



# British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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A Union of Professionals

## UPDATED GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS REVIEW

*A Brief to the*

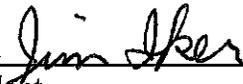
**Ministry of Education**

*from the*

**British Columbia Teachers' Federation**

Revised submission

March 2016

  
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President

  
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Executive Director

## **Updated Graduation Requirements Review Brief 2016 BC Teachers' Federation**

*bctf.ca/BriefsAndPositionPapers.aspx*

### **Preamble**

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) is a union of professionals that represents the 41,000 teachers in BC's public-education system. The BCTF is committed to success for every student in a strong and stable public-education system.

In reviewing the current BC graduation requirements and plans for the draft curriculum in the fall of 2012, the BCTF encouraged discussion and input from all members, and specifically requested teachers who sit on BCTF committees and provincial specialist associations (PSAs) to provide advice. The BCTF made its original submission in December 2012. Now, four years later, we have reviewed, revised, and are resubmitting our feedback based on the current context and progress to date.

### **Recommendations for consideration**

The BCTF recognizes that the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) has received input from many sources suggesting amendments to the graduation requirements. It is a priority for BC's teachers that any changes made to the graduation requirements for students continue to foster the growth and development of every individual, to the end that she or he will become a self-reliant, self-disciplined, participating citizen with a sense of social and environmental responsibility within a democratic, pluralistic society. This is the sacred trust of public education, which prepares all students to engage in a world each generation will shape and build. The public-education system must provide students with knowledge and wisdom. The system must protect and nurture their natural joy of learning; encourage them to become persons of character, strength, and integrity; infuse them with hope and spirit; and guide them to resolute and thoughtful action.

Public education plays a pivotal role in providing opportunities for those students who are disadvantaged in their wider, general communities. Children who live in poverty, who are marginalized because of physical or mental challenges, or who are not of the dominant culture

must be able to enter and graduate from public school on the same basis as all other children. Schools must therefore provide support systems to mitigate the inequities of society as a whole. Specifically, schools in BC must address their historic failure with Aboriginal students. The Ministry will need to provide additional funding for further in-service, and an adequate array of resources to support embedded Aboriginal ways of knowing as is outlined in the K–9 draft curriculum.

It is precisely because education was the primary tool of oppression of Aboriginal people, and miseducation of all Canadians, that we have concluded that education holds the key to reconciliation.

– Justice Murray Sinclair

The BCTF commends the Ministry for recently addressing the inappropriate use of Evergreen Certificates in many school districts—an extremely serious issue raised by the BCTF in the spring of 2015. The issue of marginalization is of central concern to teachers. To provide quality public education to all students, no matter their life circumstance and regardless of geographic location, socio-economic status, and language of instruction, the Ministry should ensure that all students have equitable access to all core and elective courses offered within the province. Students in remote locations should be able to enrol in core and elective courses on the same basis as those who live in dense urban areas. Boards of education should not have to choose which courses to offer students because of a scarcity of funds, nor should they be forced into offering only online options for core or electives because of scarcity of funds. For many students this is not a suitable way to learn and no student should be forced to take courses online.

The policy and procedures around provincial electives must be clearly developed and communicated. In the draft mathematics curriculum electives are being developed, however, in fine arts separate courses are not. Leaving the advocacy for the elective courses to be offered to teachers alone is an unfair and unrealistic burden to place on teachers of elective areas. Going forward, it is necessary to develop a system where practices around electives clearly communicate and share locally developed curriculum. It is critical the Ministry develop and communicate policy and a framework to guide development of locally developed courses.

Additionally, it is necessary to develop a central system to clearly communicate and share both practices and locally developed electives/curriculum.

Consequently, the BCTF recommends the following:

1. That any changes include support systems to mitigate the inequities of society to provide all students with the opportunity to graduate from secondary school.
2. That the Ministry ensure that all students, no matter their life circumstance, geographic location, socio-economic status, or language of instruction, have equitable access to all core and elective courses offered within the province.
3. That policy around the development of local electives be developed and clearly communicated.
4. That the Ministry ensure Evergreen Certificates are only awarded to students with a special-education designation.

Students throughout the province should be able to graduate with proficiency in a second language in the course of 13 years of formal education. To that end, the BCTF recommends that second-language instruction begin in Kindergarten, and be supported throughout a learner's public-education experience. French, one of the two official languages in Canada, should be offered to students at the outset of their school careers and continue throughout the elementary years, so that by graduation students are proficient in the language.

In addition to second-language proficiency, the BCTF believes that students must graduate as well-rounded individuals who have had the opportunity to achieve success in both the fine arts and applied skills areas. Therefore, we recommend that the Ministry include the requirement that students take both a fine arts and an applied skills course as part of their graduation program.

Public education in BC has been available to children between the ages of 5–19, and adults who want to complete their Grade 12 graduation. We recognize that not all students learn at the same rate, and that some leave school before completion and then return to finish their studies. Additionally, because of life circumstances beyond their control, many students may find themselves in situations that necessitate leaving school prior to graduating. Accordingly, we

strongly urge government to reverse the discriminating change in funding policy for adult learners and emphasize the need for the Ministry to provide quality, publicly funded education, including self-paced programs, to students over the age of 19 completing or upgrading their Grade 12 diploma.

Furthermore, the Ministry should support those adult learners by ensuring that extra learning support services, including adequate access to counselling, psycho-educational testing, and learning-support specialists be available for adult students. Removing funding for adult learners is short-sighted and further marginalizes those most vulnerable. In the case of English language learner (ELL) students, it is critical for the Ministry to lift the arbitrary five-year cap and support these learners to graduation.

The BCTF supports the acknowledgement from the Ministry that students should obtain cross-curricular competencies. Therefore, we recommend that the term “social justice” be included as part of those competencies under the domain of personal and social competency, in keeping with the Ministry’s excellent Making Space resource. Central to all the work that we do in schools, and central to any reconceptualization of curriculum and graduation requirements, must be a commitment to enabling students to create systemic change to build a more just and inclusive society. Public schools play a central role for growing active citizens who work for social change. In this context it is critical for students to have opportunities in their graduation years to examine and critique the pedagogy of oppression and its impact on society in Canada and around the world.

The need for continued struggle for equity and inclusion based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and economic/social disparity must be part of the education system, recognizing the struggles by working people and others to build a more inclusive society. Students need the skills, understanding, and responsibility to build a world that has enhanced equity, security, and sustainability.

The BCTF acknowledges the curriculum development work that has gone into the core competencies. What is required now is to assist teachers with the practical application of these

competencies. Without support from the Ministry the adequate implementation of core competencies may be an unrealized goal.

Consequently, the BCTF recommends the following:

5. That students throughout the province be able to graduate with a proficiency in a second language.
6. That the graduation requirements include the successful completion of at least one fine arts and one applied skills secondary course.
7. That the Ministry provide quality publicly funded education programs to students over the age of 19 completing or upgrading their Grade 12 diploma, including support services such as psycho-educational testing and learning support. Special needs students and English language learners must have this as an option and not be pushed out of school if they need an additional year.
8. That the Ministry remove its arbitrary five-year funding cap on support for English language learner students.
9. That the application of core competencies be supported with a fully funded non-instructional day to support the revised curriculum.
10. That students have opportunities to explore historical struggles and develop skills to address the impact of oppressions based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and economic/social disparity.

Significant work has been done over the past decade in BC schools to recognize the diversity of the student population and the diversity of their families. It is important all students learn in safe, welcoming environments—and the BCTF is committed to this. It is also important students see themselves in the curriculum and receive information that is accurate, up-to-date, and inclusive. The draft physical and health education (PHE) curriculum must be fully supported with opportunities for appropriate in-service for teachers, ensuring that all students learn what they need in order to make safe, wise choices—regardless of whether they self-identify as straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

The BCTF believes that the introduction of the PHE curriculum presents an opportunity. We are interested in collaborating with the Ministry on developing BC-specific resources to support the sexual health education components of the new PHE curriculum, including in-service. Perhaps this is an area that the Ministry of Health would also be willing to support.

The BCTF is also interested in working with the Ministry to develop a plan to ensure that all teachers of the new PHE curriculum have access to in-service opportunities in their school districts that will help enable them to confidently deliver the sexual health education components of the curriculum in a way that is accurate, up-to-date, and inclusive.

Consequently, the BCTF recommends the following:

11. That throughout the K–12 school years students receive developmentally and age-appropriate sexual health education that considers and addresses the needs of all students, including LGBTQ youth; and that the Ministry collaborate with the BCTF to develop accurate, inclusive materials and develop a plan for in-service.

To ensure as many students graduate from our schools as possible, the BCTF recommends that Grade 10 be removed from the graduation program. Students who are 15- and 16-years old are often not mature enough to make wise decisions about their future needs. Facing barriers to graduation, such as the Science 10 exam, may be enough to convince certain students that school is not for them. Experience and data shows that many Aboriginal students leave school before finishing Grade 10. It is incumbent on the province to find as many pathways to success for all of our learners, especially Aboriginal students. Removing Grade 10 from the graduation program is one such step.

Students deserve the opportunity to graduate from Grade 12 with the requisites necessary for any post-secondary program. False promises should not be made to students about the benefits of leaving school early, only to find out later that the further education they missed out on will now be on their shoulders. Government has a responsibility to ensure that the graduation years are spent with a full-slate of graduation courses to select from, regardless of geographic location.

Too many students are adding to their post-secondary debt by completing/upgrading secondary courses to meet the requirements for programs of their choice.

Government is seeking to increase the number of dual-credit courses that are offered to students. The BCTF has many serious concerns regarding the long-term plan around dual credits. Currently, post-secondary institutions are not to offer courses that are part of the K–12 curriculum, however, in reality there are dual-credit course offerings in English literature, business education, fine arts, biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics—to name a few. The Ministry has done nothing to curtail this development. Government has also provided post-secondary institutions with grants for these courses and continues to under invest in the supports and resources for these courses at the secondary-school level. This unequal access is troubling as it further marginalizes the most vulnerable. The Ministry must implement its current guidelines on recognition and funding of dual-credit courses to curtail the offering of post-secondary courses that duplicate secondary-school courses.

The draft curriculum is organized with an increased hands-on, applied approach to learning. To support our schools in providing quality programming, government needs to reinvest in schools with adequate funding for resources to support this approach. For example, without adequate resource funds a science teacher will be forced to choose the topics that are the least expensive to explore. When resource funding is inadequate the causality becomes curriculum and student learning.

Recognition of the diverse range of literacies, such as numeracy, fine arts, ecological, scientific, applied skills, information technology, physiological, and communication literacy, in existing or revised curriculum, will help create more pathways to successful graduation. Possession of a range of literacies will help students face their future work and personal lives.

For students supported with individual education plans (IEPs), additional pathways should be available that allow for completion of a Dogwood Certificate or the Adult Dogwood Program. Alternate pathways should be explored that would allow such students to complete a Dogwood Certificate so they may enrol in a post-secondary institution of their choice. This development

would emphasize the importance of keeping these students in school longer and providing adequate transitioning. The sad causality for many families after secondary school is that there is a lack of supports and services. The stress on families is significant, and does not help graduate students who are contributing citizens with a strong sense of purpose and community belonging.

The focus government has on “choice” as being the key driver of change ignores the reality of today’s society and its impact on classroom composition. The complexities of today’s classroom make-up is such that the majority of students won’t benefit from more “choice,” but they would benefit from more supports, resources, and time to realize their potential. More “choice” does not necessarily equate with “more opportunities,” in fact, it may mean exactly the opposite, as choice is really only available to the few—not the many.

The public-education system is seriously under-resourced and proposed changes cannot be realized or sustained without the infusion of significant additional resources. The recent budget announcement points to a reduction in funding and thus puts in jeopardy any proposed changes to curriculum and its implementation. It will be a false choice if there is no money for the greater choice electives and core curriculum. There is fear of greater competition for dwindling resources and greater inequality depending on where a student lives and their learning needs.

There is a concern that the expectations of the new curriculum do not match the funding and resources available in public schools. The current funding formula and the reduced requirements for graduation have led to less choice for students and greater competition between electives. Without additional funding the proposed changes will only exacerbate the situation and be a barrier to implementation. If there is to be success, funding has to increase to address class size, class composition, specialist-support teachers, and learning resources. The government cannot download the conditions for implementation on to teachers.

The Ministry needs to restore the number of credits required for the Dogwood Diploma to the pre-2004 number, and include fine arts and applied skills credits in the graduation years. Neither the current nor the proposed number of credits for graduation provide students with the opportunity to explore academic core and elective courses needed for a well-rounded, educated

citizen. It is critical for students to take core and a wide-range of elective courses, including fine arts and applied skills. Too many students leave secondary school without the courses they need for the post-secondary pathways of their choice.

The Capstone Program, tied to a high number of credits, could be a barrier to graduation for students living in rural or inner-city communities and those who may not have opportunities to explore their passions. This will lead to inequity, as not all students will have access to enriching experiences to complete their projects.

Consequently, the BCTF recommends the following:

12. That Grade 10 be removed from the graduation program, and be restored to pre-2004 status.
13. That the Ministry restore the number of credits required for the Dogwood Diploma to the pre-2004 number, and include fine arts and applied skills credits in the graduation years.
14. That program requirements are such that all students graduating from Grade 12 have the necessary requisites for a post-secondary program.
15. That the diverse range of literacies, such as numerical, fine arts, ecological, scientific, applied skills, information technology, physiological, and communication literacy, be recognized as pathways to successful graduation.
16. That alternative pathways, in particular for students with special learning needs, to completion of graduation requirements for the Dogwood Certificate be offered, including provision of adequate services and supports for transition from secondary school.
17. That the graduation program reflects that more “choice” is not going to create a difference for most students and families.
18. That the Ministry commit to funding public schools adequately to provide a full-range of electives.
19. That the Ministry not pursue expanding dual-credit offerings.
20. That the Ministry implements its current guidelines on recognition and funding of dual-credit courses to curtail the offering of post-secondary courses that duplicate secondary-school courses, such as English literature, business education, fine arts, biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics.

21. That the Ministry commit to adequately funding resources, including in-service and collaboration time to support the draft curriculum.
22. That the Ministry fully fund public schools to ensure staffing and resources are in place for successful implementation of the proposed curriculum.

Specialist teachers are critical links in supporting students' individual pathways and choices. A teacher-librarian, a learning-assistance teacher, a resource teacher, a counsellor, an educational psychologist, a speech and language therapist, a hospital-homebound teacher, an English language learner (ELL) teacher, and other specialist teachers—all serve vital roles in the support of students, schools, and families. Unfortunately, these key resource-roles are often unacknowledged and undervalued by government. The continued erosion of these roles does not serve our students, schools, or communities. It is imperative to reinvest in specialist-support teachers to ensure equity and success for all students.

Consequently, the BCTF recommends the following:

23. That the Ministry ensure every school has the necessary specialist-support teachers to help every child meet their potential, and that the students are supported by appropriate professional support team, e.g., a teacher-librarian, a learning-assistance teacher, a resource teacher, a counsellor, an educational psychologist, a speech and language therapist, a hospital-homebound teacher, an English language learner teacher, and other specialist teachers.

No matter what alternate pathways are created to aid students' pursuit of graduation, it must be clear that those pathways are to be provided by certified teachers. While it is often appropriate and warranted to bring in community members to augment students' understanding or complement their learning, those special guests must always be under the supervision of a certified teacher. Teachers ensure that the curriculum is followed and know the best way to introduce learning standards to their students. Members of the external community may be useful at certain times and for specific activities, but they are not teachers and should not be used as a replacement for a certified professional. In BC, teachers are highly trained and qualified. The BC public education systems' quality and success is due in large part to the strength of its

professional teaching staff. Efforts to reduce costs in their jurisdictions by introducing lay personnel to teaching roles is short-sighted; it robs whole education systems of their quality and students of critical learning opportunities.

For several years, the BCTF has supported the use of a wide-variety of assessment and evaluation practices. Along with the Ministry, faculties of education, and pedagogical experts, the BCTF has encouraged teachers to engage in assessment practices that inform students' learning, as well as provide them with feedback on their learning. The graduation program in BC must continue to support teachers' autonomy to use assessments for, of, and as learning, in ways teachers deem appropriate.

As changes to reporting and communicating student learning unfold in alignment with the draft curriculum, the BCTF urges the Ministry to work with the BCTF and its locals to provide any needed in-service for teachers. In-service must not be provided as mandated teacher professional development. Teachers must remain in control of their own professional development needs, which must be integral to their individual practice. New methods or systems in the workplace require the employer, be it the Ministry or the individual board of education, to provide the time and money needed to retrain the workforce. Whatever changes are brought to the reporting and communication processes must also be manageable by teachers. The overwhelming bureaucracy of the current system is crippling. Teachers' time must not be spent filling out forms and producing data and reports, rather than working directly with and offering service to students. Teachers need operating systems that function effectively and support the work they do, and not ones that add to their workload and frustrations. Additionally, sending the message to parents that teachers will be able to communicate at all times sets unrealistic expectations.

Consequently, the BCTF recommends the following:

24. That the curriculum and graduation requirements be delivered by certified teachers.
25. That the use of a wide-variety of assessment and evaluation practices that inform student learning and align with the directions of the draft curriculum be encouraged.

26. That the Ministry continue to work with teachers through their union, the BCTF, in the development of reporting and communicating processes and policies, and other education change initiatives of the Ministry.
27. That up to two annual non-instructional in-service days be provided for teachers as ongoing teacher collaboration is central to the success of the draft curriculum, and cannot be limited to only a three-year plan.
28. That the burdensome requirements for data collection and reporting taking away instructional time from teachers be reduced.
29. That the schedule for implementation of curriculum provides the time to develop resources to support the curriculum and any changes to graduation requirements.

### **Conditions for success**

Change is a fixture in today's reality. However, not all changes produce the results wanted by those who initiate them.

In the case of the secondary-graduation program, it is in the interest of everyone—students, teachers, government, and society—that changes initiated by the Ministry of Education improve secondary education for all.

As the Minister of Education appropriately and frequently points out, by any measure we have a very good education system in BC. It is essential that in the change process, we do not inadvertently upset the stability of the school system and lose the qualities that make it effective and inclusive overall—two of the essential elements of the current BC secondary-school system.

A successful change strategy must include the following conditions:

- Engage those asked to change in open discussion of the proposals for change, and accept critical questions.
- Provide adequate time to explore the proposals and to experiment with new approaches in teaching before declaring the changes.
- Provide learning resources that support the changes in curriculum and make them accessible to all teachers.

- Support in-service that allows teachers to share their work and evaluate the approaches defined in the curriculum.
- Provide classroom conditions—class size and composition—that make new approaches feasible without causing burnout of teachers and an inability to provide personalized attention to all students.
- Maintain a school structure that promotes students taking a wide-range of elective studies, without creating a competitive environment where teachers have to politic for courses to exist.
- Ensure that students with special needs, English language learners, or vulnerable students will not become marginalized in a system that is less structured and assumes that special needs will be met through a general “personalized” program.

Failure to provide the above conditions is likely to destabilize the system without producing the improvements that were the rationale for the change.

## **Conclusion**

Public schools are places where all students are welcomed and supported in their learning. Making changes to the graduation program should reinforce and support students’ opportunities to learn and grow.

The Ministry will need to give serious thought to the curriculum implementation and graduation requirement timelines and work with the BCTF to address serious concerns and challenges. The rapid pace of curriculum development and implementation may prove to set the draft curriculum on the wrong course. It is imperative we take the time to do this right.

We must continue to foster the growth of all children and mitigate social inequalities such as socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, or geographic location. It is one of the key purposes of public education. Our children’s future and the future of our province depend on it.