

[Address to the B.C. School Superintendents](#)

**Premier Gordon Campbell  
November 27, 2003**

*Check Against Delivery*

Learning makes us aware of the world we live in. It's what makes us aware of the possibilities that exist for each of us.

I want to thank the B.C. School Superintendents for the work you do on the front lines, month in, month out, year in and year out, to provide the best public education system anywhere. You do exceptional work on behalf of us all, and it's important that you celebrate the successes of each of your colleagues as we go through the next year.

An excellent public education system is the best economic development tool that we have yet discovered. Education is by far the best preventative health care program that we have yet discovered. It is the most integrated and comprehensive social program that we have yet discovered. So as we look at education it's important for us to think about not just what we can do for young children from five to 18, but what we do both before and after that.

Look at the person sitting across the table from you. They were probably here last year. Are they looking any younger this year? What's happening to all of us is happening to our world, and is happening to our society. We're aging. As we age, the world is changing pretty rapidly. One of the things that I've been told by folks in the education field is that children are far more adaptive to the changes we're going through than many of us are.

I used to be in private business, and I was making an arrangement with a company in Holland. This was when duty-free shops in airports were just sort of opening up. Schiphol airport in Amsterdam was just the place to shop. I was at Schiphol, and I was going home. My son Geoff was six years old. I thought: this will be great. I'm going to get him one of these new little electronic games. Because I wanted to make sure it was okay, I decided to try this game on the way home. I couldn't get it to work. I was getting seven and 14 as scores in this game. I thought to myself: Oh, no, this is going to be way too tough for Geoff.

I gave it to Geoff when I got home. He was getting 1,426 and setting new records. It's just because he approached that with a totally different mindset than I did. I knew what it was supposed to do. It just wasn't working for me. He didn't actually know. He figured it out.

That was probably 1983-84. Think of how much the world has changed in that time. My kids both went through public education system. I'm proud to say they both graduated not just from their school experience, but they graduated from universities. Our education system gave them an awful lot, and we should never forget what our public education system gives our kids.

Those of us who are in elected office are, perhaps, catalysts for change. Now, I recognize that when you are in politics, some people think you're a good catalyst, and some think you're a bad catalyst. But my experience is, regardless what party you're from, people want to have a great public education system. You, on the other hand, are change managers and change masters. That is a challenge for each of you and for all of us.

The fundamental question I think we have to ask ourselves is: Can we afford not to change the system to reflect all that we know today? The fact is we know an awful lot more today about how and where kids learn, and what methods are and are not effective. We know much more about children's diversity and about the challenges we face as we try and take a public system and focus it down on the individual needs of children.

We know, for example, that year-round learning is almost as important, and more effective, than interrupted learning. We know you don't start learning at the age of five and stop at the age of 18. You start much, much earlier than that, and you go much, much longer than that. Those are things that we have to recognize as we look at how we publicly respond to delivering the best possible public education system.

The first public education system in this province was started in 1872. There were 524 students. Things have changed a little bit since 1872, but there were still teachers, there were still principals, there were still parents, and there were still people hoping their kids would get the best education possible. So our world has changed, but the fundamental values have remained the same.

We had a 1960s Royal Commission on Education that offered some ideas on improving public education. In 1987-88 another report was brought out. That's still a pretty darn long time ago. In 1987 and '88 there wasn't much in the way of computers that were on people's desks. The Internet hadn't been "invented" at that point. We weren't able to connect across the province and around the world. No one had heard the term "broadband" before.

We didn't know what we know now about early childhood development and early childhood learning. We're doing some groundbreaking work at the Brain Centre at the University of British Columbia about how kids learn and what we need to teach them. We have to find ways that we can share that information with parents, because as we move it through the system we'll have children that are better prepared when they get to the formalized public education system as four- and five-

year-olds.

When I was an early parent I knew at one year my children would start walking, at two years they'd start talking, and at three years they might be trained. But I can't remember anyone saying to me: "You know, Gord, a good thing for you to do would be to read to your child every single day. From the first day, start reading. Get them used to that. Build that environment of literacy; that environment of learning". From the time that we're conceived, each of us is trying to learn. It is all about learning, and it is all about how we deliver that.

We know the first teachers that we have are generally our parents, and we know that our parents care about us and want the best for us. We know when parents are involved in education our children do better. We know every parent wants the best possible education system for our kids.

I think our task is to try and deliver that, and you as superintendents create a framework for that to take place. You create a framework for learning about the challenges that you face; for teaching parents about the issues you confront. Superintendents are not just about budgets and buses and books; they're about creating a school community and a district-wide sense of opportunity in education.

One of the things that I would like to try and do over the next year is make sure that we create an environment where you feel comfortable having a discussion with me and members of the government about what you think we should be doing to improve our quality of education, and to improve the achievements of our children.

Each of us wants our children to be achievers. Each of us wants our children to be literate and numerate. Each of us wants our children to have a world of opportunity and creativity opened in front of them. Each of us knows we need to have healthy, active children if we're going to have the most creative children.

Your dedication and your commitment, your expertise, your knowledge and your professionalism helps us chart a course, and it's a course that has to reflect the words of W.B. Yeats. Yeats said: "Education is not the filling of the pail but the lighting of a fire." Education is creating that spark in a young person that says: This is an area that I want to pursue. This is something that I want to discover. This is an adventure that I would like to be part of.

And as we try to create some new approaches to what is an excellent education system, it's important to note that's what is driving our agenda: the sense that education should be exciting; education should open worlds not just for children in communities but for parents and communities themselves.

We believe we are taking positive steps in that direction. First, we're setting clear academic standards. And we do want to monitor progress because if we don't, we don't know whether the programs we're offering are effective or not. We do want to provide better support in the system and more opportunity for people to pursue their own route to get to that destination.

We have made graduation requirements more relevant and applicable to the world we live in today. We're seeing positive results. We've watched as 5,100 grade 12 provincial scholarship winners moved forward this year; that's 500 more than last year. We want to continue building on that.

We want to continue celebrating the success of this system that you are such an important part of, and of the students who we are trying to provide services to.

The new foundation skills assessment scores are rising: 80 per cent of grade 4 students are meeting or exceeding expectations in reading. Eighty per cent is good, but each of us in this room knows that 100 per cent is better.

If we don't give children the gift of literacy by the time they have left school we have failed. I think we have to recognize that's an objective we should share, because when we give children the gift of literacy we give them the gift of learning. When we give them the gift of learning, we give them the gift of creating their own future and having some control over that future.

Last year 77 per cent graduated. That's good. We have a great public education system. Let me say that again: we have a great public education system. The fact that it's great doesn't mean it can't be better. If we have a graduation rate of 77 per cent then 23 per cent aren't graduating. The question we ask ourselves is: how can we improve on that?

Again, a hundred per cent graduation rate is better. How do we get there? We may never attain it, but it's worth striving for. It's worth putting the effort in, to seeing whether we can find the answers to that.

We are trying to create some opportunities and some new tools. We've tried to open up school boundaries, and I know that creates problems as well as opportunities. We've tried to expand choices that are available to boards so they can provide additional choices for their students.

We know that 20 school districts this year are offering 39 new choice programs: that's a step; that's progress. I also know that progress takes an awful lot of hard work. It takes an awful lot of time on behalf of each of you as superintendents, working with your school trustees, talking to your boards about what their objectives are, working with parents and offering the kinds of programs that you believe will be more effective.

We shouldn't be ashamed of the fact that some of the programs that we may offer may not have the results that we're hoping for. If we're not willing to try things that are new, we're not going to break new ground. If we're not willing to cut the new path, then we're not going to find the success we need.

If we are all satisfied with 77 per cent, then we can sit there and say: Let's just stand still. But we're not satisfied with 77 per cent. No parent would be satisfied with 77 per cent of their kids graduating from school.

We've tried to include parents in the discussions that were taking place in public education because it is a public system. It includes parents; it includes students; it includes superintendents; it includes trustees. It is a public asset, and it requires us to find ways to open doors to public discussion and create public opportunities to improve it.

We've now given parents the legal right to volunteer in schools. We've now said the dollars we generate from PST is refunded to parent advisory councils. We now have school district accountability contracts. Each of those things is meant to try and create a bridge between the public and the institutions that are serving it, and between our students and the goals of achievement that we have set.

I believe that if I said to you, "Tell me the one thing that we could do in government that would make your life a lot easier," it would probably have a dollar sign in front of it and a whole lot of zeros behind it. I know that there are challenges in terms of the resources that are available.

Over the last two years we've been able to provide an additional \$42 million back to boards in the first year and \$50 million back to boards in the next year through administrative savings. Over the next three years there'll be 143 million additional dollars that will be coming to the boards.

I know that as you look at those dollars and you look at the frameworks that you're working in, it still creates substantial challenges. The number of students that we have is falling; that's correct. The opportunities we want to create are increasing; that's correct. So we know there's going to be a constant tension between the resources that are available and our ability to deliver. And that's where your expertise, your knowledge and your commitment are invaluable.

I would be misleading you, and I would be misleading our kids in the province, if I said today that we're not going to continue down the path of financial prudence. Education funding, for us, is a critical component of moving forward. We are moving towards a balanced budget next year. We have committed to you and we have committed to the people of British Columbia that when we balance that budget and we're creating the kind of flow of resources that we need, much of those resources will be going into the education system.

But we have to get that balance because education is about delivering to our kids the opportunities that they deserve. It is about delivering to our kids the choices that they deserve.

When I graduated from university, the total public debt was \$2.8 billion. Today, the total public debt is in the order of \$35 billion. I don't believe that we can say that all of that debt has generated the kind of positive return that it should have.

So our responsibility to our children is to create the opportunities for them to make their own choices. In doing that, we do not just want to get our financial house in order but start to generate the resources we need, to provide the kind of education system that's critical.

In September we announced a new \$765,000 student achievement action program. It does contain resources for parents. It does promote teacher excellence. It does promote best practices in schools and tries to help you share with other boards and other superintendents areas where you have been particularly successful. And it does target early literacy. I believe those four components are critical cornerstones, as we move forward.

In March we'll be hosting an international conference that will highlight leading edge practices to increase student achievement. Many of those accomplishments will be your accomplishments. They will be goals and programs and results that you have delivered, right here in the province of British Columbia.

I'd like you to know today that our province is committed to a public education system that works for our children. Our province is committed to a public education system that focuses on student achievement and teacher excellence.

And we know to get there we need to work in a full and open partnership for public education, a partnership between teachers and parents and students and superintendents and principals and vice-principals; a partnership that brings all the players in, in good faith, and says: Let's set an example; let's show people what a great public education system can do; let's show how it can respond to the individual needs of students from First Nations, from communities in the north, from resource and rural communities and from urban centres.

Let's take up that challenge. Let's take up the challenge to constantly improve. Let's take up the challenge to always learn, to always learn from one another, to learn from our experiences, to learn from the results that we generate, and to learn about the excitement of education that we can all find in our children's eyes.

