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ABSTRACT

An educational reform effort to implement a comprehensive school act in British Columbia (Canada) is analyzed with a focus on some sociotechnical and political aspects. An overview of the content, background, and implementation of the reform effort is followed by identification of seven contradictions inherent in the plan. Contradictions are as follows: (1) inconsistency and lack of integration between proposals; (2) lack of incorporation of new ideas into schools' organizational structures; (3) simultaneous centralization and decentralization processes; (4) dysfunctional organizational effects of initial implementation; (5) conflict between content and process; (6) discrepancy between technical-rational and political goals; and (7) conflict between increased parent involvement and increased centralization. (31 references) (LMI)

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## JUMP-STARTING EDUCATIONAL REFORM: IMPLEMENTING BRITISH COLUMBIA'S COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL ACT\*

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### I. British Columbia Tackles School Reform

Some funny things happened to British Columbia on its way to the brave new world of educational reform. In September 1989, the Ministry of Education and educators in the province's seventy-five school districts began to struggle with the early implementation stages of a comprehensive, innovative, and controversial school reform program enacted by the ruling Social Credit government earlier that year. This paper describes the content and background of these reforms, analyzes and interprets problems and reactions focusing on both the sociotechnical aspects of the proposed changes and the politics of education in which they became entangled. The paper identifies seven contradictions, or at least paradoxes, inherent in this specific reform program. The consequences of these contradictions are as yet unknown. Finally, the paper addresses the lessons American might consider from the British Columbian efforts.

First, the history. The 1989 School Act, its first revision in 31 years, and *A Legacy for Learners*, the reform package, arose from many of the concerns that worried educators, politicians, and the public in North American provinces and states during the decade of the 1980's. The perceived inability of graduates who could help their country compete effectively in an increasingly demanding world economy, high drop out rates (roughly 30 percent), and an alienated youth culture that incorporated substance abuse on a growing scale led citizens to question their schools. Moreover, escalating costs which increasingly came to be financed by, and identified with, unpopular local property taxes as well as provincial/state income taxes prompted governments to scrutinize public education and to generate a "reform agenda." Immigration also influenced the reform context. Southwestern British Columbia, especially the Vancouver metropolitan area had long been a magnet for Canadians moving west and Asians moving east. Canadian economic growth after 1984, combined with the impending British departure from Hong Kong, resulted in the arrival of tens of thousands of middle-class and affluent newcomers which escalated housing costs and made potential property taxes more visible.

These were, however, general conditions in North America. In Ontario, for instance, debate on education has raged as the Legislative Assembly discussed the

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report of a select committee that had rejected calls for standardized testing and streaming [tracking] of students. A Globe and Mail (March 5, 1990) editorial worried that "something other than financial starvation must explain the great number of students emerging with inadequate reading and writing skills and with little familiarity with or interest in science and mathematics. Something other than money must explain the high dropout rate." However, these concerns with schools in British Columbia must be put in perspective. While there was a vague sense of dissatisfaction with the schools and insipient tax revolt (fostered by government rhetoric), neither the public nor the professionals believed that education's problems in the province had reached crisis proportions. The Ministry's own data from an extensive and expensive provincial review process in 1985 signalled caution. In addition to 500 public meetings, 3,500 individual responses from parents and other members of the public, and 1,000 documents from educators, the committee commissioned the Gallop Organization to survey over 800 members of the general public and over 600 educators. According to Let's Talk About Schools (Ministry of Education, 1985, p. 5),

responses have been temperate in nature. That is to say, public and professional responses have been focused around what may be described as a middle-of-the-road approach which seeks to improve school policies and practices in an incremental way. Respondents have not called for a dramatic or radical restructuring of the present system. Rather, they have called for a number of adjustments to increase the effectiveness of schools and to make them more responsive to the communities around them.

## II. The Government versus the Teachers' Federation

In British Columbia there was one important additional factor not discussed in the Report: the government and the teachers' federation were virtually at war. The Socred party had governed the province for two generations with only a single brief interlude of New Democratic Party rule in the early 1970's. Historically, the Socreds had been hostile to labor unions and unsympathetic to teachers whom they saw as representing the twin evils of liberalism and secularism. The BCTF represented to them with negative, frequently hyperbolic imagery and consistently confrontational politics. Crawford Kilian (1985) has detailed the early years of the conflict in his aptly named book, *School Wars*.

In the late 1980's, the government sought to redefine the industrial relations climate of publicly funded education. Never friendly, the BCTF has been the fiercest and most vocal opponent of the province's fiscal restraint that followed in the aftermath of the recession, and the government attempted to curb the federation's power through legislation. The result was Bill 19 and Bill 20 voted on in 1987 and passing into law on in January, 1988. These bills had several immediate consequences. Most important, the gradual evolution of the BCTF from a mutual benefit and professional association into a full trade union was written into law. Teacher certification and program accreditation was removed from the federation's jurisdiction into a newly formed, elected College of Teachers which was to be independent of the BCTF. Principals and vice-principals, many of whom had been active in BCTF affairs and from whom federation leadership cadre had come, were required to form their own association. (This reified the historical tendency of principals to move from the "head teacher" to the "school manager" role.) Collective bargaining was to become a local affair, with school trustees negotiating directly with representatives of federation locals on virtually all issues, including the aggregate financial package. Bill 19, which affected all of organized labor, replaced the old Labor Relations Board and Mediation Services Branch with an Industrial Relations Council more clearly biased in favor of employers. As a result of

the legislation, labor relations in provincial education became more "American" and less "British."

From the government's perspective, Bills 19 and 20 were less than successful on two counts. Successful candidates for the new College of Teachers were largely BCTF present and past activists who seemed unlikely to dilute the federation's influence over certification matters. Furthermore, the BCTF was far more prepared for district-wide collective bargaining than their counterparts among school district trustees. Local bargaining seemed to favor the federation rather than the government. A BCTF Issue Alert (January 3, 1989) reported on five recent settlements (Delta, Kitimat, Maple Ridge, Prince Rupert, and Victoria) in which federation goals in several areas had been met or exceeded. There were major "victories" in salary, preparation time, sick leave, as well as duty free lunch hours, voluntary rather than mandatory extra curricular activity supervision, and leaves of absence to attend to federation business. According to Vancouver Sun Columnist Vaughn Palmer the government flinched at these gains.

the socreds began planning their current effort to control education costs after a confidential survey of teacher contracts set off the alarm bells last summer. The survey, conducted by government officials and never made public, looked at the first round of bargaining between the newly-unionized BCTF and 75 school districts (Vancouver Sun, February 7, 1990).

The government's eventual response promises to have a significant effect on school reform.

### III. The Sullivan Royal Commission on Education

The immediate impetus for the 1989 School Act was an extensive, virtually massive, Royal Commission Report--A Legacy for Learners, also entitled the Sullivan Commission Report after its Commissioner (Sullivan, 1988)--that appeared in August, 1988. The Sullivan Commission included reports from six task forces on (1) schools and society, (2) learners, (3) curriculum, (4) teachers, (5) finance, and (6) governance and administration. Educational professionals in the schools, the universities, and the Ministry played major roles on the commission, but information from every conceivable source was gathered. The report's appendix provides, in 28 pages of fine print, written and oral submissions from a large number of individuals and groups.

A Legacy for Learners contained no less than 85 specific recommendations. Some were far-reaching, and their number and scope suggested that full implementation could fundamentally alter teaching and learning in British Columbia. The potential result could be the most profound provincial effort at school reform in Canadian education. The most significant recommendations were curricular, and these bear listing:

1. Ungraded primary classrooms for grades K-3 (#5.2)
2. A common, interdisciplinary curriculum for the intermediate grades (4-10) that includes four subject matter categories: humanities, fine arts, sciences, practical arts (#5.3, #5.4)
3. On an experimental basis, school districts assess learner progress individually (#5.6)

4. Provincial Grade 12 examinations be extended to all subject areas and count for one-third of Grade 12 marks (#5.11)
5. Initial school entry be based on developmental criteria rather than solely on chronological age (#5.1)

The commission report also recommended both the present programs for special needs learners be maintained, but also that

6. The government endorse "mainstreaming," by providing additional support services for special needs learners and their teachers in normalized classroom settings (#8.30).

#### IV. Political and Professional Responses to the Reform Agenda

Educational professionals, especially teachers, charged with implementing these changes, reacted surprisingly favorably to the Report. In the BCTF's newsmagazine, Teacher (September, 1988), its initial headline ran "Teachers Heartened by Commission." Three months later, the magazine headlined "1989: The Year of Professionalism" (Teacher, January, 1989). The BCTF was especially active, generating committees, meetings, and a flurry of documents to brief members on the contents and implications of A Legacy for Learners. They quickly developed a coherent federation position, which included general approval of the Royal Commission's emphasis on teachers' professional status, its confirmation of the BCTF's role, and its recognition of native Indian and gender issues. It was disappointed the lack of recommendations addressing class size and status quo position on funding. The federation endorsed as high priorities 36 of the 85 recommendations, reflecting positions they had taken previously. These included the proposals on ungraded primary classes, on mainstreaming special needs students, and on individualized student assessment. They endorsed an additional 15 recommendations. Only nine Commission recommendations, including the increased emphasis on province-wide tested were opposed specifically. For the BCTF, an additional 25 recommendations would require clarification or further study, including especially the school entry recommendation and especially the intermediate curriculum recommendation (BCTF, Response to the Royal Commission, 1988, pp. 3-5).

On July 7, 1989, Bill 67, the new School Act, passed its Third Reading and passed into law (Izard, 1989, p. 65). The Bill's provisions did not deal specifically with educational reform, but set the stage for enacting A Legacy for Learners by expanding the powers of the Ministry of Education. Specifically was empowered to make orders, without restriction, determining the nature of educational programs, requiring schools to participate in assessment and in establishing graduation requirements. These powers superseded previous consultative powers and have been seen as reducing the relative power of school trustees to set local policy.

The legislation allowed the government to set policy and compel implementation. Anthony Brummet, Minister of Education, the mandate with the program's mission statement: "the purpose of the BC school system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes need to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy" (Vancouver Sun, September 1, 1989). By Fall, 1989 A Legacy for Learners was put in place on a pilot basis, and planning for full implementation by Fall, 1990 were being planned by the Ministry, by administrators, and by teachers. Some Sullivan Commission recommendations were modified or elaborated, but both the spirit and the essential content of A Legacy for Learners were adopted as a whole. Developmentally

appropriate school entry was reformulated as "dual-entry" for youngsters in either February or September. The individualized learner assessment became expanded to encompass not only a new report card structure, but raised the possibility of more complex, eventually computerized portfolios for each student (Ministry of Education, 1989, pp. 8-21).

Public reaction to the new program was cautious, indicating optimism mixed with confusion, especially by parents. The Alberni Valley Times (October 10, 1989) noted in an editorial that "changes were coming as education enters the 21st century. The BC Report (October 23, 1989) was more cautious in stating "Yes, but will it work?" The Vancouver Sun editorial of September 29, 1989 chided doubters as giving a "carping response to a bold vision." Debate and discussion continued for several months. At the end of January the title of an editorial in the Province (January 30, 1990) expressed the ongoing ambivalence of the public-at-large: "Year 2000: Far Away but Still Too Soon." The editorial continued by recommending that "Victoria should press on, but cautiously; fast enough to get on with the job but slowly enough to allow us all to monitor the process."

## V. Implementing Reform

Fall term was devoted to informational meetings for both educators and parents. The Ministry scrambled to explain the new program to educational leaders who then communicated to teachers and the public. BCTF staff travelled throughout the province to brief teachers about what A Legacy for Learners would mean for them and about how they and the federation would respond politically. Parents worried about what dual entry, ungraded primary education, and the new intermediate program would mean for their children. While educators had at least considered and debated the educational issues involved, much in the program was new for the public. School boards and administrators were concerned that sufficient new funding had not been attached to the reform package. They were worried both about short-term training and start-up costs and the longer term costs of funding such potentially expensive changes such as ungraded primary classrooms which might need lower student-teacher ratios. Newspapers supported these apprehensions. Writing in the Province (February 6, 1990), Brian Kieran pointed out that "implementing the Year 2000 document will demand immense commitment of teachers' time and energy outside the classroom. Smaller classes and more preparation time will be vital and will also increase demand for teachers." School trustees in Vancouver "feared costly changes...[with] multi million dollar increases..but it has now idea whether or how much the education ministry will help pay for them" (Vancouver Sun, January 25, 1990). Among that district's concerns was its high proportion of recent immigrants and correspondingly large and expensive English-as-a-Second-Language program. Most school districts, for instance, delayed introduction of dual entry kindergardens (Vancouver Sun, January 6, 1990). Several months of discussions had not been successful in clarifying expectations. As columnist Crawford Kilian (Province, January 23, 1990) put it, "its time the ministry and teachers explained to the public what their concerns are." Moreover, the Province (January 30, 1990) also reported that "Vancouver parents also want Victoria to proceed slowly...chairwoman Alayne Keough says the public hasn't been given enough time to respond."

Teachers thought they did know what they wanted. The public and the ministry may have put traditional concerns on the back-burner, but the BCTF certainly didn't as "salaries, class size, and aides [continued to] top teachers' talks list" (Vancouver Sun, February 13, 1990). Moreover, the federation encouraged resistance to change both on substantive issues, the intermediate program for example, and in order to keep some

control over the process. President Ken Novakowski wrote in a special issue of Teacher (January, 1990) that "we have resisted the government's hurried timeline, working instead to promote the widest possible discussion among teachers about the implications of the proposals...in short, we are assuming our responsibility as professionals to act as advocates for the public education system."

Teachers made an effort to convey to the public and the Ministry that they were not obstructionist and were excited about parts of A Legacy for Learners. They evinced particular enthusiasm for the new primary program and the ungraded classroom, a reform they had advocated for years (BCTF Issue Alert, February 13, 1990). However, they had grave reservations about the intermediate and graduation programs which required an almost total rewriting of the curriculum for 4th to 10th graders and the likelihood of having to teach in areas where they had not been trained. In this they received support from the universities who neither felt that the curriculum had even limited academic credibility nor that they could train teachers to carry it out (Vancouver Sun, January 10, 1990; UBC Reports, February 8, 1990). Mainstreaming of special needs students, while accepted in principle, was worrisome to teachers who knew that new resources would be necessary. The Task Force on Teaching Conditions and Professional Practice report harshly to the March, 1990 Annual Meeting: "no single issue is currently generating as much concern among teachers as the mainstreaming/integration issue. It is an area where teachers feel they have all the responsibility but none of the authority. ..It is causing intense frustration among a growing number of teachers [and] was the central issue in the strike by Mission teachers...Teachers are generally supportive...However, they will oppose it vigorously if certain conditions do not accompany the implementation of mainstreaming and integration."

## VI. The Referendum Initiative

On February 1, the government dropped a bombshell on A Legacy for Learners. The Education Minister announced fundamental changes in school financing. Each school district would receive a block grant calculated on a per student basis of roughly \$5,300, but with some district to district differences. Rather than having school trustees set property tax levels to pay additional costs as had been current practice, they reinstated local school referenda. It was widely assumed on the basis of earlier experiences in the 1970's and 1980's that voter tax resistance would result defeats for the schools at the polls. The proposed new financing scheme threatened to bring educational reform to a crashing halt. Suddenly nobody wanted to discuss school reform. For the next two months newspapers dropped coverage of implementation of A Legacy for Learners and chose to look only at reaction to the new government policy.

The BCTF's reaction was no surprise. Both government and federation were aware of the delicate relationship between flimsy support for education and negative attitudes towards property taxes. Writing in the Province (February 6, 1990), Brian Kieran's column was headed "Picture the Premier as Dirty Harry." Kieran contended that "there is nothing Premier Bill Vander Zalm would like better than a Magnum Force blowout with educators...It would hand him the issue he sorely needs to polarize voters." On the other side, federation president Ken Novakowski vowed to fight the referendum idea and claimed that "the whole education community is pretty well united on this issue" (Vancouver Sun, February 5, 1990). Novakowski may have been right. The Province (February 14, 1990) reported that the "referendum plan spurs a parent revolt" organized by the Home and School Federations within the province.

The press was equally vigorous in its opposition. A Province editorial (February 2, 1990) worried about the effects of the proposal on school equity, noting that the process would be "unfair," because it would magnify differences between districts in rich and poor communities. One of its columnists, Crawford Kilian, called the plan a "fiasco" and a "gimmick." He wrote that "school funding referendums look like democracy in action but they're just the reverse. Referendums destroy the democratic authority of elected trustees to do their job. They can't plan or bargain with their staff and teachers if they're going to be second-guessed in referendums" (Province, February 4, 1990). His Vancouver Sun (February 5, 1990) counterpart, Nicole Parton, opined that the new tax plan was "too harebrained to work." Two months later the government still is determined to implement the referenda process, and indeed trustees in fourteen districts have chosen to call elections. The Ministry has turned its direction towards the political process and away from the structural reforms contained in A Legacy for Learners.

## VII. Contradictions

How can we assess the first year of intensive school reform in British Columbia? The program can fairly be characterized as both ambitious and comprehensive. If implemented, A Legacy for Learners, promised to make substantial changes in virtually every aspect of provincial education, affecting students and teachers alike. With the possible exception of the new intermediate curriculum, none of these changes were at all revolutionary. The potential impact came less from specific changes themselves, or even from integrating the diverse changes, than from the number of proposed changes and the likelihood that virtually every educator would have to redesign and reorganize instructional activities and that all of them would be doing this more or less simultaneously. More striking than the scope and scale of the reforms are the contradictions embedded within A Legacy for Learners, contradictions that would lead readers of the theoretical literature on organizational change and organizational design to anticipate serious problems in implementing the program. Convincing evidence about whether these contradictions had the predicted effect on the reform process is difficult to obtain given the huge number of actors (75 districts, 1000+ schools, 30,000+ teachers, 500,000+ students) and the very early stages of program implementation. Nevertheless, some anecdotal and documentary data may be brought to bear on the topic.

*Contradiction #1: The contradiction that the whole may not equal the sum of parts.*

A Legacy for Learners is quite a bit less than the sum of its parts. Both A Legacy for Learners and the eventual Ministry program were essentially a collection of mostly good individual ideas. Even if we limit discussion to the curriculum section which in any event contained the most far-reaching proposals, there is neither effort to integrate proposals nor to assess the extent to which they may or may not be consistent with one another. At no time was the list explicitly prioritized on the basis of either significance or importance. The very length of the reports and the number of proposals had the effect of intimidating and confusing both professionals and the public. However, while this confusion may have discouraged prospects for immediate implementation, it also may have had the (probably) salutary effect of allowing the political process to create a rough system of priorities. The complex schedule set out in A Legacy for Learners: Working Plan #1-1989-1999 provided a set of practical priorities, but lacked an intellectual rationale.

*Contradiction #2: The contradiction of failing to incorporate the introduction of new ideas into the organizational structure of schools.*

Schools are complex systems, combining a loosely coupled structure with organizational cultures reinforced by habits, personal affinities, and interpersonal interdependencies. They work most effectively when staff are able to integrate their individual, "behind-closed-door" instructional activities with those activities--dealing with exceptions and school-wide planning--that require working with others. Most schools accommodate new teachers, special needs of all kinds, and pilot projects relatively well because administrators, and staff generally, can focus "extra" energy and resources on a finite number of people and projects. Massive change, especially when it is mandated from above, requires everyone to focus on individual problems and issues they face, probably to the detriment of helping one another make changes. The complexity and totality of Enabling Learners takes the slack out of school organizational processes. Administrators will be too busy monitoring change to facilitate it.

*Contradiction #3: The contradiction of simultaneous centralization-standardization and decentralization-individuation.*

Three central components of the reform package tend to individuate both teaching and learning. Dual (developmental) entry into public school, restructuring report cards and the development of a "portfolio" structure for student records, and the ungraded primary classrooms all indicate a substantial effort to match individual student attributes and needs with instructional program delivery. If there is a model for this approach, it comes from the individual educational plans incorporated into special education. Cost factors aside, it tends to de-emphasize traditional teaching practices in which classrooms, or at least learning groups within classrooms, are as homogeneous as practically and students are moved forward within the context of some kind of ability grouping. However, the desire to standardize assessment through increased emphasis on province-wide exams and the mandate that all curricula would have 80 percent common content stresses centralized control at the provincial level. A recent survey (Bateson, 1990) indicates that the existing Grade 12 provincial examination system has resulting in instruction that "teaches to the test."

*Contradiction #4: The contradiction that the effort required to "jump-start" an inertial system may over-correct the system's course.*

Schools are stable, highly institutionalized systems, maintaining themselves in part because many rhythms and patterns are built into the lived experience of citizens who went through schools similar to those their children and grandchildren experience today. The structure of the school day and the outlines of the curriculum itself, as well as the isolation, autonomy, and discretionary activities of each teacher, makes schools resistant to change, especially if participants themselves have limited interest in it. Educators and the public have enough experience of piecemeal reform to be cynical and to expect that brief flurries of change will do little more than ripple the surface of school life before returning to the old ways. The shock treatment of A Legacy for Learners was designed to cut deeply enough into the system that return would be impossible. But the cost could be enormous: resistance by teachers and the public, the probability that in changing so quickly, serious mistakes would be made, the inevitability of unintended consequences. An "all or nothing" approach results in neither all nor nothing, but rather in the type of chain reaction that creates both long and short-term surprises.

*Contradiction #5: The contradiction between listening to professional concerns about content and ignoring professional concerns about process.*

The Sullivan Commission Report, A Legacy for Learners, for the most part, reflected both educational research and the preferences teachers had expressed through

negotiations and lobbying throughout the previous decade. Ungraded primary classrooms, student progress through developmental rather than chronological criteria, and mainstreaming of special needs students reflected directions probably supported by most teachers. Even the interdisciplinary intermediate curriculum intrigued many teachers. However, once reported out, the Ministry stopped listening to teachers and administrators who knew that time and resources would be needed to build a solid foundation of effective practice. Teachers saw further in-service training, discussion, and experimentation as the way to implement changes. BCTF reports from local federations and specialty associations all pleaded for more time.

*Contradiction #6: The contradiction of trying to maximize both technical-rational goals and political goals.*

Notwithstanding the inevitable relationship between politics and education in modern societies, the government's political priorities and motives seemed to push reform farther and faster than circumstances justified. There was little hard evidence that provincial education was "in crisis." Nevertheless, educational reform is a popular political issue in North America, and the A Legacy for Learners potential ability to crystalize conservative opinion around union-bashing and property tax revolt affected the course of implementation. The referendum proposal seems to be a direct consequence of these political concerns. A Legacy for Learners and the School Act put the teachers' federation on the defensive from the outset by adopting issues originally raised by teachers themselves and putting the government on the moral high ground. At the same time, the political process and the ways in which specific components of the reform package were implemented created mistrust among those who would have to carry out the reforms. The government lacked credibility among teachers so even good ideas met resistance. Research on organizational change, especially in professional settings, stresses the importance of participants involvement in both decision-making and the implementation process. Teachers felt little ownership in many of the reforms.

*Contradiction #7: The contradiction of attempting to involve parents through parent councils while de-emphasizing the role of trustees through centralization at Ministry level.*

Increasing parent and community involvement was a secondary decentralizing goal of reform policy. Specific roles had yet to be spelled out, but combined with attempts to standardize assessment and curriculum, this proposal effectively reduces elected school trustees' role. Government willingness to do this may also be seen in the subsequent move to consider province-wide, rather than district-by-district collective bargaining. It is not clear how the referenda proposal fits in.

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