



Graduation Requirements Dialogue

A Community Conversation About the Future of
Graduation Requirements

*Fraser Valley Region
Robert Bateman Secondary School, Abbotsford BC*





SUMMARY REPORT

On October 25, 2012 more than 250 parents, students, teachers, school administrators and community members participated in a Ministry forum to help inform the development of future requirements for British Columbia high school graduation. The six school districts in the region, Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Fraser-Cascade, Langley, Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows and Mission were represented. The wide ranging discussions centered around five key questions and responses were captured and submitted by group recorders. This paper is the writer's attempt to analyze and synthesize a large amount of information into some key themes and ideas that might serve to provide some direction for further action.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis and synthesis has, by nature, a subjective component and the writer has attempted to identify themes that are mutually exclusive and capture the breadth of responses by forum participants. The goal is to capture the big picture and avoid overemphasizing what appear to be singularly unique or outlying statements. To this end, the synthesis captures responses that were provided with a moderate to high level of frequency.

“Most of the schools that today’s children attend were built when prevailing wisdom assumed that children were born to be taught rather than to learn. Which is why, for so many children, the wonder of learning has been replaced by the tedium of trying to remember what they were taught about something which really didn’t interest them very much in the first place.”

*John Abbott
Overschooled, But Under-Educated*

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS - A SYNTHESIS

In general terms, participants expressed strong support for the notion of the Educated Citizen and the five core competencies, and encouraged the Ministry to pursue novel ways in which evidence could be provided that our education system is graduating students who possess the described attributes.

They supported the need to focus on core skills while at the same time providing opportunities to explore their interests and passions through expanded choice and pathways to graduation.

Relevance of the learning experience was a recurring theme. Strengthened K-12 Career Education/ Exploration programs and related activities were identified as an area of needed improvement with a view to helping students make thoughtful and informed choices.

They expressed a desire to have a more flexible system in terms of graduation requirements, delivery of curriculum and learning experiences, communicating student learning, and acknowledging student achievement through financial awards.



QUESTION 1

What do you think are the core or essential things all students should know, understand, and be able to do by the time they leave secondary school?

Based on the working descriptions that were provided, participants voiced strong support for the five core competencies: **Communication, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking and Innovation, Personal Responsibility and Well Being, and Social Responsibility.**

There were questions as to whether the core competencies adequately captured all of the attributes of the Educated Citizen.

Additional skills areas that might fall under the theme of **Personal Responsibility** (or alternatively, perhaps, **Employability Skills**) were identified:

- The ability to think independently and engage in self-direction and self-regulation.
- The ability to be flexible, resourceful, and adapt to change.
- The ability to set goals and make prudent decisions.

Financial Literacy was frequently identified as a fundamental skill area. Concerns were raised about whether this area was being adequately addressed in schools at this time.

There was also considerable discussion about physical health and well being, and there were questions about the adequacy of the way in which senior students are currently being asked to demonstrate their skill or involvement in this area.

Social Responsibility also generated considerable discussion. Some key ideas that might also fall under the theme of Social Responsibility were raised:

- The notion of service learning and voluntarism as a means by which to demonstrate social responsibility.
- The need to develop collaboration/teamwork skills and leadership skills was identified as a high priority (employability skills).
- An important component in demonstrating competency in Social Responsibility was described as an understanding of global economic, environmental, social and cultural issues and their impacts on our communities.

Participants also identified a number of additional essential skills areas.

“Authentic leadership skill development should be infused into the curriculum. Leadership is more than simply planning events. It’s about learning effective communication skills in order to lead a group”

Forum Participant

Literacy and Numeracy – Being literate in all its forms (reading, writing, speaking listening) and numerate, especially in the application of maths to real world problems and personal finance.

Information literacy – The ability to access, evaluate, synthesize, and present information using appropriate technology.

Career Awareness – Career exploration, planning, and goal setting was identified as an important component of the graduation program. Questions were raised about the sequencing, timing and effectiveness of the current K-12 curriculum model for Planning and Career Education, in particular Planning 10 and Grad Transitions. Expanded work experience opportunities (possibly for all students) were identified as a means by which students can demonstrate key personal responsibility skills as described above.





QUESTION 2

Beyond the core, how could pathways for choice or exploration be provided?

Rethinking the Concept of Graduation - If one subscribes to the notion that students learn at different rates, and learning is continuous and lifelong, it would follow that graduation would occur at different times for different students. Currently, graduation is perceived to be too much of a scheduled, culminating “event” to which students arrive on time (June of Grade 12), early, or late. Consideration should be given to creating:

- Multiple exit points for graduation depending on the student’s chosen program and pathway to post-secondary
- A more seamless transition between high school graduation and post-secondary or the workplace.
- A graduation program that encourages all students to continue their education in some way, with a view to learning marketable skills that lead to gainful employment.

Encourage risk taking - Removing the Deterrents - Students need to be encouraged to take some risks, to try things and to understand that it is alright to fail. The current emphasis on achieving high marks and our punitive response to failure (F on a report card, no credit granted, and total repeats) are deterrents that need to be removed.

Cooperative Education - The expansion of Coop Ed programs was seen to be desirable. They are seen to be an effective means by which to create choice and pathways to graduation; they are usually cohort based, giving teachers the flexibility to design relevant cross-curricular learning experiences; they are less dependent on the school schedule; and they provide a significant work experience component.

“Graduation should have a softer deadline ..currently, we have tension, stress...some of our students are ready to graduate, some are not...we need to come up with a graduation dependent on “readiness to leave”

Forum Participant

“Graduation should be a gradual process because it’s pushing people who aren’t ready “out” and its forcing people who are ready to leave to stay”

Student Participant

“Let’s not always judge kids - give them opportunities to explore new things but at their own pace - it’s ok to fail - freedom to try and fail - and if they decide it’s not for them, let’s continue to search”

Forum Participant

Problem or Project Based Learning - More opportunities for curricular and interdisciplinary project based learning should be encouraged. A greater number of students should be encouraged to engage in Independent Directed Studies (IDS). Appropriate teacher mentoring and the development of competency as independent, self directed learners in K-9 would help ensure student success and attainment of high standards.

Extending Learning Beyond the Classroom - Relevance can be brought to classroom learning experiences by reaching out to businesses and community organizations.

External Credit - Opportunities to obtain external credit for learning outside of school should be expanded. The need to adhere to rigorous standards is a given.

Flexible Scheduling - School schedules need to be more flexible so that learning is less time bound by the school day or school calendar. Enhanced flexibility offers opportunities for students to combine school and work, attend classes at more than one campus, or pursue learning interests offered in the community.



“Flexibility in navigating pathways is key. Students should be able to move from one to another without being locked in no matter which grade they are in”

Forum Participant





QUESTION 3

Research is underway with a focus on the following five cross-curricular competencies:

- a) Communication
- b) Critical Thinking
- c) Creative Thinking and Innovation
- d) Personal Responsibility and Well Being
- e) Social Responsibility

How do you think student could demonstrate these competencies?

Participants discussed the five competencies separately and collectively. There was strong support for having students demonstrate their learning in multiple ways and for allowing some flexibility and choice as to how it should be demonstrated. The need for well developed standards and rubrics to support valid and reliable assessment was underscored. Participants opined that Personal Responsibility might be the most challenging to assess. They further suggested the following:

- Problem or project -based learning involving authentic tasks in the form of projects, scenarios, case studies, ethical dilemmas and other forms can be a powerful means for students to demonstrate all five of the competencies. This should be incorporated into all curriculum areas.
- The development of appropriate rubrics in order to properly evaluate PBL activities and the demonstrated competencies is of paramount importance.
- Presentation and demonstration skills using multi-media and with multiple audiences is an important component in the development of communication skills.
- Students should be provided with some flexibility and choice in representing their learning in a variety of ways with authentic tasks.
- Portfolios and graduate exit interviews are seen as another means by which students can demonstrate the five competencies.

“In our offices and our classrooms we have way too much compliance and way too little engagement. The former might get you through the day, but only the latter will get you through the night”

Daniel Pink Drive



QUESTION 4

How could student learning be communicated to:

- a) Students?
- b) Parents/Guardians?
- c) Post Secondary Institutions/Employers?

There was general agreement that the present system of reporting could be vastly improved. Whatever changes are undertaken must be, and must be perceived as being, an improvement over the status quo. Change will not come easily; established practices have become entrenched for generations. Participants suggested the following:

- Regular, ongoing communication with students and parents about how students are learning is preferred over the episodic nature of current reporting methods.
- Technology should be utilized to the fullest extent possible to achieve this end.

Students need to take a more active role in communicating about their learning.

- Students need to be fully aware of their progress, their strengths and areas for needed improvement. Student self assessment should be encouraged and supported.
- Students should always be active participants in conferencing involving teachers and parents

Communicating about learning should have less of an emphasis on grades and a greater emphasis on what the student is able to do and recommended areas of improvement.

- More anecdotal reporting is preferable
- The use of rubrics, criteria, performance standards or other reference points provide common language in communicating learning
- A review of representations of student work, (portfolios, presentations) made available digitally or in hard copy should be an integral part of communicating learning.

“We have to take incremental steps to make the changes, each of which would be huge in the broader context of a system that hasn’t changed in decades”

Forum Participant

A significant amount of parent education about changes to student reporting will be required. A dramatic departure from what they currently experience or had experienced when they were students will be met with apprehension and resistance.

- Parents need to have a good understanding of the language, the how and the why of current and emerging trends in assessment, evaluation, and reporting.
- Parents will continue to expect that learning is measured against appropriate standards
- Ranking does matter to some parents and that will somehow have to be addressed.

Ensuring appropriate credentialing in order to achieve post secondary admission is a concern. Currently the BC Dogwood and its accompanying transcript finds ready acceptance not only in BC but also across Canada and internationally. Will that continue to be the case in the future?



“Parents look to marks because it’s something they can understand. They will need to be educated in order to understand other forms of communication about learning”

Forum Participant





QUESTION 5

How would you design an awards program to recognize student success in a personalized learning environment?

The conversation was focussed specifically on the various components of the provincial awards program, namely the passport to education, provincial scholarships, district scholarships, and apprenticeship awards. There was strong support for ensuring that awards were based on a broader set of criteria and less of an emphasis on course grades. To this end, it was suggested that

- Awards should recognize well rounded students who demonstrate the attributes of the educated citizen and/or the core competencies.
- Application and selection processes should be changed in order to achieve this.
- Decisions regarding who should receive the awards are best made at the school or district level.
- The ministry can enable this by allocating all of the funds to districts and schools in a fair and equitable manner.

It should be noted that a significant number of participants took a contrary point of view, suggesting that broader participation in post secondary education could be encouraged by making it more affordable for all students by

- Making funds available to every graduate who chooses to continue their education, or
- Eliminating the awards program and use the funds to lower post secondary tuition fees.

“We should be recognizing students for doing amazing things, not just high marks”

Student Participant

Their position is based on the premise that if we want all students to experience success, why are we not recognizing all of them?

It would be advisable to review, establish or affirm the broader purposes of these awards. Are they intended to

- Recognize high achievement?
- Encourage all students to continue their education?
- Encourage enrolment in specific post secondary programs or skills training?
- All of the above?

If our system is committed to encouraging all students to continue their education beyond graduation in some way, how might this pool of money be used to support that?



ISSUES, CONCERNS, OBSERVATIONS

A number of issues, concerns, cautions, and queries arose during the discussions. These are noted here.

- Parent support for changes to graduation requirements, credentialing, and communicating about learning is of paramount importance. Considerable time and resources will need to be invested in ensuring that parents fully understand whatever changes are made, the rationale behind them, and the compelling argument that they and their children will be better served.
- Although there was general support for alternate pathways, many participants cautioned about having students choose directions from which there is no return. Students who have determined that a pathway is not for them and who therefore change course shouldn't face the consequence of delayed graduation.
- There was understanding and support for addressing the core competencies across curriculum areas. Questions were raised about the interrelatedness of curriculum content. Would steps be taken to help ensure that there are more relevant interdisciplinary learning experiences, as opposed to curriculum offered in "silos" through a series of disconnected courses which currently appears to be the norm?
- Questions were raised about how changes to graduation requirements might positively or negatively affect students with special needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are an attempt to capture, interpret and expand on the general direction offered by the Graduation Requirements Dialogue participants. It is acknowledged that a system that provides more flexibility and choice and more meaningful, relevant learning experiences is desirable and should be a policy imperative. Schools and districts require flexibility to implement change. That said, they also need to be reminded of the flexibility that they already have to make incremental changes as BC's Education Plan moves through its various developmental and implementation stages.

The organization of time and space in our high schools needs to be enabling rather than restrictive by serving the learning agenda as opposed to driving it. Student scheduling, the school day and school year need to be made more flexible in order to support choice and exploration. Schools and districts are already empowered to implement them and should be encouraged to do so.

THE CONCEPT OF GRADUATION AND SEAMLESS TRANSITIONS

Graduation should be seen to be less of a culminating event to which students are expected to arrive “on time” (June of grade 12). It is recommended that there be

- Multiple exit points for graduation depending on the student’s chosen program and pathway to post-secondary.
- A more seamless transition between high school graduation, post-secondary or skills training and the world of work. Dual registration should be a common occurrence.

CREDITS, COURSES AND CREDENTIALING

Introduction of the credit system provided districts and schools with an opportunity to expand flexibility and choice for students by designing 1, 2, 3 or more than 4 credit learning experiences and allow for partial completion of 4 credit courses.

A general reluctance to move away from the classic bell schedule and traditional school day, equating credits with seat time, and assorted other organizational challenges have helped to preserve the status quo, resulting in virtually all scheduled courses moving to the default position, namely 4 credits.

The credit system can prove a useful way in which to provide the credentialing for graduation, and can be enabling in offering choice and in designing pathways to graduation. Furthermore, it is a widely recognized system that can be found (in different variations) across Canada and internationally.

It is recommended that the credit system be preserved and that districts and schools be supported in fully utilizing the flexibility it can offer in creating choice, through the reorganization of time and space during an extended school day.

Planning 10/Grad Transitions /Career and Post Secondary planning, goal setting, decision-making

This topic received considerable attention during the forum. Questions were raised about the sequencing, timing and effectiveness of the current K-12 curriculum



model for Planning and Career Education, in particular Planning 10 and Grad Transitions. Presumably, this area will be reviewed as part of the curriculum revisions that are taking place. As the revision work is undertaken, the Ministry is urged to give attention to ensuring that quality service delivery models are in place across the province.

Exit interviews accompanied by presentation of a student portfolio have become a popular and growing component of Grad Transitions. With clear standards and an appropriate assessment rubric this provides a good opportunity for schools to present evidence of having attained the core competencies. It is recommended that this become a requirement for graduation.

External Credit/Dual Credit

It is recommended that opportunities to obtain external credits for learning that takes place outside of school be expanded. External credits should be subject to meeting appropriate and rigorous standards. It is also recommended that dual credit opportunities involving post-secondary institutions, skills training, and apprenticeship programs be expanded.

Problem or Project Based Learning

More opportunities for curricular and interdisciplinary project based learning should be encouraged. A greater number of students should be encouraged to engage in Independent Directed Studies (IDS). Appropriate teacher mentoring and the development of competency as independent self directed learners in grades K-9 would help ensure student success and attainment of high standards. It is further recommended that completion of a major “culminating” project be a requirement for graduation.

Credentialing

Education is a global enterprise and the BC Dogwood and accompanying transcript are widely accepted as evidence of student performance in a quality education system. BC graduates seek to continue their education not only in this province but across Canada, the United States and beyond. Our credentials need to be somewhat aligned with other progressive educational jurisdictions. The credit system is a widely used method to indicate that graduation requirements have been met, and to identify areas of study and levels of achievement undertaken and attained by students. To this end, it is recommended that graduation requirements include the following:

- A minimum number of required and elective credits (as it is now).
- Satisfactory attainment of the core competencies including completion of a culminating project.
- An exit portfolio and interview.

COMPETENCIES

It is recommended that the Ministry ensure that the five core competencies suitably capture all of the attributes of the Educated Citizen, and that particular attention be given to the manner in which students are being asked to demonstrate physical health and well being. As more specificity is brought to bear on the core competencies, the Ministry is encouraged to consider the advice provided on page 3 of this report.

COMMUNICATING ABOUT STUDENT LEARNING

Communicating about student learning should be an ongoing process that is outcomes based, evidence rich, and easily understood by parents and students. There should be less of an emphasis on grades and more on what the student is able to do and areas of needed improvement. The established system of periodic reporting on up to 200 high school students three or four times per year makes such high quality communication extremely difficult, if not impossible. Progressive use of technology and more flexibility in provincial requirements would help achieve the desired ends.



“Students today expect to learn in an environment that mirrors their lives and their futures—one that seamlessly integrates today’s digital tools, accommodates a mobile lifestyle, and encourages collaboration and teamwork in physical and virtual spaces”

ACOT2 Learning in the 21st Century

Student/Parent/Teacher Conferencing

Learners’ involvement in self assessment, self-correction, awareness of their own progress and communicating about their own learning can be enhanced by their active participation in student/parent/teacher conferencing. It is preferable and it is recommended that such conferencing be student-led. Given the large number of students involved, schools would need to rethink the commonly used one or two evening “event” of scheduled parent/teacher interviews.

PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENT AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Provincial Assessment is undertaken in order to determine, on a large scale, how well students are performing and to provide some degree of quality assurance that school systems are performing as they should. Current practice cannot adequately tell us that we are graduating students who possess the attributes of the educated citizen.

The existing format of provincial examinations needs to be reviewed and revised to include other performance tasks besides written tests. Performance measures need to be designed to address the competencies as well as key areas of learning.

A provincial strategy for collecting and reporting performance data on exit portfolios/interviews and the culminating project would also serve to tell stakeholders that the system is graduating students with the desired attributes.

STUDENT AWARDS

It is recommended that the current system of student awards (Passport to Education, provincial scholarships, district scholarships, apprenticeship awards) be revised with a view to achieving the following ends

- To recognize the achievements of well rounded students that demonstrate the attributes of the educated citizen and/or the core competencies
- To encourage students to continue their education
- To provide for additional encouragement for students to enter specific post secondary programs or skills training
- To be awarded conditionally upon registration in a post secondary or skills training program.

Decisions as to recipients are best made at the district and school levels based on criteria established by the Ministry of Education.

