

# BCTF Research Report

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## Online education is not the same as home schooling

[www.bctf.ca/ResearchReports/2004ei01](http://www.bctf.ca/ResearchReports/2004ei01)

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Newspaper headlines claiming that religious materials have been banned for B.C. home schooling are wrong. No government policy—new or old—limits what resources parents can use to home school their children. Parents who register their children for home schooling have total control of teaching their children and using any resources they want to—whether or not that right is a good public policy.

Why, then, the complaints from home school parents that they can no longer use religious books to teach Math, English, or Social Studies to their children? The problem is confusion between students registered for home schooling, and those enrolled in a school district online program.

Some 28 school districts are now running some form of online program. Most of these are run by individual districts, while nine are part of the Connect Program of the Regional Distance Education Schools. Students in these programs are “enrolled” in a public school, which is different from being “registered” for home schooling.

Each student enrolled in a district online program brings the same \$5,343 basic education per-student grant into the school district as a student registered in a neighbourhood school. What comes with that funding is an obligation on the part of the district to provide “a level of teacher service comparable to a neighbourhood school.” (Plecas & Twynstra, 2004)

The educational service in a funded online program must meet four ministry criteria:

1. The school board is responsible for the education program of students enrolled in the school district;
2. Each student’s educational program must be supervised by a teacher;

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3. The student's educational program must follow the requirements that apply to students attending a regular school and be carried out by a teacher; and
4. Students must be evaluated and report cards from the teacher (with letter grades after Primary) issued three times a year, along with two informal reports.

(Text of the policy is online at [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/policy/policies/distance\\_ed.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/policy/policies/distance_ed.htm))

The key to this policy is that the school board and the teachers it employs are responsible for the education of the student. The parent is not the teacher. Enrolling in an online program is *not* home schooling.

According to the ministry, adequate supervision by the teacher must be demonstrated by five elements:

- Teacher course planning;
- Evidence that a teacher is leading the evaluation and assessment of students;
- Ongoing teacher reporting on student achievement;
- Ongoing teacher engagement in student learning;
- Ability to authenticate student work. [In other words, the student, not the parent, is doing the student's work.]

In addition, "learning resources must be selected from the Ministry's list of recommended resources or through local approval processes within a district." (Plecas & Twynstra, 2004) This requirement is the source of the news stories of home schooling parents feeling deceived.

Bobbi Plecas, from the Assessment Department, Ministry of Education, reminded her audience at the BCED Online conference that from the very beginning, the school law in B.C. has declared public education to be non-sectarian. There is legally no room for religion in the B.C. public schools, except for comparative religion courses. This goes beyond just resources—"Resources or modules, assessments, assignments, homework may not include a particular dogma or creed." (Plecas & Twynstra, 2004)

Ministry policies are absolutely clear—online education offered by public school boards is not the same thing as home schooling. Online education must follow the requirements for public schools.

## **Why the confusion between online education and home schooling?**

When online education began in British Columbia in 1994 with the creation of the Nechako Electronic Busing Program (E-bus) by School District 91, the ministry did not have the clear policies that are now in place. By implication, any student in a school district should be under the same regulations as any other student, but that was not explicitly stated.

In fact, the stated purpose of the E-bus was to bring home schooled students back in to the public system. The E-bus program said that they were not recruiting students to drop out of a regular school and go online. Rather, they contended that a public school teacher supporting the parent teaching their child at home would provide an education more like that of the public school. For some students, online programs would be a route back in to the regular classroom.

The role of the teacher was more that of a consultant to the parent-as-teacher, rather than in directly offering instruction to the student and evaluating the work of the student. Over the

decade of the program's existence, the E-bus, like most of the programs in the other 17 districts that had permission to run online education, moved toward meeting the requirements finally outlined by the ministry quite clearly in a 2002 policy statement.

However, the pitch to home school parents has seldom been clear in telling them that they are really putting their students back into a public school when they sign up for an online program offered by a public school district. Further, messages among parents in the home school network have compared how much leeway from the policy different programs would offer to parents.

The claim that the online programs would bring students back from being registered as home schoolers was accurate. In 1990, the first year of home school registration, a total of 2,453 home schoolers were identified. Numbers had nearly doubled, to 4,917, by 1996, the peak year. After that, as the E-bus and other programs were created, registration of home schoolers has declined steadily, down to 3,329 during the 2003–2004 school year.

Many of the parents signing up their children either were not aware of the ministry expectations of online programs, or expected that they would be able to get around them, perhaps with a wink-wink, nudge-nudge by those recruiting for the programs.

### **“Incentives” and “cash cows”**

Some districts have offered “incentives” for students to sign up to online programs. From the beginning, the Nechako E-bus offered to provide for free computers, software, trouble-shooting support, and Internet access for families from around the province. In the mid-1990s, that incentive was significant, but probably is less so now, with the ubiquity of home computers and Internet access.

Many districts have offered to reimburse parents for purchases of learning resources by as much as \$1,000 per student per year. This is one of the areas of contention, because no religious materials are supposed to be purchased with these public funds. In fact, the only legitimate purchases, according to ministry policy, are resources that fit either “the Ministry’s list of recommended resources or through local approval processes within the district.” (Plecas, 2004)

The issue of incentives has become more problematic with a number of changes in legislation and in ministry policy. “Choice” legislation gives every student the right to enroll in any school district in the province, regardless of where they live. Unless you live in the Lower Mainland or southern Vancouver Island, it isn’t very convenient to go to another district. But if you are signing up for an online program, location isn’t an impediment.

Two other key policy changes encouraged expansion of online distance education. In the late 1990s, a cap of 2,200 was put on the number of students in online programs, and only 18 districts had approval to offer programs, with a quota for each. Further, each online student brought a grant valued at half that for a student in a face-to-face school program. The government changed both these policies in 2002. Any district could offer a program to as many students as they wanted, and each online student would be funded the same as a face-to-face student.

In the context of frozen education budgets and open boundaries, online distance education became the one area of potential growth in funding for a school district. Districts did not want to lose students and their grants to other districts. But if they could attract students from another district, that would be even better. The most blatant of these situations is the New Westminster school district opening an online program, complete with drop-in classroom and a teacher, on Bowen Island in the West Vancouver school district.

Online programs were seen by some as a potential “cash cow.” Each student would bring full funding, but little service would have to be provided because parents would look after the education of their children. The extreme “cash cow” situation developed in the Gold Trail school district, with more than 600 students enrolled and just one educator to look after their education. The district offered an incentive of \$1,000 for parents to spend on resources. With so little personnel assigned to the program, parents clearly were not going to be bugged much about what materials they used.

While the ministry is prepared to demand that districts follow the programs and policies of the public school in its online programs, it is not prepared to tell districts that they could not offer “incentives.” This is an area of school district discretion. To direct that it stop would limit competition among districts, something that the province wants.

However, the ministry has identified some limits on financial incentives. Its “Key Areas for Clarification,” distributed at the BCED Online conference, states:

- It is appropriate to fund parents for education resources and activities that relate *directly* to a student’s education program.
- Examples of good practice are those programs that reimburse parents after legitimate receipts are submitted to resources and activities that relate directly to a student’s education program.
- Districts must make decisions on what is acceptable and must be able to defend their suggestions. (Plecas & Twynstra, 2004)

Defending decisions about what is acceptable may have a number of dimensions. One is whether the material is religious or not. According to the preliminary indications from the audit of ten district programs, some have approved paying for religious materials.

However, other questions about incentives may come up as well. If a district is funding an online student to attend a concert or to go to a camp, and does not offer the same opportunity to a student in a regular program, is that defensible? Teachers who have to charge their students to take part in activities, often with a contribution by the teacher, may not see it as equitable if online students get funded for such activities. The practices with incentives vary substantially from program to program. The offer of these incentives by some districts is driven by the competition for students between districts, rather than by the principle of equity.

## **The audits of distance education online programs**

Many people knew about the situation in the Gold Trail school district and felt it was wrong. It does not take an audit to know that one educator cannot offer a quality program to hundreds of students. At least some who knew about the situation complained to the ministry. The ministry sent in an auditor, whose report led to some \$2 million being reclaimed by the province, about 10% of the district budget, creating a crisis and cutbacks to the service throughout the district. (In the 2003–04 school year—after the audit—the Gold Trail program has 239 students and eight teachers.)

Now distance education programs have become a part of the regular audit cycle for the ministry. During the 2003–2004 school year, ten districts have been audited: Kootenay Lake, Kamloops/Thompson, Abbotsford, Southeast Kootenay, New Westminster, Langley, Boundary, Comox Valley, Mission, and Surrey.

The programs to be audited are chosen on the basis of several factors:

- Type of school;
- Public complaints;
- Geographic location—urban vs. rural;
- Have they been audited recently?

Assessment always influences practice. That is as true of audits as it is of standardized testing. The audit criteria are the real indicators of what the ministry is expecting in the way that online distance education programs are run. The ministry information, “Audit approach: An example” (Plecas & Twynstra, 2004) distributed at the BCED Online conference, gives some clarity in four areas of what the province is expecting in all online distance education programs. All of the following are quotes from the ministry document about what should be covered in the audit.

- A student’s educational program must be *supervised* by a person who is *a member of BCCT [BC College of Teachers]*.
  - Review course overviews, match to learning outcomes, individual learning plans for students.
  - Review teacher’s role in preparing assessment and reports. Look at historical documentation.
  - Through discussions and review of policies, will assess how the program defines the parent/teacher role.
  - Verify teacher’s membership.
- A school board is responsible for the educational program of the students enrolled in the school district.
  - Review the district’s role in terms of responsibility, authority, and student record management.
  - Look for defined roles, organizational structure, assigned responsibility for operations, sufficient technology infrastructure, financial commitment with clear budget lines, professional development opportunities for teachers, link to district activities and plans, a vision/mandate/purpose, PACs.
- The student must receive ongoing, regular assessments, progress reports, and letter grades.
  - Assess evidence of regular and ongoing interaction between school, teacher, and student.
  - Determine what processes the district has in place to authenticate student work.
  - Assess compliance with the MO [Ministry Order] on progress report standards and provincial letter grades.
  - How does the school deliver exams and FSA [Foundation Skills Assessment]?

- Approved Learning Resources
  - Determine if there is a process in place for approving learning resources within the district.
- Religious Material
  - Take a sample of textbooks and resources being used.
  - Take a sample of student work—compare it with the learning plan, student samples, courses list.

At the BCEd Online conference, Bobbi Plecas provided a summary of the general findings of the audit so far, and indicated that an overview and recommendations from the audit will be available by June 2004. The initial findings were:

- Student record-keeping is inconsistent.
- For programs wanting to expand, additional staff and resource commitments will be required.
- Most programs only offer services to students in their own district.
- Administrators of the programs are often stretched with other responsibilities.
- Some evidence of religious curriculum being used.
- Teachers feel isolated on how to access/develop courses or learning objects.
- The biggest area of concern is assessments and report cards.
- In some cases, there are blurred lines between home schoolers and DE [distance education] programs.
- Program staff identified concerns that a large number of students want to enroll after September 30th.

## **Implications of online education audits**

The criteria for audits have defined many aspects of online distance education programs that have been loosely defined until now. The process has been consistent with the “loose/tight” approach to governance that has been adopted by government. It has given school districts the responsibility, with very limited regulation, to create programs and to compete with one another. That is the “loose” part of the approach. The “tight” part comes with the audit and the criteria provided to the auditors to assess the programs. The message to school districts is that they have the freedom to offer programs they design and to compete with one another for students. But whether they will have funding for their programs taken away depends on an audit with criteria set by government.

Clearly there is an appropriate role for government in defining the conditions of public education. That definition should maintain lines between what is public and what is private, maintaining the public interest in public education. However, those conditions should be set out clearly in advance, so that the district officials and the teachers involved in creating programs know what the conditions and boundaries are. Parents should also have a clear understanding of what they are choosing when they decide to have their child enrolled in a public school program or registered in a home school program. Lack of clarity leads to unnecessary conflict.

Bobbi Plecas has indicated that the ministry will produce a summary audit report that will be posted on the ministry web site. Each district audited will receive its own report on the audit and the public will be able to have access to it through freedom of information requests. She said that some parents have already requested the reports to use them to make decisions about which program they want to choose for their children. An audit is not an assessment of the quality of education in a program. However, it will likely be used as that by some people.

As it happens, many of the criteria adopted in the audit process are positive policies for maintaining a quality public education system. They just should have been made clear in policy in advance, rather than in an audit process.

## **Expectations of online programs**

Pulling from the audit criteria and ministry policy and Ministerial Orders, these are expectations that parents, teachers, and the public should have of online programs:

- A student enrolled in an online program brings to the district the same basic funding as a student enrolled in any other program in the district.
- The online program must provide a level of teacher service comparable to a neighbourhood school.
- A member of the BC College of Teachers must supervise the educational program.
- Supervision includes course planning, evaluation and assessment, reporting, ongoing engagement in student learning and authentication of student work.
- A student's entire educational program must be secular. Resources or modules, assessments, assignments, homework may not include a particular dogma or creed.
- Learning resources must be selected from the Ministry's list of recommended resources or through local approval processes within a district.
- Funding of resources or activities must relate *directly* to a student's educational program.
- The educational program of a student cannot be contracted out, nor can delivery be contracted to an independent (private) school.
- Districts that offer an electronic program to students with special needs must follow the requirements and guidelines set out by the Ministry.

School districts should not wait until there is an audit and they face the potential clawback of ministry funding. They should act to ensure that their programs are meeting the criteria for online education within the public schools.

## **References**

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