

**A REVIEW OF EXEMPLARY CAREER  
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN BRITISH  
COLUMBIA**

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*Students, parents, government, and the business community have been telling schools for a long time that (students) are not satisfied with...or...trained for the...jobs of today and tomorrow, or the reality of repeated career change.*

(Williams & Millinoff, 1990)

Largely in response to the concerns raised in the above quotation, politicians and educational policy makers have increasingly connected discussions about public schooling within the context of occupational relevance, globalization and international market competition. Locally, the British Columbia Ministry of Education has made career development one of the three main goals of the public education system. Ministry policy as of January 2004 declared that education programs in BC schools should help prepare all students for a successful transition to the post-secondary and employment sector, when they leave the K-12 school system. While the Ministry has formally committed to the development and expansion of career preparation programs, there remains a huge discrepancy between individual districts in terms of specific programs offered, administrative staffing assigned to program development, and long-term plans for program expansion.

Consequently, some school districts throughout the province are in the process of analyzing their career education programs and choices for students to see if they are in line with this new Ministry direction and priority. This study helped to highlight specific successful practices and programs in three districts as a model for other districts.

Our research was guided by three specific questions. First, we wanted to know, what are the essential components of successful career development programs? If other districts are trying to create a successful and sustainable program, they need to know what aspects are crucial for success. Secondly, we asked, what resources are needed to develop and maintain successful career development programs? Districts need to know beforehand what type of investment (human and capital) is necessary when establishing a program of this nature. Our final question allowed our interviewees the opportunity to boast about their successes and also express their frustrations associated with the topic. We asked, what are the special accomplishments and challenges associated with career development programs?

Three districts were chosen to be the focus of this research: Central Okanagan, Vancouver, and Langley based on the recommendations of Ministry personnel and career educators. This selection created a sample of recognized leaders in career development programs.

The primary method of data collection was interviews. In each district, district career coordinators, school-based coordinators, and program teachers were interviewed to offer diverse perspectives. In addition, interviews were also conducted with The Acting Manager of Student Transitions for The Ministry of Education and two college-based

instructors associated with school transition programs. Finally, program observations and district documents were examined to offer further insight into these career programs.

Through the results gathered in the research, a number of tentative conclusions and recommendations were determined.

### ***Essential Components of Successful Career Development Programs***

Successful programs have a focus on career development for all. All three districts cited a comprehensive philosophy around career programs including mandatory career development programs, like Planning 10 and Career and Personal Planning, working synergistically with a variety of optional career programs like Career Preparation, Secondary School Apprenticeships, and Career Technical Centres. As students, “learn in a variety of ways and at different rates,” it is essential to offer a range of choices that meet the individual needs of learners. Some districts cited different career program types based on different socio-economic dynamics as well. This conclusion was backed up in the literature presented. Authors (Watts and Gitterman, 1988; Gitterman, Levi and Ziegler, 1993) address the shift from narrow, specific career pathways (vocational training) to a broad understanding of the types of work and range of occupations available (career education). From a modern business perspective, Wong and Hoffman (2003) pointed out that only 29% of high school graduates will require a university degree while 44% of graduates will require other career-based training. In order for students to make informed career decisions, there need to be opportunities available.

It is clear that school districts with successful career development programs make them a priority and value them. Two of the three districts have career development as part of their respective District Accountability Contracts, and the third district has recommended this. In districts that have extensive and successful career programs, there is an embedded culture. Coordinators believed that career development was now viewed as essential, not optional. Respondents noted the presence of career programs in superintendents’ reports and student feedback as evidence of their importance. In these districts there is a shared vision of the importance of career development, starting with the superintendent, as a fundamental component of a well-rounded, pragmatic approach to education.

Partnerships with the business and the labour community are present in districts with successful career programs. Relationships with the community provide students with work experience and relevance for classroom-based programs, a goal of the British Columbia Ministry of Education Career Development Policy Document (January, 2004). Businesses involved with career programs in the three districts studied range from locally owned family businesses to nation-wide franchises and large institutions such as banks. Although some of the relationships are established and maintained by individual schools (more specifically teachers with individual passions), most school-business relationships are developed and coordinated at the district level. Numerous authors provide evidence to support the position (Taylor, 1998; Savickas, 1999; Gitterman, Levi, and Ziegler, 1993; Hunt and Vandergrift, 1998) of strengthening the bond between school and community.

Partnerships and relationships with post-secondary institutions are also actively pursued and maintained in districts with successful career programs. All three districts have relationships with post-secondary institutes, where students receive dual-credit for both high school graduation and post-secondary training. Examples include: Central Okanagan School District with Okanagan University College and the British Columbia Institute of Technology; Langley School District with the British Columbia Institute of Technology and University College of the Fraser Valley; Vancouver School District with the British Columbia Institute of Technology and Vancouver Community College. Post-secondary institutions also bring with them their business relationships and connections thus providing students with the most up-to-date equipment and training. These institutions also provide instructors for their programs.

A corollary is that partnership viability and sustainability are maintained through on-going and regularly scheduled meetings between district personnel and the organizations concerned. However, the frequency and timing of the meetings varied. The purpose of the meetings was to establish and maintain the relationship, set and fine-tune goals and growth plans for the partnership, as well as exchange information to keep the programs timely and relevant for the subjects and students.

Finally, program marketing is essential for program sustainability. Without enrolment, programs are not sustainable. For example, coordinators report that certain programs have been dropped due to limited enrolment. To combat this tendency, successful districts engage in aggressive marketing campaigns from K-12 to advertise programs to students and parents. A variety of avenues is used in promoting their programs such as: newsletters, brochures, web sites, school-wide assemblies, career fairs, spotlight programs, job shadows, and career days. As the coordinator for Vancouver said, “Good marketing tools will result in enrolment.” In addition, marketing is the primary method of educating students and parents about future job trends. Although this result was present in our findings, there appears to be a lack of research in this area.

### ***Resources for Successful Career Development Programs***

In terms of necessary resources, it seems clear that successful districts have an established organizational structure in support of career development. Successful programs have district-level support including coordinators and support staff. In addition, there is, at the very minimum, a designated school-based contact or coordinator whose primary responsibility is to seek out interested students and link them with program offerings. The school-based contact or coordinator acts as a liaison conduit between the school and the career program. When career development opportunities arise, employers rarely have time to connect with multiple school sites to share information. The coordinator then becomes the liaison officer for the district with the power to act and make decisions, and also act as a clearinghouse to link school-based learning with community-based school and work experiences. Again, the number of support staff needed varied depending on the size of the district and the breadth and depth of programs provided.

## *Accomplishments and Problems of Career Development Programs*

Career Development programs can have an enormous positive impact on the lives of students, and, in particular, at-risk students. One reported reason for this success is the relevance many career development students suddenly see in school and in the subjects within school. Many authors substantiate this conclusion (Hiebert and Bezanson, 1999; Lyons et al, 1991; Grubb, 1989; STATCAN, 71-222-xie; Naylor, 1987). As reported, every interviewee in every district recounted personal stories of students that suddenly felt a connection with their education. Students were able to see a connection to subjects like math, because they related directly to an aspect of their program. This was perceived to be especially true for students labeled 'at risk'. All the interviewees supported the literature that says that job training and work experience help keep kids in school (Clausen, 1991; Valliant and Valliant, 1991; Blustein, 2001; Fachler, 2004). Generally, districts reported a higher success and retention rate of students enrolled in career education programs.

Districts with successful programs realize the value of these program choices for students. In the past, these programs generated funding for districts. However, the districts examined have maintained their programs in spite of Ministry formula funding changes. According to interviewees, funding changes have led to the demise of career programs in other districts and they have led to a reduction in personnel in the districts involved in this study. Nevertheless, programs have been valued and retained despite this reduction. Interviewees stated that program choices have not been retained as a source of funding, but, rather, have been regarded as an integrated component of a balanced education, as supported in the literature by Hyslop-Margison (2002).

### **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusions reached through our study, we offer five recommendations:

1. Districts should make every attempt to provide a range of career development programs and options based on the needs and unique characteristics of their respective communities. There needs to be career development for all students including opportunities beyond mandatory curriculum, including: Career Preparation, Secondary School Apprenticeships, and dual-credit transition programs. It is clear that the three districts examined were of varying size, geographical location, and demographic profile. All three districts managed to provide a rich diversity of program choices, even in the face of budget constraints, policies that can serve as a model for other districts hoping to develop or enrich existing career development programs.
2. Districts hoping to support the Ministry goal of the importance of career education should identify career education as a district priority and include it as part of the District Accountability Contract. Career development is one of the three goals of the education system in B.C., and the importance of it needs to be clearly and explicitly reflected as such by each district. District priorities receive funding and support through resource allocation. For career development programs to flourish, or be created where they do not exist, districts need to make it a vital part of the district culture in order to support this

facet of student education and success. This suggestion is supported by our conclusion that districts need to value and make career programs a district priority with an established organizational structure that includes staffing.

3. Districts must develop and foster positive working relationships with business, labour, and post-secondary institutions. Successful career development programs are by their very nature partnerships between schools and the community. Districts must acknowledge and foster these partnerships in order to align themselves with the Ministry philosophy that encourages closer links between school and community. Further to this suggestion, regularly established meetings should be mandatory to develop and enrich these partnerships. Business, labour, and post-secondary institutions are an intrinsic part of successful career development programs. Numerous authors provide evidence that supports the importance of strengthening the bonds between school and community (Taylor, 1998; Savickas, 1999; Gitterman, Levi, and Ziegler, 1993; Hunt and Vandergrift, 1998).

4. In order to sustain program viability, districts need to actively market their programs through a variety of methods. These could include the following means: newsletters, brochures, web sites, school-wide assemblies, career fairs, spotlight programs, job shadows and career days. Students and parents need to be aware of the full spectrum of program offerings in a district in order to make informed decisions. This recommendation is supported through our conclusion that specific programs with low enrollment were cancelled.

5. Finally, career development programs need to have a senior-level district coordinator with support staff. The scope, range, and complexity of the work involved in developing, growing, and sustaining successful career and transition programs requires dedicated personnel with clearly articulated goals, vision, and responsibilities. These positions will link school-based learning with the community-based opportunities for student learning. Districts with successful career development programs have an established organizational structure which includes staffing. Also, those districts value and make career programs a priority, whereby those districts view career programs as essential, as evidenced by their inclusion in District Accountability Contracts.

In summary, the purpose of this study was to examine exemplary career development programs in British Columbia. The recommendations suggested are based on the results of this study and the evidence produced therein. Of course, each district must set and achieve its own goals. However, if a district wishes to align its goals with those established by the Ministry, then career development and education should be at the forefront. The five recommendations outlined, and supported through research literature, form the basis and foundation of three exemplary models already operating successfully within British Columbia today.

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