

BCTF Research Report

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Developments with Distributed Learning

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Significant changes are sweeping through much of the public school system and distributed learning is no exception to this. In fact, this is an area where change is perhaps the greatest in the system. This is an update of the report that went to the April 17–19, 2002 Executive Committee meeting. New information provided here includes policy statements from the ministry and information from the Vancouver School Board virtual schooling project.

1. Funding for distributed learning

A. The past

For the past several years there was a cap on the funding for distributed learning at 2,200 students at an amount of \$3,500. Allocations were provided to 18 school districts to make up this 2,200. Only those designated districts could receive funding for this “electronically delivered pilot program.”

Some other districts created their own programs and received the regular per-student allocation for students in their districts. Districts that offered distributed learning for students resident in their districts seem not to have had a problem with funding audits.

However, at least one district, Gold Trail, signed up students from outside their district and received full funding for them as if they were students attending a regular public school. They offered no teacher support, but did provide funding to parents of up to \$500 to purchase learning resources chosen by the parents. A ministry audit concluded that 648 students were “receiving a home-school program and do not qualify for full funding under section 108 of the School Act.” The ministry then reduced the grants to the school district by \$2,549,063.

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B. The future

Funding for school districts for the 2002–2003 school year has been announced as \$5,308 per student. In the Operating Grants Manual, the ministry says “The students in Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) are now funded the same way as regular school-age students.”

2. Home schooled or schooled at home?

Many of the issues in funding for distributed electronic learning fall into a grey area of whether students are home schooled or schooled at home.

There are about 4,700 registered home school students in B.C., about 4,000 with independent schools and 700 with public schools. The first of the distributed electronic delivery programs, the E-bus, enrolled home schooled students from around the province. When students signed up with E-bus, and later with the other “pilot” programs, the students were no longer defined as home schooled. They were now public school students schooled at home.

What is the difference between these two categories?

The Gold Trail audit report, acquired by the BCTF from the ministry through a Freedom of Information request, helps define the differences. For a program to qualify as a public school distributed electronic learning program, it must meet these criteria:

- a. A B.C.-certified teacher must develop, direct and assess the educational program and progress of the student. It is not the parent who does this.
- b. The student must follow the prescribed provincially or locally approved curriculum and use ministry- or district-approved learning resources.
- c. A B.C.-certified teacher must assess and report on student achievement and the student must take the Foundation Skills Assessment.

If a program does not meet all of these criteria, then the students enrolled in the program are home schooled, not schooled at home in a public school program.

3. Ministry “Home Education Policy Statement”

The Gold Trail audit and the new policy of equal funding of students who attend school and those who are educated at home using distributed education led to a need for the ministry to be more explicit in its policies. The policy paper distributed at the Education Advisory Council defined funding eligibility and home education as follows:

Eligibility for the base per pupil funding (\$5,308)

School boards are responsible for the education program of students enrolled in their district. The Ministry of Education will no longer make a distinction between the various program delivery models that districts may choose, but rather will provide per student funding based on the following four criteria:

1. The school board is responsible for the education program of students enrolled in the school district.

2. The school board is responsible for ensuring that each student’s education program is under the supervision of a member of the British Columbia College of Teachers.
3. The school board is required to provide the requirements for an education program as set out in the following Ministerial Orders:
 - *M295/95 (Required Areas of Study) for students in grades K-10; and
 - *M205/95 (Graduation Requirements) for students in grades 11-12.
4. The school board is responsible for ensuring students are assessed and evaluated by a members of the British Columbia College of Teachers as set out in the School Regulation and following Ministerial Orders:
 - *M60/94 (Provincial Learning Assessment);
 - *M191/94 (Student Progress Reports);
 - *M192/94 (Provincial Letter Grades); and
 - *M190/91 (Permanent Student Record).

Home education policy statement

It is important that superintendents and other school board members understand the difference between an enrolled student and a home-schooled child. As there are duties and responsibilities for parents as well as for superintendents and school boards with respect to each, I encourage school districts to review the *School Act*, particularly sections 12 and 13, as well as the Education Policy Order, the School Regulation, the Investigation by Superintendent Order and other appropriate legislation.

4. What do these new policy statements mean?

The ministry has toughened up the requirements for funding students who learn at home. These are some of the differences:

- a. A teacher who is a member of the B.C. College of Teachers must be responsible for the education of the student. In the past, the secondary correspondence courses did not have teachers—only markers, with no requirement that they have a teacher certificate.
- b. The courses and curriculum defined by the Ministerial Orders must be what is being taught. Parents deciding what to teach their child at home is not acceptable for an “enrolled student” (e.g., a student for whom the board gets full funding). If a parent wants to choose the curriculum for their child, then the student is a home-schooled student, and the district gets \$250.
- c. A member of the B.C. College of Teachers, not a parent, must be responsible for the assessment and evaluation of the student. The Ministerial Orders that boards are told they must adhere to include the assessments (FSA) and letter grades for Grades 4–12 defined “in relation to expected learning outcomes set out in the curriculum.” The teacher must be the active evaluator, not just taking the word of the parent on the progress of the child.

The increased funding for students on distributed electronic learning has come with a price—less independent direction and assessment by a parent and more active intervention from the teacher. This is a price that some parents who really wanted home schooling, but with public resources providing computers, internet access and resource materials, may not be willing to pay.

5. What support is there for students with special needs on distributed electronic learning programs?

The ministry policy statement distributed to the May Education Advisory Committee meeting allows only three programs to receive extra funding for special needs, and freezes a cap on the number funded in those districts. It says:

The ministry is examining policy and accountability issues for students who are identified for special education funding *and* who receive their education program through distributed electronic learning programs. Over the next year, while policy is being developed, school districts are advised that with three exceptions, special education funding will be allocated only for those students who receive their education program in a “neighbourhood school”. The three exceptions are the pilot programs currently in operation at the South Island Distance Education School in School District 63 (Saanich), the Fraser Valley Distance Education School in School District 33 (Chilliwack) and the North Island Distance Education School in School District 71 (Comox Valley). The number of students eligible for special education funding in these three schools is capped at current enrolment.

6. Which district can register the public schooled-at-home students?

The Gold Trail audit report points out that “There is a provision of the *School Act*, Section 75, that allows for a school-aged student to enrol in a school in a district in which the student does not reside, *if the student’s resident district is in agreement.*” The audit team used postal codes to identify which students were from the Gold Trail district.

This is a key provision. The E-bus was allowed to sign up students from anywhere in the province and include them in the number of students to be funded. The nine regional distance education schools also signed up students from outside their districts, but usually within their designated region.

To allow any district to sign up students regardless of where they live would set up a competition among school districts for students from other school districts. This would be the one way to get more resources into a school district—by taking students away from another district.

On the other hand, having to get approval to sign up students from another district may create problems for the E-bus and the Connect program of the regional distance education schools. As more districts create their own distributed electronic delivery programs, they will likely want students who live in their district to enrol in their programs rather than those offered by another district.

Section 75 of the School Act is one section amended in Bill 34 introduced in the legislature on April 15, 2002. It will be necessary to do an analysis of the impact on DEL programs as a result of these changes.

7. Online teaching resources—Open School and COOL School

While most of the DEL programs have focussed on getting the students and offering them programs, two groups have focussed on developing and/or distributing teaching resources for DEL programs: the Open School and COOL School.

The Open School, as part of the Open Learning Agency, has had a mandate to develop and distribute courses for print and electronic delivery of distributed education. It has been a main supplier, for example, to the regional distance education schools. However, the B.C. government has announced that the OLA will be phased out and it isn't clear what might replace it.

On this issue, one of the recommendations of the Select Standing Committee on Education was: "Designate one department or agency to develop a provincial infrastructure for online learning, and ensure that all institutions have easy access to this infrastructure so that they can support learners who opt to use an online approach for all or part of their education."

A number of school districts have been dissatisfied with the course materials offered by the Open School and have decided not to wait for the province to resolve this. Some 16 districts have joined a consortium now known as COOL School.

COOL School started four years ago as a project in the Central Okanagan School District to put courses online for students on self-paced programs in an alternate school setting. With the demise of Pathfinder, which had been developed for a similar purpose, interest from other districts developed and COOL School became a consortium project that other school districts were invited to join.

COOL School is really a course exchange, not a program to deliver educational services. Districts that are members of COOL School contribute courses developed by teachers in their districts and can use the online course materials developed by teachers in other districts. COOL School courses are developed in the WebCT software, the courseware that is most used for online teaching. The ministry is paying for half the cost of WebCT for the next year as an encouragement for districts to use the online environment.

COOL School courses cannot be sold—they are developed on an exchange basis. Districts that want to use the courses may join the consortium for a one-time fee of \$5,000 and an annual fee of \$1,000. To date, all of the money collected has gone towards course development, updating and revising.

8. Vancouver's virtual school

The Vancouver School Board has announced that it will have a virtual school online for September 2002. The project is designed, according to the project proposal, as an entrepreneurial opportunity encouraged by the ministry. The group developing the Learning Network is "to identify and develop innovative programs to meet market needs such as International Education students."

Before even developing any courses, the policy statement says "It is the vision of the Vancouver School Board that all secondary students will take at least one course prior to graduation."

The VSB says it plans to use a “centralized online model” with “high quality online courses that are articulated to the B.C. curriculum and are founded in the B.C. principles of learning and sound pedagogy.” They promise eight courses for October 2002: IT 12, English Literature 12, Physics 12, First Nations 12, Law 12, Geography 12, CAPP 11/12 and Comparative Civilization 12.

Needless to say, most of these are substantial courses. How are they going to get these courses online by October? They plan to have seven teachers “invited to participate” over the summer to create them—with an honorarium of \$2,000.

It is clear that the group who proposed this project has no idea of what it takes to produce a quality online course. Tremendous up-front work is required if it is to be more than a guide to read some pages of text and answer some questions, which clearly does not fit with “a constructivist learning model.” If the teachers are able to produce a quality course in the time frame and for the cost indicated, it will be because they will have done hundreds of hours of work for which they will not have been adequately compensated, yet the result will belong to the board, not the teacher.

The VSB claims that “The cost of providing online learning to students will be the same as providing face-to-face instruction. Schools will have their staffing entitlement decreased based on the number of students enrolled in online courses and their staffing entitlement increased based on the number of teachers teaching online.”

Given the ministry encouragement to entrepreneurial activities, we can expect that the Vancouver virtual school will be followed quickly by other districts announcing their own virtual schools.

9. Loose-tight applied to distributed learning

The report of the Select Standing Committee on Education resurrects from the Royal Commission the management technique that it calls “loose–tight.” What that means is local authorities are given flexibility to make decisions, but are held accountable through audits and testing.

According to ministry sources, districts should expect tighter audits next year on distributed learning programs. If districts are found not to be meeting all the criteria that have now been clearly outlined, they may have all the money for a program taken away, not just for individual students. Teachers in the regional distance education schools have been told that the audit may go as far as having the auditors visit the homes of students to see that the criteria for funding are being met.

10. Issues Issues Issues

The expansion of distributed learning raises a number of issues that should be researched further. Some of these are practical, others are more philosophical, such as:

What is the completion rate for students in distributed learning compared both to the correspondence model and regular face-to-face instruction?

What are the characteristics of students who do well in distributed learning programs? What are the characteristics of students who do poorly in distributed learning programs?

What mix of online and face-to-face works best?

What are the conditions of teaching that best facilitate effective distributed learning?

What are the conceptions of knowledge, teaching and learning that are implicit or explicit in distributed learning programs?

What standards should be applied to the development of courses for distributed learning?

What should be the process for the evaluation and approval of learning resources for distributed learning?

What are the effects on social development and citizenship development of students being educated through distributed learning? What opportunities should be provided for group activities that include a range of students and teachers?

What kind of professional development would help teachers develop and offer programs using distributed education?

What kinds of assessment and evaluation are appropriate for students using distributed learning?

What are economic and cost factors for distributed learning? How are marketization and privatization related to distributed learning?

What will be the effect of continuing rapid developments of technology on distributed learning? Does the technology drive education or does education drive the technology used?

Will pre-determined online courses that are hard for a teacher to modify or are centrally determined, as in the Vancouver model, take away from the professional decision-making of teachers?