

# **BCTF Research Report**

Part of the BCTF Information Handbook

Section XII  
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## **Distributed Learning in British Columbia Schools 2006–07**

*bctf.ca/publications.aspx?id=5630*

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### **1. Background on distributed learning in British Columbia**

The British Columbia public education system has offered correspondence courses for BC students since early in the 20th century. These were printed courses, delivered by the postal system. Students completed assignments and mailed them in. They were then marked and returned to the student. Students who used these courses were primarily those traveling out of the province for an extended period of time and students in areas where they were too isolated to have access to a school or where their school had too few students to offer a course.

The first significant change in the program was the creation of nine distance education schools around the province, rather than having one correspondence department at the Ministry of Education in Victoria. Teachers and markers (who did not need a teaching certificate) were employed by the school district in which they were located. Having teachers in the regions meant that some of the students could have personal contact with the school, with the teacher sometimes going out to visit the homes. Telephone contact became a part of the program as well.

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## **Online programs introduced**

The next major change was the introduction of computers and the Internet. The first program to use these technologies, called the E-bus, was created in the Nechako School District in 1995. This program identified students being home schooled as its primary source of students. The Ministry of Education approved this as a pilot program and provided funding for students registered with the E-bus at about half the funding for students in the regular public schools.

The new *School Act* adopted in 1989 recognized home schooling, only requiring that parents register their child with a public or independent school, and then the parent could be the instructor for the child. In the first few years of the registered home schools, the number grew rapidly to more than 4000. When the E-bus opened, that number stabilized and began to decline. In the early years, the E-bus repeatedly said that it was seeking students being home schooled and not trying to get students to switch from face-to-face classrooms. They identified the parent as the teacher of their students, with the public school teacher being, in essence, a consultant to the parent teacher.

This program grew rapidly and a number of other districts became interested in offering online programs. The nine regional distance education schools were also quite concerned that they would lose students who were on correspondence programs if they were not able also to offer the option of online programs. The ministry responded with an expanded pilot program with a cap of 2,200 students, with a quota assigned to 18 districts. The E-bus was allowed to hold about a third of the student places, the nine regional distance education schools got about half of the positions and the other eight districts were allowed small programs.

The early programs offered free technology access as an incentive for parents to put their children on the programs. That included computers and Internet access, some technical support, and access to some software. Some of the programs also offered reimbursement for parent purchases of learning resources, for taking their children on their own field trips, and for swimming and other physical activities. Some of the parents purchased faith-based learning resources and some of the work they had their children do was based on religious material.

## **Rapid expansion of online programs**

The next major shift was in 2002, when the new BC Liberal government removed the cap on the number of students and the limitations on which school districts could offer online programs. This was consistent with the shift in government policy to promote competition, with the contention that it would improve education. It also coincided with significant cuts in education funding. Bringing in students for online programs was one of the few ways that a district could increase its funding. Not offering a program meant that the district might be losing students and funding to another district.

The growth in enrolments was rapid. In the 2004–05 school year, ministry auditors reported 27,000 students were registered in programs, with about 9,000 full time equivalent enrollments when one accounted for students taking less than a full program of courses.

Even as the province deregulated who could offer programs, problems—some present from the beginning, others as fallout from rapid expansion—lead to new regulations. The small Gold Trail School District had signed up more than 600 students from around the

province, all assigned to one school administrator. They used the funds the 600 students brought the district to offer other programs for students in the face-to-face programs that would not have been possible, overcoming the impact of the provincial budget cuts. Other districts complained and the ministry took action. It sent in auditors and then required the district to return most of the funding because the district was not providing much service to the 600 students. The district is still repaying a deficit, with funds that would otherwise be available for services to the students in the district.

### **Online public school programs could no longer be home schooling**

The ministry also decided to make it clear that online programs offered by public schools and funded by the government must be public school programs and not home schooling. The summary of policy on the ministry web site says:

- School Boards are responsible for the educational program;
- BC certified teachers lead the education program;
- Students taking distributed learning must meet the same course requirements as any other student;
- Courses taken through distributed learning are equivalent to the same course taken in a classroom.

[[http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist\\_learning/policy.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist_learning/policy.htm)]

Auditors were sent in to audit several school district programs each year. They were looking to ensure that these were public school programs and not home schooling. The auditors looked at program records to see that it was teachers who were designing programs and assessing the students, not parents. They also reviewed work done by students and information about the learning resources used to ensure they were not religious, to meet the requirement of the *School Act* that public education is secular. Some programs had funding clawed back because they found student work that was religious.

### **Virtual school announced**

The Throne Speech in February 2006 announced that BC would be creating a virtual school. As is usual in these speeches, few details were announced—those were to come with Bill 33 in May of 2006. It left open to speculation how this new program would relate to what came before.

## **2. Bill 33 and the new framework for distributed learning**

Most of the attention when Bill 33 was passed went to the provisions related to class sizes and the number of students with special needs in a class. Bill 33 also had significant sections that redefined the situation with distributed learning in BC and provided the legal framework for the policies that would shape the new look of online learning.

Bill 33 defined “distributed learning” in a way that combined the traditional correspondence courses with a delivery of education by various new media, including online programs:

**“distributed learning”** means a method of instruction that relies primarily on indirect communication between students and teachers, including internet or other electronic-based delivery, teleconferencing or correspondence; (*School Act* definitions)

It is further defined on the ministry web site:

Distributed Learning is a choice for students in BC. Distributed Learning takes place when a student is primarily at a distance from the teacher, whether the student is at home or connecting to teachers from another learning facility.

Bill 33 also required school boards to fall in line if they wanted to offer distributed learning and brought a new blending of the public and private school systems, as described in the next two sections. The legislation opened more “choice” for Grade 10, 11, and 12 students who could now take distributed learning courses from any school district program approved by the ministry.

### **3. Control of distributed learning through a “Distributed Learning Agreement”**

Provisions of Bill 33 also created a new form of regulation of educational programs by the Ministry of Education. The legislation did this by requiring in Section 75 (4.1) that a board “may provide all or part of an educational program by means of distributed learning only with the prior agreement of the minister of education.” The form used to provide this prior agreement of the minister is a formal contract called a “Distributed Learning Agreement.”

These agreements are very effective means of central control over distributed learning. The contracts—for only a one-year term—set out what school districts must do. The one-year term ensures that if the school district does not follow the terms of the agreement, the province can end the program just by not offering another contract the next year. The ministry can also terminate the agreement mid-year if the school district fails to comply with any provision of the agreement or provides information that “is materially untrue or incorrect.” These are much more effective forms of control than audits or imposed administrators, the forms of enforcement that have traditionally been used to ensure boards follow provincial requirements.

#### **Requirements of school districts in the agreement**

The school district agrees it will (quotes are from the standard contract on the ministry web site):

“...provide the highest quality, interactive and engaging learning opportunities and assessments that are suited to students’ individual needs...”

“...work to meet or exceed the Distributed Learning Standards...”

“...work to align its website with criteria established in discussion with the Ministry.”

“...ensure that it has supplemental supports in place ...and in particular Special Education, Aboriginal Education and English-as-a-Second Language supports.”

“...allocate and be able to demonstrate that the funds allocated to it by the Ministry are used to support Students taking courses or programs through Distributed Learning. The process for determining how much funding to

allocate to both direct and indirect costs by both the School and the School District (e.g. instruction, technology) must be transparent.”

“...provide training and professional development for Teachers who deliver all or part of an educational program by means of Distributed Learning.”

“...only employ Teachers delivering all or part of an educational program through Distributed Learning who have experience or training in teaching using Distributed Learning methods.”

## **Reimbursements to students and parents**

This section is aimed at stopping the widespread practice of offering “incentives” for students to sign up with a specific program. These had included providing computers, software, and reimbursement for many expenditures by parents. The practice had been the opposite of student fees charged by the face-to-face school. Parents collected from the online programs for materials and field trips, instead of paying for them. Section 12 of the contract covers the new rules:

**12.01** If the School District uses a third party to provide educational services, materials, educational resources, or supplies to Students, the School District must

(a) ensure that the educational services, materials, educational resources, or supplies are part of the educational program supervised by an employee of the School District who is a member of the British Columbia College of Teachers, and

(b) subject to paragraph 12.02, pay the third party directly and not the Parent of the Student or any other person.

**12.02** The School District may provide financial assistance to Students or Parents for a portion of Internet connections fees only, if the Students requires an Internet Connection to participate in an educational program delivered in whole or in part through Distributed Learning, a course delivered through Distributed Learning, or at a Distributed Learning School.

**12.03** Subject to Paragraphs 12.01 and 12.02, the School District may not provide financial payments or reimbursements to Students or Parents. The School District may lend, not give, equipment that is part of the educational program (such as computers) to Students or Parents.

## **Records and reports**

Provisions for records and reports are aimed at ensuring the funding is provided only for a student who is an “active participant.” In the past, school districts would receive funding for students if they were registered with the distributed learning program by September 30. Schools could have many more students registered than were actually doing the schoolwork on an ongoing basis. However, if a student enrolled after the fixed date to determine funding, the school would be offering the program with no funding from the ministry for that particular student.

Under the terms of the contract, if students withdraw the date and reason are required. Student and parent satisfaction must be measured at least once a year. This provision

leads in the direction of posting reviews of particular courses, much like Amazon publishes reader reviews—taking the system further in the direction of seeing participants as customers rather than students.

Being an active participant requires that the student complete at least one assignment between the time they sign up and one of the four dates during the year where the distributed learning program is required to report on the number of students for funding purposes. A student on the books on September 30 must complete an assignment by October 31, or the school will receive no further funding for them.

### **Foundation Skills Assessments**

The contract says: “The School District must work to achieve 90% participation rate of Students who take all or part of their educational program through Distributed Learning in either the Foundation Skills Assessments or an equivalent assessment to be determined by the Ministry.”

### **Key elements of distributed education privatized**

Some of the conditions of compliance required by the agreement provide for privatization of standards, curriculum, and registration for distributed learning programs.

Section 7.01 of the contract requires compliance with the act and regulations, orders, and policies of the ministry, but also “the Distributed Learning Standards set out in Schedule A” to this agreement.” These standards were not developed by the ministry, but rather by BCED Online, a society created to carry out activities like professional development and development of standards. It is funded partially by school district members and through project funding from the ministry and is run by a board made up primarily of district administrators. Some teachers were involved before it became formalized and excluded teachers from its board.

The agreement also requires that the school district become a member of the “BC Virtual School Society,” another society set up to carry out work determined by, but not delivered by, government. The district must make information about its courses available through the BC Virtual School web site and have students enroll in courses through the web site.

If the agreement is renewed after the first year, the district must also pay five per cent of student and course funding that it receives from the ministry to the BC Virtual School Society for “development costs,” presumably meaning for the development of course materials to be used in distributed learning.

As of November 1, 2006, 45 school districts were listed through the ministry web site as having signed the agreement and been approved for offering distributed learning courses.

The full text of the standard agreement can be found on the ministry web site at [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist\\_learning/policy.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist_learning/policy.htm).

#### **4. LearnNowBC is the name given the distributed learning program**

When the virtual distributed learning school was formally announced, it was given the name LearnNowBC, although its URL is *www.mybcschool.gov.bc.ca/*.

The program is structured so that registration must take place through the government web site, allowing provincial authorities to ensure that only authorized programs are enrolling students. When LearnNowBC was announced on October 21, the ministry said that 47 school districts were offering distributed programs and that 17,000 students are currently registered in these programs.

The ministry press release said that \$1 million had been spent on the LearnNowBC and that another \$5 million was budgeted to additions to the web site and further services. Currently the web site has links to online tutoring for math and science for Grade 10, as well as “academic advice,” essentially phone counselling of students. Library service is linked not to school libraries, but “to all the public libraries in the province, you will be able to access the new ‘AskAway’ virtual reference service.”

#### **5. Incursion of private schools into public education**

Bill 33 introduced an entirely new element into public education in British Columbia, opening the door to religious education for students earning a Dogwood graduation certificate in the public schools.

Public education in BC has been by law secular and non-sectarian going back to its origins in the *Common School Act, 1865*, even before BC became a province. Private schools did not receive any public funding, until the *Independent School Act* in 1977. Now the government has moved a step further in removing boundaries between the public and private.

The new Section 3.1 of the *School Act* permits public school students in Grades 10 to 12 to take distributed learning courses from either public or independent schools. Students in independent schools can register for distributed learning courses in public schools. Students can be registered in a school in one system and also register for courses on a course-by-course basis in the other system. Schools in both the public and private systems are required by provisions of Bill 33 to provide to the other information about students who have completed credits in a distributed learning program.

At least one religious independent school has advertised through letters to public school principals and counsellors that it is seeking public school students to take courses that have religious content, clearly outside the secular requirements of the *School Act*.

#### **6. Policies of the BCTF on distributed learning**

Although distributed learning has gained more profile because of the promotion of it by the provincial government, some programs have been operating for more than a decade and the BCTF has considered policies related to distributed learning.

The new ministry policies have responded to some of the concerns that led to BCTF policies, such as the concern about districts providing incentives, such as free computers and reimbursement for resources and activities.

The existing policies should be reviewed in the context of the changes in the programs. The policies currently say:

### **51.11—Distributed Learning**

That BCTF policy on distributed learning be:

1. Distributed learning remains a positive offering within the BC public school system when fully supported by adequate staffing, funding and resources within provincial guidelines.
2. Distributed learning should not be used in place of sufficient staffing or adequate facilities.
3.
  - a. Distributed learning and electronic delivery of public education programs should be delivered under the provision of the collective agreement.
  - b. Distributed learning programs and courses in BC public schools should be equivalent to other programs and courses in curriculum, assessment and reporting.
4. Policies on distributed learning should be adopted by any school district that intends to use distributed learning for any of its students, either in its own district, or in conjunction with another district that runs programs:
  - a. the teacher local should be involved in the formulation of the policy;
  - b. the policy should include criteria and processes for making a decision on whether distributed learning is an appropriate placement;
  - c. the policy should consider the social purposes of education, as well as the educational development of individuals.
5. The school district in which any public school student lives should receive funding for that student. Decisions on requests to place the student in a distributed learning program should be made by the school district according to established criteria and processes. If a school district believes that an out-of-district distributed learning placement is most appropriate, then it should make enrolment and financial arrangements with the other district.
6. Development of learning resources for distributed learning should be directed by the Ministry of Education, and BCTF members, identified through the BCTF process, should be involved in the development of the resources and compensated according to their rate of pay under the collective agreement provisions that apply in their local.
7. Distributed learning programs should not include marketing learning materials, courses and programs outside of BC.
8. There should be no financial or other incentive for parents or school districts to enrol students in one program over another.

(01 AGM, p. 42-43)

9. That locals should ensure that all distributed learning courses and programs are being offered by qualified teachers who are members of our bargaining unit.



**51.13**—That locals be encouraged to develop policies on distributed learning that include a statement of where distributed learning may be used appropriately, the appropriate conditions for the work of teachers using distributed learning and transparency in budgets for distributed learning and that locals use these policies in attempts to influence school district practices.

(Jan./Feb. RA 03 p. 17)

**51.15**—1. That the BCTF opposes allowing Grade 10–12 students in the public schools taking courses in the independent distributed learning programs.

2. That the BCTF supports legislation and policies that ensure quality public school distributed education programs.

3. That public education programs, such as distributed learning, should be carried out through public institutions, not private societies.

4. That distributed learning programs not be promoted as better than classroom-based programs or be used to replace classroom-based programs in schools.

5. That locals be made aware of the possible implications for staffing, transfers, and layoffs from some distributed learning programs not meeting the ministry conditions by May 31 and thus not able to offer distributed learning programs.

(May 06 Ex., p. 12)

**51.17—BCeSIS**

That the BCTF opposes the implementation of the British Columbia electronic Student Information System.

(Feb. 05 RA, p. 5)

## **7. Working conditions of teachers working in distributed learning**

While teaching in a distributed program has many similarities to other types of teaching, it also has many differences. The nature of work in distributed learning has not been addressed at the bargaining table and no provisions specific to distributed learning exist currently.

In addition, the class size and class composition limits defined by legislation explicitly exclude distributed learning from those provisions.

With the growth of distributed learning, it is essential to address issues of concern about working conditions. As an initial step, the BCTF Research Department has initiated a research project on the nature of the work and working conditions in distributed learning programs.

Similar issues are facing teacher unions across Canada. The Canadian Teachers' Federation is co-sponsoring with the BCTF a seminar on working conditions in distributed learning to be held in February 2007. It is expected that a report from that seminar will suggest some future directions in policy.

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