

## Opinion

Parents cannot "opt out" of provincial curriculum: clarifying alternative delivery

*by Glen Hansman*

In my opinion, a significant part of this year's settlement reached in *Corren and Corren v. BC (Ministry of Education)*, which had been before the BC Human Rights Tribunal for a number of years, addresses the confusion around the Ministry of Education's Alternative Delivery Policy and so-called "sensitive content" in the prescribed learning outcomes.

"Sensitive content" is a vague descriptor with the potential to encapsulate a whole range of issues—not just provincially mandated curriculum in sexual health, diverse family models, or child-abuse prevention. A lot depends upon the community one teaches in. Well-meaning administrators and teachers have been known to excuse students from curriculum in music, physical education, social studies, art, science, and discussions dealing with same-gender families just to avoid conflict with parents and an uncertainty about what the School Act and Ministry of Education had to say on this practice.

A few years ago in *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District* book-banning case, the Supreme Court of Canada's Chief Justice McLachlin wrote: "Learning about tolerance is...learning that other people's entitlement to respect from us does not depend on whether their views accord with our own. Children cannot learn this unless they are exposed to views that differ from those they are taught at home."

It is this tension between views at school that may differ from the views taught at home that has placed teachers in an untenable situation of having to determine what might or might not be "sensitive content" while teaching the prescribed learning outcomes as set out by the Ministry of Education.

The ministry's letter

Can students be unilaterally excused from parts of the provincial curriculum? The simple answer is no.

As part of this year's settlement in *Corren and Corren v. BC (Ministry of Education)*, a letter clarifying the true nature and limited reach of the Alternative Delivery Policy has gone out from the Ministry of Education to all school boards in British Columbia, the BC School Trustees Association, the BC School Superintendents' Association, the BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association, the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, and the BCTF.

The Ministry of Education's letter clarifies that:

- \* there is no provision in the law or ministry policy for parents in public schools to excuse their children from any of the prescribed learning outcomes in the IRPs.

- \* schools or school districts do not have the authority to omit addressing or assessing any part of the prescribed learning outcomes.

In other words, mandated provincial curriculum is just that--mandated for all students and all schools.

## Alternative delivery

What is available to families are certain provisions under the Alternative Delivery Policy that apply only to the prescribed learning outcomes in the health curriculum organizer in the following IRPs: Health & Career Education K-7 (which is replacing the old Personal Planning K-7 IRP), Health & Career Education 8 & 9, and Planning 10.

For the health curriculum organizers in these three IRPs, families who wish to address the health curriculum organizers by means other than instruction by a teacher in a regular classroom setting may do so. The alternative delivery policy provides students, with the consent of their parents or guardians and in consultation with their school, the opportunity to arrange agreed-upon alternative means for addressing these learning outcomes. This might include home instruction with an agreed-upon package from the school, registration in a distributed learning course, self-directed studies, or other means suggested by the school, parents, or student involved.

This does not excuse students from having to meet the learning outcomes in the health curriculum organizers. The Ministry of Education expects that these students will be able to demonstrate to the school that they have learned the prescribed learning outcomes, and that the school will handle this assessment. The policy does not apply to any other curriculum organizer in the above-mentioned IRPs, nor does it apply to any other British Columbia provincial curriculum.

## An example

For example, the topic of healthy eating falls under the health curriculum organizer for Grade 4 Health & Career Education. A child's mothers inform the school that for personal reasons they would like their son to receive alternative delivery of the healthy eating prescribed learning outcome. The mothers consult with the school about the range of topics covered under that prescribed learning outcome, borrow some resources from the school, and the student receives instruction at home from his mothers on the topic of healthy eating. Afterward, the child is assessed by his teacher to make sure he has learned the prescribed learning outcome on healthy eating. Perhaps the same assessment used with the rest of the boy's class could be used, or he could demonstrate his knowledge to the school by some other means.

However, content in the career curriculum organizer in Health & Career Education K-7 is not covered by the alternative delivery policy, nor is any other elementary IRP so the scenario described above would not apply. Upcoming changes to the IRPs resulting from the Corren settlement will be geared toward making the curriculum more inclusive and representative of the constituencies our schools serve, including same-gender families, as stated in the BC Human Rights Act. These IRPs will go through the usual public review process utilized by the Ministry of Education.

Teachers should not have to apologize or feel undue stress for teaching the curriculum or for promoting inclusive classrooms.

The full text of the Alternative Delivery Policy and of the IRPs, including the new Health & Career Education K-7, are available online.

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