
Thompson-Okanagan Regional Report to the Graduation Requirements Dialogue

A Synthesis of Community Meetings

September-January 2012 Process • Thompson-Okanagan • Report Date: 14 January 2012



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SUMMARY REPORT

In September and October of 2012, the nine school districts of our region were tasked with gathering feedback within each of their respective communities on the topic of secondary graduation requirements in BC. The participants of these community forums were challenged to propose changes, adaptations and reforms to this process. The nine school districts included

- SD 19 Revelstoke
- SD 22 Vernon
- SD23 Kelowna
- SD 53 Okanagan-Similkameen
- SD 58 Nicola-Similkameen
- SD67 Okanagan-Skaha
- SD 73 Kamloops-Thompson
- SD 74 Gold Trail
- SD 83 North Okanagan-Shuswap

The discussions on the future of graduation centered on five critical questions, and the responses were noted by group facilitators. Invitations to attend these meetings were extended to those directly connected to the field of education, such as students, teachers, administrators, district staff, support workers, adult education personnel, Aboriginal Education members, school trustees and post-secondary institutions. Community input was essential to this process and to the ultimate value of the data. In all, nearly 300 people contributed their opinions and personal insights to this process. Some of the community partners present at the meetings included

- civic leaders,
- chamber of commerce members, employers and labour organization leaders,
- First Nations elders and members,
- parents (including Francophone and independent school), PAC and DPAC members,
- students (including Francophone and independent school),
- government services (e.g., RCMP, MCFD, CYMH).

The responses documented in these meetings touched on many different issues and the scope of the responses was large. This report is an attempt to draw upon major themes that emerged from this process and to highlight reoccurring ideas that differ from what is currently required to graduate in our province. In light of this two-tiered objective, not all responses will be mentioned specifically in this report, but rather only those that were found to be occurring with a moderate to high rate of frequency. The reader is reminded that this report is a reflection of many different views and opinions, and as such, points made within the document are to be considered suggestions of a larger group and not the opinion of any particular person, including the author of this report.

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?

This question asks what it means to be an educated citizen in British Columbia. This question was very accessible to all participants as it appeared that everyone had an opinion on what is essential to being prepared to contribute to our larger society. The many responses to this question were varied in scope and the major themes that emerged were as follows:

Career Preparation & Employability

Work Experience was considered essential to the readiness of BC grads entering the workforce. Numerous skills and attributes were identified, and the following were reported with the highest frequency:

Hands-on opportunities in which students get out of the school buildings and get more opportunity to be immersed in work culture and subsequently benefit from career mentoring.

Basic commercial skills was identified as an essential component at every forum. Skills such as practical math, counting change and other workplace computations were discussed.

Personal employability feedback included fairly general terms like work ethic, flexibility and 'drive'. As well, it was established that students should have the knowledge and skills to navigate the portal to get a job. In this vein, it was suggested that students know how to construct an effective resume, know how to obtain and complete job applications and be versed in the manner in which to engage in a job interview.

Early identification of interests and goals was also identified as essential to career preparation.

'You [schools] teach them, we'll train them.'

- Forum Participant, Business Owner and Chamber of Commerce Representative



“Our students need to know about personal finances - I think that has been made really clear by recent developments both locally and globally.”

Forum Participant

Life Skills

Financial capacity was the number one response in this category. Students should be expected to understand the concept, ramifications and importance of mortgages, loans and general financial management.

Problem solving was highlighted and the tools suggested included collaborative and team-building skills as well as personal goal-setting.

Personal skill sets deemed essential included basic reading ability, self-awareness, and healthy living strategies, such as proper nutrition and wellness. Some participants specifically mentioned the need for education that touches on family dynamics and issues.

Education Skills

Literacy skills exceeded the combined total of all other responses in this category. Participants were adamant that reading and writing skills are as important as ever. Essay writing was mentioned specifically as a skill to be emphasized in schools.

Post-Secondary and trades transition training preparedness was discussed as essential as well.



Other Considerations

- The concept of mandatory **First Nations education** was suggested. Numerous community members argued that all students should have a basic understanding of BC's First Nations cultures and traditions.
- **Technological literacy** was considered critical in the schooling process. Students should be expected to have basic computer skills, but this was widely acknowledged to be a pillar of our existing system. Much of the conversation around technology hinged on the social responsibility and protection issues surrounding social media. Issues such as exploitation, digital foot print and online presence were highlighted.
- **Critical thinking skills** such as recognizing reliable sources, and also subjective sources were identified as well. This issue was connected by many to the conversation around technological literacy. Our students are subjected to ever increasing sources of information and as this list becomes less traditional, such as blogs and online forums, it is important to effectively sift through what is authentic and what might be questionable.
- **Social responsibility** was uniformly identified as a critical requirement of all graduating students. Included in this conversation were the notions of respecting different views, of illustrating environmental responsibility and of instilling empathy. Community involvement was also included in this conversation. The emphasis on community and civic duties was discussed, as well as the expectations of a 'global citizen'.



Question 2

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

This question asked participants to go deeper than question number one; to ‘colour outside the lines’ as one participant suggested to his group. As another person suggested, this question might be considered to be the value-added portion of a BC graduation. This question asked participants to ponder and discuss what an education system might look like in an era of specialization, when unique qualifications and value-added traits may likely prove more valuable than ever.

Personalized Learning

Electives were widely discussed at numerous forums and a few interesting ideas emerged. Participants suggested that BC expand the availability of courses that fall outside the ‘required’ category and that a greater number of these courses be required to graduate. An interesting idea that arose from this conversation was to grade more of these electives as pass/fail grading schemes rather than attaching a specific grade standing. The argument behind this notion is that it is perceived that many students shy away from taking an elective that is not considered a personal strength as the student fears that the grade will hurt his/her ultimate grade standing. Courses feared to be grading liabilities are not considered by students who are competitively vying for scholarships and university entrance.

Extra-curricular activities were identified as an essential to the health of the individual and to the betterment of the community. Awarding more credits for these activities was suggested.

Personalized learning as a term was discussed with some forum participants struggling to arrive at a common definition. Despite some struggles over quantifying this term, people did put forth suggestions as to how we might personalize education. Here is a sampling of the more common responses:

- assist students in identifying passions;
- expand project-based and inquiry-based learning opportunities;
- develop classroom and curricular models that emphasize flexibility in both delivery and assessment;
- encourage students to both produce and present personal portfolios;
- allow students to design personal curriculum paths suited to interest areas or job goals;
- adopt programs that allow students to focus on career paths at earlier grade levels.



Community and Global Educational Opportunities

Connections to industry, post-secondary and apprenticeships dominated the data collected in this category. No sub-category of any question in this entire report was more populated with responses than this one. The message is clear that across our region, people see the need for students to gain access to experiences and assets beyond the bricks and mortar school environment. Extending community-based credits was highlighted as an area in need of exploration. The concept of schools delivering the basics and community members providing the specific, context-based instruction was particularly stressed in every one of the community forums.

Distance learning is deemed essential by some communities as a way to allow students to access an educational experience that might be difficult to deliver within the constraints of the existing school system.

‘We’re raising global citizens whether we like it or not.

Our students have access to the world every day, every minute, every second.’

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 students could demonstrate these competencies?

The Ministry of Education is developing five competencies considered to be essential in forming the Educated Citizen. Forum participants were asked to provide input as to how the actions, products and assets of students in BC might best relate to these categories.

Communication

Differentiation in demonstrating learning outcomes was a major theme in this category. Sometimes termed ‘show what you know’, this notion suggests that schools adopt delivery and assessment models that allow students more varied options when it comes to providing a manifestation of understating and knowledge acquisition.

Multi-level groupings was a concept explored at one of the forums. The suggestion being that we group some students by variables other than simply by the number of years they have been in school.

Critical Thinking

Case studies and real life-scenarios were promoted in this category, as was the teaching of critical thinking at the primary level. This category prompt received very few responses.

Creative Thinking and Innovation

Differentiation was highlighted in this category as well. A number of suggestions were introduced as methods to achieving this goal:

- project-based learning was identified as being the route to more creativity and deeper learning opportunities;
- case studies to be used more extensively;
- exposure to 21st century issues and problems;
- less rote memorization termed as ‘learning’;
- awarding more credits for these activities was discussed.





“If schools could provide a way to incorporate mental health and well-being then the ability to learn these five competencies will come easier.”

Forum Participant & BC First Nations Member



Personal Responsibility and Well Being

Healthy living and relationships were terms discussed by forum participants when addressing this category. Suggestions included slowing the pace of learning, teaching the importance of relationships, addressing the concept of spirituality and emotions in education and the importance of making safe choices.

Social Responsibility

Volunteer and leadership opportunities and the availability of them dominated the data collected in this category.

Other considerations

The ‘Five Competencies’ proposed by the government may not be the true competencies we want to explore.

Adult to student ratios are critical to this conversation. Class sizes must be reduced for these competencies to be fully realized.

Measurement of these competencies should be conducted in cooperation with community members in each of the last three years of secondary schooling.

Holistic education should be considered. A sound education system needs to adopt the ‘circle of life’ model that encompasses the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs of each student.

Question 4

How could student learning be communicated to:

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

Communication is critical to the education system as it is unavoidable that evidence of student learning must be conveyed to others. These forums provided an ideal opportunity to include members of all three of the groups listed in this question, and to glean pointed feedback on how best to relay student achievement information.

Students

Self evaluation was a major theme in this category. Participants strongly suggested that more avenues need to exist that allow students to convey their own understanding to themselves and others.

Portfolios were the most suggested avenue for how to improve student-based communication. Further suggestions included developing a 'Life Plan' with students that might include the mentorship provided by an adult within the community. One idea presented was the concept of a 1:10 ratio of teacher mentor to students in the education system. A necessary component of this type of structure is that more time be made available for students to meet with teacher mentors.

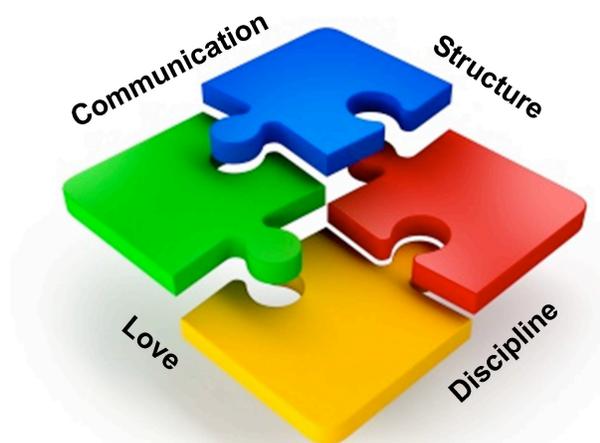
Parents/Guardians

Interactive platforms were widely discussed at numerous forums and nearly all of these conversations centered around more frequent and effective communication between parents and the those in the education system. Some of these suggestions were rooted in current technologies,

whereas others were based on more traditional communication systems.

Technologically-based systems serve to inform parents on a need-to-know basis. Some participants suggested using programs such as Jupiter Grades that allow parents immediate, continuous and ongoing access to detailed information on the academic standing of their children. These systems are online and operate 24-7 so as to suit the varying time constraints of parents.

Parent-Teacher interviews do not appear to be slipping into the shadow of online options. Forum participants clearly communicated that face-to-face meetings between parents and teachers are not only important, but that this communication format needs to be injected with increased availability and flexibility. This conversation included the acknowledgement that parent-teacher interviews are incredibly valuable and that many parents who should attend these meetings for the benefit of their children choose not to. At least four different partner forums included the suggestion that parents be legally obligated to attend.



Post-Secondary/Employers

Personal interviews were mentioned in numerous forums as a way to better connect students to outside institutions. As well, employers have a strong desire to have a teacher/mentor contact for each student within the school system. Having improved school-institution communication would:

- Better the relationship between post-secondary/employers and the school system.
- Better prepare the student to adapt to the work environment.
- Improve the readiness of post-secondary and employers to meet the needs of the students/employees arriving in their care.

Other Considerations

Reporting processes currently used rely too heavily on percentages. Not only are these percentages inconsistent between different teachers and schools, but they do not necessarily provide accurate reflections of learning.

Comment-based reporting is more effective and critical to this conversation. Some parents attending the forums spoke of needing better explanations relating to the progress of their children. Class sizes must be reduced for these competencies to be fully realized.

High school resumes were discussed at a number of the community forums. The idea would be to have each student produce a resume during his/her high school years highlighting his/her competencies and accomplishments. This resume could be useful to students, parents, employers and post-secondary institutions.



Question 5

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

Through the process of reviewing graduation requirements, it is worthy to consider the awards process that is associated with it. Millions of dollars are currently distributed to students through awards in British Columbia, and processes for awarding money to grads varies between districts.

Alternative criteria for awards were widely discussed at every community forum. There appears to be an strong appetite for awards to be based on factors that extend well beyond a student's grade point average. A number of alternative considerations for determining awards came out of the community forums:

- Awards should be based on factors that are more difficult to measure, but important to being a well-rounded student. Some of the criteria listed included self-motivation, drive, perseverance and determination.
- Awards should include student-designed criteria and students could in-turn play a role in highlighting the extent to which they have met the criteria.
- Awards should be based on family/socio-economic needs.

Post-secondary award implications were discussed and some suggestions included extending the timelines during which the money must be used and providing financial assistance to anyone in need.

Passport to Education funding was certainly scrutinized by a number of forum participants in multiple jurisdictions. Many felt that the definition of 'success' should be considered to fall well beyond

ones grades and greater flexibility in the Passport to Education criteria was encouraged. The mention of an 'unlevel playing field' was made in reference to financial aid being given based on student skills.

Local districts have an interest in determining award criteria that reflect individual communities and their unique cultural elements: money could be managed locally in order to better suit the specific needs of students and to address the often unique situations found in schools.

Personalized learning environments, and the discussion surrounding this concept, seems to be incongruent with the current system of determining awards (such as Passport to Education). Further discussion may be required if an awards system is to reflect education plans that are individualized.



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