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Rural Education


A Brief to the

Rural Development Consultation

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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President



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Brief to the Rural Development Consultation from the British Columbia Teachers' Federation

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) is pleased to have this opportunity to present its views to the Rural Development Consultation.

The BCTF represents 43,000 members who are teachers and teachers on call in public schools. Our members work in communities large and small, urban and rural, and in every corner of the province. Public schools are important to every community—providing educational opportunities to all children and youth, as well as physical spaces for many out-of-school community activities. Public schools are a vital part of neighbourhoods and communities.

Although most British Columbians live in the Lower Mainland and Lower Vancouver Island, most school districts serve children and parents located outside that region. In many school districts, rural life continues to be a geographic and economic fact. Delivering equal school services and ensuring equal educational opportunities to areas with thinly scattered populations continues to be a challenge for the provincial government and school districts. Education across the province needs to be equitable and accessible. Students in all areas of the province must have equality of opportunity.

Rural schools offer many positive benefits to students and their communities. They tend to be smaller than their suburban and urban counterparts, with smaller class sizes and more interactions among staff, parents, and students. Rural school districts are often the largest single employer in the area, and rural schools often serve as the social, recreational, and cultural foundation of their communities.

Rural schools are at the heart of their communities in a way that is not possible in a suburban or an urban setting. If a school closes, many rural residents feel they have lost the glue that holds their community together. The value of a school in a rural community goes far beyond its primary purpose of educating children. Rural schools have positive economic and social effects, provide a resource for community development, and offer a delivery point for local services.

In BC, many of our rural school communities face a host of challenges: underfunding, unemployment, geographic isolation, small population base and declining enrollment, difficulties in transporting students to schools, higher per-pupil costs, inadequate facilities, and high turnover among teachers and administrators.

Over the past 16 years, well over 200 schools have closed, with many of those being in rural areas, causing very real harm to the communities in which they were located. This was a result of the financing policies at the time, such as the elimination in the education finance formula of a base of funding on a per-school basis. Regardless of the size of the school, some costs are the same for administrative and other basic services. When funding is simply on the basis of a per-student amount without a school base, a district finds it hard to maintain smaller schools in more rural communities.

School districts might have been able to save some of these schools if they had adequate overall budgets. However, austerity budgets provided by government meant that districts had little flexibility to make decisions to keep open schools that they and the community did not want to close.

Following are recommendations for ensuring that students in rural and remote communities across the province have access to quality education.

Value of rural and small schools—opportunities for youth in rural communities

Recommendation 1

That the rural development process champion the value, benefit, and importance of rural and small schools.

Rural and small schools offer many positive benefits to students and their communities. They generally have smaller class sizes and have more interactions among staff, parents, and students. Rural and small schools often serve as the social, recreational, and cultural foundation for their communities. Rural schools are an integral part of the community. Rural schools also play an important role in the socialization of students. The children who attend rural and small schools

are an important part of the province's future. These children are entitled to a quality public education system. The rural development program must issue a strong statement about the value, benefit, and importance of rural and small schools.

Education funding

Recommendation 2

- 1. That the provincial government increase education funding to meet the educational needs of the province's students and to ensure equality of educational opportunity for all students in the province.**
- 2. That the provincial education funding formula take into account the unique circumstances facing rural and small schools.**

Rural and small schools face unique challenges. The funding formula should acknowledge their unique needs. Geographic, environmental, and other unique factors should be taken into account in developing a funding formula for rural and small schools. The funding formula must acknowledge the importance of providing the opportunity for students to attend a school in their community. We need to recognize that some rural and small schools may not be cost effective in dollar terms, however they are very effective in human and educational terms.

We also need to ensure that small and rural schools are able to provide facilities and services in keeping with the provisions of the *BC Human Rights Code*—including the changes brought in during the summer of 2016.

Recruitment and retention of teachers

Recommendation 3

- 1. That the provincial government, school districts, and the BCTF work together to develop strategies to promote the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote school districts.**
- 2. That teacher education institutions ensure that teacher preparation programs take into account the unique needs of teachers in rural settings.**

Recruiting and retaining teachers in rural and remote areas continues to be challenging. It normally takes several years for teachers to become acquainted with the life of a particular school—especially a small rural school where the proximity of community affairs makes a thorough understanding of children in all aspects of their development that much more important. With high teacher turnover, school programs and community relations can be less than ideal. Frequent arrivals and departures on the part of teachers in rural communities promote a climate of instability and do little to enhance the involvement of teachers in the general life of the community.

Programs such as forgivable loans, scholarships, and bursary programs for pre-service teachers may attract prospective teachers to rural areas of the province. In order to attract teachers, school districts also need to provide affordable and reasonable housing. Mentoring is also a proven strategy for retaining teachers in the teaching profession.

Given the diversity of new teachers entering the workforce, proactive and funded steps must be taken to ensure safe and inclusive work environments for new teachers from equity-seeking groups. A remote and rural school strategy in this regard should be implemented.

Teacher education institutions need to ensure that the unique circumstances faced by teachers in rural areas are taken into account in teacher preparation programs. There is a need to institutionalize the relationship between teacher-training institutions and rural schools.

Professional development (PD)

Recommendation 4

That special measures be taken to improve the availability of teacher professional development programs in rural areas of the province, including consideration of additional professional development funding and release time.

Teaching is difficult, demanding, and complex. The frequent professional isolation, the sense of overload, the barrage of competing and often incompatible demands, the accelerating pace of curriculum change—all make it difficult for teachers to continue month after month, year after

year, without encountering stress and fatigue. It is crucial that all teachers, especially rural teachers, have as many opportunities as possible for professional development.

Possible offerings to consider include action research, graduate studies, in-service education programs, study groups, self-directed professional development planning, serving as a faculty associate, educational leave, online learning, participating in exchange programs, course work, conferences, and workshops.

In many rural communities access to professional development is limited as well as expensive. Because rural areas often face the greatest difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers, special measures must be taken to improve the availability of professional development programs in those regions. Additional PD funding and release time, summer school study costs, and travel grants to enable opportunities at out-of-district programs could improve professional development opportunities for teachers in rural communities.

Learning resources

Recommendation 5

- 1. That the Ministry of Education and school districts provide a variety of learning resources to assist teachers in meeting the needs of students in rural and small schools.**
- 2. That teachers in rural and small schools be provided with the time and resources to develop, adapt, and implement curricula that meet the needs of all students.**

Many teachers in rural and small schools are expected to teach more than one subject or grade and teach students with a wide range of abilities in the same classroom. Teachers need to be provided with learning resources that will assist them to meet the needs of all their students. Additional time is also required to assist teachers in modifying learning resources to meet the needs of students in rural and small schools.

Support for Aboriginal students

Recommendation 6

That encouragement and resources be provided for schools to work with Aboriginal communities to meet the needs for education that supports Aboriginal student success.

Many rural communities have significant populations of Aboriginal students. When non-Aboriginal populations have reduced in areas affected by the decline of resource industries, the school system still needs to be able to provide excellent support and education to the remaining students who will contribute to their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

This rural development consultation is also an opportunity to continue the work of meaningfully implementing the education-related components of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, in particular Call to Action 57: "We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). This is an important task that must be implemented. The BCTF is pleased the government is committed to fully implementing all the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations. Resources must be available to do so, including funds to implement Recommendation #57 for public servants in rural areas.

Distributed Learning

Recommendation 7

- 1. That Distributed Learning be considered a positive offering for rural schools within the BC public school system only when fully supported by adequate staffing, funding, and resources.**
- 2. That Distributed Learning programs and courses in rural schools be equivalent to other programs and courses in curriculum, assessment, and reporting.**

3. That Distributed Learning not be used in place of sufficient staffing or adequate facilities to offer full programs for students.

Access to Distributed Learning offers promise in rural schools. With advanced communication and information technologies, rural schools may be able to access the same information and opportunities as schools and communities located in larger areas. Access to high-speed internet must be available in rural communities. Technology that is available and dependable in urban areas is not necessarily available in rural areas.

Cutting-edge technology should not be viewed as the justification for closing small schools. Distributed Learning can be used to serve locally defined purposes without sacrificing more durable and essential qualities of rural and small schools. Adequate staffing, funding, and resources must be available within the school to support students taking Distributed Learning courses.

Conclusion

Rural schools offer many positive benefits to students and their communities. These schools are at the heart of their communities in a way that is not possible in a suburban or an urban setting. In our submission we make recommendations regarding the value of rural schools, education funding, recruitment and retention of teachers, professional development, learning resources, support for Aboriginal students, and Distributed Learning. The BCTF urges the government to champion the value, benefits, and importance of rural and small schools.