



# The Advocate

www.surreyteachers.org

## Letter from the STA President Gioia Breda

Colleagues it's hard to believe we are beginning the last three months of this school year!

Teachers really have their professional plates full these days. Let's consider all the new things Surrey teachers are dealing with:

- We have our new curriculum being implemented or explored, full with new challenges and inspirations for teachers at all levels.
- We have new demands on us as new ways of reporting are introduced.
- We have our Supreme Court victory which is bringing much needed increased staffing, along with smaller classes and more reasonable composition ratios, but it means change and adjustment at all school sites.
- We have the provincial election coming upon us; interest in education issues is high which offers us a chance for change and investment in our schools.

Teachers are under the spotlight in many ways!

We are professionals and will be able to handle all these challenges and hopefully transform some frustrations into opportunities for our students. Please know we in the STA office continue to be here for teachers to offer support when needed as well. In this issue of the STA Advocate we offer you some perspectives on Professional Autonomy, and interviews with three of your colleagues on how they are contemplating the curriculum changes.

In Solidarity,  
Gioia Breda President



## **Special Curriculum** **Spring** **Issue 2017**

### **STA Full-time Table Officers**

President - Gioia Breda  
pres@surreyteachers.org

First Vice President - Laura Barker  
1-vp@surreyteachers.org

Second Vice President - Matt Westphal  
2-vp@surreyteachers.org

Health & Safety Officer -  
Kristine Olsen  
grv-hs@surreyteachers.org

Grievance Officer - Sue Heuman  
grieve@surreyteachers.org

Grievance Officer - Joanna Cerazy  
grv-spt@surreyteachers.org

Pro-D Issues Officer -  
Anne McNamee  
pro-d@surreyteachers.org

General Inquiries  
sta@surreyteachers.org  
604-594-5353

### **Other Executive Members:**

#### **Local Representatives to the BCTF:**

Jatinder Bir  
Devinder Kaila  
Julia MacRae  
Bhupinder Mattoo  
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# Professional Autonomy

*by Anita Chapman, edited and updated by Julia MacRae and reprinted with permission from the BCTF*

Much of our job satisfaction in teaching comes from exercising our professional judgment in order to meet the diverse needs of our students. The professional autonomy of teachers to exercise their judgment and act on it is an important source of strength in a public education system, and as such, should be valued by the broader society as well as by members of the profession.

As we go through the complex process of new curriculum implementation over the next few years, it is timely to reflect on how we are already experiencing many limitations and threats to our professional autonomy.

## **School Act and Regulations, Ministerial Orders, Ministry Policies**

*The School Act* and Regulations, Ministerial Orders, and ministry policies put some parameters on teacher professional autonomy.

Teachers are required to teach the curriculum and assess student performance, but we have professional autonomy about how to do that, what instructional and assessment strategies to use.

Our collective-agreement language on professional autonomy generally recognizes restrictions with wording such as "within the bounds of prescribed curriculum."

## **School-Board Decisions and Policies**

School boards often pass motions that curtail teachers' professional autonomy. Teachers may not be as vigilant as they might be about such board actions because the ramifications for professional autonomy of specific board motions are not always immediately obvious.

Many school boards have mandated local report cards that exceed the provincial requirements for report cards and therefore increase the workload of teachers. Some school boards are implementing fresh grade or CSL templates for reporting without consideration for the extra time it takes or the technological resources and know-how required.

There is no provincial requirement to do things of this nature. Usually, there is no local board requirement to do them either. If teachers do not question such directives and draw current frustrations to the attention of their local union, professional autonomy is further curtailed.

Classroom teachers are usually clear on what is being required of them (for example, with report cards) but they may be unclear whether it is required by a Ministerial Order, a local board policy, a principal's preference, or colleagues' decision. Teachers therefore do not always have the information they need to make a judgment about how much professional autonomy they have in a situation. That ambiguity tends to further curtail professional autonomy.

## **Principals' decisions**

Principals often tell teachers that certain things are required. Teachers generally assume these are provincial requirements or board policies. However, the requirements are sometimes simply decisions of the individual principal, based on his or her opinions about best practice. In addition, principals' decisions are sometimes based on their own misconceptions about provincial requirements and board policies.

Teachers often need help from their school union reps and local unions to determine if something is truly a requirement and by whom, or if teachers in the local have professional autonomy over the matter in question.

## **Colleagues' decisions**

School staffs and departments sometimes make decisions or develop "policy" that curtails the individual professional autonomy of teacher colleagues. For example, a staff may decide to implement EBS (Effective Behaviour Support) school-wide, or a department may decide to have a final exam in a course. There is no problem with such decisions if they are unanimous, but to protect professional autonomy, there should be some provision for dissenters, if any, to opt out. Teachers who exercise their professional autonomy in such situations are sometimes viewed as obstructionists by other staff members. Colleagues may be harshly critical, believing that the "majority rules." The majority does not rule on matters of professional autonomy; it is an individual right we have under the collective agreement.

There is a dynamic tension between individual professional autonomy and the fact that the most powerful locus of educational change is the group, school, or department, and not the individual teacher. This is a right-versus-right dilemma that does not have a clear answer, so it is important that the issue of professional autonomy be an integral part of staff development and staff decision making.

## **Public pressure**

Public pressure can have an enormous impact on teachers' professional autonomy because the level of conflict, the heated rhetoric, and the level of media attention have an overall dampening effect on teachers' willingness to take professional risks. Yet at the same time we are now being asked to take risks in our classrooms and make large changes in our practice in the name of "innovation." No matter who initiates changes to schooling, any blowback always seems to come towards teachers, so we cannot shrink from addressing these issues as a collective.

Teachers have been instrumental on the writing teams for the new curriculum, and as a group we are generally in favour of improving the educational system through curriculum change. It is vitally important that we now participate in the implementation carefully and thoroughly, looking for ways to tweak and improve it, and actively suggesting changes through any and all feedback processes. This is not the time to be passive.

## **The "lighthouse" syndrome**

School boards and district and school administrators often feel considerable pressure to look good or do well in relation to current ministry initiatives or flavour-of-the-year educational trends. Sometimes the pressure is obvious (e.g., Fraser Institute rankings or a visit from the deputy minister). Other times, the pressure is subliminal but no less powerful.

Currently, the implementation of the new curriculum feels rushed to many teachers. In our classrooms we know that making changes to our curriculum requires deep thinking about what is being covered, whether the new content and emphasis on skills requires a change in our pedagogical methods, how it will be assessed, how our changes will be communicated effectively to parents, etc., all of which is very time consuming. BC teachers really care about the details!

Classroom teachers prioritize their own students' needs more than any educational fad or change, and will continue to do so.

## Hidden threats

Professions that have professional autonomy are characterized by the ability of members to make decisions about the work they do and by a work environment that encourages such decisions. Most of the current threats to teachers' professional autonomy are not direct attacks on the ability of teachers to make decisions about the work they do, but rather erosions of the work environment that effectively limit and discourage the exercise of those decisions.

We have recently won our long battle in the courts to restore our stripped language, and we expect to see money flowing into the school system to restore the staffing levels required to implement our contract language. However, fifteen long years of accumulated cuts have had a serious effect on teacher autonomy. Larger class sizes, more complex class composition, and fewer resources have dramatically narrowed the range of teacher decision making. We are being asked to change many things about our work for the revised curriculum without much time or extra resources. Exercising professional autonomy under such conditions is challenging.

It is important for teachers to guard against all unnecessary restraints on our professional autonomy so that we can continue to work toward meeting the diverse needs of our students.

*-Anita Chapman was an assistant director in the BCTF's Professional and Social Issues Division.*

*-Julia MacRae is a teacher at Fraser Heights and active in the STA on various Committees.* ✦

## STA CONVENTION STILL NEEDS WORKSHOP PROPOSALS

**Submit your proposal to [staconvention.ca](http://staconvention.ca)  
just click "workshop proposals" and fill in the form.**

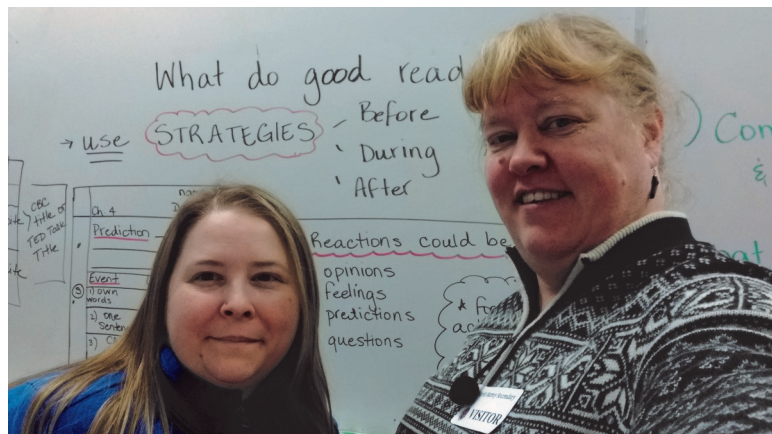
### BUT WHY SUBMIT???

- You can have a half day release to prepare, paid by the STA.
- You could propose a 90 minute, half day or full day session or an excursion.
- You can work with a colleague to plan and present together.
- You will receive a nice gift in thanks for your contribution, and you will be entered in a draw for an Ipad mini.



## Interview with Melissa O'Byrne

### Humanities 8 & 9 and Law 12 Teacher at North Surrey Secondary



*Melissa O'Byrne and Julia MacRae*

**Julia :**

**What have been your actions in your classroom in curriculum implementation so far?**

**Melissa:**

My process has really been to look at the new curriculum and think about what parts of my old practice and the old curriculum I like, and I have started there so that the changes I am making are manageable and one thing at a time. For example I have focussed on skills, because I think the new curriculum has a lot more emphasis on skills versus

content, especially in social studies. The whole thing has really allowed me to take a step back and focus on the big picture of what I want to do.

I don't know if the new curriculum has the same amount of time to do things as I had hoped it would, I think that is a flaw, actually, but I am using it as that opportunity, to really slow down what I am doing and be really skills focussed, and pick the parts that I like.

For me as a humanities eight teacher, it is really easy because I have taught 8 and 9, so I can take things I like from both. Grade 10 Socials will be all new and will be more of a challenge, but again I am trying to look at what have I got that I really think is working, so I am not as overwhelmed. I think that's what people need to understand.

**Julia:**

**So you teach Humanities 8 and 9 and what else?**

**Melissa:**

Humanities 8, 9 and Law 12, The way I teach Law seems to fit well with the new curriculum, it is exactly how I've tried to teach it. It has a lot of organizing around critical thinking and historical benchmarks which I was naturally doing anyways, so it isn't a big shift.

**Julia:**

**In your school, or in general, what do you think are some of the pitfalls in the curriculum implementation?**

**Melissa:**

Resources and time are the big ones for me. You know, it's not that a text book is the be all and end all, but I know a lot of people including myself are spending a lot of time on the internet trying to find resources, that we may or may not have access to. Our old Pathways textbooks are pretty Eurocentric, and it is hard when you are trying to do things like historical perspective, yet our textbooks are old and biased.

**Julia: ...and if you try to do some cool stuff like authentic documents etc, that's awesome but it takes a lot more prep!**

**Melissa: It is huge amount of prep, I do use TC 2 a lot because we have access as Surrey School teachers, but definitely it takes time to gather those materials. Finding time is hard.**



**Julia:**

Talk about some of the things you have seen so far that you think probably need to be revised in the new curriculum.

**Melissa:**

I am concerned about the English curriculum, I'm of two minds about it, I know for some of our really struggling learners the idea of English 12 is a bit scary. The fact that we don't know what that final literacy assessment is going to be yet and the whole idea that they have planned this curriculum without an end in mind these to me are big concerns. It looks as though you could have kids in grade 10 and 11 doing slam poetry and media, and then all of a sudden they have to take a potentially high stakes literacy exam, without having to practice those skills in grade 10 and 11. As much as I think having student choice is great, there are some issues around that! You know, working with teenagers, we know that kids are going to teacher-pick, sometimes they pick the path of least resistance, an easy 'A' or they might think: "I don't like to write, so I am going to choose the others." I think writing is important and it matters, and so apparently does the government, who still talks about literacy exams, and having a high standard for literacy.

As for socials, I am happy with the change, that is my bias, that is how I teach. I am not a 'stand and deliver a ton of content' kind of teacher, I am not a good lecturer, that's not my style, but there are teachers that have that style, and the change can be difficult and may not fit with the philosophy that they have.

**Julia:**

Segueing from that, in your school among your teacher friends or other comments you have heard, how is it going for other people at your school?

**Melissa:**

I know in humanities it is going reasonably well, we're very collegial, which is really helpful because we can share what we are doing and I find if you have somebody you are on the same wavelength with you can get a lot more done, you can collaborate on those collaboration days that we have had, but I do know there are other people who are becoming frustrated and sometimes we have to choose to care less. Teachers have really been pushed to such a limit that they start to think: "I need to take care of myself." I'm also starting to do that. When I see my colleagues stressing out I think about teacher wellness and say we must choose to stop stressing, and just do our best. Change parts here and there in a manageable way; this should not be expected to be an overnight process, and I think the ministry does think it will be quick. Change, while important, can't come at such a rapid pace that people make themselves sick over it.

**Julia:**

Our principal has clearly said to us that it is a long process, but maybe the ministry doesn't think that, perhaps people there have not taught for a long time, or maybe they weren't teachers at all. In terms of the ministry have you done any of the feedback? Have you emailed them specific questions?

*Melissa :*

We did have some concerns about some of the changes that are happening where kids can't be modified anymore, so we did send some concerns regarding that, because I don't think failing kids is the right option, but I also feel like we have to be honest with parents about what their kids can do, so as a department we sent feedback, and we haven't heard anything back! I think the LST department has heard back but we haven't.

*Julia:*

That's interesting, we had a curriculum day in our department and I was taking notes about everyone's reactions and questions and at the end of the day I sent an email from our whole department, a whole series of questions, and they answered them the next day.

*Melissa:*

Well, we have asked similar questions and they haven't got back to us. With the Communications 11-12 situation, while I understand streaming isn't an ideal educational model, I also understand why we do it. At our school we've got an adapted Humanities 8 & 9 because it is the only way we can get LST supports into the classroom because we are so short of people, we've lost huge EA numbers in the last few years I have been here.

*Julia:*

So you think there are enough collaborative processes in place for everyone to learn what they need to learn about the curriculum?

*Melissa:*

No, absolutely not, we've had some curriculum days but I'm the sort of person who wants more time to do that kind of work.

*Julia:*

In our department, for the last curriculum implementation day, we booked the previous day as well, a department release day, so we had 2 full days to think things over, which was great. It is good to ask for the time.

*Julia:*

So I don't know if you remember we published an article that Jen Wadge wrote about the difference between Pedagogy and curriculum, so what are your thoughts on curriculum change vs pedagogy and how linked are they?

*Melissa:*

Well, I've heard Gioia say and I agree, that our pedagogy is our own and it can't be dictated what it looks like. I feel like the inquiry model has been SO pushed, but that's not an area of expertise that I have, (although I have been trying), but personally I think a 6 week inquiry process can sometime end up in such a waste of time. It just feels to me like I can't justify it, I think they are getting a lot more learning with my more direct style of teaching. They go through a lot more material more quickly, it is being framed for them, a lot of modelling and repeated practice, I have a little acronym for how to remember to be good readers, and every conversation in here this morning was about that, good things were happening. They were focussed and engaged. There is some sense (in the push for inquiry) that my kind of teaching means they are not engaged, which is not true. I am not standing here giving 80 mins of stand and deliver every day. But I am structuring things so they can understand and grow, and I am very focussed on assessment, everything I do in class is leading towards that. I think inquiry is an interesting way of teaching but it is not the only way..

**Julia:**

**Now that they have delayed the implementation for a year, how does that feel?**

**Melissa:**

I think it does relieve some of the pressure. It isn't solving the underlying issues around resources. If we are making such a rapid change, and if the ministry wants that change to be manageable and successful, it should really be paid for, not just on teacher's own time. We need opportunities to collaborate more to implement it, I know that costs money, but that's the bottom line. ✨

## E-interview with Christine Wozney

### Grade 4 teacher



*Christine Wozney*

**What have been your actions in your classroom in implementation of the new curriculum so far?**

Two years ago I was part of a pilot project with Fresh grade and the new curriculum. During spring break of 2015, I bought several different coloured post-it-notes and broke up the grade 6/7 curriculums into the following categories: Big Ideas, Core Competencies, and Curricular Competencies. I really felt at that time that it was the Core Competencies that were guiding the new curriculum. I created this wall mural of everything connecting together so that I could visually see how this was all supposed to work. Since then, I have been focused on the Aboriginal perspective and have created several cross curricular units to guide my students in learning, inquiry, ownership, self-evaluation and independence. Sharing the links that I see with them has definitely helped them with outside the box thinking. Realistically, I have done all of this planning on my own time. I have also bought all of

my own resources so that I had the right tools in place for my students to be successful as I guided them down the learning path.

**What do you think are some of the pitfalls in the implementation process?**

I think resources have been a huge pitfall. As a school we decided to focus on the area of the curriculum we knew had changed the most and we didn't physically have resources on site. We created Science tubs that could be signed out. Unfortunately there is only one per grade and currently we have 4 grade 4/5 classes. We have to plan our units separately for science to avoid crossover. Furthermore, it is dangerous when teachers are using Google as their source for teaching materials.



### Talk about some of the things that you think need revision.

I was happy to hear that the 10-12 Curriculum has been postponed. It is important though with that extension that the Ministry provide extra planning days for those teachers to grasp the new curriculum and to implement it when teachers are ready and resources have been provided.

### How are other teachers at your school dealing with this?

Every teacher at my school is in a different place. We are not only learning the new curriculum but also learning new assessment and reporting guidelines. Furthermore, not one of those reporting guidelines has been “officially” sanctioned. So really we are working hard to assess and report but it feels like it can be changed again at will. There are some new teachers at my school this year I haven’t spent anytime with. No one is in the staff room. Collaboration is difficult. Questions and queries are often done electronically. I believe this is because teachers are trying to keep their heads above water the best they can.

### Are there collaborative processes in place to help everyone learn what they need?

I think my administration is doing their best to provide the time and guidance needed. Their intentions are good. But often this guidance is provided through committee work, or meetings scheduled during lunch time or after school. Teachers already spend a huge chunk of time planning for their students or even coaching extra curricular activities. Best practice would be to provide regularly scheduled collaborative time that is ongoing rather than take up lunch hours to relay information about assessment and curricular practices.

### Your comments on curriculum change vs pedagogy

I think the curriculum, the “how” has been that positive. I like there is choice, flexibility, and differentiation built in for all learners. I like there is no end point. A student doesn’t need to reach a certain explicit standard rather, they are allowed the flexibility to build a foundation and manage themselves and their learning. I don’t think curriculum change and pedagogy should be placed as opposites rather, they should be considered connected. How is just as important as What you do. Not only are we building relationships with our students, we are helping them learn how to interact with one another. We respect where they are as learners. At the same time we recognize everyone is not the same, thus offering choice and negotiating learning that fits the learning capacity of the child. ✨



### Reducing our Footprint

We are sending up to 15 copies of the *STA Advocate* per elementary school and up to 45 per secondary school with no change for learning centres or adult education centres. The PDF version will be circulated via STA Representatives. If you need to adjust the numbers of copies received, please contact the STA

## E-interview with Colin Brown (Humanities + Information Technology) Teacher Enver Creek Secondary

**What have been your actions in your classroom in implementation of the new curriculum so far?**

To be perfectly honest, as a new(ish) teacher, there hasn't really been a significant amount of "change" that I've needed to do in order to implement the new curricular goals. For Social Studies, at least, many of my colleagues have been implementing the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking for some time- well before the announcement of the new curriculum. What really intrigued me was the freedom that the lack of prescribed content outcomes gave us to really explore some of the bigger ideas associated with the benchmarks themselves. The really interesting, if not beautiful, thing about studying history is that it helps to give people a context, and maybe even a narrative, for the world around them. The new curriculum gives us the opportunity to explore these concepts more deeply. So rather than "covering" the surface material, we're able to more of those "deep dives" that are more likely to give students understanding of historical processes.

One of the solutions to helping students grasp some of these really deep concepts, is to structure the course around the "big ideas"- but to word them as "essential questions" that let us get into context of the course content. Backwards designing units and lessons has actually made it easier for me to conceptualize what it is that I want students to be able to know, do, and understand. When students can see what the learning intentions are, and they think that those are indeed worthwhile, the process of learning becomes something interesting rather than a chore. It takes a lot of the "what are we supposed to be doing" frustration out of it.

**What do you think are some of the pitfalls in the implementation process?**

Curricular documents weren't unloaded off of a truck, fully shrink-wrapped for our consumption. It was a dynamic process and these are by their very nature messy. Part of me, and I think I'm representative of at least a few of my colleagues, feel at least some comfort in being told simply "do this"- but that's not exciting, and it really starves us of our own creative impulses and creativity. And really, it doesn't let teachers do what they do best. There's a lot of data that shows that when teachers have more control of what goes on in their classrooms they feel more empowered and by extension, allow their students to achieve their own potential. So it might seem like I'm drinking the Kool-Aid, and I might be, but the pitfall of the implementation process- that is the slowly releasing different "drafts," seeking input, having years of overlap, is also what will make it stronger over the long-term. The shrink-wrapped delivered package may have been easier, but that doesn't mean it was better.

**Talk about some of the things that you think need revision.**

There are some unanswered questions in the Socials curricula- there is a lot of emphasis placed on historical thinking and understandings, which is important, but does not seem to give human and physical geography an equitable stance. That said, I think there's room within the curriculum for teachers to make informed decisions for themselves regarding these topics.

### Have you accessed the feedback process?

I have not- I've been at district meetings in much earlier stages where these concerns were voiced to people within the ministry, so I feel that they've been heard.

How are other teachers at your school doing with this?

There's a lot of really interesting things happening out there. I think the general feeling out there isn't one of apprehension but rather of affirmation. In many ways, the new curriculum merely puts into writing what a lot of teachers were already trying in their classrooms- if anything, it opens the gates to let others feel more comfortable taking risks with new ideas, technologies, and methods. Does that mean that the ways that I was doing things before didn't work, or were somehow wrong? Of course not, but that doesn't mean that I couldn't find a more interesting, effective, or engaging way of helping students achieve deeper understandings.

### Are there collaborative processes in place to help everyone learn what they need?

We have a few different mechanisms in place- namely the Improving Student Learning committee, which hosts a number of events for teachers to get together and collaborate. Learning Lunches, our EnverCreekLearns.ca website, and even just the relationships formed within the group have gone a long way to help people feel more comfortable with their practise.

I really should take a minute and plug the [envercreeklearns.ca](http://envercreeklearns.ca) site- believe it or not, but the site itself was student-created (at the request of a couple very committed teachers). It serves as a sort-of hub to highlight innovative things that teachers are doing, and even gives a venue for teacher-blogging. It's serving as our de-facto local site for resources and as a tool for online collaboration. It gives us a window into different departments and a chance to see what is going on around the school.

### Your comments on curriculum change vs. pedagogy

I've only been teaching since 2010, so I won't pretend to have any significant wisdom on this, but it seems to me that they mutually drive each other. I've spent a significant amount of my career looking for that Platonic Ideal of what the perfect classroom, lesson, or unit would look like and I think that the older and more experienced I'm getting is helping me realize that it simply doesn't exist. There really is no "perfect" when it comes to teaching. That said, there is definitely a difference between a lesson that works and one that doesn't, so this pursuit of this Platonic Ideal must by its nature, be a good one.

It's probably cliché, but the student's experience must absolutely lie at the heart of what we do. We must always strive to do better for our students- to model for them the inquiry process and to demonstrate the messy and sometimes frustrating process of learning. Now, beyond these platitudes, I think it's important to realize that the more we learn about the science of learning, the more we must adapt our ideas of "best practice"- and by extension, the vehicle in which we encourage teacher best practice.

Curricula are, without being too dramatic, documents of what we feel are important concepts within our society. It's the arm of the state dictating what tools and skills its young citizens need in order to become successful and contributing members of society- be they habits of mind or practical skill. Naturally, since our society changes, so must our curricula. Good pedagogy which is focused on how people learn, and curricula- what people learn, must naturally walk hand-in-hand. They're married concepts that shouldn't stray too far from each other, should constantly be revisited and revised.





# BCTF GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATION CHANGE

Teacher engagement in education change is guided by and supports the following principles.

## **Education change must:**

- be fully resourced in release time, in-service, funding, technology, and support materials.
- be recognized as a process that unfolds over time.
- consider and respect reasonable teacher workload boundaries.
- adopt clear guidelines for communicating student progress and focus on teacher-selected reporting tools that are timely, reasonable, and sustainable.
- respect teachers as professionals whose knowledge and input are actively sought and integrated.
- preserve teacher autonomy in selecting pedagogical, instructional, and assessment approaches and tools.
- support and advance equity in our schools and among students.
- support students with special needs.
- support the infusion of Aboriginal content and understandings throughout the curriculum.