

**Summary Report: Meeting of Board Chairs, Branch Presidents,  
Provincial Councillors and Ministry of Education  
Friday, October 22, 2010**

This report is a summary of the presentations and discussion that took place when BCSTA board members, Provincial Councillors and school board chairs met with Ministry of Education officials to learn more about the Ministry's vision for personalized learning. Included in the report is a summary of questions and comments raised by individual trustees at the meeting, and as such, do not represent the position or opinion of the BCSTA.

**Opening remarks by BCSTA President Connie Denesiuk**

President Denesiuk opened the meeting and described the goal as: "to discuss how local boards and the Ministry of Education together can shape a vision for learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to consider how to translate that vision into valued and sustainable programs for our students."

"It is critical that boards of education and the Ministry bring our ideas and efforts together," said Denesiuk. "As the leaders of public education we have a unique opportunity – and a responsibility – to work together to shape a vision and develop programs that will improve education for all students in our province."

Denesiuk also urged trustees to carry on these conversations back in their communities with partner groups, parents and students. "As co-governors we will also need to consider how our policies and legislation might be changed to enable the vision – for we know that good practices in the classroom stand on a foundation of good governance."

**Remarks by Deputy Education Minister James Gorman**

Deputy Minister Gorman recalled the Throne Speech of February 2010 being the first time personalized learning was introduced.

Deputy Minister Gorman cited the bold statements made by government in its Throne Speech:

- Reforms to advance to modernize our education system for 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Increased parental involvement and engagement.
- New forms of schooling.
- Smarter approaches to allow resources to be focused on students' needs.
- Recognizing and responding to individual needs.
- Flexibility in when and where and how learning takes place, not always in a classroom. Teachers as facilitators of learning, supported by technology.
- Focus on student outcomes rather than system inputs.

Conversations began at the Ministry about this vision and what is meant by "personalized learning" – and how it would mean a shift in public education. In August, the Ministry began those conversations with various stakeholders on this new vision.

By any measure, BC has a high-performing education system – fifth in the world, among the top three provinces in science, reading and math. BC has some of the highest transition rates to postsecondary education. Like other high performers, the high-school completion rate hovers at about 80 per cent; this drops to just over 50 per cent for Aboriginal students.

The Deputy Minister noted a changing environment: demographic shifts, declining enrollment, struggling economy, increasing health care costs, etc. This leads to concerns about competitiveness, changes in use of technology and the ability of our education system to keep up. He also noted that feedback from postsecondary institutions, employers and parents is that too many students leave school without the relevant skills they need to prepare them for work and life.

**Remarks by Superintendent of Achievement Rod Allen**

Superintendent of Achievement Rod Allen discussed the Ministry's role in implementing personalized learning: how it is working with government to translate the vision set out in the Throne Speech into policy. A key part of that work is involving the field in articulating and implementing the vision for personalized learning, ensuring that policy and work align.

Students are often more comfortable and adept at using technology than their teachers.

The second example highlights the difference between *knowing* something and *understanding* it. Until now, the system has devoted more time to *knowing*. The curricula are fact-based; teachers have to "cover" topics.

Traditional learning involves the ability to accept facts as provided, to learn how to compute without always understanding the subject matter or its applicability – taking notes quickly and accurately; retrieving/transcribing information previously acquired. Mental and emotional concerns are parked for large periods of the day; students sit still for much of their time in school.

There is a broader understanding of how humans learn – including that learning is ideally active and social. Learners start from different places to get to the same end.

Mr. Allen presented two lists of skills. The first list is what the public education system has concentrated on until now:

- Reading
- Writing
- Arithmetic.

There is a second list – additional skills required for this century – that is increasingly seen in more contemporary learning situations related to critical thinking and problem-solving:

- Critical thinking and problem-solving
- Creativity and innovation
- Collaboration, teamwork and leadership
- Cross-cultural understanding
- Communications, computing and ICT (Information, Communications and Technology) literacy
- Career and learning self-reliance
- Caring for personal health and planet earth.

Mr. Allen asked participants to imagine what education could look like in the future, with a focus on personalized learning, asking, “What if things started getting packaged in terms of kids’ needs, passions?”

- Schools would provide the foundational skills
- Students would one day choose from a menu of courses and perhaps encourage independent study
- Student-initiated, self-directed, interdisciplinary learning with the teacher as facilitator
- Co-planning with parents and teachers
- Students wouldn’t just sit in a class because they need to graduate.

The Ministry has been consulting with international education experts to better understand national and international perspectives on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, such as:

- The idea that learning could be made more relevant through a community of learning that involves parents, mentors, coaches, supporters. Feedback should be encouraged from the students about what works for them, what doesn’t.
- establishing a learning society that is everyone’s responsibility.

Mr. Allen emphasized that parents, teachers, and – most important, students – need to be part of the conversation on personalized learning. In the future, there will be a different idea of who leads the learning experience. Learning must become reciprocal between students, teachers and parents.

He concluded his remarks by looking at ways the Ministry can enable personalized learning to occur across the province. The Ministry is looking at its policies and structures and whether these could be adapted or changed. It’s also looking at the current school day and the school-year calendar provisions, “at ways for us to make easier for districts to do what they need to do.” Mr. Allen suggested that structures need to be “more nimble, flatter.”

### **Group discussions**

Attendees were asked to discuss three questions, providing individual responses on forms made available to each. A summary of the answers is provided here. The detailed transcribed responses are available by [contacting BCSTA](#).

Discussion Question 1: *What are the most exciting aspects of the Ministry vision for personalized learning in the 21st century? How will students benefit?*

- Whole direction is exciting: the recognition of research on how the brain works, and that we will best serve our students with diverse learning; the inclusion of parents and communities; and the concept of open minds and fewer barriers.
- We’ll recognize the uniqueness of each student. It’s an opportunity to recognize that 100 per cent of students are learning, and to create structures that acknowledge this learning; an opportunity to enhance alternate learning styles.
- The thinking can be applied to development of teachers as much to development of students. In fact, ideally it will be.
- Struggling students have potential not to be “turned off” because there isn’t the need to progress at a rate that is beyond their capability.

- When students have the opportunity to learn what they are interested in, they welcome engaged learning. We will let students shape their own studies with the help of parents, teachers and schools.

Discussion Question 2: *What will be needed to successfully translate the vision into action in your district?*

- Buy-in and support from all partner groups.
- Teacher training, mentoring and in-service to support change.
- Flexibility: with curriculum, so it works for the student, not the other way around; and with using our own creativity and expertise to move this vision forward locally.
- Dialogue with university faculties of education on preparing teachers.
- Less emphasis on parents in governance, more on engagement.
- Freedom for school districts to continue to implement innovative ideas and then share their success(es) with other school districts.
- Remove barriers, e.g., Bill 33; allow flexibility in curriculum and the calendar.
- We'd like and need more freedom and flexibility to make this work locally using our own creativity and expertise, as well as our own knowledge of the available resources within each community ... Trust us – we won't disappoint you!

Discussion Question 3: *What do the Ministry, BCSTA and other partner groups need to do now to further shape the vision?*

- We need to be able to clearly articulate the vision in a simple and concise manner to all our partner groups.
- Close work with teachers and principals. They are in the front lines of developing this to success.
- Provide workshops and forums in schools to prepare the students. Communicate what is going on, and how they will be supported.
- Start a "let's talk about personalized learning" dialogue in every school district and at the provincial level.
- Bring teachers on board in a respectful way. The vision will fail if it is top-down.
- Support the role of locally elected trustees to their represent communities.
- Address child poverty.
- Don't lose the following important elements of education: literature, classical studies, history.
- Align government's policy direction between ministries.
- Have a provincial vision to support each child across all agencies and ministries, including support in the school.
- Every partner needs to be involved in fleshing out the details and to enhance the discussion.
- Don't allow a "silo" mentality. These are BC's students – not one group's or another's. Our collective future depends on all stakeholders working together.
- Recommendation: that each university board include at least one school trustee.

#### **Notes from question-and-answer/comment session**

*The final part of the afternoon was an open question-and-answer session, with some discussion points summarized here.*

**Q:** We're excited about the change, about parents taking part in their children's learning at home. But what about children with single parents: how are we going to help them? Those are the kind of communities we have to be working on.

**A:** Parents would like more in-depth conversation than 15 minutes every few months. We want to give all parents that. I agree with you, in many cases that will definitely be challenging.

**Q:** We need to have dialogue with parents about this concept. It's good for the hyper parent, for those really involved in the education of their kids. We have to make sure we deal with reality. More than 50 per cent of parents in Vancouver don't speak English as a first language, and face issues of poverty. Parents need to have a sense of what personalized learning looks like: does it fit with their cultures? How this might be something we could strive to work towards?

**A:** Parental engagement will look different in different places. We will look at many different ways of connecting. We realize we're never going to get to a place where we engage everyone.

**Comment:** I'm worried about widening the gap between those students who have involved parents, and the students who don't have that. Some parents are not going to get those e-mails. Some kids are couch surfers, sleeping at different friends' houses every night. We know there's not much support for them, and are pleased that you're going to address those issues.

**Q:** When parents come into the school system at the Kindergarten level, they're really excited. Their kids are excited. But then we throw in those letter grades, and we have discouraged parents and children. If we could take the letter grades away, and celebrate learning rather than discouragement, we would have a better system.

**A:** We need to have a bigger conversation around assessment. What does B mean, or 86 per cent; how do we get parents more information? Lots of places around province using performance-standard assessment, which doesn't take much more time.

**Q:** How do we get more support around vulnerable students? In this rush to embrace change, we're looking at resources and support, how to deliver, what is driving the change? We should embrace students and have more trust in their intrinsic ability to think and learn and have a greater part in our communities. Students are our most valuable resource in rolling this out. Let's give the vulnerable student more power to take charge of their education.

**Comment:** Parents exist in communities. These may not be geographic communities; they may be ethnic. Students are pivotal to this change. As co-governors we hope you see this as *our* project, not you're going to do it, or we're going to do it. We need to work with nontraditional partners, like business groups.

**Q:** You've mentioned the 20 percent of students whom we cannot reach. When restructuring education, what do you expect? Are we restructuring for the 80 per cent, or for the 20 per cent? We need to be clear about how to get to that 20 per cent. Some social issues some beyond our control.

**A:** We're targeting the 100 percent. We hope to have in place a model that allows all people to fulfill their potential, all kids to be able to succeed.

**Q:** I appreciate new ways of lowering the threshold of learning. My mom got information only from a report card. I like supporting the strengths of children. How about putting wheels and support into community schools, mentorships; pulling disparate groups within community together?

**A:** We need to address the learning needs of all kids; it's different than 20 years ago.

**Comment:** We have to consider flattening grad rates and the impact of cumulative years of budget cuts. Many resources have been lost to budget cuts: multicultural liaison workers who go out to homes, who engaged parents, for example. Community partners are panicking because schools closed. Yet we still offer mini schools, immersion, sports, chef programs and many more: we've brought a range of choice. Personalized learning is a great concept, but it will take authentic investment, with pro d for teachers.

**Q:** Boys are not achieving to girl standards. With new approach to responsibility in learning being discussed, will it bridge this disparity?

**A:** We do know that with boys, if you have an opportunity to tailor learning to their passions, they will be engaged.

**Q:** We've had a factory system a child goes in at age x and comes out at age y. How will this change?

**A:** We have a dream of classrooms where kids could move around a lot more; where more active engagement could be allowed. As teachers become more comfortable with project-based learning, we can allow students to learn in smaller groups.

**Q:** It's a wise journey you're describing, but elementary schools are already doing a lot of this. Secondary schools are the nut to crack. We're excited that you're working on that. We need to work together with universities, so that there are not two silos.

**A:** We've started dialogue with universities. The list of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills is what universities have said they would like.

**Q:** I'm really impressed with this conversation. I feel as if we're moving in right direction with this. The area that seems to need the most attention is between the Ministry and teachers in general. There's some healing that needs to take place. We need open discussions to continue before decisions are made.

**A:** Teachers say how much they value being able to collaborate with other teachers in and across districts. How we can best support how teachers learn in classrooms? It's a matter of providing support and opportunities for engagement; of harnessing the collective energy, wisdom and passion of people here and in districts.

**Comment:** Perhaps the Ministry and BCSTA can work together to have a collation of various work that is going on in districts specific to personalized learning. We could see where we are, because we have already started.

**Q:** We want the education system to deliver critical thinkers. Teachers want to create critical thinkers. They have said FSA makes them teach to the test. The Ministry should say assessments aren't working. My perception is that teachers are teaching in *spite* of assessments.

**A:** We are going to going to look at legislation, policies and practice. These are all part of the problem, all part of the solution.

**Q:** I don't believe that somebody else's blueprint fits my footprint. How to capitalize on what's in place, remove barriers for single parents, for vulnerable families? I heard research on kids in care in Manitoba: there's been a 43 per cent increase of kids in care. They're further removed from family, further removed from the education system.

**A:** The role of family is critical. What is starting to emerge around province is school communities working in more integrated fashion with community resources; better understanding of kids and families. It's the ideal dream: every school linked into its community.

**Q:** Teachers must have skills when they come into classroom. Are you in conversation with deans of education?

**A:** These conversations are taking shape; we are all on same page, understanding the needs of students in BC classrooms.

**Q:** I'm both terrified and electrified. Electrified at the possibility of changing to a more collaborative, personalized system. But we have approached barriers many times in the past. I'm worried about funding. All-day K is wonderful but there's always the shortcoming in funding. With this new vision, we could have the potential to build amazingly strong bridges in the education community. Involvement of parent with individual child is not system-wide. I'll applaud if this is a shift. What about the barriers? What discussions have there been with BCTF?

**A:** We have been hearing from parents with a desire to participate with children in learning. This is a government that wants to allow parents maximum of choice. It's not always obvious where barriers are. It's not a comfortable conversation. We have had a couple of conversations with BCTF; we have plans for more conversations. We are continuing to have an open dialogue. More inclusiveness is important. Your role as trustees is important in terms of allowing and fostering dialogue within districts.

**Q:** What is your plan to hear what students want out of this?

**A:** We hear from students through the Education Advisory Committee; districts provide opportunities for the student voice. We want to make as many opportunities as possible when Ministry staff are visiting districts. We've had focus groups of students. It's also up to districts to have this conversation. A big piece of the whole conversation today is getting the voice of the kid in the room.