studies, are concerned both with the amount of content, as well as with “watered down content” that is not seen to be age-appropriate. These issues are linked to reporting and standards, with one member expressing concern about “vague directions leading to a lack of standards,” while another asked, “Are we dumbing down our kids by having fewer expectations?” Across these concerns, many members commented that these challenges would be more acute for newer teachers. As one member stated, “As a new teacher there is very

little guidance. Especially when you are teaching outside of your normal subject area.” More experienced teachers may also experience the “challenge of change to teaching practice,” including the need for more resources for inquiry-based approaches.

Meaningful engagement with Aboriginal ways of knowing: Within the feedback, members were generally positive about the focus on engaging with Aboriginal content across the curriculum, seeing it as showing a “respect for First Nations history and culture.” However, many members expressed concern around how they would engage this content. For some members, Aboriginal content seemed tokenistic. For example, members providing feedback on food studies content were “concerned about putting one cultural group in the spotlight,” while other members commented that it appears “they drop Aboriginal topics...where it looks convenient as there appears to be little regard for appropriateness, especially, within the applied skills, design and technology curriculum.” Other members worried about cultural appropriation, such as a dance teacher who highlighted the difference between “teaching about cultural dance versus teaching cultural dance,” adding that “First Nations do not want teachers teaching their culture.” Across this feedback, there was a general call for resources that would help teachers to meaningfully engage with Aboriginal ways of knowing: “Many teachers have expressed deep concern with not knowing what can or cannot be shared and taught.”

The role of technology: Members have substantial concerns regarding the use of technology in accessing and delivering the curriculum. Many members feel that technology is a valuable resource, particular with the push for “problem-based learning,” but access is seen as a major issue. This includes reliable internet connections as well as technological devices (such as computers or iPads). In particular, members have stressed the need for funding in order to ensure “equitable access” to technology for all students. Given the cost of technology and current budget deficits, there is concern that the focus on technology will exacerbate the “growing disparities between ‘have’ and ‘have not’/inner-city schools with regards to access to technology.” The focus on technology within the curriculum requires “significant investment” by the Ministry. There are also some concerns around the promotion of

technology and online learning (despite the lack of research on the effectiveness of online learning for K–12 in Canada).

- 3) Implementation timeframe**—One of the areas in which the “vision” is most in tension with the “reality” is in terms of the timeframe for implementation. As one member stated, “I feel as though this was an idea that needs a lot more design, detail, and thought before it is rolled out to the province.” The Ministry has determined the timeline for implementation despite a lack of direction to teachers regarding provincial assessment, graduation and reporting requirements, or a plan to support the curriculum with resources. Many members feel the implementation process is rushed, providing inadequate time for consultation (as will be discussed below), necessary professional development, and collaboration with colleagues to make implementation a success. While members have diverse opinions on when and how the curriculum should be rolled out, there is an overwhelming call for “more transition time,” “realistic expectations,” and “clarity around timelines.” The BCTF has written a letter to the Minister of Education citing implementation communication from other jurisdictions that supports a need to slow down the approach to reflect what is doable.
- 4) Provincial assessment and graduation requirements**—Across the feedback, members broadly agreed with the comment, “I am also extremely concerned about how we will be assessing students under the new curriculum, and do not feel that there is any guidance being provided on this.” While there are divided opinions as to whether, and how, students should be assessed, the lack of guidance is leading to multiple questions and concerns around how to implement when assessment is unclear and current “government exams do not fit this new curriculum.” Likewise, the lack of guidance on graduation requirements is causing confusion, and there is a need for “clarity around what’s mandatory and what’s not.” There are also subject-specific concerns (e.g., English and social studies) around courses that are, or may no longer be, mandatory. Simply communicating these requirements is insufficient. There needs to be meaningful consultation between the Ministry and members.

- 5) **Reporting**—From the feedback, there is a great deal of frustration with the lack of clear guidance on reporting, with one member commenting that it is like “putting the cart before the horse.” The overall confusion around reporting is fueling many questions. For example, there are questions as to whether, and how, the core competencies will be assessed, such as one member who asked how they would be “translating co-operative learning into a mark” and another who wondered how do you “assess” empathy. Some members see the curriculum as providing more teacher autonomy in relation to assessment, which may lead to a more “authentic evaluation,” while others see potential reporting requirements as being in tension with the curriculum framework. As one member asked, “Are the performance standards going to be modified to reflect the new focus?”
- 6) **Consultation process**—While BCTF members have been part of the curriculum development teams, and saw the chance to rework the curriculum as an exciting opportunity, some members feel there has been a “lack of representation” within the curriculum development process. This is exacerbated by the rushed timeline which, as one member said, can lead to members wondering “what, if any, impact my feedback will have on the curriculum” and a sense that there is “little we can change right now.” Some members also feel there are key groups who are not currently included in the consultation process, such as students, parents, and university post-secondary programs. Given that these groups have been involved, these comments are indicative of a lack of clear communication from the Ministry in regard to the consultation process. Furthermore, some members involved in curriculum revision teams have also expressed concerns regarding the process to date. The vast majority of curriculum team members have expressed a need for further meeting time to reflect on the curriculum as a whole and consolidate the work. While some members of the revision teams felt this has been a very collaborative process, others have expressed frustration at being “herded, not heard.”
- 7) **Education change**—Education change is not only about the *means* of educational reform (such as revised curricula) but also the *ends*: *Why do we educate?* (BCTF research report, RR2014-07). While there has been little public discussion in BC about the fundamental

purposes of education, this is forefront in many members' minds as they engage with the curriculum. As one member said, "I have trouble finding the answer to a burning question: what is the main purpose of making these changes? When we know the purpose we can evaluate the changes to see if they suit the purpose." In 2008, the Ministry did have a year-long, province-wide consultation on the "attributes of a BC graduate¹" and results from the consultation are reflected in the BC Education Plan². However, it is also necessary to consider the broader policy environment in BC and how the role of public education may be reduced to providing graduates with skills for industry and commerce. As one member commented, "Previously, I considered the overall move to a 'competency' driven curriculum as positive. However, upon further investigation into the sources and developments in this direction and its emphasis on 'personalization,' I see fundamental inconsistencies between it and public education as a social institution." This includes the privatization of education, and how "personalization" may become another means of "social segregation." There is a critical opportunity here to engage members in this conversation, as one member argues:

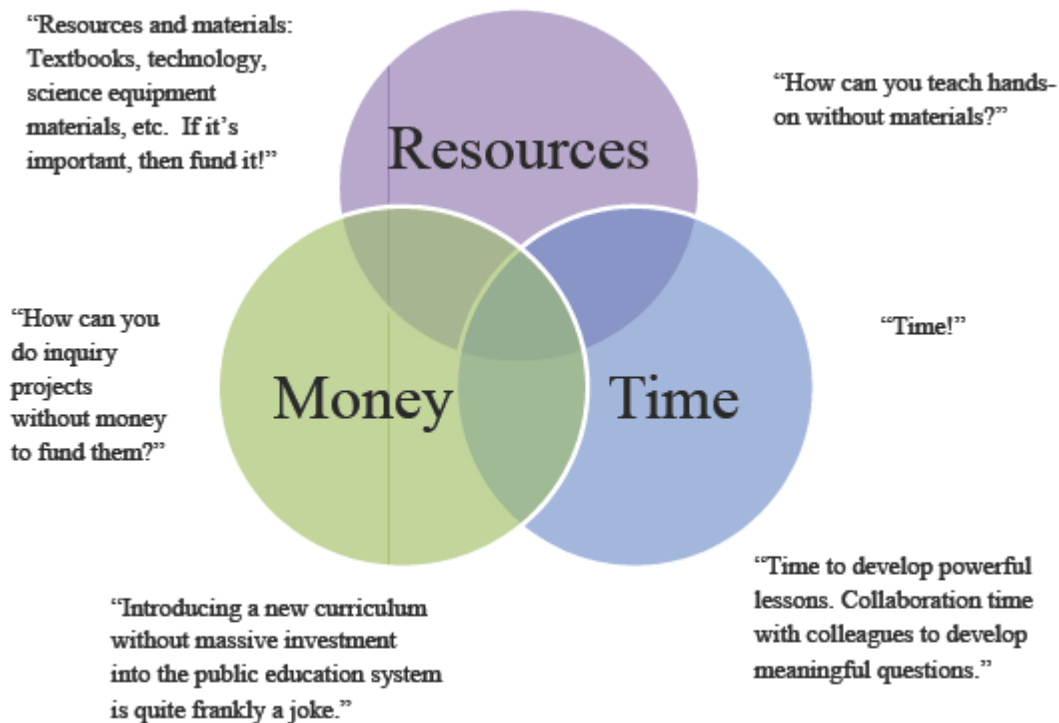
The BCTF should take advantage of its current position on curriculum development and push for sweeping revisions that reassert the value of education as a public social institution dedicated to the dynamic socialization of people, the development of a full range of capacities for all students, and the building of a truly democratic society in which there are not only competent individuals, but empowered communities and social organizations capable of shaping our future. And, we should, for the sake of our members and students, put implementation on hold until the money, resources, and time are in place.

What supports are needed

Across the feedback, there is a feeling all teachers are "coping with a lot of change" and it can be "overwhelming that the whole curriculum is changing all at once." Broadly, suggestions for support fall into three inter-related areas: resources, money, and time.

¹ www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/kindergarten-to-grade-12/support/prog_guide_grad_trans.pdf

² www.bcedplan.ca/



Specifically, members have provided detailed suggestions for supports needed from (1) the Ministry of Education, (2) schools boards, and (3) the BCTF.

Supports needed from government

Feedback indicates that the most significant supports needed are (a) resources, (b) funding to support the changes, and (c) clear communication.

- Members have made many suggestions for resources, from an “online sharing center to access vetted lesson plans and unit plans” to “new textbooks and resources if this is mandated.” Members also requested exemplar lessons and tools related to benchmarks and performance standards.
- In terms of funding, the dominant message is “fully fund public education!” Specifically, members recognize that school district level support will only occur when the district has the capacity to provide it. As discussed above, members also said it was essential for the Ministry to fund necessary technology networks, supports, and tools. Several members critiqued the “bring your own device” expectation as unrealistic, as well as problematic from a privacy perspective. Members also requested funding for ongoing non-instructional days.

- As indicated throughout this discussion paper, inadequate communication from the Ministry on all aspects of curricular change has caused significant confusion. It is also leading to frustration and disillusionment in how involved members are, or can be, in processes of education change. Members also felt that communication with parents should be the responsibility of the government and the district, not individual teachers.

Supports needed from school boards

Members overwhelmingly expressed a need for more in-service time devoted to the redesigned curriculum. This time should focus on collaboration with colleagues, not “talking heads,” and allow departments, grade groups, and collectives of teachers interested in similar topics to explore and deepen their understanding of the curriculum. Members also expressed a desire for real leadership by districts to support teachers with the changes. This includes support for taking risks in changing practice, as well as mentorship opportunities. Members also suggested a formalized network for sharing resources across the district, and highlighted the need for in-class and specialized supports (especially librarians and learning assistance teachers).

Supports needed from the BCTF

Members identified a number of union-specific supports, including the following:

- facilitating networks for sharing teacher resources
- continued advocacy for non-instructional days and other opportunities for collaboration and networking among teachers
- protection of professional autonomy (e.g., in relation to reporting)
- assistance with communication across different levels (e.g., to parents and administrators)
- ongoing consultation on education change.

Further questions

While members provided diverse feedback in many areas, there were a number of gaps that warrant further attention. These are posed as three key questions below.

Will “student-led” learning be beneficial to all students?

While a vision of student-led learning is powerful, implementing this vision without adequate materials and human and financial resources risks further marginalizing students who need extra support. This includes students with designations, students with mental health issues, and English second language learners. Furthermore, as a few members did point out, the focus on inquiry-based approaches might not meet the needs of some students, such as those with autism.

How is curricular change engaged within the broader structural environment?

Curricular feedback tends to focus on the curriculum itself. However, and as seen underpinning many members’ comments, curriculum is implemented within a particular structural environment. Class size and composition concerns and inadequate funding for public education cannot be separated from processes of education change.

Who else is involved in implementation?

There are many different kinds of teachers and support workers who interact with the redesigned curriculum. Members recognize that all teachers (including those who teach part-time and teachers teaching on call) need to be engaged in processes of education change. They also recognize the importance of support within their school, including teacher-librarians, learning-assistance teachers, and counsellors.

Looking forward: Fostering dialogue on the process of curriculum change

As requested by members, the BCTF is committed to ongoing consultation on education change as a process. Based on this round of feedback, the Research Division is developing the framework for a three- to five-year research project on curriculum change. The aim of the project is to develop an in-depth understanding of teacher experience and perspective on processes of curriculum change and assessment. The research will support members to make critical assessments of curriculum changes over time and support their active and ongoing engagement in shaping the direction of education change.

Background to this discussion paper

Since 2013, teachers and Ministry staff have been revising the existing British Columbia K–12 curriculum. Initiated by the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for the co-ordination and facilitation of the curriculum work, revisions have been undertaken by teams of teachers appointed by the BCTF, the Federation of Independent School Associations BC (FISA), and the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA).

Broadly, the intent behind the curriculum revisions is to make the curricula more manageable for teachers and to provide more opportunities for teachers and students to focus on particular topics of interest in their schools and communities. The learning outcomes in many subject areas have been reduced, theoretically providing more time and flexibility to explore topics in-depth.

Between January 27, 2016, and May 15, 2016, the BCTF asked Local Presidents, Local Representatives, provincial specialist associations (PSAs), and Professional Development (PD) Chairs to engage members in providing specific feedback on BC's redesigned curriculum (currently available in draft form at curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum).

This was in response to the motion carried at the November 5, 2015, Executive Committee meeting:

That:

- 1. members be encouraged to collectively discuss concerns and provide feedback on the supports needed for the implementation of the new K–12 curriculum via school-based union meetings, and then bring forward concerns through their local's decision-making processes.*
- 2. locals be encouraged to forward feedback to the Federation.*

The Professional and Social Issues Division (PSID) of the BCTF provided three questions to locals to help frame member feedback on the new curriculum:

1. Where are the positive aspects of the curriculum, and what are you looking forward to in education change?
2. What are the concerns?

3. What supports are needed from government, school boards, and your union?

In response to these questions, 15 locals and all 32 PSAs provided feedback on the redesigned curriculum, as well as school departments and individual members. These questions were framed as suggestions, and locals were encouraged to provide feedback in a form that reflected the needs and concerns of their members. In addition to general feedback, detailed feedback was also received in relation to the following subject areas: applied skills, design and technologies; arts education; careers education; English language arts; French (core, first language, and immersion); physical health and education; math; science; and social studies.

Prior to the May 15, 2016, deadline, PSID and the BCTF Research Division worked together to identify key themes that could guide analysis. These initial themes were discussed with the Education Policy Work Group (EPWG) of the BCTF and the Executive Committee, and have been used to determine a broad framework for analysis. Following the May 15 deadline, the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti was used to analyze member feedback within these themes, as well as identify silences and gaps in relation to the draft curriculum framework.

The analysis has been limited by a number of factors, including: (1) the variety of ways of providing feedback encourages member participation, but limits what kind of systematic analysis can be carried out and (2) member feedback is ongoing, and it is beyond the scope of this analysis to present a comprehensive overview of member perspectives. Overall, and in appreciation of the diversity of member perspectives, analysis has been used to inform a discussion paper related to key themes. Within these themes, we have provided questions and concerns from subject-specific feedback that can prompt ongoing discussion. The appendix, which will be posted at a later date, will contain both the detailed and general subject-specific feedback received by May 15, 2016.