

Accountability in Education in British Columbia

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Accountability in education in British Columbia has seven elements: reports, large-scale assessments of student achievement, program evaluation, indicator programs, school accreditation, reference sets, and financial audits. These elements are tied to the goals of education and the attributes of the public school system. This article describes elements that have recently been established or modified.

La responsabilité en éducation en Colombie-Britannique comprend sept facettes: les rapports, l'évaluation à grande échelle des résultats scolaires, l'évaluation des programmes, les systèmes d'indicateurs, l'agrément des écoles, les ensembles de référence et les vérifications financières. Ces éléments sont reliés aux buts de l'éducation et aux caractéristiques du système public d'éducation. Cet article décrit les éléments qui ont été récemment mis en place ou modifiés.

British Columbia, as most other jurisdictions, has witnessed an increased government interest in demonstrating accountability at the school, district, and provincial levels. This interest results in part from the educational change initiatives undertaken by the British Columbia government after the report of the Royal Commission on Education (Sullivan, 1988). Change initiatives, by their very nature, reduce public comfort with the established and familiar, but not necessarily well-performing, education system; consequently, in recent years there have been calls for all levels of the education system to be more accountable.

The current government has been responsive to public concerns, and has also been proactive in openly reviewing education and other programs. This openness is exemplified by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act currently in force. It is arguably the most liberal of any such legislation in Canada and supports the general accountability agenda by providing a vehicle for interested parties to examine the actions of public institutions.

THE NATURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

When discussing accountability, it is important to establish who is being accountable to whom and for what. This paper does not attempt to examine accountability at the classroom, school or district level, but focuses primarily on the provincial system's accountability to the government, education partners, and the public as a whole.

The *Annual Report* of the British Columbia Ministry of Education (BCME) describes accountability initiatives in relation to a ministry objective: "Resources

are allocated in a cost-effective manner; parents and the community are informed of the progress of schools and are involved as partners in planning” (BCME, 1993, p. 71).

Although this does not constitute a complete definition of accountability, the importance of the communications element in the objective needs to be stressed; one cannot demonstrate accountability if one does not communicate the elements effectively. This is one reason why the structure of annual reports in British Columbia has changed over the last few years. Prior to 1986, the annual report focused largely on fulfilling its mandate as a required report of a ministry to government; it reported primarily on inputs and process variables based on demographic and financial information. Since 1986 the annual report has responded to the larger accountability agenda by targeting the public as a primary audience and communication as a primary purpose, and by using a framework based on the current goals and attributes of the education system as the vehicle for communication. These goals and attributes (see Figure 1) themselves represent an aspect of accountability, since the public and education partners have a common framework on which to build and evaluate programs. It is notable that one of the attributes is “accountability.”

ELEMENTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability in education in British Columbia involves seven elements. Reports to the public and specific groups, including the ministry annual report to the legislature and school district annual reports to the public and the ministry, comprise the first element of accountability. The second element is large-scale assessments of student achievement, including: international assessments such as those administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and International Assessment of Educational Progress; national assessments such as the School Achievement Indicators Program of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC); provincial assessments such as the Provincial Learning Assessment Program; and provincial examinations and scholarship programs. The third element is program evaluation, including reviews of such school programs as the primary program, as well as evaluation of some ministry initiatives. Fourth are such indicator programs as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Indicators of Education Systems project, the CMEC’s Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program, the Provincial Education Indicators Resource, district key indicators, and reporting of ministry information in terms of school and district profiles. The fifth element is school accreditation, requiring accreditation of all British Columbia schools on a six-year cycle. Sixth are Reference Sets in reading, writing, problem solving, and numeracy, which demonstrate some of the system’s educational standards by showing the growth in performance of students overall and provide representative samples of student work (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Ministry

Goals of Education

Intellectual Development—to develop the ability of students to analyze critically, reason and think independently, and acquire basic learning skills and bodies of knowledge; to develop in students a lifelong appreciation of learning, a curiosity about the world around them and a capacity for creative thought and expression.

Human and Social Development—to develop in students a sense of self-worth and personal initiative; to develop an appreciation of the fine arts and an understanding of cultural heritage; to develop an understanding of the importance of physical health and well-being; to develop a sense of social responsibility and a tolerance and respect for the ideas and beliefs of others.

Career Development—to prepare students to attain their career and occupational objectives; to assist in the development of effective work habits and the flexibility to deal with change in the workplace.

Attributes of the Public School System

Accessibility—a variety of programs is available in the province to meet the full range of student needs.

Relevance—programs are current and relevant to the needs of the learner.

Equity—resources are allocated fairly.

Quality—professional teaching and administration are of high quality.

Accountability—resources are allocated in a cost-effective manner; parents and the community are informed of the progress of schools and are involved as partners in planning.

FIGURE 1

Goals of Education and Attributes of the Public School System

(Source: Brummet, 1989, pp. 5–6)

Responsible for Multiculturalism and Human Rights [BCME/MRMHR], 1992a). Finally, the seventh element of accountability is the Auditor General's regular financial audit of the ministry and the ministry's financial audit of school districts.

One could argue that another element of accountability is the representation of stakeholders on committees, which provides opportunities for the ministry to receive input on changes to policy at an early stage and advice on key concerns. Examples of such committees are the Education Advisory Council, standing

advisory committees, curriculum and assessment working committees, and the Provincial Board of Examiners.

These elements, when combined, form a generally comprehensive accountability framework. Many elements of the framework also serve functions other than accountability and there is sometimes a tension when these mechanisms are given apparently contradictory roles. For example, program evaluation is intended to be primarily formative, but must also perform some summative roles to be effective as an accountability mechanism.

ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAMS

As outlined above, there are several accountability programs in British Columbia. To describe each element fully is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, several programs have recently changed or are undergoing significant changes and I will now elaborate on these.

School Accreditation Program

Accreditation in British Columbia is defined as follows:

Accreditation is a process for school improvement and accountability, with an emphasis on school improvement. Such a process fosters continual positive growth, assists the school with setting direction, staff development, and vision formulation and confirmation. Accreditation incorporates accountability whereby student outcomes (knowledge, skills and attitudes), parent/teacher satisfaction and community satisfaction are assessed and reported. (BCME, 1994b, p. 3)

The purposes of accreditation are to ensure that schools demonstrate provincial education standards with respect to the three goals of education and the five attributes of the public school system, that they consider shareholders' opinions and disclose to them at regular intervals their strengths and areas needing change, and that schools are learner focused and plan to maximize student opportunity to acquire the qualities of "educated citizens" (BCME, 1994b, p. 3). Accreditation is also meant to assist in developing School Growth Plans (described below) which will enhance student learning opportunities, and to accommodate the implementation of provincial objectives.

British Columbia's accreditation system has a 70-year history, from its inception as a credentialling model in 1925 to its operation as a broadly based evaluation program for accountability and school improvement in 1992. In its earliest form, accreditation was an inspectorial function, to determine whether secondary schools were competent in setting their own final examinations for students in grades 8 through 12. Independent reports were filed by the school principal and the inspector.

Accreditation at the elementary level began on a voluntary basis in the 1988/89 school year with 10 schools participating. The next year the pilot was expanded to 47 schools. Elementary accreditation is now mandatory and approximately 140 elementary schools are scheduled annually; this number will increase in future years, however, as the program is phased in. Since 1989 the accreditation reports have been analyzed for information that could assist program evaluation and indicator development in the ministry. Such analyses have shown, for example, that secondary school teachers in schools undergoing accreditation are generally satisfied with students' ability to demonstrate creative thought and expression, but less satisfied with students' reasoning and thinking abilities. Information like this, derived from similar analyses, has been reported in the ministry's annual reports since 1989/90.

Accreditation involves an internal team carrying out a self-evaluation, using a set of 80 criteria and following a standard procedure. An example of a criterion statement would be "students in this school have ready and timely access to student services." Teachers in the school review the criteria, then the team gathers supporting evidence, and establishes the staff's level of satisfaction with the degree to which the criteria have been met. This leads to summarization, wherein strengths and weaknesses are discussed, and ultimately to the development of a School Growth Plan. Upon completion of this process the resulting internal report serves a guide for an external team of at least three persons who visit the school, usually in the spring term, to provide an arm's-length judgment of the internal report's validity. The teams' composition varies depending on particular circumstances, although certain requirements must be met. For example, the internal team must involve not only professional educators but students (in grade 8 and above) and parents. Parents and students (from other districts) should also be involved on the external teams, and over the next few years, involvement of the business community is expected.

The result of the process—the School Growth Plan—should deal with the issues the internal and external teams raise. If the external team accepts the report and the resulting plan, accreditation is granted. When the external team is not satisfied that the plan is adequate, the approval of the superintendent, and in extreme cases of the Minister of Education, is required before accreditation is granted.

A salient feature of the British Columbia school accreditation model is the provision of funds over two years to enable the school to engage fully in the accreditation activity, and to help ensure that the school growth plan can be implemented in the years following accreditation.

Provincial Examination Program

The Provincial Examination Program began in the 1920s and, apart from the nine years 1974 to 1983, has been in continuous operation since. Scholarship examin-

ations, designed to award provincial scholarship money fairly and equitably, were conducted even in the years when provincial examinations were not administered.

The examination of grade 12 subjects establishes provincial standards for these subjects and thereby lends credibility to the grade 12 graduation diploma. The 15 subject areas presently examined are biology, chemistry, communication, English, English literature, Français langue, French, geography, geology, German, history, Latin, mathematics, physics, Spanish. This list will expand in June 1995 to include the Punjabi, Mandarin, and Japanese languages.

Many issues presently surround the examination program, some with implications for the accountability the examinations provide. One issue is linked to the policy question of which subjects should be examined. The ministry wants to review the program and re-establish priorities for the subjects to be examined. Being examinable lends status to subject areas and certain universities are indicating that they intend to accept only grade 12 credits for those subject areas examined by the province. This could present a problem for students wishing to study such specialized areas as music or such enriched areas as psychology, as they would be disadvantaged compared to students taking examinable subjects.

Another issue is linked to credentialling courses not officially part of the British Columbia education system but which either are taught in school, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, or are given by recognized institutions and pursued by students in an extracurricular capacity, such as Royal Conservatory of Music courses.

Provincial Learning Assessment Program

The general purposes of the program of regular assessment are: (1) to inform professionals and the public at large about strengths and weaknesses of the education system; (2) to assist the ministry, school districts, and schools in making decisions linked to the development, review, modification, revision, and implementation of curricula and supporting instructional resource materials; (3) to assist the ministry in decisions concerning allocation of resources; (4) to identify areas of need and provide directions for change in both preservice and inservice teacher education; (5) to provide directions for educational research; (6) to monitor student learning over time; and (7) to provide the province, school districts, and schools with information that can be used to identify strengths and overcome weaknesses (BCME/MRMHR, 1992c, p. xvii).

The Provincial Learning Assessment Program was originally introduced in 1976 to monitor student outcomes in the absence of provincial examinations, which were not being administered at that time. The program has been on an annual cycle with the exception of the years 1979, 1982, and 1992. During 1992, the program was substantially modified, resulting in the 1993 cross-curricular assessment of communications skills, a substantial departure from the previous cycle of subjects focusing mainly on reading, mathematics, and science.

Recent assessments have included additional studies of areas of current interest, for example, the “socioscientific issues” component of the 1991 Science Assessment and the “assessment of writing for specific audiences and purposes” study as part of the 1993/94 Communications Skills Assessment. Such additional studies can significantly increase the assessment’s perceived relevance to the students being assessed as they deal with “real life” issues. Two examples from the socioscientific issues component of the 1991 Science Assessment deal with the use of animals in research from the points of view of university medical researchers and animal rights activists, and the safety and aesthetics of tanning from the points of view of dermatologists and suntanning parlour clientele (BCME/MRMHR, 1992c, pp. 43–44).

Including such issues broadens the traditionally narrow concept of a subject-based assessment and gives accountability flowing from such assessments greater validity.

National and International Assessment and Indicators Programs

British Columbia continues to be actively involved in national and international programs in assessment and indicator development. British Columbia is currently involved both as a separate jurisdiction within Canada and as part of the Canadian sample in the Third International Mathematics Science Study. It is also involved in the Cross-Curricular Competencies subgroup of the OECD Indicators of Education Systems project.

These programs provide external reference points for provincial assessment and indicator development. The external reference points are particularly useful for accountability purposes as they allow some triangulation when assessments measuring similar concepts are analyzed together. For example, a provincial interpretation of the results of the Second International Assessment of Educational Progress provided additional contextual information with which to explain the results of the 1991 Provincial Assessment of Science (BCME/MRMHR, 1992d). On both assessments, the results of students in the younger age group were judged less satisfactory than the results of those in the older age group.

Provincial Educational Indicators

The most recently developed element of the accountability framework is the *British Columbia Education Indicators Resource* (BCME, 1994a), a selection of indicators available in both print and interactive electronic versions. The result of several years’ developmental work, it is based on a model providing maximum flexibility in interpretation of the indicators. The core design is that of the Context, Input, Process, Output, Outcome paradigm, the basis of many indicator sets used today. Each indicator is mapped to the goals and attributes framework so that the indicators can also inform other elements of accountability.

The set consists of 34 indicators distilled from an original pool of nearly 400. This was done through expert review, consultation with partner groups, and application of the criteria that indicators be comparable across time and jurisdictions or against standards, accepted as meaningful measures of stated values, responsive to changes in the underlying phenomena, modifiable through positive action, and supported by accessible data. Examples of indicators are: *context* (immigration to B.C., children and elderly as a proportion of the population), *input* (age and years of educators' experience, capital spending per student), *process* (class size, gender equity among educators), *output* (mathematics achievement, alcohol and drug use), *outcome* (student attitudes toward multiculturalism, graduates' satisfaction with career preparation) (BCME, 1994a, pp. 2–3).

The set of indicators attempts to convey information in a way allowing comparison over time, providing external links where possible, and presenting data without promoting a particular conclusion. The set also displays information in ways most readily interpreted by policy makers. For example, instead of simply showing the number of students passing grade 12 examinations, the data are presented as a percentage of former grade 8 students passing selected grade 12 subjects. This means that the results take into account two important variables often omitted—participation rate in subjects and dropout rate from school.

Program Evaluation

As a part of the development of the new primary, intermediate, and graduation programs in 1990, a comprehensive review process was established to provide accountability to the learners, their parents, and the public. As the primary program was the first to be implemented, the first review framework was established for that program and was subsequently published (BCME, 1991). It is based on the process of naturalistic inquiry and subscribes to principles identified by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1981). These guiding principles concern four aspects of program evaluation—its utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy.

In 1992, the review focused on program design issues, reported in the publication *Building Firm Foundations* (BCME/MRMHR, 1992b). The second report, *Charting Change* (BCME, 1994c), focused on implementation and perceptual issues examined during 1993, the second full year of review. Reviews conducted in 1994 and 1995 will probe the primary program's effects on learners and on the education system.

FUTURE TRENDS

The focus on accountability in British Columbia shows every sign of continuing at least into the near future as the need to demonstrate efficient and effective

practices is even greater in times of restraint. These programs are not perfect; they need continually to be improved and updated to reflect current policies and needs of the system. As can be seen from the program changes I have outlined, the effectiveness of accountability processes in British Columbia is closely monitored and further changes will inevitably take place.

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