

BCTF Research Report

Part of the BCTF Information Handbook

SECTION V
2011-EF-03

Personalized Learning? Is there anything new in the Ministry of Education Service Plan for 2011–12?

<http://www.bctf.ca/publications.aspx?id=5630>

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February 2011

Each time a provincial budget is released, along with it comes a “service plan” for each of the ministries. It is supposed to be the minister’s accountability report. So what’s new this year?

The minister isn’t new. Although she was replaced for a short time, Margaret MacDiarmid is back in the role of minister. Unlike some previous plans where teachers were not even mentioned, this time teachers are referred to several times in the report.

The purpose for education is repeatedly put in economic terms, preparing students for the world of work. Some examples: Increased competition in the global economy, improving the productivity of BC’s workforce, employers are looking for..., skill shortages in its labour market, lifelong learning so that every adult in the province has the 21st-century skills they need to succeed.

Not surprisingly, given the talk in education circles in the past few months, the recurrent theme in the service plan involves “personalization,” “technology,” and “skills for the 21st Century.” Just what do these terms mean?

The one concrete thing is distributed learning. The report touts that “Nearly one-third of all graduating students have participated in a distributed learning course...that reflects the ministry’s commitment to personalized learning and the principles of supporting the individual needs and interests of each learner.”

“Online and distributed learning, offering more personalized schooling choices, more than doubled in demand between 2006–07 and 2009–10 to over 71,000 students.” Note that this does not say that 71,000 students were successful in distributed learning courses. In fact, the ministry has acknowledged elsewhere that it does not really know what the level of completion is in these courses.

Is anything else concrete in defining “personalized learning?” Not really.

One strategy for personalized learning is to “Develop new forms of schooling to support the unique needs and interests of students.” Another is to explore “other assessment processes that would provide developmental information at the individual learner level.”

The ministry will “Revise and streamline curriculum to better accommodate the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the 21st century, and to offer more personalized programming and instruction tailored to students’ interests.”

Included in the ways of providing personalized learning is “Continue to support family choice through independent schools and home schooling options.” A quick check of funding increases shows that once again the private schools get a larger percentage increase in funding than do the public schools.

The ministry also promises to “Support the development of networks among school districts, schools, and teachers to build capacity in teaching and share practices throughout the province.” No sign of the money for these in the budget, though.

Perhaps most significant among announced plans is to publish “a new and improved suite of goals, objectives, strategies, and performance measures tied to personalized and 21st-century learning.” Is that how we will find out what “personalization” means?

The report card on the service plan also addresses the FSA results. It identifies the percentage of students who “meet expectations.” This percentage is based on the total number of students in Grades 4 and 7. The impact of this is to count a student who does not take the test as one who is not meeting expectations.

The ministry acknowledges that if they reported the percentage of those who took the test, not including those whose parents withdrew them, the results would be nearly 10% higher than those reported.

A significant portion of the service plan is dedicated to Aboriginal students. The report indicates that 51 of 60 school districts have signed an Aboriginal enhancement agreement that involves “shared decision making and specific goal-setting to meet the educational needs and interests of Aboriginal students.” The minister’s statement claims “These agreements ensure that Aboriginal culture is integrated into public schools, and Aboriginal communities are involved in the design of programs, services, and curriculum delivery for our Aboriginal students.”

The service plan ends with information about major capital projects. Most of them have included space for a neighbourhood learning centre in the new school design, but no new funding is announced for operating these centres.