

## Continuing the Discussion on Professional Growth, Development and Currency

*Perspectives in Practice* is a series of briefing notes to promote discussion on select employment matters at issue in the K-12 public education sector. Each ends with a question to get the conversation started. Let us know what you think at [contact.us@bcpsea.bc.ca](mailto:contact.us@bcpsea.bc.ca).

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In the spring and summer of 2011, BCPSEA published two papers to invite discussion on professional growth, development, and currency as part of a suite of papers exploring selected employment issues within the K-12 public education system.<sup>1</sup> We started with the premise that the current system is an assembly of parts regulated by numerous statutes, contract provisions, policies, and practices. Each individual part was created for a particular reason or in response to a specific historical concern. Individually and as a whole, some of these elements have not evolved to keep pace with our contemporary society or best human resource practices in other jurisdictions and sectors.

For example, from an employment perspective, the way we organize the development and professional growth of individuals is determined by various independent structures, practices, and processes that include professional development provisions in collective agreements, limited mentorship initiatives, district in-service, professional development days, periodic evaluations and the like. Unlike other professions, the self-regulatory body for the education profession in BC does not oversee the professional currency of its members and it is left largely to individual teachers to decide how they want to continue learning as professionals. Development is rarely linked to employee assessment and is therefore less able to contribute to improving a teacher's effectiveness in specific areas of practice. Finally, there is the professional development disconnect, with the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) arguing that educators should have full autonomy in making decisions about their professional development, separate from the educational goals and policies defined at the level of the school, district, or province.

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<sup>1</sup> We have published five papers as part of our *Perspectives in Practice* series, on school organization, learning in the 21st century, professional development, employee assessment and professional autonomy. They can be accessed at: [www.bcpsea.bc.ca/resources/manuals-and-reports.aspx](http://www.bcpsea.bc.ca/resources/manuals-and-reports.aspx).

Our goal with the papers is to prompt discussion on professional growth, development, and currency from an employment perspective and to encourage reflection on how an integrated systems approach might differ from our current practices. We were also informed by district experiences, the BC Ministry of Education's vision of personalized learning, and the 2011/12-2013/14 Service Plan of the Ministry. It is hoped that discussions at the bargaining table will also be instructive in examining these issues from an employment perspective.

The paradigm shift envisioned by personalized learning will necessitate a parallel shift in employment practices. We need to consider what system-wide changes are required to support and enhance teacher effectiveness so that they can foster the collaborative, critical thinking, and creative skills our students will need to meet the opportunities of the century ahead.

Our discussion papers explored some issues related to professional development, growth, and currency within this broader context. The commentary that emerged from the two papers has been informative, far-reaching, and instructive. Among the responses, we were pleased that Dr. Charlie Naylor, a researcher with the BCTF, contributed his perspective in the BCTF Research Report, *Professional Development/Professional Growth and Engagement: What's wrong with the BCPSEA picture?*, published in September 2011.<sup>2</sup>

## **A Review of BCPSEA Documents on Professional Development**

It is worth providing a brief synopsis of the two BCPSEA documents and the BCTF Research Report. The BCPSEA discussion paper on professional development:

- summarizes the importance of professionals maintaining currency
- describes how other professions ensure their members are up to date
- provides an overview of the way professional development currently works in the province
- summarizes some best practices around professional development for educators
- explores the issue of professional autonomy and the BCTF's insistence that teachers "have autonomy in making choices about their own professional development," and
- outlines the lack of oversight for educators' professional development in BC.<sup>3</sup>

Borrowing from the central observation of Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman, the paper ends with a question to readers: "If you accept the proposition that *The evidence is clear that teaching is one of the most important school-related factors in student achievement, and that improving teacher effectiveness can raise overall student achievement levels*, is the current way in which we ensure professional currency the most effective?"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Charlie Naylor, *Professional Development/Professional Growth and Engagement: What's wrong with the BCPSEA picture?* September 2011. Accessed from <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/ResearchReports/2011-EI-01.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> BCPSEA, *Teacher Professional Development: A Question of Development, Growth and Currency*. Accessed from: [www.bcpsea.bc.ca/documents/Publications-ResourceDiscussionDocs/03-HJF-Professional%20Development.pdf](http://www.bcpsea.bc.ca/documents/Publications-ResourceDiscussionDocs/03-HJF-Professional%20Development.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Quote taken from Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman, "Lessons Learned from Finland, Ontario, and Singapore," in *Teacher and Leader Effectiveness in High-Performing Education Systems*, edited by Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman, Alliance for Excellent Education and Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (2011), p. 1.

The second BCPSEA document, “Employee Assessment in Public Education: Integrating Roles, Responsibilities and Development,”<sup>5</sup> begins from the assumption that there might be better strategies to address professional development than our current practices. The way we currently address professional development is disconnected from assessment and from larger system goals, and the piecemeal approach now in place was developed decades ago and does not reflect best practices around supporting teachers to grow as professionals.

Our collective bargaining proposal on professional growth and engagement outlines our first attempt at a new model. It proposes working with the BCTF to develop a professional growth, development, and engagement program that includes the needs of both the organization and the individual, defines expectations, outlines strategies to support performance and growth, and includes a process for reviewing performance and growth.

## A Review of the BCTF Research Report

The BCTF Research Report:

- compares professional development funding between university professors and teachers
- compares professional development funding between school districts and school jurisdictions
- argues for the need for systemic support (time, strategies and money) for professional development
- summarizes the literature on professional development, emphasizing the need for autonomous, self-directed professional learning and critiquing any involvement from the employer in either suggesting areas of professional development or assessing employees
- criticizes the BCPSEA’s proposal for a mentoring program as a “disciplinary tool” rather than a tool to provide “support for all new teachers”
- criticizes the BCPSEA’s use of the term “employee” when referring to teachers, which the author says is part of a “‘master-servant’ relationship, denying both professionalism and reducing, if not eliminating, autonomy”
- suggests that the BCPSEA position aims to reduce school district control and ignore “collective agreements already in place supporting teachers’ professional development,” and
- proposes an alternative vision of professional learning based on teacher autonomy.

## Establishing a Basis for Discussion or a Foundation for Disagreement?

Respectful dialogue and conversation — the foundation of a constructive interchange — begins with understanding the perspective of the other party. From this understanding, we can find common areas of agreement or develop new alternatives that will resolve the matters at issue.

The author of the BCTF Research Report articulates his support for respectful conversation. In a response to a BCPSEA *Perspectives in Practice* paper on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, he states

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<sup>5</sup> BCPSEA, “Employee Assessment in Public Education: Integrating Roles, Responsibilities and Development.” <http://www.bcpsea.bc.ca/documents/publications/04-HJF-Employee%20assessment.pdf>.

that, “The BC education community needs, as [a] matter of urgency, to engage with ideas through serious and inclusive discourse rather than to foster polarization.”<sup>6</sup>

However, the Research Report moves away from the stated desire of engaging in serious and inclusive discussion in the way it frames its assessment. The report adopts an “us versus them” stance, uses antagonistic language when describing BCPSEA, and misrepresents many elements of the BCPSEA documents to support its claims.

For example, in the review of literature on professional development, the BCTF Report praises models based on a “holistic” and “ecological” vision of professional learning. This is contrasted with a depiction of the BCPSEA vision as “bureaucratic” professional development that is derived from an ‘industrial and mechanistic’ age that “wants professionals ‘developed’ in ways that fit organizational goals.”

BCPSEA is painted as a negative, “increasingly pernicious” force that sees teachers as employees with “deficits” that must be fixed through a controlled and regulated employer-driven system of performance-based professional development. Indeed, the very term “professional development” is seen as representing “mandated and monitored approaches” that emphasize a performance agenda.

Positioning BCPSEA as the villain in this drama, the Report describes BCPSEA’s vision of professional development as entirely employer-imposed and designed to monitor and control teachers.

Yet where has the BCPSEA outlined this position? In our paper we say that effective professional development must “balance the need to respect a professional’s autonomy to decide upon his or her personal professional development goals, with the need to ensure that those goals are aligned with those of the employer.” And in our bargaining proposal “Performance Review, Professional Growth and Mentorship,” the proposed jointly developed program is founded on “organizational goals and objectives, and employees’ individual professional development goals.”

This is hardly a position that denies teachers’ professional autonomy or forces them to participate in an employer-driven agenda. Yet the BCTF Research Report sets up an inaccurate representation of BCPSEA’s perspective and then shows its flaws as support for their position.

In another example, the mentorship program proposed by BCPSEA is criticized as part of BCPSEA’s “accountability concept where a teacher’s performance has been judged problematic.” Yet the goals of the proposed program are to foster “collegial sharing, mentoring and cooperative learning through the use of employee mentors.” While we do say the mentoring program could be used “to address goals or concerns identified in an employee through the performance review process,” this is but one element of the proposed program. Yet it is this element that the Research Report emphasizes.

We are curious to understand why the writer chooses to label the program as a (negative) accountability measure and criticizes a program that would provide peer support to educators working to improve their professional practice. Would it not make more sense to see the

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<sup>6</sup> Charlie Naylor, “BCPSEA: Fostering division and polarization or promoting a conversation?” <http://bctf.ca/publications/BCTF-research.aspx?id=23335>.

proposed mentorship program as aligned with the best practices of professional development outlined by Linda Darling-Hammond and quoted approvingly in the Research Report as learning that is “supported by modeling, coaching and the collective solving of specific problems of practice”?

The misrepresentation of our discussion documents prevents constructive conversation. The use of hyperbole and negative labels undermines the author’s purported aim to “engage with ideas through serious and inclusive discourse” showing a preference — at least here — for a rhetorical strategy of labelling and guilt by association that emphasizes derision over discussion.

## A Vision for Professional Learning

The BCTF Research Report proposes an alternative vision for professional learning that “might include:

- building on and extending promising practices in professional learning
- enabling teacher-directed learning communities that value autonomy
- building networks of professional learning that engage teachers and link to their interests and needs as professionals while also supporting students’ learning needs
- creating systemic support that includes adequate funding for professional learning.”

The Report does not elaborate on the details beyond these four bullet points. However, this is a starting point for us to better understand the principles grounding the BCTF’s approach to professional learning.

We agree with the first point and the need to build on promising practices in professional learning. BCPSEA proposals emerged from many best practices in districts where educators collaborate with administrators to create professional growth plans. The proposals are based on the principle that areas for professional development or learning are identified through assessment (self, peer or administrator), expectations are defined, learning is supported and feedback is provided. They outline a professional growth and engagement program to be developed collaboratively with the BCTF that will replace the outdated provisions in the collective agreement that do not reflect best practices in development, evaluation, discipline, and dismissal.

The other three points offer opportunities for discussion and dialogue around how professional learning fits into the larger system of employment practices in the education sector.

The BCTF Research Report clearly values autonomous, teacher-directed learning communities. It cites professional development literature in support of self-directed and collaborative learning environments and against systems where teachers are “pressured into directed learning.” However, the Report’s emphasis on the disconnect between the interests of teachers and employers raises the larger issue of professional autonomy, and the Report seems to advocate that teachers should have complete autonomy over their professional development.

But do any employees — professionals or others — enjoy complete autonomy? Public sector employees, nurses, doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers and other professionals do not have free reign to engage entirely in learning of their choice. Is it reasonable that teachers should pursue all their professional growth without consideration for additional learning that might need

to take place to meet the specific needs of the school, district or province in terms of evolving educational goals and policies?

Best practices in other organizations — and incorporated in our discussion documents — emphasize balance rather than professional development that is 100% employer-driven or 100% employee-led. Yes, employees have autonomy, but they also operate as part of a team within an environment focused on goals that are only achievable when everyone is supported to work towards a shared outcome.

Indeed, a professional's autonomy can never be absolute, nor should this be something to aspire to. Professionals apply knowledge to specific situations based on a body of evidence and standards of practice. They do not make decisions based entirely on their personal style or preference. In the same way, professional learning communities are an effective tool for professional growth, yet they are not sufficient on their own. As Ben Levin argues, "Relying on learning communities is not enough because there is no system or driver in this approach that works towards compelling evidence on better practice."<sup>7</sup>

The vision of professional learning presented in the BCTF Research Report does not address accountability. Other professions require their members to maintain currency. The education profession in BC does not. The report approvingly refers to the professional growth clause in the collective agreement between the Richmond school district and the Richmond Teachers' Association. Yet this clause states that "participation is voluntary." Does this offer the public confidence that *all* teachers are advancing their professional practice?

School districts — as employers — have a keen interest in ensuring that all are engaged in activities that lead to professional growth and maintain professional currency. Where does this fit into the BCTF's model of professional learning? Is there a place for the employer to be involved, as a collaborative participant or as a coach/advisor who supports an educator's professional growth and development?

We come back to our original question in the discussion paper. If the public and those involved in the education sector agree that "teaching is one of the most important school-related factors in student achievement,"<sup>8</sup> is our current approach to ensuring professional currency and development effective? Is it achieving what we want it to achieve? How do we know if it's working or not?

The BCTF Research Report states that "hundreds of teachers are reflecting on their practice in collaboration with peers with support from the BCTF...They neither need nor welcome BCPSEA's interference in their professional development and learning." "Hundreds" of public school teachers may be engaged in the kind of self-directed autonomous practice praised in the Research Report, but what of the remaining 40,000?

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<sup>7</sup> Ben Levin, "Research, Knowledge and the Teaching Profession," *Teachers College Record*, August 29, 2011, [www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16521](http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16521).

<sup>8</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman, "Lessons Learned from Finland, Ontario, and Singapore," in *Teacher and Leader Effectiveness in High-Performing Education Systems*, edited by Linda Darling-Hammond and Robert Rothman, Alliance for Excellent Education and Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (2011), p. 1.

Finally, the BCTF Research Report rightfully mentions the need to establish “systemic support that includes adequate funding for professional learning.” BCPSEA was criticized in the Report for failing to discuss the support required for professional development “in terms of time or money.” It is true that our two discussion papers did not talk about resources (and indeed, there are many other issues we did not mention or explore). The discussion of systemic support for professional growth and development includes talking about “time and money,” but it also, in our view, requires talking about how professional development fits within the broader framework of employment practices in the sector.

## Professional Growth, Development, Currency and the Bargaining Table

The current discussions regarding professional growth, development, and currency are taking place within the context of labour relations. Given that many of the processes and practices around teacher development originate in the collective agreement, any decisions about these issues must be bargained by the parties involved. Bargaining in the K-12 public education sector in BC takes place in the public sphere, and observers need to recognize that bargaining should be about interaction for the purposes of understanding, that understanding leads to the ability to develop options to address the matters at issue, and that proposed options enable the parties to craft a negotiated agreement.

The terms and provisions of the collective agreement are obtained by a process in which each party first establishes bargaining positions on matters at issue, then gradually modifies and changes its views until, by compromise, the parties find common ground on which they can reach a settlement. The interactions and, as required, concessions, compromises, and general back and forth of bargaining finally produce an agreement. In the process, each party usually drops some issues entirely, concedes some issues, and modifies its views on other issues to produce a certain division of the objective each anticipates.

In May 2011, BCPSEA tabled a series of opening proposals related to professional growth, development, and currency. Two concepts or alternatives to address these issues were proposed. The first concept would see the BCTF and BCPSEA jointly develop a program with its associated processes. Should the parties be unwilling or unable to make such a joint effort, a second alternative was proposed involving the negotiation of provincial language on the matters related to professional growth, development, and currency. The provisions in the proposals were drawn from collective agreement language currently in collective agreements.

The first concept of joint creation of an integrated model includes a series of elements that should be the foundation of the program, referred to as the Performance Review, Professional Growth, and Mentorship Program. The program seeks to integrate professional growth and development initiatives and evaluation processes to facilitate professional currency, development, and engagement. The purpose of the program is to assist employees to accomplish both personal professional development and organizational goals. BCPSEA proposes that the program incorporate the following ideas or concepts:

- Expectations of employees are clear and measurable
- Employees have access to integrated growth and development systems, programs, and processes that foster professional currency, development, and engagement

- Employees have access to a professional growth program, which is the basis for the development of annual individual professional growth plans
- School and district organizational goals and objectives as well as individual employee professional development goals are the foundations of the professional growth program
- Employers have the ability to evaluate employees on a regular basis and, as necessary, to direct individual employee growth plans and professional development activities
- Employees have access to processes for regular feedback and support, including initiatives such as mentorship
- Employee discipline and dismissal are subject to just and reasonable cause.

## For Reflection and Discussion

Recognizing that bargaining proposals are just that, proposals, would focused discussions and the sharing of perspectives help identify common ground? Is there likely to be sufficient common ground and overlap of interests to develop processes, systems, and practices that facilitate professional development growth and currency? If so, how is this best achieved? If not, what is a way forward?