

Learning Roundtable Minutes
Friday, April 21, 2006
1:00 PM – 3:30 PM
Premier's Vancouver Office

Minutes – not yet approved.

Opening comments – The Premier

- Welcomes partners
- Commits to continuing to collect class size data to continue the dialogue about learning conditions.
- Reminds partners of significant additions to the education budget of \$150M last year and an additional \$20M this year at a time of declining enrollment.
- Seeks agreement of this meeting, in view of the pressing timeline, to dispense with the usual order of business and proceed to some important questions so as to canvas the partners on significant questions.
- Underlines importance of continuing dialogue and the premier's personal priority on issues related to public education.

No objection is presented by the partners to the Premier continuing and putting forward his questions. Following is a report on the questions asked and the responses given by each participant. A summary of findings concludes these minutes.

Premier - Can we all agree that all schools in all school districts must respect the legally established class size requirements?

BCSTA

- There is no doubt that Boards have duty to uphold the *School Act*.
- There needs to be clarity around the provisions so that Boards know with precision what is expected of them.
- Legislation needs to make room for different approaches to fit varying needs of school districts.

Premier – Compliance is not one size fits all but all boards are expected to get to a standard in their own way.

BCCPAC

- Agrees that legislation needs to be enforced and that accountability provisions must be put in place.
- There must be consequences for non-compliance.
- Parents do not believe that it is clear that boards are held accountable now. Greater clarity with accountability measures is necessary.

BCPVPA

- Agrees “the law is the law”.
- Interpretations and meaning must be clear from the onset to avoid confusion.

BCTF

- Compliance is necessary and at all times.
- Timeliness is an issue.

BCSSA

- Compliance is required – A process for resolution and clear timelines to resolve non-compliance is necessary.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

- There needs to be a clear understanding up front that there will be consequences for non-compliance.

Premier - Can we all agree that there should be legal enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with legislated class size requirements?

BCSTA

- Minister now has the necessary authority to investigate and make recommendations. The authority should be exercised when necessary.

BCCPAC

- Parents are going to want to see that boards respond when they are not in compliance.
- There is a need for a clear understanding that autonomy does not provide reason to break the law.

BCPVPVA

- Authority applied by Minister's office will work.
- Mitigated by flexibility – need to fall within guidelines.

BCTF

- Ministry is responsible for the enforcement mechanism.
- Board can provide for ongoing compliance by leaving room in classes during initial staffing for new students.

BCSSA

- Superintendents are responsible to confirm compliance.
- When a district is not in compliance the Ministry needs to work with the district to bring it into compliance.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

- Clear understanding and consistency is necessary.
- Need to apply consequence consistently.
- There needs to be confidence that compliance expectations are consistently applied.

Premier - Do we all agree that steps should be taken to either reduce or limit class sizes in the most obvious problem area identified in the class size data reports, grades 4 to 7?

All partners agree that grades 4 to 7 were a class size pressure point. This was based on a shared concern that students in these grades and in large classes had their learning conditions affected all day rather than for a limited part of the course as in grades 8 to 12. Concern was also expressed for students moving from the smaller classes in grades K to 3 to the larger classes in grades 4 to 7. Specific issues follow.

BCSTA

- Grades 4-7 are a priority pressure point
- Cautioned that any tightening of parts of the system reduces the flexibility across the entire system.

BCCPAC

- Distributed a position paper on the class size issue - http://www.bccpac.bc.ca/Issues_Bulletins/class_size_composition_a_pr06.pdf
- Expressed concern that fixed numbers in secondary schools limited elective choices.
- Concern about grades 4 to 7 large classes expressed. Solutions should include flexibility.

BCPVPVA

- Do not support class size fixed limits in legislation or collective agreements but recognize large classes in grades 4 to 7 are an issue.

BCTF

- Support firm class size limits at grades 4 to 7 and 8 to 12.
- Concerned that limits in grades 4 to 7 without limits in grades 8 to 12 will create the same problem that current exists between primary and grades 4 to 12.

BCSSA

- Issue on class size is related to funding, flexibility and facilities.
- Important, if regulations around class size are to change that the system is informed in a timely manner.
- Grades 4 to 7 is a priority for attention.
- Flexibility must be preserved in any changes made.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

- Grades 4 to 7 is an area of concern as students tend to be in these classes all day, so if the class is large the impact may be high.
- Principals need to be asking the question, “is the learning situation acceptable?”

Premier – It seems that there is agreement that decisions are deliberate and that they result from open, informed consultation that includes all appropriate partners. If classes are different than a standard, do you agree that those affected should be consulted?

BCSSA

- Dialogue is happening now but it needs to happen at a deeper level.
- When meaningful dialogue occurs even when you do not agree with a decision the participants understand it.

BCTF

- Roles and processes need to be set out with clarity.
- Consultation is complex – particularly in secondary schools.
- We need to clarify the nature of consultation expected.

BCPVPA

- Consultation must be inclusive.
- Consultation is broad based – needs time.
- BCPVPA does not recommend legislation that defines consultation.

BCCPAC

- Consultation works well now in some districts but not in others.
- There is not a clear understanding of expectations to consult – parents cannot be confident that they will be included.
- Parents are frustrated and do not feel meaningfully involved in many issues.
- Parents do not need to be decision makers but need a meaningful role in informing decisions from their perspective.

BCSTA

- Support and inclusive model for decision making.
- It would be reasonable to have a provincial expectation for all school boards to establish policy that describes their local processes of decision making regarding class size and composition, including consultation to provide meaningful voice, and recognizing that these processes may look different in each district.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

- Consultation must be inclusive but privacy must be respected.
- The principal is responsible for the school organization.
- Teachers need to be involved – share best practices.

Premier - Do we agree that we need to reduce and limit the numbers of students with diagnosed special needs in classes?

BCSTA

- BCSTA is opposed to a firm cap on the number of students with special needs assigned to a class. A designation is not necessarily a disability in every class.
- Students with special needs are sometimes grouped for instruction in a single class so they can be supported.

BCCPAC

- Parents do not support the introduction of provisions capping the numbers of students with special needs.
- Support inclusion but allow schools to be accountable for all the students.
- Special Education is a complex issue that needs more discussion.

BCPVPVA

- No caps – best decisions made at school level.

BCTF

- Teachers support inclusion.
- Firm caps support inclusion.
- Some categories of students create significant challenges to the learning environment.

BCSSA

- Do not support caps on the number of students with special needs in classes.
- Believe that schools can provide greater supports for students with special needs without caps.
- Too complex for simple rules.
- Even students within same categories have greatly different needs.
- Teachers need to be involved in the complex decisions affecting class composition.

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

- Principal and teachers should decide class composition based on professional judgement.
- When parents are concerned, the principal should be accountable to provide a rationale regarding learning conditions.

Premier – Concludes meeting with comments at 3:35 PM.

- Another meeting will be scheduled within the next month or six weeks.
- Indicates that there may be short term improvements initiated while long term solutions continue to be sought.
- Commits that the Minister and Premier will consider what has been heard in response to the questions and that there may be provisions introduced in this legislative window.

Summary of meeting

- Dialogue will continue – Learning Roundtable will continue to seek solutions to optimize learning conditions for students.
- All members agree that the legislative requirements should be observed by Boards and that there should be consequences for non-compliance.
- The members of the Roundtable agree that grades 4 to 7 are a “pressure point” in respect to class size. With the exception of the BCTF members do not agree that firm limits are a solution to this problem. Flexibility is necessary. Firm limits constrain flexibility. The BCTF supports firm limits for K to 12 and expressed view that no limits in grades 4 to 7 should be implemented in the absence of limits in grades 8 to 12.
- Members, with the exception of the BCTF, do not endorse limits on the numbers of special needs student in classes but do agree this is an important consideration respecting learning conditions. Integration must be thoughtfully determined in a consultative and inclusive manner. Teachers and parents need to be engaged in the consultation about class composition and principals need to provide explanations of decisions reached that are understandable to all. BCTF support firm “caps” on the number of special needs students integrated in classes.