Executive Summary

This paper attempts to widen the discussion about twenty-first century learning beyond the parameters offered by recent BC Ministry of Education presentations and at the (November, 2010) BCSSA conference.

Sixteen years after “Schools” in the future: What has to change and why (The 21st century learning initiative, 1994) was published, and ten years into the new millennium, the government of British Columbia has launched a series of presentations concerning how learning and schooling might either evolve or be radically changed to incorporate some of the ideas articulated in the 1994 paper. This initiative reflects a welcome change in the sense that the government is sharing its thinking and ideas without launching into directives or policies, allowing for initial discussion and reaction, and for potential consultation and collaboration. However, they are late to the discussion, and well behind many BC public-school teachers, whose twenty-first century learning initiatives have been either thwarted by government policies or consistently ignored by government and ministers.
Six areas are considered in the paper:

- **The purposes of education: Why do we educate, and how do the ideas of 21st century learning advocates address this question?**

  The purposes of education is an area largely ignored by the 21st century learning advocates, yet there exists a range of literature that argues for a wider view of educational purposes that includes participation in communities, caring, and the creation of good and worthwhile lives in a just and sustainable world. Much of the current 21st century learning proposals discussed in BC focus too narrowly on economic goals and focus almost exclusively on the “means” of education (how to educate), rather than the “ends” (what kind of society the educational means is intended to create). The history of education shows that educational systems have reflected the interests of dominant classes in society, including, at different times in history, the church, merchant classes, industrialists, and, in some 21st century proposals, arguably the interests of high-tech, multinational corporations.

- **Trends in technology**

  There is no doubt that rapid technological change is changing the world and significantly impacting how all people learn and communicate. While trends are explored as possibilities, the future is unknown, and some statements of critical issues for schools that are articulated in the literature require greater discussion and, in some cases, challenge, than advocates for 21st century learning provide, in particular the assumption that all current educational systems are overly bureaucratic and lack innovation. Key issues include how technology trends are or may be influences on teaching and learning and how to incorporate appropriate new technologies into classrooms and schools.

- **21st century skills**

  There is an ever-expanding literature on 21st century skills, but much of it is less new than its advocates are claiming:

  The weight of empirical evidence clearly indicates substantially less skill upgrading of jobs than the heralds of the knowledge-based economy typically assume. Future discussions of increasing demand for more highly skilled knowledge workers should pay at least as much attention to the slower growing forest of routine data transmitting, service providing, and goods processing jobs as to the faster growing knowledge work trees. (Livingstone, 2004)

  Critical thinking, problem-solving, and inter-personal skills may have new labels but are old perennials. There exists a fundamental dichotomy between much of the rhetoric of 21st century skills, including personalized learning and the current accountability systems of large-scale testing, which are the antithesis of those 21st century learning concepts stated to date.

- **How the world is changing—some alternative perspectives on economic and societal trends**

  While the advocates of 21st century learning portray a brave new world of high-tech, high-pay economies, they ignore alternative analyses which argue that the future includes many low-pay service jobs and greater disparities between rich and poor. They also either ignore or pay lip-service to issues of social equity, especially where it occurs in high-performance countries such as Finland:

  The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture insists school performance is linked to a close attention to social equity issues. The Finnish childhood poverty
rate is one of the lowest in the industrialized world. Universal health and dental care, paid parental leave, and seamless social services are a given. (Ravani, 2010)

This section explores some alternative perspectives, including skeptical views of knowledge economies, and the impact of recent breakdowns in capitalist economies that have increased nation-states’ regulation on banks and bailouts of major corporations. By widening the focus on how the world is changing, it is possible to expand the “frame of thinking” beyond that recently proposed in ministry and conference presentations.

• **Other 21st century learning initiatives and literature**

  Training is a preparation for a future we know
  Education prepares for a future we don’t know.
  (Macdonald and Hursh, 2006)

There are some explorations of what kind of educational systems are needed in a changing world which are conveniently ignored by recent proponents of 21st century learning. They may be ignored because they offer both preceding and competing perspectives. The main area explored in the section is the Multiliteracies literature, which since its (1996) inception, has argued for changing approaches to teaching and learning while also recognizing diversity and communities as assets on which to build learning and societies.

The vision of learning in the future as articulated by the New London Group recognizes globalization and technological change while also addressing social and cultural contexts (especially multi-cultural urban environments) and critically challenging the hierarchical nature of “old capitalism” and, implicitly, educational systems that “sifted and sorted” students to meet the needs of industrial societies. The New London Group, as early as 1996, thus discussed twenty-first century learning, recognized the prevalence of technological change in a globalized world, yet also argued that technology was one tool to be used to educate for a world of social equity and inclusive diversity, where differences in languages and cultures were assets on which to build, not deficits to address.

• **BC teachers’ 21st century teaching practices**

Recent ministry presentations have made very generalized and tepid acknowledgments of current 21st century teaching and learning approaches in BC’s public schools. The paper shares just a few of many innovations that BC teachers have implemented with some support from their union but with minimal, if any, support or acknowledgment from a government that now conceptually promotes the very practices it has ignored for some years.

The paper concludes with a series of questions in four areas, to stimulate ideas and conversations about 21st century learning within the union.

The four areas are:

• **What should be “in the frame” of a vision for 21st century learning?**
• **How might systemic changes be made to support 21st century learning?**
• **What changes in individual teaching practice might support 21st century learning?**
• **How might the BCTF position itself to best support teachers’ and learners’ needs?**

Charlie Naylor, Ph.D.
BCTF Research
January 2011
Questions for discussion

What does “teaching and learning in the 21st century” mean?

Is it a specific idea about the future of education? Is it primarily about technology?

Or should it be considered as a more general invitation to talk about future directions and current barriers?

What are the purposes of public education? Have these changed because of economic, social, and technological change?

Has your practice changed to fit current realities?

What changes in educational practice would you like to make?

What are the barriers you face in making the changes you believe would be more effective?

What are the supports that you need?

What systemic changes should be made to support teaching and learning in the 21st century?

What would you like the BCTF to do to best support teachers’ and learners’ needs?

Tell your story: What are your current practices that already reflect the economic, social, and technological changes that have taken place? Send to 21stCentury@bctf.ca.

Please take the time to read and discuss the paper; it can be found on the BCTF web site, at http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/21CL/21CL-DiscussionPaper.pdf.

Printed copies are also available on the Research display table in the foyer during the AGM.

DISTRIBUTION: 2011 Annual General Meeting