

Trades training and transformation touted: Ministry priorities for 2013–14, according to the *Service Plan*

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A service plan for every ministry is published every time the government tables the provincial budget. I've never seen anyone else write about these plans, so maybe I'm the only one who reads them. They do provide some idea of what priorities one can expect to see from the ministry—and often are as telling in what they do not say, as in what they do say.

In the Ministry of Education *2013/14–2015/16 Service Plan*¹ published in February 2013, two things stand out: trades training, and lack of context for the “transformation” being touted in the *BC Education Plan*.

Increase trades training, but where are the teachers?

One thing that both the BC Liberals and the NDP have in common, judging by the public statements in the pre-campaign period, is that BC is facing a shortage of skilled workers and that emphasis must be placed on getting students into trades training.

You can tell the ministry has been told to get action on trades training. References to trades training appear in nearly every section of the *Service Plan*. The key strategy identified is “Working with school districts to set clear targets and accountabilities for increased trades training enrolment, improved trades promotion and expanded partnerships with industry and post-secondary institutions.”

In no other objective in the *Service Plan* is direction this clear to school districts. Watch for trades training to appear on board agendas as the districts try to grapple with how to make trades training numbers boost by 50%.

This objective is illustrative of the central weakness in the whole “transformation” that is supposed to take place through the *BC Education Plan*: directions are being set and strategies developed that do not take into account the context.

In the case of trades training, the task is not as simple as just getting counsellors to talk to students with a message that they should consider trades as an option. The schools don't have the staffing and facilities to expand programs within existing resources. Technology Education courses are already overloaded beyond the levels of safety, and very few trades-trained teachers are available. No adequate approach exists currently to bring people with the Red Seal (trades certification) to get teacher qualification, or to support qualified teachers to get the Red Seal.

The *Service Plan* says the Ministry will “Ensue the availability of teachers delivering trades and technical training, and help school districts coordinated regional sessions to review labour needs and opportunities.” Will the teachers appear out of a hat? And are we to expect that school boards are now labour-market planners?

¹ <http://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2013/sp/pdf/ministry/educ.pdf>

Certainly, some dual-credit programs exist, where students get credit both toward high school graduation as well as credit at a post-secondary institution for initial courses in a program. But expand them by 50%? Where are the resources to accomplish this goal? Which of the under-resourced institutions is going to shift resources from another part of their program? Will this program, by default, lead to college teaching staff offering secondary-school credits?

School readiness—but nothing on alleviating childhood poverty

The *Service Plan* rightly praises the Early Development Index (EDI), which involves Kindergarten teachers doing assessments in five areas of development—health, social competence, language development, emotional maturity and communication skills. EDI identifies students who are not developmentally ready to enter school, and the EDI should provide information that allows those students to get additional help to support their development.

Of course, the schools are not where those five areas of readiness are developed before children are in Kindergarten. They are what the child brings from home when the child enters Kindergarten.

So how do we help more children be ready for school the first day they walk in the school? The government's response is to say that readiness will be developed through StrongStart programs, and school districts will “reach out to parents of pre-school-aged children” to get their children “developmentally ready” to learn. What can the school district do for these pre-school children—another mandate without resources?

Poverty is not the only factor in school-readiness, but it is a significant one. Pretty clear evidence links the kind of social supports and cognitive enrichment that a child has in the home as a key element of school readiness. A family living in poverty has less ability to offer these developmental supports.

Again, the ministry ignores key elements of the context. Poverty affects development. BC has among the highest rates of poverty in the country. So does government have a plan to eliminate child poverty as an approach to increasing school readiness? Nope.

Ministry “supporting teachers”—but not by providing better conditions

Teachers would be happy if this ministry-stated goal in the *Service Plan* were a reality: “Goal 2: Effective support for teachers.” The ministry could achieve this goal of support for teachers by reducing class sizes, providing more specialist support, offering more preparation time.

But what does the ministry offer in support of teachers?

The ministry claims that it administers the teaching profession “in a way that ensures high standards and puts student success and the public interest first.” That is code for imposing the Teacher Regulation Branch.

The ministry *Service Plan* offers a “10-Year Agreement” to provide “certainty and stability for all partners in the education system.” Where has that idea gone?

Further, the ministry “Improv(es) oversight for the teaching profession, including performance management and incentives.” That is code for stripping the collective agreement of seniority and fair evaluation provisions.

And the ministry claims communications with teachers have improved—through the Teacher Regulation Branch publication, *Learn Magazine*. They forgot to mention that the minister uses

the addresses from the Teacher Regulation Branch to send e-mail messages directly to all teachers.

From reading this section of the plan, it seems the ministry forgot to ask for teacher views on what would be “effective support for teachers.” Or they failed to listen.

Assessment and reporting—every tool shapes the task

Assessment and reporting drive much of classroom practice. No matter how many times one hears that the curriculum is flexible, requirements are broad and not specific, or every student will have a personalized program, the real story will be in what and how you assess and report.

It’s fine to spend time on developing curriculum before assessment, as is happening with the *BC Education Plan*. It’s fine to talk about cross-curricular content and competencies. In theory, you should develop curriculum first, then develop an assessment and reporting system that fits the form and assumptions of curriculum.

But the reality is that whatever you think about curriculum, the real curriculum will not be known until you have clearly described the assessment approaches that go with it.

The confused mix of ideas on assessment in the *Service Plan* reflect the lack of real clarity about what the *BC Education Plan* is about. This is what the *Service Plan* says—all in the same paragraph—under “High standards for individual students”:

Student progress will continue to be monitored through rigorous province-wide assessments. Effective classroom assessment practices are essential to student success and will be even more vital in a more personalized learning environment. Educators will have the ability to decide how and when each student is assessed. New tools are being developed to provide greater access and transparency, richer information, and more consistency across the province on student progress. Regular reporting to parents both formally and informally will be enhanced.

Is there a contradiction here? Educators will decide how each child is assessed—and there will be more consistency across the province.

This paragraph can be understood as coherent only if one accepts the premise that **personalization requires more standardization**.

The form of personalization will not be one of exploring to see what can be seen, where the journey, not the destination is the purpose, an ideal proposed by Dewey, among others.

Rather, it will be one where the student has choices, but there are a limited number of possible destinations and the choice is really about which of several pre-mapped routes there are to take to get there—a consumer model of personalization.

The “new tools” are key here. What are these “new tools” described in the paragraph that provide for the teacher’s decision about which to use and consistency across the province at the same time? This is the new version of BCeSIS the ministry has called for in a Request for Proposals. The RFP is for a system much more complex and flexible than BCeSIS, but that will standardize in the way it defines the different routes to pre-determined ends.

A detailed examination of the RFP for the child of BCeSIS is available on the BCTF website at <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/ResearchReports/RR2013-03.pdf> .

Critical thinking about the *BC Education Plan*

“Transformation” of the education system is central to the *BC Education Plan* and the *Service Plan* and should be subject to critical thinking by teachers and everyone else with a stake in public education.

Everyone thinks that students developing “critical thinking” should be an important aspect of what we are about in public education. For teachers to teach critical thinking, they must be able to exercise critical thinking themselves, including in thinking about the *BC Education Plan*. But what kind of critical thinking?

One form of critical thinking is being flexible and analytical in one’s way of thinking so one can find the best way to reach a pre-determined goal, *often chosen by someone else*. This version of critical thinking would define the new system, and then ask teachers to be critical thinkers about how to achieve it.

Another type of critical thinking is being able to look at the goal and ask if it is the right one, and if not, choose a different goal and how to get there.

Which type of critical thinking is the ministry hoping to promote to teachers and students in the planned “transformation”?