



Speech to the Innovation and Improvement in Education Conference

**Premier Gordon Campbell
March 8, 2004**

Check Against Delivery

This is the first time we've joined together in a forum like this, so I want to start by saying thanks to all of you for being here today.

Too often we all focus on problems rather than on solutions, but today is one day where you can think about all the great things that you're doing. And, more importantly, it's a chance to share with one another the exceptional work that's being done in our public education system across the province.

I know that all of you are participating in different ways - whether it's as parents, teachers, superintendents or principals. I do want to thank the B.C. School Superintendents' Association, the B.C. Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association, the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, the B.C. School Trustees' Association and Staff Development Council of B.C. for partnering with us to present this forum.

I think one of the critical things for us to remember is that everyone in British Columbia wants to provide our kids with the best possible education system. Our public education system is a critically important part of establishing our children's sense of their future and, most importantly, giving them the power to go forward and to pursue their dreams.

I hope what will come of this conference is a sense of common purpose and common commitment to build on the strengths that we have in our public education system in British Columbia. I hope if you hear one story of success that can convert itself into 20 or 30 stories of success in other parts of the province as you tailor programs and opportunities and exciting new ideas to the students and the schools in your communities. I hope that it's a time when you can take a moment to imagine all that we can do, to let your imaginations run free, to think beyond the rules and regulations and the constraints that we face in our day-to-day lives and think about what we may be able to accomplish if we work together and if we learn from one another.

We should take this chance to ask ourselves questions. They should be tough questions. They should be questions about how we can do better, not because we're doing badly but because we can always do a little bit better.

B.C.'s public education system was founded in 1872. There's a lot that's changed since 1872. In fact, I think that today as we sit in this room, there's a lot that's changed in ten years.

We have new knowledge about how we learn, and new science, and new tools. The question that we have to ask ourselves is should we hold ourselves back from making necessary changes that reflect that new knowledge that we have? Should our fear of making change hold back the next generation of British Columbians? I think the answer is no.

So we had better be willing to challenge ourselves. We had better be willing to learn from the new sciences out there and the new child development information that's out there. We had better try to understand better what parents and their children face if we are going to be able to deliver the kind of public education system that we want.

To me, one of the things I think we have to try and do is go back and re-imagine what the school is in our community. Our schools are very important parts of our communities. But there may be opportunities for us to re-imagine that physical resource and to recreate the school as the centre for communities and for neighbourhoods in a way that we have not thought of in the past.

I am particularly excited about the potential for building higher levels of literacy throughout our population. And that has to start at the earliest possible age. We know things today about early childhood development and the development of reading skills that we did not know 20 years ago or even five years ago.

How can we take that knowledge and give that to those children who are entering our school system, who are coming into our province as new citizens? We have to be willing to challenge ourselves and see what institutional boundaries we should erase, what institutional boundaries we should live with so that we can meet the needs of our kids.

I went to school, through the public school system, and I had a great education. I had great opportunities to learn. But one of the things that we know better today than ever before is that there's a whole series of ways of learning. Every student may have different talents and different abilities. We have to find ways we can tap into that. And there are different ways of teaching. There are different ways of capturing the passion that people have for the subjects that they teach.

We have to try and find new synergies and new opportunities for working together that create opportunities for our children to develop not just an interest in their exam results but also an interest in learning that builds on the curiosity that every child brings the first day they come to school.

I don't know if things have changed, but, boy, when I went to school, was I excited about what was going on. And it wasn't just the new pair of cords that I was wearing that day. I can remember being excited about learning how to read. I can remember being excited about learning how to write.

And I can remember that I always had some great teachers who were carrying me along, who were giving me support or offering that critical understanding of what was important about little Gordie Campbell that might help little Gordie Campbell do something more later in his life. I think we have to try and give that to all of our kids.

Let me just tell you a quick story. It's not directly related to education, but it tells us something about our institutions. Last summer in British Columbia we had the worst forest fires in the history of our province. We responded extremely well. The public servants responded well dealing with the emergency. People in the province responded with exceptional generosity to the people who had to be displaced. It was the second-largest evacuation in the history of the country.

There was a very interesting thing that happened: as we started to try and respond, it became clear there is a big difference between an institutional response and a personal response. I can tell you that for the 50,000 people that had to leave their homes, there were 4.1 million British Columbians who were there to say: How could I help? Should I send a blanket? Should I send a cheque? Should I send a radio? Should I send a phone card, a computer? They weren't sure how they could help, but they wanted to help.

And one of the issues that we faced as a government trying to respond to that is how do you respond personally to the needs of that person or that family, as opposed to how do you do it institutionally?

I think that's the same thing that we face today in education. We have to find a way that we can break down institutional barriers so that we can deliver what people want for their kids and deliver what kids need to build their knowledge base, and that is a challenge. It's a challenge that comes to each of us as we look to the future.

Dr. Louise Stoll, who is speaking at this conference, wrote: "Innovation requires creativity, imagination, autonomy and risk taking. To respond to these needs, an education system must possess some of the same characteristics."

Imagine a place where every student that goes to school thrives in the school. Imagine a place where every school is a centre of excellence and innovation and creativity, where the passion of every teacher is connected with the talent of every student so that they're both set free. Imagine a place where every student graduates from high school with the tools they need to learn through life. Just imagine that.

We can accomplish that. It's an enormous task, but we can accomplish it if we set our minds to it. Imagine that every student in the province who graduates has been given the gift of reading and the confidence and the tools to pursue his or her own dream. Isn't that what we would like public education to do? Isn't that really the gift that teachers want to give to children in the classrooms, and that school trustees want to be sure is there in every school district? It's certainly what we want to try and be able to provide in British Columbia.

So today, in this room, you're sitting with people who've led the way to literacy. They've led the way in development of reading skills and computer training and technology innovation. They've led the way in sciences and math and fine arts and languages and athletics. In spite of the critics, we have a great public education system in British Columbia, and if we work together we all have an opportunity to make it even better for the next generation of British Columbians.

For an example, look at the teachers in school district 44 in North Vancouver who developed the Reading 44 program. They got together as a team across the district and said, "How can we work together to develop tailored programs and materials for students in North Vancouver?" The tools they developed are now being shared with school districts across the province.

Or Peace River North, where they developed a wireless writing program - a remarkable example of what happens when technology and innovative ideas and great teachers and eager students come together.

In September of 2002, only 70 per cent of the grade 6 and 7 students met provincial writing standards. Then they were all issued laptop computers. The following May, 92 per cent were meeting provincial writing standards. Not only was their writing better, students took more pride in their work and were more involved in their work.

The district implemented that program within their existing budget. We can learn from that. Think of how we build on that as we bridge the digital divide. By 2006, virtually every community in the province will be connected by broadband Internet access. As we connect those districts and those communities, some of them very remote, perhaps the wireless writing programs will be even more accessible to kids in every community in the province, and maybe it can be adapted to meet your district's needs.

Nothing is more important to the advancement of education than reading and writing. Today, B.C. students rank number two in Canada in international tests for reading, mathematics and science, behind only Alberta. That's good. It's nice that we're number two. But it will be way better when we're number one - and there's no reason why British Columbia shouldn't be number one.

Forty years ago, 47 per cent of B.C. students completed high school. Last year, 79 per cent of our students graduated. That's an improvement. But I think everyone should understand that we can do better.

As Louise Stoll has said, "A school is either improving or it's getting worse." Schools don't stand still. So our goal is to make sure that every school is improving.

Today I want to talk to you just about two or three things that we're going to try and do to give you some tools to build on your successes, and that will give us an opportunity to learn more, to discover more about one another, and about what works and what doesn't work.

If we can provide young people with the gift of reading, we've provided them with the gift of a life of learning. If we get them excited about reading, that's even better. So the province has decided that we will be moving forward with a major new program to try and enhance literacy skills, not just at schools but outside of schools as well.

We're calling the program Literacy Now. It's a \$5-million program to enhance the tools that are already there for young people in the school system and to provide new programs in schools. It's a bold initiative aimed at making B.C. the most literate province in the country and, by that leadership, making Canada the most literate country in the world. Believe me, with our resources, with the talent of our teachers and with our institutional creativity, there's no reason why we can't meet those objectives. So let's reach for them and let's meet them.

Our Literacy Now program will bring together educators, community agencies, school-based and community-based librarians, aboriginal agencies, workplace representatives, media representatives, and local and provincial government representatives in a literacy summit this spring to outline provincial programs and opportunities.

Our goal is to have 20 additional new literacy programs up and running by this fall. Our goal is to make sure that we share the development of Literacy Now with those who are already out in the field, so we're complementing their work.

I can tell you that Literacy B.C. does exceptional work with a very small budget. We intend to make sure that that budget is enhanced and improved through support for additional programs in the workplace and in our schools.

We know that our schools are already doing an exceptional job with literacy. The one-on-one reading program that the Okanagan District established - 45 minutes a day, three days per week of reading to enhance children's access to benefits that reading creates for them.

On Galiano Island, grade 5 and 6 boys got together and decided that they were going to create a book club, called Men With Books - and they received a donation of books to get them started.

Prince Rupert's talking tables is another way of building literacy. They've got volunteer coaches sharing wide discussions with kindergarten and grade ones to make sure that they learn how to tell stories and just talk with each other as a foundation for learning how to read.

All of those things are ways we can enhance people's reading ability.

When we give people the tools, it's amazing what they can come up with. If we can find a new environment where new ideas can be tested, where new ideas can be shared, where new ideas can be brought forward, it is unquestionable that we will see positive results.

Look at the Haida Gwaii - Queen Charlotte literacy program. They found in their skills assessment that grade 4 reading skills after the implementation of their program increased to 75 per cent, from 52 per cent, in just one year. That's the story we want to tell in every First Nation across this province. We want to make sure that every First Nation child has the chance to build on that kind of success.

Look at the success of the Nisga'a First Nation. They've seen school completion rates climb from 26 per cent in 2002 to 65 per cent in 2003. They've also seen incredible improvement in math skills. In 2002, 32 per cent of Grade 10 students met math skills expectations. Last year, 82 per cent met the mark. That's a tribute to the Nisga'a, to their teachers, and to the schools. There are literally dozens of kids that will be very grateful for the work that they have done.

We gave them the tools. They made the decisions and they created a program that met the needs of their kids. And that's creating the kind of opportunities that they needed to proceed and to progress.

The \$5 million we'll be placing in the hands of Literacy Now is meant to complement the work that we're doing in the school boards across the province, so teachers and school boards with great new ideas have those ideas supported.

Under the Legacies Now program, we're also going to initiate two other programs that are equally important. The first is Music Now. We know that music is a critical part of any child's education. When I was in school, I wasn't one of the kids those could hardly wait to go to music class and play the recorder. But all of us know as adults that music is a critical part of any child's curriculum and upbringing and learning.

Music Now is a way of reaching out through programs that will connect musicians with our school system, with our young people, and with our communities across the province, so that they can see enhanced music programming and music opportunities.

The Arts Now program will be the same, with a focus on visual and performing arts. In a few weeks, we will announce the specifics of the Music Now and the Arts Now programs, but I want you to know that we're thinking of those as we look for new approaches that expand the opportunities for young people in schools.

A critical part of all this are the parents of B.C. children. Parents are the first teachers that our children have. We know that their involvement in public education is a critical component of any child's education. I want to thank all those who sit on parent advisory committees for all the time, effort and energy they put in.

As we look at our schools, maybe one of the things we should be looking at is establishing within the schools parent centres within the school that give parents a chance to read to their kids, to learn what's taking place in the school, and to help with their kids in extra-curricular activities.

The most important thing isn't how parents participate, as long as they're able to participate. Young children do much better when they're involved in their school system.

We've tried to build on that. Our Achieve B.C. Web site is aimed specifically at giving parents the tools that they need and at least connecting them with the opportunities for learning that they may want to pursue on behalf of their children.

As we do that, we also want to try and create an environment where we encourage school boards to provide young people with choices for different avenues of learning.

We've seen those developed in many school districts. There's a soccer academy at Burnaby Central and at Reynolds Secondary, here in Victoria. In Vernon, all five secondary schools are using the same timetable so students can take classes in more than one school. In Courtenay, the Lake Trail Middle School offers separate grade nine math and English classes for boys and girls, to provide optimal learning environments for each. A.R. MacNeill, Richmond's newest school, focuses on fine arts and science programs for grade 7 and 8.

Each of those programs is aimed at trying to connect with the passions each young person and the teachers have to offer and share.

So I hope that as you celebrate your successes today and think of what your colleagues have been able to do, that you will keep your sights high. Far better that we set our goals too high and miss them, than set the goals too low and succeed.

There will always be room and opportunities for improvement. In ten years, people will stand here in Victoria and they will be saying, "What more can we do; what more can we provide for our kids?"

But let's not forget that we do share a common objective: to give our kids a sense not just of who they are but what they can do, and give our children a sense that in British Columbia - of all places in the world - any child can dream their dream and can reach it.

We want to try and give them the tools that they need. We want them to be excited by their learning, not just when they're in school but when they're outside of school. We want to create an environment where children are able to ask questions, where they're able to explore new ideas and are not afraid of taking risks by pursuing new ideas, where they're not afraid to challenge the status quo, where they're not afraid to say that they can do better, and are not afraid to be as creative as they can possibly be. I know we all share that same goal.

Marian Wright Edelman who was the founder of the Children's Assembly in the U.S. once said: "Let's all join together, putting one foot ahead of the other, basking in the beauty of our children and the chance to serve and engage in the struggle for a purpose higher than ourselves."

The best thing that we can give our children is a great education and a great sense of what they can accomplish if they dream big dreams. Thank you very much.



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