

Discussion Paper
on
Class Size and Composition
for
The Learning Roundtable

This discussion paper is provided in response to the Premier's invitation for other Learning Roundtable participants to submit their own comments following the BCTF's unilateral tabling of School Act Amendment recommendations on November 14, 2005. It does not counter those particular recommendations, but rather examines the class size and composition issue with the intention of enriching dialogue at the Learning Roundtable and thus contributing to shared understandings that can lead to mutually acceptable action that will increase the ability of schools to "enable all learners."

The following assumptions have been made:

- Participants at the Learning Roundtable share a sincere common commitment to students and to the public education system in British Columbia.
- The class size and composition issue is complex, involving the interaction of many pedagogical and fiscal factors. An effective response requires thoughtful consideration of that complexity and the experience and expertise that illuminate it.
- There can be multiple, valid points of view on the issue which, although rooted in common values and goals, result in conflicting responses of equal integrity.
- Students and the public education system as a whole will benefit most from principled deliberations that seek to understand the perspectives and interests that underlie diverse positions rather than negotiations based solely on the positions themselves.

This discussion paper is intended to contribute to the principled deliberations that the BCSSA believes the Learning Roundtable was established to foster. It is a starting point for discussion based on the experience of our members rather than a position statement. We fully expect to learn more about this topic from the response of others, and to revise our perspectives and understandings as necessary when we do.

The Nature of Class Size and Composition Concerns

Class sizes have increased relatively little on average at Intermediate and Graduation Program grade levels. This small increase in average size, however, belies the more significant increase in the number of classes in secondary schools that exceed reasonable size. This is a serious concern that affects both the range of choice offered to students and the quality of support for learning that teachers can provide. If some smaller classes are retained in order to offer less popular electives or address safety concerns in shops or labs then there must be a corresponding number of larger classes, generally in the academic areas, to maintain the average class size that is fiscally supportable.

Fundamentally, the increase in some secondary class sizes is a workload issue for the teachers involved (an observation that is not intended to diminish it), but it can also become a learning conditions issue for students in some cases. The problem can be alleviated in many cases by eliminating small enrolment classes, but this would reduce options for students and that may be detrimental to the success of some.

In some elementary and secondary schools the effect of small increases in average class size is exacerbated by the more critical fact that support services¹ may have been reduced. This has made it harder for classroom teachers to provide the support that students with exceptional needs require, which then also affects the support they are able to provide to students with more typical needs. Student diversity, or class composition, seems to us to have a more significant effect than class size on most students' school experience at this time.

Class composition cannot be adequately understood by simply thinking in terms of students with special needs. For one thing, in many metropolitan districts there are large numbers of students with English as a second language who are not "special needs" but who require very specific support from the classroom teacher. In some rural areas the same is true of First Nations students.

To understand class composition we must also appreciate that combined classes of two grades are increasingly the norm in elementary and are also not uncommon in elective courses at the secondary level. In both cases this is more prevalent than in the past.

However, the main reason that class composition concerns are not simply a matter of the number of special needs students arises from the inadequacy of the concept of special needs in representing student diversity. The particular categories of need defined in provincial policy do not capture all of the "special" needs of students and some of those that are not represented by any ministry funding category are the most challenging for teachers; for example, behavioural and mental health issues. Within the categories that are funded, the diversity of students is so great that some may require no support at all while others in the same category present significant challenges.

For those students whose challenges are adequately described by ministry funding categories, it is our experience that in many cases their challenges, frequently medical in nature, have become both more severe and often multiple than in the past. Thus, while the number of students in a particular category may not have increased, their needs and the cost of their support have increased in many cases because not only educational assistant support is required but also consultation and support from a resource teacher, speech pathologist, behaviour consultant and/or others. Such complexity, of course, also implies more meeting and planning time, not to

¹ For the purposes of this discussion paper, support services include all services that assist the classroom teacher in providing an inclusive program for all students. This may include traditional special education support, ESL, First Nations, counseling, etc., as well as para-professional support from education assistants.

mention the paperwork that accompanies it. This is particularly true in the Physical Disability / Chronic Health category.

All students are welcomed into the inclusive school and participate in the inclusive classroom, which is a demonstrably successful and viable approach with adequate training and support for the classroom teacher. Ministerial Order 150/89 makes inclusion official provincial policy by requiring that: “Unless the educational needs of a handicapped student indicate that the student’s educational program should be provided otherwise, a board shall provide that student with an educational program in classrooms where that student is integrated with other students who do not have handicaps.” As a result of this directive, and because it is generally considered to be “the right thing to do,” schools are increasingly attempting to design the regular classroom so that all students can be successful. District classes for special needs students are much less common than only a few years ago.

In an inclusive educational model, the classroom teacher is the first and most important source of assistance and support for all students. While other educational services will frequently be required to extend or enrich those which can be provided by the classroom teacher, under an inclusive educational model they should never displace the classroom teacher as the person with fundamental responsibility for enabling all learners under her care. Just as an architect may call upon structural engineers or interior designers to apply their particular expertise in the construction of a building, so too a teacher may call upon various colleagues within or beyond the school setting. Like the architect, however, the classroom teacher must retain overall responsibility for requesting, coordinating and integrating those services in the interests of the student.

This architectural metaphor contrasts with a commonly used medical metaphor in which the classroom teacher is analogous to a general practitioner who deals with common situations but passes responsibility to a specialist when complications arise that require knowledge beyond that individual’s experience or training. That metaphor applied reasonably well in the days when students with special needs were often referred out of the regular classroom to segregated settings, but it is no longer valid now that we are attempting to “enable all learners” within the regular classroom as much as possible. It is difficult for classroom teachers to assume their new responsibilities but they are trying valiantly, and with notable success, to do so. If outside support that is essential is reduced, teachers will feel that they do not have adequate professional and para-professional assistance. This creates both practical difficulty and emotional distress that depletes physical, emotional and psychic resources.

Unfortunately, the BC history of unproductive and unpleasant collective agreement negotiations taints the discussion of class size and composition. These discussions at the Learning Roundtable need to move forward and allow the Ready Industrial Inquiry Commission to do its work. However, we do acknowledge that this creates tensions for teachers.

It is understandable, therefore, that the BCTF seeks guarantees with respect to class size and composition. We absolutely understand the issues and experiences that give rise to this demand, and we share the urgent desire for improvements, but we do not feel that the response recommended by the BCTF will actually accomplish the desired ends, and we are concerned that it will impede wise professional decision making and efficient stewardship of scarce resources.

Formulaic prescriptions cannot appropriately provide for the uniqueness of students and contexts. Put simply, such prescriptions require districts to allocate resources needlessly in some cases and thus to not have the required resources in other situations that are not covered by any contractual provision. This is not in anyone’s best interest.

Thus, it seems to us that a critical issue for the public education system is to provide teachers with the assurance that their voice has been heard on this issue, that a serious attempt is being made to address the underlying causes, and they can be confident that this will continue to be the case. In part that assurance will be provided through a funding response that must be agreed between the BCTF and the government. Although the BCSSA is an interested party, it does not see itself as directly involved in this discussion. Where we can contribute more is in the discussion of how decisions are made about the allocation and use of resources once the overall budget is determined.

In this respect, the BCSSA feels that it is essential to avoid targeting of funds or prescriptive guarantees that eliminate local flexibility. We appreciate that this familiar recommendation from “management” may not be well received in schools or districts where trust is low. We also believe that there are many schools and districts in which it has worked in the past and would be welcomed in the future. Nonetheless, we would recommend that the Learning Roundtable carefully examine local decision-making processes in order to identify ways in which all parties—teachers, parents, administrators and trustees—can be given confidence that a thoughtful, principled and collaborative process will exist, with effective but efficient processes of appeal when required.

Conclusion

This brief overview of a complex topic has been intended to open discussion at the Learning Roundtable that the BCSSA hopes will contribute to deeper and more commonly shared understandings. We believe that this is the essential pre-requisite to finding a solution that is acceptable and sustainable.

Problem solving often fails when insufficient time is spent accurately defining the problem. Conflict resolution often fails when the parties focus on their dispute over proposed solutions and are unable to look beyond these “positions” to understand the underlying “interests.” The BCSSA hopes that the Learning Roundtable will not suffer from these common and predictable pitfalls. Consequently, we invite and will appreciate the concerns, perspectives and experiences of the other partner groups as we probe for understanding that can provide a foundation for successful problem solving and conflict resolution.