

Year Two Update: School Completion and Beyond

By Linda Jones

Ministry of Education grants have made it possible for the exciting initiatives described below to be undertaken throughout the province. All have the potential to positively impact student completion or transition. This succinct summary does not capture the richness or complexity of what is being undertaken. Should you wish additional information, please contact chapter directors.

As the popular song goes: There ain't no mountain high enough to keep me from getting to you... This seemed to be the theme for the 2008 Okanagan Mainline School Completion and Beyond fall forum. Despite the fact that Highway 97 near Summerland was closed due to the discovery of an unstable rock face, approximately 240 dedicated educators found their way to this event. Sessions focused on assessment and grading practices and strategies for engaging students. True to their catch phrase of from thoughtful action to meaningful results, compelling data was presented that clearly demonstrated gains in student performance. There were educators at this forum from other chapters in the province demonstrating a collective energy and willingness to take ownership of the challenges of student learning. These individuals are closing the gap between theory and practice. As a follow-up to the fall forum the chapter continues to engage Dr. Linda Kaser and Dr. Judy Halbert who are working with smaller groups of teachers. A third forum is planned for the fall of 2009.

Metro Chapter has held two forums this school year, both putting student voice at the centre of the conversations. Although teams, including teacher leaders, principals, and representatives of senior management attend the forums, the majority of participants are students. These are high-energy events characterized by bold ideas and candid reports by students about what we need to fix in terms of our present educational system. The first forum in October opened with student presentations on the "ideal school". Their presentations touched upon key aspects of the ideal learning situation. The students worked on these presentations under the guidance of the Galileo Education Network.

The second forum in February had student leaders trained to conduct a School Completion Café around six themed topics: authentic voice; student say in the structure of learning; technology; real world learning; assessment; and student teacher relationships. Plans have now been developed across districts and a web space has been set up to facilitate communication and project sharing: <https://scb.sd45.bc.ca/Pages/Default.aspx>- both events were filmed by a Vancouver School District student crew. A third forum is planned for the fall of 2009.

Fraser Valley Chapter began their work with a forum in 2008, which served as a catalyst for bringing teams together to build networks. These networks, of educators and others dedicated to the purpose of improving school completion through the sharing of promising instructional practices, continued to develop this year. Two morning sessions (November 20 and April 2) were held which enabled a cohort of about 40 teachers to meet and discuss their instructional approaches. Staff worked with facilitator, Phil Cady, in order to discuss issues concerned with student vulnerability and to determine strategies to work with these students. The chapter believes this work has contributed to the establishment of lasting networks of practitioners who share resources and insights with one another.

The main focus of the Boundary Kootenay Chapter has been to improve completion and transition rates for children and youth in care and with special needs, and to improve communication between educators and Ministry staff. It is very much an all inclusive strategy with representatives of the Ministry of Children and Families meeting with senior district staff, principals and teachers. The meetings have resulted in several action plans for working with children in care. In September 2008, at the local chapter meeting, districts reported their progress with respect to the plans. Trustees were also updated.

The chapter has now taken this work to the next level through collaboration at a conference, which showcased best practices in supporting the targeted children and their needs; provided an opportunity for the development of improved communications protocols and provided in-service on integrated case management. A follow-up to the conference was held in the spring. Much has been accomplished. The chapter continues to track data on children and youth in care and with special needs.

Northern Chapter has continued their work with Dr. Judy Halbert and Dr. Linda Kaser. The focus remains on building leadership capacity, supporting collaborative practice at the regional, district, and school levels and developing innovative approaches to improving the achievement of secondary students. Teams met, deepened their understanding of the critical link between leadership and achievement and reported out on promising practices implemented over the past year. The focus on the development of action initiatives lies at the heart of this chapter's work.

Finally, after their highly successful forum this past year, Vancouver Island Chapter also moved from theory to practice. In year one, the chapter organized a regional forum at which three districts presented the strategies they had undertaken to increase graduation, transition and completion rates. This year the chapter built on those initiatives by having all districts in the region formulate and work on a school completion action research question. Districts submitted proposals, which were evaluated according to established criteria and funded accordingly. The action research questions were compiled and sent to all chapter school districts. Districts will meet in the fall of 2009 to discuss their work. The chapter plans to evaluate the success of the initiative by analyzing impact and sustainability.

Chapters are very grateful to the Ministry of Education for the support, for the last two years, of these worthwhile initiatives. The grants have enabled powerful networks to be set up, effective practices to be shared, and all educators are committed to ongoing work in the 2009-2010 school year.