



BC Student Voice

The Voice on School

10 years later

BC Student Voice revisits four questions posed by the Ministry of Education in 1997 relating school to life after school.

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quality leadership in education

Introduction

Ten years ago students were asked to answer four questions, posed by the Ministry of Education, relating school to “life after school.” In 2007, the same four questions have been asked to the students of British Columbia to see if there have been any changes.

In November of 2007, students from BC Student Voice, a recognized group of students representing student opinion in BC since 1990, facilitated student forums at ten sites across British Columbia. Schools were contacted to send students, regardless of ability, culture or socio-economic background to participate in their region’s forum. As a result, student representation was broad and the opinions were diverse. Ten years ago, a similar set of forums was completed and using the information that students provided during their discussion sessions, the document *The Voice on School* was written and distributed to all public secondary schools in British Columbia.

The Four Questions:

1. What are the skills, knowledge, and abilities you require to be successful in “life after school”?
2. How well do schools currently prepare you for “life after school”?
3. How could schools better prepare you for “life after school”?
4. Considering that students are held accountable to schools, how should schools be held accountable to students?

This document chronicles the responses of the students and compares the responses from the 1997 and 2007 cohorts.

All of the text identified as “In our own words” are quotations from the students as reported during the province wide Student Voice regional forums.

Question One

What are the skills, knowledge, and abilities you require to be successful in “life after school”?

When comparing the responses from ten years ago to now, a few themes keep immerging. The students of today have a greater understanding of social responsibility. Technology has a bigger place in their lives, and there is a shift towards living a healthier lifestyle.

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to learn how to be better people in general. They want to be optimistic, independent, critical thinkers with perseverance and good work habits. They think about personal responsibility, motivation and discipline, being honest, confident. There was a concern about being “true to personal values and morals” while actively pursuing goals.

Ten years ago students felt that some vital information (listed below) was being taught to some students who took certain courses. They expressed a need to have these skills become part of the required curriculum for all students.

- Business skills / money management / financial planning
- Communication skills (especially public speaking)
- Job-finding skills / resume writing / interview skills
- Tolerance of races, genders etc
- Life skills
- Awareness of rights, options, limits.

(The current Planning 10 course includes these topics in its curriculum.)

Ten years ago students wanted basic computer literacy skills (typing/keyboarding) and now they require technological advancement. In response to a more sophisticated and technologically advanced society, basic computer literacy skills are taken for granted as students perceive a greater need for higher related skills.

Ten years ago students showed an awareness of the need for risk-taking, but the current group of students is able to articulate many of the required skills associated with risk taking behaviour (determination, self-sufficiency, able to step out of comfort zone, endurance, focus, understand consequences of actions, dare to succeed).

Ten years ago students also expressed the need for self-awareness. It was important to set goals and stick to an action plan. The difference this year though, is the acknowledgement of the importance of setting goals and achieving them without creating too much stress; students are very concerned with the need to set limits for themselves to prevent being overly stretched and stressed. Students are more aware of the need to be flexible in a constantly changing world (willingness to learn new things, how to prepare for change, common sense, networking skills).

Something that did not come out of the earlier dialogue with students was an awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Students understand the need for fitness, good nutrition and a balanced lifestyle that includes sports. They are concerned about the quality of food that is available in their schools. They want to be better educated about drug awareness and dangerous behaviours.

In our own words

“What do we need?
A role model, dreams or aspirations, an understanding of physical and mental health.”

“We need to know
how to learn.”

“We need global awareness
to care for our planet and
self-awareness
to care for ourselves.”

Question Two

How well do schools currently prepare you for “life after school”?

Interestingly enough, students in the 2007 group responded to the second question in the same way that the 1997 group did. They answered the question “How do schools currently prepare you for ‘life after school’?”

Ten years ago, students indicated that they were well-prepared for post-secondary life. They had the needed information and advice regarding post-secondary expectations. The current group of students is divided in their opinions. Some feel that

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school prepares students for university but not real life, while others indicate a great level of frustration while trying to plan their academic future. They feel that it is difficult to learn about colleges and what is available. No one talks to them about post-secondary education and they are not prepared. Navigating university websites is problematic, and it is hard to understand the requirements for the post-secondary institutions. Even students who are not going to continue with their formal education express concerns about their future.

Schools don't provide opportunities to talk about the future enough and to explore options for ‘life after school’.

One major theme that emerged in both Student Voice responses was the expressed need for more independence. Students want to know how they are going to fit into their new lives outside of school, and they are looking for ways to gain experiences that will help them be successfully independent. There is a sense that school is not preparing them for the practical aspects of becoming an adult in our society. They are looking for more work experience and practice for living alone in the future.

The 2007 group did indicate signs that the situation is improving to some extent. They knew about Ace-it programs and workers' rights and responsibilities. They acknowledged the improvement in life skills education regarding physical activity and nutrition; also, they saw the graduation transition plan as a useful activity. There was also an indication that students are becoming more aware of job opportunities because of their work in school.

In our own words

"Students are taught facts, but not how to apply them to real life."

"It's still difficult to learn about colleges and what is available."

"Schools can't really prepare us because they don't know how the rest of our lives will play out."

"Schools teach social acceptance and make you brave and show you a way to discover your true self, who you really are."

Question 3:

How could schools better prepare you for “life after school”?

In 1997, students were seeking greater involvement in the decisions that affect their education. There was a suggestion that “There should always be student representation whether it be at staff meetings or any other meetings in which ‘big school decisions’ are made”. Ten years later, not one student reported lack of student involvement and input as an issue. This shift can probably be explained by the current practice in British Columbian schools to have student representation on the School Planning Councils. The answers to the two following questions would help to clarify the reason for the

shift away from this concern: Do students feel more empowered now? Do they feel that they have a meaningful voice about their education?

Students are looking for mentors who can teach them about post secondary expectations and future employers who will explain how to be a successful employee. They indicate a desire to know more about career preparation with a particular emphasis on the transition from secondary school to adulthood.

Our current students have a serious worry about their future. They want tangible, usable advice about the challenges that they will be facing in the constantly changing nature of their adult lives. They want the community to come into the schools and teach them what the requirements are for “life after school.” They are

looking for mentors who can teach them about post secondary expectations and future employers who will explain how to be a successful employee. They indicate a desire to know more about career preparation with a particular emphasis on the transition from secondary school to adulthood. Ten years ago, students “were alarmed that most senior students do not know some of the basic procedures required in applying to post-secondary institutions” (*The Voice on School*, 1997). The situation does not seem to have improved very much in spite of the fact that many of the suggestions in the 1997 document have been implemented. Many secondary schools have post-secondary information sessions and bulletin boards. There is still a sense

that students are looking for more help.

A common theme that emerged in both student dialogues was the desire to see their teachers use a variety of teaching styles that enable students to show their learning in different ways. In 1997, students felt that this concern could be remedied during teacher training. Ten years later, students are still asking for variety in the curriculum. They want guest speakers, open ended projects, real life experiences, work experience and more opportunities to gain strong communication skills.

Another commonality between the two groups of students is their almost urgent need to understand how to handle their financial situation. They want to know about mortgages and tax returns. “All students need a strong background in money management since it is important to success and survival in the ‘real world’” (*The Voice on School*, 1997).

Students see school as a place where they can get the help they need.

In our own words

“Schools should be working together with the community to form a more cohesive effort on our education. The resources need to be shared and information available at the community level should be made available at the schools.”

“Parents, the community and the schools need to work together to best provide students with the skills necessary to succeed with life after school!”

“What schools do is show the door of the future, but we have to open that door. Currently the school is too isolated from society.”

“Find different ways of testing student knowledge.”

Question 4

Considering that students are held accountable to schools in a number of ways (e.g. attendance and performance), in what ways should schools be accountable to students?

The students in the 1997 group wanted a rigorous system of assessment. “Schools should be evaluated by the school community (parents, staff, and students) on a regular basis. Every BC high school should be marked in the same way and on the same things” (*The Voice on School*, 1997). Our current students want accountability, but they see respectful communication between all of the parties involved as the best way to maintain and improve schools in British Columbia. They suggest the use of suggestion boxes, student forums and

Schools should have suitable punishment for bullying and fighting. Besides being physically safe, students require a comfortable environment that promoted a positive learning climate. There should be many opportunities to be involved with the greater community in clubs, sports and the arts.

the PAC to monitor and improve schools. There should be inspection committees made up of students, staff and parents who report on various aspects of the school.

The present students feel that they need to be kept aware of future changes and issues that involve them. There should be opportunity for feedback so that administration and district staff understand how various changes will impact on their students. There needs to be a sense amongst students that their opinions and

concerns about their education are being listened to and acted on. They want to be told about opportunities to be involved in educational forums and discussions such as Student Voice and the Student Congress.

In both documents, students expressed an expectation that schools should be safe places to work. Schools should have suitable punishment for bullying and fighting. Besides being physically safe, students require a comfortable environment that promotes a positive learning climate. There should be

many opportunities to be involved with the greater school community in clubs, sports and the arts.

The 1997 and 2007 students indicate that their teachers are a vital component of the learning process. As one student in the current group put it, “they need to be responsible for teaching us since we are responsible for learning.” Students want organized, qualified, enthusiastic teachers who are able to teach to students with many different learning styles.

Regardless of whether a student is going straight out to work or on to university, all students expect the same level of care and attention. Students in academic, sports, art or trades programs should have equal access to school funds and special opportunities regarding work experience and job shadowing.

In our own words

“Teachers need to take a little focus off the university bound students and ensure the ones who are just heading straight to work are ready.”

“Help us succeed.”

“Create and sustain a safe and comfortable environment.”

“Let students have creative freedom to improve their own school to help them be proud of it and improve school spirit.”

“Administration and staff should encourage student opinions.”

Conclusion

The students of 1997, when given the opportunity, contributed immensely to the collective understanding of what students think about their educational experience in British Columbia. Many of their concerns have been addressed by the Ministry of Education. Such initiatives as Planning 10 and Graduation Transition Plans have helped students gain essential skills for “life after school.” Students are more involved at the committee level in their schools as they take required positions on School Planning Councils. Students ten years ago, with the help of The Voice on Schools, set in motion a trend towards more open dialogue between students, parents, schools and the community. Students have shown us that they want to balance their lives, be true to their beliefs and gain acceptance in their communities as they become successful in “life after school.”

Notes

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