ADDRESSING STUDENT DIFFERENCES: NEXT STEPS

June 1997

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Ministry of Education,
Skills and Training

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Introduction

Most students are successful in school. They acquire basic learning skills, pass their exams, graduate from secondary school, and move on to post-secondary education and training or enter the workforce.

This paper focuses on the estimated 20% of students who are not successful. It deals specifically with students in the "grey area" —those who, for one reason or another, are not acquiring important literacy skills, are not identified as having a special need, and are performing poorly in school. It is clear that without important educational skills, these young men and women will have considerable difficulty participating effectively in our knowledge-based society.

This paper proposes some initial steps to take to improve success rates of these students. Changes in some provincial policies are recommended. Much of what is proposed is based on the belief that improving success rates can only be achieved through strong leadership from schools and their local communities.

This paper is the work of the Provincial Working Group on Addressing Student Differences. The task was to make recommendations on the broad and complex issues involved in addressing the range of student differences in schools. Specifically, their tasks were to address the need identified by teachers, administrators and parents to clarify provincial policies that deal with modified curriculum and, more broadly, policies that address student diversity in classrooms and to make recommendations for policy development.

Provincial Working Group

The Provincial Working Group (Working Group) consisted of representatives from various education partner groups, including practicing teachers and administrators.

Erika Bock, Parent, SD #82 (Coast Mountains), BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils

Pat Clarke, Assistant Director of Professional Development, BC Teachers' Federation

Anita Chapman, Assistant Director of Professional Development, BC Teachers' Federation

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Silvia Dyck, Parent, President of BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils

Nancy Fernandes, Principal, SD #43 (Coquitlam), BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association

Brent Herman, Teacher, President of BC Alternate Education Association, SD #31 (Merritt), BC Teachers' Federation

Tracy Massop, Student, SD #41 (Burnaby), BC Student Voice

Helen Middleditch, Teacher, SD #7 (Nelson), President of Special Education Association

Susan Rehnby, Principal, SD # 36 (Surrey) BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association

Jackie Tegart, Trustee, SD #74 (Gold Trail), BC School Trustees' Association

Jerry Mussio, Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, Chair of the Provincial Working Group

The following Ministry staff supported the activities of the Working Group: Madhuri Pendharkar, Special Programs Branch, Robert Lazar, Policy and Corporate Services Branch, Becky Matthews and Dave Williams, Curriculum and Resources Branch. The Working Group would also like to acknowledge the contributions during the development of this work of Mike Zlotnik, BCTF and Susan Coelho, Policy and Corporate Services Branch.

As well as developing this paper, the Working Group prepared two discussion papers: *Modified Curriculum and Individual Differences – A Working Paper* (November, 1995) and *Addressing Student Differences: Setting a Direction* (September, 1996). Responses to the two papers informed the development of this work. The appendix contains a summary of field response to the September 1996 paper.

BACKGROUND

Policy Issues

The Ministry sought advice from the Working Group on provincial policies related to students who are having difficulty achieving curriculum standards:

- *In Progress (IP)*: This reporting symbol was introduced in 1994 in an attempt to provide students who are in danger of failing with additional opportunities to attain success. While there is broad support for retaining the principles of IP, teachers report that the policy is difficult to administer and want it changed.

- *Modified curriculum:* For many years schools have regularly placed students who are struggling in regular programs in programs with modified curriculum—curriculum that is less challenging than what is prescribed.

Some argue that this practise is appropriate as repeated failure is the only other alternative for these students. Others argue that placing students in programs with modified curriculum is an unacceptable practise because it denies those students access to higher level skills. Educators have requested that the Ministry clarify its policy on modification of provincial curriculum.

- *Mathematics 9A, 10A, 11A; Communications 11, 12:* These provincial courses were designed for students who experience difficulties with the standard mathematics and English courses. The future status of these courses has been questioned in light of the introduction of new applied courses in mathematics and English language arts.

The Problem

Students in the "Grey Area"

- The students discussed in this paper are those who are not succeeding in school. They are often referred to as students in "the grey-area" because they don't fit traditional labels; they do not meet criteria for special education funding. Some of these students receive learning assistance support. They frequently are placed in programs with modified curriculum in secondary schools where significant changes are made to provincial learning outcomes.

- These students are not succeeding for many different reasons. Some find school boring or not challenging. Some are not succeeding because they are in conflict with teachers or their peers. They may lack interest and motivation and sit quietly disengaged in classrooms. Some may be experiencing family problems or other social, emotional or health related difficulties.

- These students typically lack important skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Many of them do not respond to teaching approaches offered in standard classrooms; some learn in ways that are different from those of their peers. Others require more time to learn important concepts or to complete their work. Some drop out of school; others remain.

Magnitude of the Problem

- Recent test data tell us that most students in the province are successful in school and attain skills required to function as responsible citizens. B.C. students have performed well in national and international assessments, placing in the top third when compared with other industrialized nations. The data also tell us, however, that about 20% of students are not achieving important skills now considered essential. Anecdotal comments from teachers and school administrators confirm the magnitude of the problem with percentage figures varying significantly from school to school.

- The 1993 Communications Assessment reported that 20% of students are not achieving important reading and writing skills by the end of the primary years. This percentage, according to this assessment, remains relatively constant throughout the grade levels. The report also noted that the teaching of reading in grades 8-12 was not emphasized or required in the provincial curriculum at that time.

- The Communications Assessment identified that in homes with little reading material, reading and writing are less likely to be valued, and parents are less likely to read to children or for their own pleasure.

- Following the administration of an international reading and mathematics literacy test, Statistics Canada reported that 20% of B.C. residents 16 years of age or older have only low-level literacy skills. Across the country as a whole, about 22% have low literacy skills. (This study pointed out that in order to maintain and strengthen literacy skills they must be used regularly). Compared with their more literate peers, persons who performed poorly on this assessment typically make less money and are more likely to be unemployed or on social assistance.

- Students categorized as having intellectual difficulties comprise under 2% of the school population. These students, in most cases, would not be able to meet provincial learning outcomes.

- Provincially, the school completion rate for over the past five years has increased from 66% to 72%. These rates rise to 80% in the same time period for 25-year olds. While these results are positive, they indicate that about 20% of people still do not achieve what is considered a minimum education standard in our society. Results for aboriginal students are particularly troubling—70% of aboriginal students do not graduate.

Higher Expectations and Growing Complexity

- For the first half of this century relatively few people graduated from secondary school and moved on to higher levels of education. Young adolescents could leave school after grade eight or nine, obtain good paying manual jobs in the resource sector and participate in society as responsible citizens. Literacy requirements for these manual jobs were minimal.

- With the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, social and economic progress depends on having well-educated citizens with high literacy and numeracy levels, who can think critically, who continue learning and who can adapt to change. High school graduation is now considered a basic requirement for all citizens, with most new jobs now requiring some form of post-secondary education or training. In short, education and literacy standards that were once applied to only a limited elite are now viewed by society as essential for all citizens.

- As literacy standards rise, the challenge of addressing student differences in the province's classrooms grows more complex. The number of students who speak English as a second language has more than doubled since 1991, growing from 34,176 to 71,371. Since the mid 1980s, more students with special needs have been integrated into regular classrooms with their numbers increasing from 28,704 to 45,862; of particular concern to teachers and school administrators is the increased number of students with behavioural disorders. Complicating the problem further is the difficult fiscal situation facing school districts and the provincial government.

FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The Working Group established the following targets and principles to focus their discussions and to frame their recommendations:

Targets

- *Common curriculum K-10:* An important target for the K-12 school system is for all students, with the exception of some students with special needs, to attain the learning outcomes prescribed in the provincial curriculum K-10.

- *Graduation:* A second target is for all students to attain a high school graduation diploma. For students with special needs who are not able to attain graduation standards, it is expected that they will receive a School Completion Certificate, denoting that the student's learning plan has been achieved.

- *Student transition to post-secondary and the workplace:* A third target is for all school graduates to continue their studies at the post-secondary level or be prepared to successfully enter the work place.

Principles

- *High standards:* Students learn best in a school environment where all students are valued and are challenged by high standards and expectations.

- *Student learning:* Students learn in different ways and at different rates; learning requires the active participation of the student; learning is both an individual and group process.

- *Early intervention:* Early intervention to address student learning difficulties is more successful than responding to accumulated deficits at a later date.

- *Instructional Strategies*: The diversity of student needs can be met through the implementation of a wide range of effective instructional strategies based on best professional practices.

- *Parent and community support:* Improvements in student success rates are best achieved when teachers, parents and the community work collaboratively toward common education goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations address our concerns for students who are not succeeding in school. We worry about the futures of the "grey-area students" in our system who do not fit traditional labels or meet criteria for special education funding. We do not claim to provide "the ultimate solution" to improving success rates of all students. Rather, we propose a number of recommendations to identify initial steps for the Ministry and School Districts to act upon to address student differences. Much of what we propose is based on the belief that improving success rates can only be achieved through strong leadership from schools and their local communities.

We direct the following recommendations to schools, school districts and the Ministry. We consider these recommendations to be a starting point in the development of a comprehensive action plan to improve success rates in schools.

1. Early intervention

Detecting and addressing student learning difficulties early rather than later is essential if we wish to reduce the number of students who experience learning difficulties later in their schooling. Early intervention is also important from a broader societal perspective as failure to address literacy and numeracy problems early can lead to significant social and economic costs to society later on.

The use of assessment and intervention strategies to address basic literacy and numeracy problems during the Primary Years (K-3) is critical to the future success of students. Abundant research demonstrates that students in grade three who have poorly developed reading skills are unmotivated, have low self-esteem and are often referred to

special education programs, where they may remain for many years. At the same time, the evidence suggests that almost all children (except those with the most severe learning difficulties) can succeed if appropriate programs and services are provided. Teachers have little difficulty identifying students at risk from their earliest years in school; the challenge is to design strategies that work. There is a growing body of research documenting successful strategies. A summary of this research and its implications is included in the Ministry publication: *Early Intervention of Learning Difficulties*. Attention should not be limited to the primary years as students can experience learning difficulties at later stages of their development.

It is important that intervention strategies also be in place for the Intermediate Years (grades 4-10) and Graduation Years (11,12). We recommend:

1.1 *That the development and implementation of early intervention programs be made a priority by the Education Ministry and school districts. Actions taken should include: implementing pilot projects for early intervention and teacher inservice; coordinating preschool programs and services provided by various agencies and organizations, including government; and requiring that early intervention be a topic of preservice study.*

2. Reading

The 1993 Communications Assessment identified that 20% of students are not achieving important reading skills by the end of the primary years. This percentage, according to this assessment, remains relatively constant throughout the grade levels. The report also noted that the teaching of reading in grades 8-12 was not emphasized or required in the

provincial curriculum at that time. Given the importance of reading in the mandate for schools, we recommend:

2.1 *That school districts ensure that comprehensive reading instruction is in place for each grade, K-10, in support of the prescribed learning outcomes of provincial curriculum, and that schools systematically monitor reading achievement.*

2.2 *That the Ministry support and promote the implementation of successful models for the teaching of reading skills in grades K-10.*

3. Mathematics 9A, 10A, 11A

In the junior secondary years, mathematics, more than any other subject, often serves as a screening device to divide students into either academically challenging courses or those courses with lower expectations. A substantial percentage of students are placed in "modified" or lower-level mathematics courses. For example, province wide, about 25% of students are enrolled in Mathematics 9A, a provincial course that, in effect, restricts students' future access to post-secondary education and training and subsequently reduces future career options.

Some argue that there should be only one set of provincial mathematics courses for grades K-10 with all students studying the same curriculum. Others argue that while this approach may be possible in the humanities, the sequential nature of mathematics makes it impossible to teach classes of students with a wide range of abilities and competencies. Locally modified mathematics curriculum and the provincial courses, Mathematics 9A, 10A and 11A, were developed to meet the needs of a range of learners, including some students with special needs. Recently the province

developed Applications of Mathematics courses to reach a broader range of students. Many teachers argue that Mathematics 9A, 10A and 11A are still required because the standards of the new courses are too high for many students. In view of the complexity of these issues, we recommend:

3.1 *That a task force be struck (including, teachers of mathematics, other educators, parents, trustees, and representatives from business and labour) to analyze the enrolment and achievement patterns over time in mathematics courses in the province. The task force will review the overall purposes of the mathematics curriculum in the province as a basis to complete the following tasks:*

- *define the basic mathematical literacy requirements for citizenship;*

- *propose strategies for increasing the number of students engaged in high level mathematics programs;*

- *develop specific recommendations about Mathematics 9A, 10A and 11 A.*

4. Coordinated Community Support

Schools can accommodate in several ways those students experiencing academic difficulties. For example, schools can make adjustments in teaching strategies, time or other variables that they can control. Some cases, however, require support beyond what the school can provide. For example, schools have little or no control over problems related to family crisis, or economic and health difficulties that impede students' academic progress. Support for the academic development of these students requires both strong school leadership and strong support by the community as a whole.

We recommend:

4.1 That school districts be encouraged to develop a coordinated community strategy to support student learning. Such a strategy should be used to guide the district's working relationships with parents and other members of the community, and with regional staff of the Ministry for Children and Families.

5. Assessment and Reporting Policies

In Progress (IP): The In Progress (IP) reporting symbol identifies when it is appropriate to provide opportunities for students to have additional time or support to meet the learning outcomes. It is also intended to serve as an alert to parents and students of potential failure and to specify a learning plan so that the student can be successful. There is support for the purpose of the policy. According to many teachers, however, implementation of the policy has created an administrative burden that has distorted the intent of the policy.

Minister Ramsey recently announced that the key principles underlying IP will be maintained, but that the reporting symbol "IP" will be replaced by the symbol "I" as of September 1, 1997. More importantly, the IP process, will be replaced with a solution that will work better for teachers, parents and students.

We recommend:

5.1 That schools be required to inform parents as soon as a problem is detected and prior to an "F" being assigned; that this alert be issued at any time during the year; and that parents and students be provided with an opportunity to consult with the teacher about the problem and possible solutions; and that, in an effort to eliminate unnecessary paper work, many of the provincial rules dealing with the adminis-

tration of IP be eliminated and that responsibility for administrative details be assigned to school districts.

Reporting policy and modified curriculum: Questions have been raised as to why letter grades cannot be used to report progress of students who are following a modified program, as defined in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). The Special Education Advisory Committee (May 1994) recommended that letter grades be used for these students, with the understanding that the letter grades be linked to the curriculum standards defined in their IEPs. Response to the recent discussion papers on student differences supports this position.

We recommend:

5.2 That teachers be permitted to use letter grades for students with special needs; that the goals/ outcomes stated in the IEP—as opposed to provincial curriculum standards—be used as the reference point for the letter grades; and that report cards clearly indicate that the student is following a modified curriculum as defined by the IEP.

6. Provincial Policy On Modification: (K-10)

School procedures, structures and timetables, particularly at the secondary level, are typically organized for group instruction. These organizational structures work well for most students, but often don't work well for those students who require more personalized and adaptive learning environments. Teachers, under pressure to "cover" the curriculum in the standard timetable, often find it difficult, if not impossible, to slow down and adapt their teaching strategies to accommodate individual students who require more extensive help.

Many schools presently modify the provincial curriculum in various ways to provide achievable outcomes for students who are having difficulty attaining the prescribed outcomes in one or more areas. Typically, schools modify courses or programs in one or more of the following ways:

- use a subset of the prescribed learning outcomes for the grade/course;

- use outcomes from previous grades;

- use outcomes that are not part of provincial curriculum;

- reduce the expectations for student performance.

Because no provincial guidelines exist, the ways that schools modify curriculum vary widely from classroom to classroom. Students at the secondary level are often unable to access post-secondary training with these courses and may not be adequately prepared to enter the workplace. Parents often are unaware of these impacts.

The basic goal is for all students to achieve the learning outcomes stated in provincial curriculum. To that end we recommend

6.1 *That the Ministry have a policy in place by September 1998 on modified curriculum (K-10) to assist students who are experiencing serious difficulty achieving the prescribed learning outcomes in one or more provincial curriculum.*

6.2 *That the new policy encourage schools and school boards to continue to develop unique and innovative programs to suit the needs of individual students in their quest to achieve the standard provincial curriculum; that for those students who continue to experience serious difficulties achieving the standards reflected in one or more provincial curriculum, school boards be empowered to alter the*

required courses of study and to focus on a set of core learning outcomes (K-10).

6.3 *That the Ministry, in collaboration with teachers and other stakeholders, identify a set of core learning outcomes (for the purposes of modification) in the following areas of learning (K-10):*

- *Reading*

- *Writing*

- *Numeracy*

- *Citizenship and Social Responsibility*

And that the Ministry work with partners to develop indicators of progress to serve as standards to monitor and report individual student progress for these students in the above mentioned areas of learning (K-10).

6.4 *That parents, and where appropriate, students, be consulted with respect to decisions involving the placement of students in any program that departs from standard provincial curriculum. The consequences of such decisions to students' future education must be clearly communicated to parents.*

6.5 *That until details of the new policy are fully developed by September 1998, districts be permitted to continue to offer modified curriculum, provided that parents are consulted before students depart from standard provincial curriculum; that report cards note that students are following a modified curriculum.*

The development of provincial policies should be undertaken with the understanding that some students with special needs will still not be able to graduate from secondary school with a Dogwood Graduation Diploma. For these students, a School Completion Certificate, denoting that the individual student learning plan has been achieved, will still be the appropriate goal for secondary school completion.

7. English and Mathematics Requirements (Grades 11 and 12)

In order to graduate from a B.C. secondary school, all students must satisfy a number of course requirements in grades 11 and 12. For many years now, graduation requirements include the equivalent of two years of English and one year of mathematics.

Several English and mathematics courses are available to students. Students select specific grade 11 and 12 courses based on university admission requirements or based on the course requirements specified by a wide range of career programs offered by colleges and institutes. Other students select a set of courses that will lead to high school graduation. Some do this on the assumption that they will get a job after graduation; others have not yet made plans beyond graduation.

Of all students who start grade eight, 38% enrol in some form of post-secondary training immediately after completing grade 12. The balance, 62%, seek to enter the labour force immediately after graduation, or earlier if they leave school before graduation.

Students aiming for post-secondary education typically select English 11, 12 and Mathematics 11. All post-secondary institutions recognize these courses for admission purposes. New applied courses in English (Technical and Professional Communications 12) and Mathematics (Applications of Mathematics 11 and 12) are intended to provide students with sound English and mathematics skills, but with more emphasis on applications to every-day life, to the workplace and to other disciplines.

These courses are particularly suited to those students headed for post-secondary vocational-technical career programs. Recognition of these new courses by colleges and universities varies across the province. Mathematics 11A

and Communications 11 and 12 provide students with a route to graduation, but currently do not serve a career pathway. These courses have often been referred to as "dead end" courses.

We recommend:

7.1   That Communications 11 and 12 be retained and revised to focus more explicitly on literacy skills for the workplace.

7.2   That Mathematics 11A (if retained as a result of the Task Force review) be revised to focus more explicitly on basic numeracy skills for the workplace.

7.3   That curriculum for the above mentioned courses be available to schools in the fall of 1998 for implementation in September 1999.

8. Links with Universities and Colleges

Students, teachers and parents are becoming increasingly confused over the array of admission requirements in the post-secondary system.

The Minister of Education, under the *School Act*, sets curriculum standards for schools and determines course requirements for secondary school graduation. In the post-secondary sector, individual universities and colleges define their curriculum and set their individual admission requirements. In this process, each college or university determines which grade 11 and 12 courses and which performance standards will be accepted for general admission and for admission to each of its programs.

With 27 post-secondary institutions and their individual departments now independently setting admission requirements, it is becoming very difficult to provide students with advice as to what courses should or should not be included in a student's grade 11 or 12 timetables.

This lack of program articulation between the two publicly funded school systems confuses and frustrates their clients.

We recommend:

8. 1   That the Ministry collaborate with the secondary and post-secondary education communities to recommend to the Minister by November 30, 1997 a policy and a standard set of procedures to regularly review and determine which grade 11 and 12 courses are accepted for purposes of GPA calculation and admission to public post-secondary institutions. (Note that this recommendation is congruent with that included in a recent study on transition conducted by school and post-secondary educators, parents, and students.)

9. Information and Tracking

The lack of a comprehensive information system to support and inform policy development is a significant impediment to reviewing policies on student differences and discussions around literacy and related success rates in the province.

The existing information systems used across the province make it very difficult, if not impossible, to address the following types of questions on a systematic basis: What percentage of students are experiencing difficulty in school? At what levels and in what schools?

What percentage are boys and girls? What types of programs are they are enrolled in? Do they receive any type of community support? Do these students drop out or do they graduate? Are particular interventions making a difference in student learning?

This type of information is critical to school staffs, school boards and the Ministry in the process of allocating resources and monitoring the effects of new initiatives.

We recommend:

9.1   That the Ministry, in collaboration with stakeholders, review and, where necessary, refine student information systems across the province.

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APPENDIX 1: FIELD RESPONSE: ADDRESSING STUDENT DIFFERENCES

In the fall of 1996, the Ministry received 264 group and individual responses to the discussion paper *Addressing Student Differences: Setting a Direction.* About 67% of responses were from teachers or other school staff members (primarily teachers), either as individuals or collectively within a school. Approximately 20% of responses were from school boards or their members, or from district offices (including groups of educators within a district). Another 10% of responses was from provincial or regional organizations such as teachers' associations; and the remainder (about 3%) were from parents (individually or through PACs) and students.

Although there was not consensus on the issues, the following general trends emerged.

- Educators felt that they are not in control of all the factors required to ensure student success, and that students, parents and others must also assume responsibility for student learning.

- Educators indicated a need for more money, time, and human resources, as well as smaller classes, in order to effectively meet the needs of *all* students.

- A concern expressed was that teachers are not able to meet the needs of all students using a common curriculum K-10. Many felt that the assumption that all students can achieve common essential learning in K-10 reflects an idealistic view of the world and for some students is false.

- Respondents suggested a need to organize the curricula into different pathways or levels: essential (which all students must attain), standard, and enriched to accommodate student differences. Respondents indicated that the existing Principles or Applications pathways in mathematics do not satisfy this requirement because some of the prescribed learning outcomes are too difficult for up to 20% of students. Respondents felt that until these different levels or pathways are developed, existing modified courses (the 'A' stream in Mathematics, Communications at the secondary level) should be retained, otherwise more students will not graduate and/or districts will have to modify curriculum locally.

- Many respondents recommended establishing different types of school leaving certificates, or alternate routes to the Dogwood Diploma, to recognize various student needs/pathways to completion, with the ability of students to move between pathways to avoid streaming.

- Many respondents believed that the current structure of the school system (e.g., lock/step courses, semesters) impedes the ability of some students to succeed, and does not recognize the principle that students learn at different rates and in different ways.

- A need for better communication/cooperation between home and school to meet students' needs (e.g., to develop learning plans for students on modified curricula) and to keep parents informed of student progress was identified by many respondents.

- Many respondents felt that all students should be graded in a similar fashion so as not to stigmatize any students. For example, students who are working on modified learning outcomes should receive letter grades that indicate their achievement as it relates to those learning outcomes.

- Many respondents indicated that the IP is difficult to administer, but it should be retained in a modified form as it is a useful concept.

- Many respondents indicated a need for IRPs to be modified to both put priority to the learning outcomes (identify those that are essential and must be attained, and those that are enriching) and to establish standards for acceptable performance in meeting the learning outcomes.

- Respondents suggested that if appropriate early intervention is provided, students might require less support in the secondary years. However, there is a recognition that more resources would be required to implement early intervention broadly.

- Educators indicated that, as front-line professionals dealing with students daily, they should be given some measure of discretion and autonomy from requirements/regulations in order to do what they think is in the best interests of individual students.