BC’s “new” curriculum

1935—The Department of Education undergoes a “complete revision of all programmes” based on “a study of literature upon curriculum building and an examination of modern curricula produced elsewhere.”


The resulting project method “unusually blended progressive and social efficiency ideas, echoing contemporary US education trends.”


“While the basic subjects still must be given due prominence, not only the R’s are needed today; the three C’s are equally essential—Citizenship, Character, and Culture.”

—Letter in BC Teacher, 1938.

“Dr. King [in the Department of Education] imposes the method and the curriculum without first adequately preparing the teachers. In desperation, locals set up curriculum study groups. After school, teachers struggle to come to grips with the new system. In frustration, many leave the profession.”

—Stanley Hayes, A short story of the BCTF.

1939—The Chant Commission recommends a core of basic subjects to “serve as a base where basic education was always important, it was never more so than in our time because of the increasing complexity of the world in which we live.”


1968—Four teachers and BCTF staff travel across the province and receive hundreds of oral and written submissions about a vision for public education. The resulting book, Involvement: The key to a better school states that “education should be humanized and personalized.”

—Involvement: The key to better schools, BCTF, 1968.

“Today, nearly ten years after the shake-up, teachers in British Columbia can feel justifiably proud of the fact that their success in implementing the recommendations of the Chant Report has made it possible for our side to leap ahead in the space race. When an astronaut from Apollo 11 lands on the moon this summer, all teachers of the New Math will know in their hearts where most of the credit really belongs.”

—Speech given by Alan Davie as part of the “entertainment” for BCTF Golden Anniversary party, 1969.

1974—The Ministry establishes a core curriculum for all schools (defined as “that which must be taught” for success in “the world”) and introduces “pilot projects” to “examine the possibility of providing secondary school graduates with specific skills in addition to their general education graduation.”


The BCTF critiques the implication that “all children are alike, can and should learn the same thing at the same rate.” At the same time a large majority of teachers and the public agree with the intention of a provincial core curriculum.


“No one in the Ministry bothered to look carefully at the many previous attempts to establish core curricula in BC.”


“Once again teachers may be left to pick up the pieces of expectations shattered by the disparity between the promises of political announcements and the reality of a program that is philosophically misguided and operationally confused.”

—Larry Kuehn on the Core Education Preparation Program, Is the Ministry’s newest program a mistake?, BC Teacher, 1980.

1987—The Sullivan Commission aims to determine “the most appropriate and cost-effective means” to meet the objectives of a population well prepared to meet the rapidly changing challenges of everyday life in the 21st century.


1990—Drawing on the work of the Sullivan Commission, and in response to “dramatic social and economic changes,” the Ministry proposes a wide range of educational reforms known as the Year 2000. The overall aim is “to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.”


And now... BC’s New Curriculum

2011—The BC Education Plan states the challenge facing education as “an education system designed in the very different circumstances of an earlier century can’t possibly always meet the challenges students face—both now and in the future.” While “staying solid on the basics,” the plan sets out a vision for a more “flexible” system. The key focus, as seen in the 2015 updated plan, is on “personalized learning for every student.”

2015—The redesigned curriculum reiterates the same qualities of the educated citizen envisioned in 1989, stating that the “concept of the educated citizen will continue to guide education decisions for years to come.” This is “education for the 21st century.”


“For curriculum revision to succeed, government must provide adequate funding to support real implementation. And the Ministry must listen and consider teachers’ feedback about revised changes, not just now, but as formal implementation takes place over the coming years. If not, curriculum change could be destined to fail in ways similar to the past.”


“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.”

—Feedback from a BCTF member on curriculum change, Spring 2016.

Teachers are invited to join the conversation.

Curriculum change is a multi-faceted and complex process that requires ongoing discussion and debate, not only on what is happening (the nuts and bolts of implementation), but also why. How do you negotiate curriculum change as a potentially risky process? What does personalization look like in the particular time and place of your classroom? How do you understand flexibility in relation to diverse student needs and experiences? How do you and your students make sense of the promises of political learning?

Raise your questions at your School Staff Curriculum Committee or in Joint Education Change Committees at local and school levels. Engage with colleagues through the BCTF Teacher Inquiry Program and explore curriculum change in and through your practice.

Share your thoughts and perspectives as part of a multi-year research conversation on teacher-led curriculum change in BC. Contact us at lvingchange@bctfa.ca

Learn more

BCTF Online History Museum: bctf.ca/history

BCTF Education Change Bulletins: bctf.ca/EdChangebulletin

Members’ Guide to the BCTF curriculum policies, https://bctf.ca/s3sZg.