

29 JUL 77

The core curriculum: simply politics

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A few months ago I co-authored an article in this newspaper which claimed that the core curriculum program being orchestrated by Education Minister Patrick McGeer had more to do with expedient politics than with the improvement of educational standards. While the minister was claiming that a whole new era in B.C. education was beginning, the core guidelines were for the most part vague and meaningless.

To the extent that core and the Provincial Learning Assessment Program were implemented, the results were likely to be destructive to creative teachers and those children normally having difficulty in school.

Those criticisms were heatedly contested by the deputy minister of education, Walter Hardwick, who accused us of lying, failing to check our sources, and, as professors in a university, of sticking our noses where they did not belong. (The deputy minister neglected to tell his readers that he is also a professor at the same university, currently on leave. So, too, is Mr. McGeer. But then how can you attack professors if you tell the public that?)

Since that discussion there has been remarkably little in the news about the core curriculum. The minister of education is not talking about it, and the media have lost interest. It seems useful, however, to

Marvin Lazerson education at the University of British Columbia.

look at what has been happening and what is likely to happen.

In most school districts teachers met to discuss core and not surprisingly found they believed in its goals and were already meeting them. They thus reaffirmed what they were doing.

In a number of districts core guidelines were used to threaten nonconformist teachers or simply those the administration did not like. In some cases, extremists on school boards were set loose by the implied hostility toward teachers which the minister was communicating. They began cutting programs and disciplining staff. The PLAP exams were given, with many students and teachers refusing to take them seriously. (Stories of examination papers being converted into paper airplanes abound.)

And, the core curriculum booklet is being revised with the most opposed words being deleted and a few innocuous words being added. This is designed to please as many people as possible even if the result is still more ambiguous and unrelated to actual teaching and learning programs.

This summer the booklet will be reissued; the minister will announce that it now reflects the will of the people, and will pat himself on the back for a successful campaign to improve education in the province.

But then what? Nothing! For those of you who still think the core curriculum was a major innovation that will dramatically change what your children learn and improve their ability to learn, let me repeat that. The summer and fall will see a few words of congratulations on what a success the core curriculum has been, how hard the ministry is going to work to see its goals implemented, followed by a great big nothing.

The reason for this is clear: the whole thing began as an effort by the minister to make political capital out of education. He has already gained all the mileage he can out of the issue. To press it further would mean actually making changes in schools, restructuring the curriculum and teaching. That is very difficult to do.

No matter how much people complain

about the schools, they do not like to see major changes in them, especially when changes affect their children. Changing what is taught and how it is taught can be very upsetting to parents, students and teachers. It is also expensive.

The resulting controversy and expense of pressing core curriculum further are not worth it to this government. So, after six months of razzle-dazzle public relations and the expenditure of tax dollars, we are left with very little but some glossy pamphlets, vague and essentially meaningless guidelines, and tests that no one knows what to do with.

There is still more to all this, for the core curriculum is a good example of the operational patterns of the minister of education. He is a man with very little patience, who gets bored easily, and needs to race from one attention-getting activity to another.

Core curriculum is already a dead issue. He is bored with it, and has newer play things.

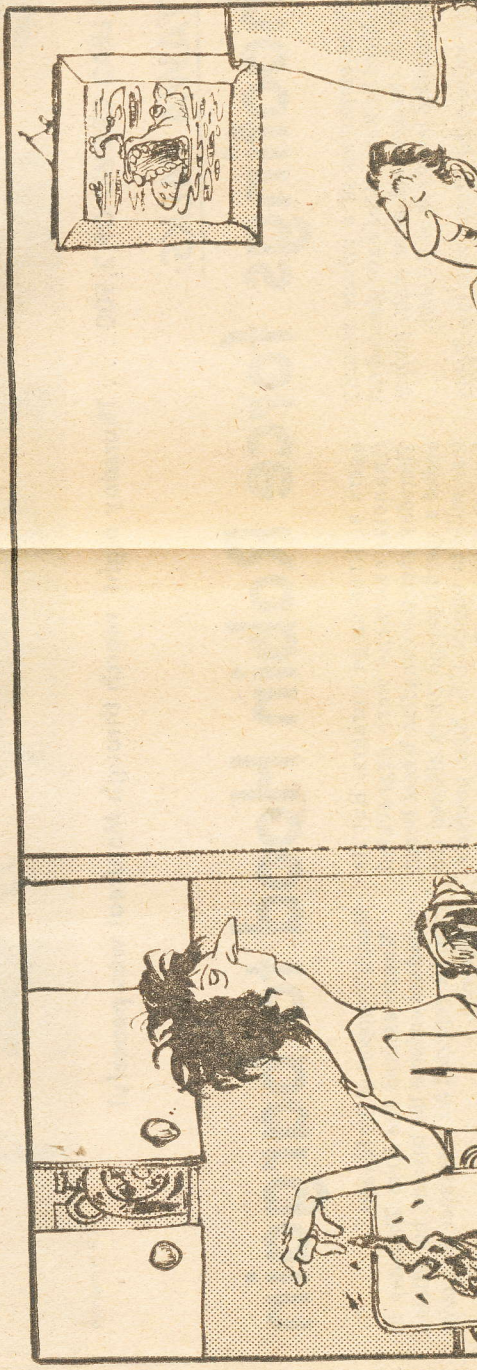
This spring it has been aid to private schools, during the summer it is reorganizing the mess at Notre Dame University (You can just imagine the Social Credit caucus telling Pat McGeer that it does not care what he does with Notre Dame but he better get back some votes.)

In the fall it will be plans to expand vocational and technical training, revise teacher training, and a scheme to release secondary school students before grade 12 so they can flood an already overcrowded labor market or enter technical training schools that will be underfinanced by a government too cheap to provide quality education.

All of this might be taken in some circle as an example of how terrifically innovative the minister is. But judging from his past performance, it most likely means a lot of rhetoric, a great deal of posturing about how significant each of his innovations is, and in the end a great big nothing.

To paraphrase an old song, "good-bye core curriculum, hello to the new whatever."

Core curriculum has served the minister well. The only question which remains



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To paraphrase an old song, "good-bye to core curriculum, hello to the new whatev- er."

Core curriculum has served the ministry well. The only question which remains is whether the public will be harder to fool each time around. □

YEARS AGO

These extracts are from The Sun and its predecessor, the News-Advertiser, on this date in 1902, 1927, 1952 and 1967.

75 years ago — Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, in accepting the freedom of the city of Edinburgh, said his main task was to promote love and respect between English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians.

50 years ago — Quebec was in a festive mood for the arrival of Prince Edward and Prince George at the start of a Canadian tour.

25 years ago — A special committee, which was set up by the city council,

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TEACHERS' MORALE DOWN

Core curriculum year old, but nobody knows if it works

By SARAH JANE GROWE

The core curriculum has been mandatory in B.C. classrooms for one full school year, but neither teachers nor education officials know if it works.

At best, the provincial government's outline of what every B.C. child must learn has been ignored.

At worst, it has damaged teachers' morale.

Jim Carter, associate deputy minister of education, confirmed that there has been no evaluation of the core curriculum.

John Church, assistant director of professional development at the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, said, "I haven't heard much. It's a non-issue this year."

And David Kandal, president of the British Columbia School Trustees Association, said, "There has been an opportunity for response but we have had no complaints."

The silence is not an indication of satisfaction.

"The core curriculum has made teachers paranoid," said John Nolan, an elementary teacher at Carnarvon community school.

"It does not change much but you look over your shoulder. You think you are being judged and found wanting."

"There was nothing in it we weren't already doing," said Nora Lynn Johnson, the Learning Assistance teacher at Carnarvon.

But the core curriculum, along with PLAP (provincial learning assessment program) and BUILD (Building Unity Into Language Development), has made teachers feel uneasy.

"The core curriculum was a governmental decree."

However, Carter seemed to think that the core curriculum was more organically grown than decreed.

"It was a response to a statement from teachers and from the public that they wanted some direction," Carter said.

"But the further development of certain areas promised in the guide has not been done to the extent it should have been done," Carter admitted.

Last year French, fine arts, healthful living and special education were acknowledged by the education ministry as weak areas in the core and were pinpointed for future consideration.

"The hoped-for curriculum for the atypical learner has not been done at all," Carter said.

And the possibility that the core curriculum has caused a severe shift in the arts program is being examined by the Cana-

dian Association of the Arts but this, I must be honest, was not initiated by us.

"It has no official sanction from the ministry yet but support for it is being considered by the fine arts advisory committee."

B.C. director of curriculum development Bruce Naylor said an expansion of the health core curriculum as well as a new French core curriculum will be ready in September.

Naylor said Nick Ardanaz, an expert in language instruction from Montreal, has been hired to develop a French core curriculum for French-speaking students.

"This is intended as a third French curriculum augmenting the French immersion for anglophones and the regular French taught as a second language," Naylor explained.

Both Naylor and Kandal confirmed that teachers and school districts had not been formally surveyed to determine the impact of the core curriculum.

Kandal said the BCSTA has asked for an evaluation of the core concept but has "learned to have a degree of patience."

Naylor said he thought it was too early for a formal assessment.

Teachers interviewed were careful to blame not only the core curriculum for their malaise. They considered the general swing to the right and the back to basics movement in education as much a function of the unemployment situation.

One teacher, who did not wish to be named, said teachers were keeping quiet because of the fear of being fired.

Carol McIntyre, elementary teacher at Bayview community school, called the core curriculum a "knee-jerk response to a problem."

"If it is true that children are not learning the way the public wants them to, then I think someone has to take the responsibility for research to find out why," she said.

When asked about this concern, Carter said, "The public debate (a year ago) provided the research base."

"But there is no specific data behind it. It is not that kind of document. It is a philosophical statement that there are clear expectations of curriculum per se and that they are not optional."

Pat Brady, president of the BCTF, said that although he had no data on the core curriculum as a separate issue, he had received letters from members in "more than one district" expressing anxiety about the current "centralized" trend in education in B.C.

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Education - Curricula - BC

Teachers' campaign exasperates McGeeer

SUN FEB 24 1977

By KARENN KRANGLE

Education Minister Prof. McGeeer said Wednesday he is exasperated by charges that the government's proposed core curriculum will make the school system too rigid.

McGeeer, at his first public meeting to discuss the core curriculum, said his major concern is that the B.C. schools are not getting "back to the basics" fast enough.

"I don't have any patience at all with the nonsense advertising that has appeared," he said, referring to the B.C. Teachers' Federation's ad campaign which says standardized school subjects won't suit every child.

"I don't think it's a sin to have a standardized curriculum. I don't think it's a sin to have a testing program," the minister told a North Vancouver audience of about 200.

"We're not trying to make children into outcasts in society, and we're not con-

cerned with rigidity. If we say not everyone can learn something, why bother teaching at all?"

McGeeer charged that, in recent years, the school system in B.C. has lacked accountability, which the government hopes to bring back through the core curriculum.

"If there's one thing in the school system that's damaging at all, it's the obscuring of the curriculum so that the basics have been eroded," he said. "I hope never again the schools in this province will get as slack as they have been in the last few years."

McGeeer said one of the principal objectives of his department is to get down to the "hard basics" and fundamentals of schools.

"We are bringing back the kinds of skills that will make our students useful and productive members of our society," he said.

"In order to get on with this, we have

which should be communicated to every student.

"This comprises what must be taught in school — not all that should be taught, it's just a beginning."

He added that his department is enriching the core curriculum with suggestions for other material that should be taught in the schools.

"We need to be flexible in the system," he said. "We should provide for plenty of local opportunity so we say there are also things which may be taught in the classroom."

"For example, near Vernon there's a centre called Lumby where logging goes on, so they give courses in logging in the secondary schools."

"But if you were to try to teach logging in Oak Bay or Point Grey, it wouldn't work because they don't need it."

McGeeer said the core curriculum proposal is like a royal commission and all

B.C. residents concerned with education are royal commissioners.

"What you have to do is say: 'Are these goals correct or are there skills that do or don't have to be included?'" he said. "You can give us some guidance for translating that into the hard basics being brought into schools in September."

McGeeer said that although the core curriculum introduced in September may not be the final answer to what's needed in the schools, there will definitely be "something" in the schools by fall.

"We will specify the content of the core curriculum for every grade in every subject and we will say that's what must be taught," he said. "In order to see this is done, we will engage in a provincial learning assessment program and we hope to say, 'Yes, the job's been done.'"

"If it's not being done in a given area, we may have to move in with remedial help."

McGeeer said the testing will involve only Grades 4, 8 and 12.

McGeeer admitted that the core curriculum won't be mastered by all students in every school, and said the assessment program plans to match the students' achievement with what each school district is expected to achieve.

"We're going to look at whether teachers are presenting the materials in such a way that students will get it," he said. "If there are students who can't manage the program, we have a back-up system (of remedial help) for that."

"What we're trying to do is see whether the schools and districts are doing the job at all."

Asked by parents why the core curriculum proposal has placed a priority on the teaching of Canadian history, McGeeer said he feels Canadian media tends to emphasize world news to the exclusion of more Canadian content.

Form a new organization?

Report charges a conspiracy to takeover BCTF

During late 1976 and early 1977 it became apparent that there was a concentrated effort to change the direction of the BCTF by influencing the AGM. The effort was being led in most instances by some principals and vice-principals (e.g. Peter Minshull's invitation in the BCTF Newsletter, Bill Melville's 'Ad Hoc Committee to Return the BCTF to the Membership' and Dave Shore's organization).

Planning prior to the AGM by a group of principals, vice-principals and supporters focused on the election of AGM delegates and the binding of delegates' votes.

During late January, February and March meetings were stacked in a number of locals and conservative delegations elected. Examples of this stacking were Langley and North Vancouver where printed slates of delegates were distributed within locals, principals encouraged their staffs to attend local meetings to get rid of the 'radical left' and large numbers of principals and vice-principals stood for election as delegates.

For example, in West Vancouver the eight-member delegation consisted of a supervisor of instruction, some principals and three vice-principals.

In Terrace, some principals and vice-principals stacked the wrong meeting. A regular turnout occurred at the next meeting and delegates were elected as usual (i.e. volunteers were sought).

In a number of locals the election of delegates had taken place prior to late January. In such locals, the pre-AGM general meeting was frequently stacked to instruct delegates on the 'proper' executive candidates to support.

The best example of this was Kamloops. Another was South Peace. Even in locals where there have normally been a few progressive delegates, such members were either defeated or bound.

Examples were Fernie, West Vancouver, and Richmond. It seems likely that other locals also bound delegates but because there has been no contact with these locals the binding was not reported.

In some locals, 'advice' rather than direction was given. This advice was based on the fact that the 'radical left-communist-marxist-fascists' were leading the BCTF in dangerous directions.

October 14, Core and EEE were given as examples. In one case (Langley) candidates for AGM delegates said

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they wished 'to represent those members who never attended general meetings.'

Although there are no statistics yet available, it appeared that a much larger number of principals and vice-principals and much fewer women attended as delegates than have in the recent past.

In some instances slates of 'moderate' executive committee candidates to support were printed (e.g. Maple Ridge) but more often these slates were transmitted by word of mouth or on the backs of cigarette packages.

By focusing on the tactic of red-baiting (i.e. labelling all 'non-moderates' as reds, communists, radicals, marxists, etc.) the 'moderates' avoided debate on most issues.

One of the few issues they openly supported (before it came to the floor) was on referenda claiming this was the most democratic method of voting.

The question of the AGM making a decision to join the Public Sector Employees Co-ordinating Council was avoided first by claiming the pamphlet was biased rather than factual and second, by tabling the resolution.

In the debate on the floor of the AGM from Monday afternoon until Wednesday morning the speakers were predominantly progressive; the debate centered on issues and the issues carried in favor of progressive policy.

For example, learning conditions, status of women and racism issues drew minimal opposition. There was a very long discussion on the EEE paper but it drew surprisingly little flak.

The policy of having principals teach at least 20% carried. The right of the executive to appoint an editorial board of the BCTF Newsletter was upheld. In contrast, the 'moderate' resolutions on referenda calling, fees by referenda and presidential balloting by the membership at large were defeated.

Also, 23 C.18 was not deleted (it was referred to the B.C. Committee but will remain as a procedure for 1977-78).

The most critical issues lost were fees, the General Secretary's address to be a regular part of the AGM agenda and the tabling of the Public Sector Council resolution.

The five so-called 'moderates' elected to the executive did not publicly associate themselves with the issues they espouse and find themselves generally cool towards BCTF policy in the area of social/educational responsibility.

The voting pattern at the AGM generally did not link candidates to issues; the delegates tended to support progressive policies but elected 'moderate' candidates. It appeared that as many as 165 delegates did not connect

The highest vote count received by a 'moderate' was 387 and by a progressive 399 (Van Seters and Kuehn respectively). The last ballot, which clearly pitted 'moderate' vs progressive was won by Steinson by only 12 votes.

Binding and red-baiting clearly influenced table officer elections.

The vote split on candidates was probably about 320 'moderate,' 275 progressive and 70 uncommitted. On issues, however, the 'moderate' vote often dwindled to 275 leaving a middle of about 100.

Much of the middle was undoubtedly influenced on most issues by the debate. From Monday afternoon until Wednesday morning the 'moderates' were noticeably absent from debate.

This might have been a deliberate decision. It appeared that a considerable amount of the 'moderate' support was lost during the AGM — especially on issues.

In summary, the organization initiated by a number of principals and vice-principals three years ago and expanded ever since, gained control of the elections at this year's AGM.

While it elected five of six members of its slate it did show signs of weakness. But most important was the fact that a switch of 40 votes would have changed the results dramatically.

Some of those 40 votes were held through coercion and claims substantiated only by red-baiting.

It is clear that the BCTF has entered a new era: some principals, vice-principals and supporters have created what is essentially a political party complete with campaign literature and slates.

They have found considerable support from conservative elements within the BCTF. They have had an organization for at least three years.

The general membership does not appear to be aware of the magnitude of the organization.

Teachers seem to have a choice: allow the 'moderates' to hold power until their own inertia overcomes them (if it does) or build an effective counter-organization which would work towards realizing their interests.

An approach that would build a stronger teacher movement would be to foster the development of an organization to counter that of the conservative elements.

Such an organization must appeal to a very broad spectrum of the membership (including some principals and vice-principals) and must be based on issues rather than 'right' vs 'left'.

In other words, any such organization must be based on

delegates and the binding of delegates' votes. During late January, February and March meetings stacked in a number of locals and conservative delegations elected. Examples of this stacking were Gley and North Vancouver where printed slates of delegates were distributed within locals, principals encouraged their staffs to attend local meetings to get rid of the 'radical left' and large numbers of principals and vice-principals stood for election as delegates. For example, in West Vancouver the eight-member delegation consisted of a supervisor of instruction, some principals and three vice-principals. In Terrace, some principals and vice-principals stacked the wrong meeting. A regular turnout occurred at the next meeting and delegates were elected as usual (i.e. volunteers were sought). In a number of locals the election of delegates had taken place prior to late January. In such locals, the pre-AGM general meeting was frequently stacked to instruct delegates on the 'proper' executive candidates to support.

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Election not on issues, but approach

As I see it, B.C. teachers have come to the end of a great experiment. The experiment has included such variables as political power, degree of public expenditures, public opinion, teacher professionalism, educational gimmickry and teacher solidarity.

The object of the experiment has been to see how far each one of these variables could be stretched, how these variables correlate, and which of these variables, when mixed together, will go 'poof.'

In other words, when you push something past the maximum tolerable level, past the state of reasonability

By focusing on the tactic of red-baiting (i.e. labelling as 'non-moderates' as reds, communists, radicals, marxists, etc.) the 'moderates' avoided debate on most issues. One of the few issues they openly supported (before it came to the floor) was on referenda claiming this was the most democratic method of voting. The question of the AGM making a decision to join the Public Sector Employees Co-ordinating Council was avoided first by claiming the pamphlet was biased rather than factual and second, by tabling the resolution. In the debate on the floor of the AGM from Monday afternoon until Wednesday morning the speakers were predominantly progressive; the debate centered on issues and the issues carried in favor of progressive policy.

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In other words, any such organization must be based on teacher objectives.

Education Commission approved

by the RA, provide a basis for approaching other groups to gain their cooperation in establishing a commission. The proposed commission will be composed of lay people and teachers. It intends to conduct public meetings, read briefs and submissions. It will also identify and promote study and debate

The Representative Assembly was generally accepting of a Commission on Education. Although some reservations were voiced, the RA voted to support, in principle, the establishment of a commission and to provide an amount of up to \$5,000 for the Commission on Education Task Force.

within and without the teaching profession towards increasing understanding and consensus. Ron McQueen, West Vancouver, expressed concern that the commission could become an 'in-house thing' if it is just established on a BCTF base. 'There are skeptics in the public who will treat it in that light,' he said.

Control of education is not teachers' job

SUN

MAR 19 1977

The Sun's article, *The Core Curriculum: expedient politics?* (March 2, 1977) and other articles and letters have contributed to a lively debate on educational policy, and this debate has raised the level of consciousness of parents, trustees, teachers, students and the public in general about education.

It is unfortunate, however, that some of the commentators, like UBC education professors Marvin Lazerson and Jane Gaskell, have not taken the trouble, as might be expected of good academics, to determine exactly what is going on before blossoming into print. Had they done so they would have found that the ministry has several of the issues they raise well in hand.

With the exception of those subject areas which have been delegated to the local boards of school trustees, the responsibility for what is taught in the schools of British Columbia rests with the minister of education and with the legislature.

Control over education does not rest with teachers or professors of education. Their responsibility is to advocate, to recommend, to develop learning material and strategies for teaching — not to decide what will be taught. That is the responsibility of the elected representatives of the public. In a democracy, civilian control of education is important.

Contrary to the view of Lazerson and Gaskell, there has been no "razzle dazzle" core curriculum. There is no media public relations campaign. Most if not all newspapers carried an accurate concise news account of the project last fall. A small booklet called *Goals for a Core Curriculum* was prepared and 175,000 copies were distributed to our citizens. The debate and discussion has gone on school by school across this province where parents and teachers are debating issues of education and not simply the parents' role in hot dog sales or sports days.

Last October, school districts were asked to organize local programs. Ministry staff assisted in preparing these by attending more than 60 meetings in various parts of the province.

The consultative program has been ex-

By
Walter Hardwick

The writer is deputy minister of education for British Columbia.

cellent in most school districts. One district alone distributed 28,000 copies, another arranged for copies in several languages. The process continues. Through this the public has had a chance to react to professional educators, initiatives and, on the basis of that involvement, their elected representatives will be in a position to approve a curriculum.

The Goals booklet outlines simply the skills and knowledge "generally accepted as fundamental or basic to the education of all children and youth within the province." The core curriculum when in place will not be the total education program. As the minister pointed out in a November 1976 policy statement, there is very much more!

The core curriculum does *not* say *how* learning should take place. There is nothing to prevent teachers from engaging in "interest-based, inquiry learning." The Public Schools Act and Regulations recognize that other strategies are needed, but ministry policy, by avoiding the legislation of a specific curriculum, wisely contends that programs should be based upon the "learning needs of the students."

Unfortunately some teachers and trustees want to make decisions on the assumption that there is a "best way for everyone to learn. Perhaps the Lazerson-Gaskell concerns arise from the fact that some of the fads originating in the education faculty of the university are being challenged.

The province is headed, the critics tell us, for large-scale standardized tests—"where teachers will be preparing their students to memorize mountains of data, much of it trivial, which will be forgotten within weeks."

This is patently not the case. Standard-

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ized testing is being confused with the Provincial Learning Assessment Program (PLAP).

The assessment programs provide the ministry with reliable data on the strengths and weaknesses of provincial programs and general performance of students in the province. Learning assessment programs are being administered at grades 4, 8, and 12 (not every grade) in such areas as language, mathematics and social studies.

The results of these permit the ministry to do what it is charged to do under the act, namely, to have the essential information for the preparation of new provincial curriculum guides and resource materials, for the allocation of financial and human resources, and for the improvement of teacher education programs.

In broad terms, the assessment programs give the overview of educational performance and, in so doing, assist the ministry in being accountable to the legislature.

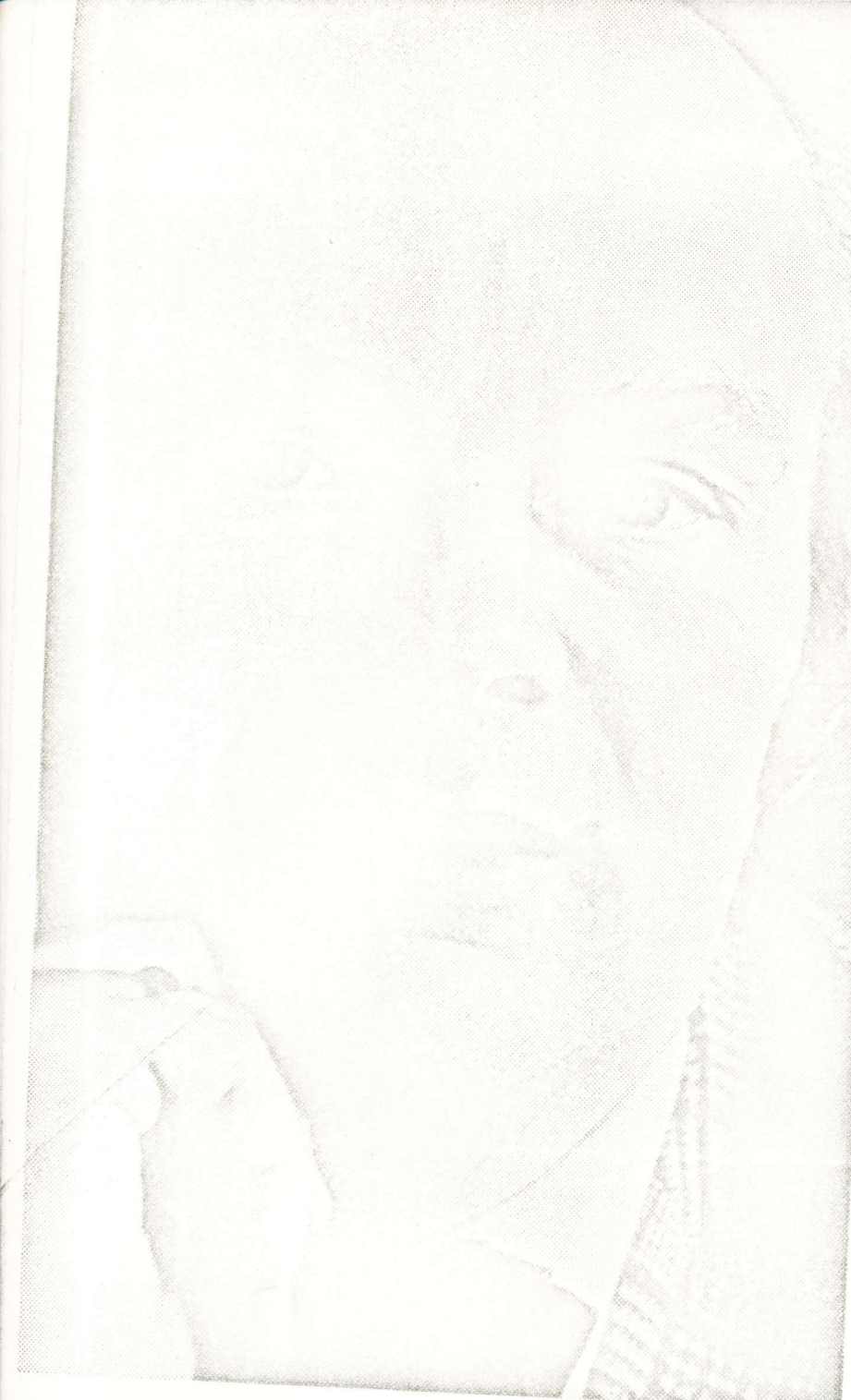
The favorable results demonstrated in the grade 4 reading assessment program are important information. Last year the ministry had mainly subjective impressions of educational performance; this year better information is available for the public and to the legislature.

Some weaknesses in technique at the grade 8 level were revealed in the English composition tests. If the critics had read the report prepared by a contract team from the faculty at the University of Victoria, they would have found 110 recommendations to improve programs and performance at this level — many of which are being acted upon.

The tests do show that children in school districts where there are many disadvantaged families did not do as well as children in other districts. Lazerson and Gaskell tell the reader that the ministry "has chosen to suppress this, thereby preventing any pressure from building to improve learning conditions in these poorer districts."

Had the professors contacted the ministry, read the press, attended local meetings, or the ministry's regular meetings with the BCTF and BCSTA, they would have known that our field services division is preparing a program of support for those very districts where performance was lower than expected.

School district officials, ministry personnel and educational researchers are all involved. The ministry believes that the principle of equal educational opportunity may demand the investment of more resources in terms of personnel and finance in these



Brian Kent photo

DEPUTY MINISTER WALTER HARDWICK: "Civilian control important"

districts than are now provided in the basic education levy available across the province.

Testing individual students is also essential but is primarily a local matter. Tests are used to identify student strengths and weaknesses to provide the basis for planning effective teaching — and where needed to suggest remedial work by the teacher.

The headline of the article reads: "What will be thrown out?" The professors see music and art, interdisciplinary courses and other subjects of interest and relevance being thrown out. That statement is false. Specific references are made to these subjects. The core curriculum is not the total program. The booklet makes it clear that in the senior secondary school, for example, students "extend and reinforce their skills through application in areas of interest and more advanced study."

Education Minister McGeer has stated repeatedly that there is no intention

to pursue the many electives that permit students to direct themselves along lines that reflect their aptitudes, career aspirations or interests, will continue to be impor-

In meetings with administrators, teachers and the public across the province, officials have been candid and frank. If there is any dishonesty, it is in the rise of educational jargon and creation of an "educational mystique" from which the public is excluded.

tant — particularly in the secondary school.

However, the delegation of responsibility was never meant to be a licence for the individual teacher to decide whether or not to teach the basic skills of reading or writing. Even in elective courses the core skills and knowledge are necessary "tools for understanding."

The critics attack the goals for "emphasizing knowledge over critical enquiry." The ministry recognized that skills and knowledge are essential, but if the good professors would read the Goals booklet they would note the inclusion of such skills as "to make valid interpretations of an author's purpose and bias" (A-12), and "identify propaganda in material read" (A-15).

I would like to assure the professors that through the core curriculum, students will have skills of critical enquiry even to detect the obvious bias of their Page 6 article!

The critics say that the core curriculum is ignoring the needs of the handicapped and disadvantaged. If I might quote again from the discussion booklet: "The learning it prescribes will not be achieved by all students at the same time. Provision to meet individual differences are made by teachers who adjust methods and materials to develop the student's full potential."

Further, the ministry is investing in programs for the handicapped and providing supplementary resources. Research programs are underway on the small secondary school, on learning disabilities, and on the progression of students from the secondary school to the work force.

Lazerson/Gaskell say "what has been frustrating about the core curriculum debate has been its dishonesty, its oversimplification of complex issues." This is simply not so. The ministry is careful about what is stated in public documents. In meetings with administrators, teachers and the public across the province, officials have been candid and frank. If there is any dishonesty it is in the rise of educational jargon and creation of an "educational mystique" from which the public is excluded.

Several opponents of the core curriculum have been describing a "we-they" conflict between Victoria and the schools. Perhaps the critics don't realize that the ministry staff in the area of school programs consists in large measure of teachers seconded from classrooms. Dozens more give of their time to curriculum revision committees and assessment panels. These are professional educators preparing recommendations, after wide consultation, for consideration and decisions by government.

In conclusion, let me make it clear that no one is "killing joy in the classroom" — the ministry is asking the parents, trustees, students, teachers, and the public that funds the programs to tell us what they want. Advice is being given on such matters as second languages, physical fitness, economic education and the problems of the slow learner.

When the evidence is in, the core will be put in place, curriculum revision will continue, teacher training might just be improved, and districts that need help will get



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Education Minister McGeer has stated repeatedly that there is a place for locally-developed courses of study. Opportunities

A system is likely to be divisive unless it continuously assures different groups of people — regional, ethnic, social or economic — their due weight in the national political process.

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sion and Telecommunications Commission (you remember them . . . they're the \$\$\$'s who are responsible for the current level of our television programming) has called for submissions regarding pay tele-

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When the evidence is in, the core will be put in place, curriculum revision will continue, teacher training might just be improved, and districts that need help will get help so that educational equality will be extended across this province.

Is that political expediency?

work at McDonald's. It makes you an efficient person. If you make the wrong size hamburger, you get fired. It is a smooth-running machine that the army should em-

McGeer says core plan backed

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Teachers get shiny red apples.
Well, teachers don't get them no more.
They've taken the fruit from the apple
And left us to chew on the core!
They say it was Eve's picking apples
That led to God's wrath and much more.
If she got all that for one apple,
McGeer should get his for one core!

By KARENN KRANGLE

That poem, which graced the cover of the most recent edition of The B.C. Teacher — the B.C. Teachers' Federation's magazine — demonstrates how many teachers in this province feel about the provincial government's planned core curriculum.

They're not particularly pleased with it.

But they're in the minority, according to Education Minister Pat McGeer.

The core curriculum, which will be introduced in the schools in the fall, has been applauded by 69 per cent of the people who responded to the core proposal, issued in a booklet late last year, McGeer said Tuesday.

In a statement detailing how the public responded to the educational goals listed in the booklet, McGeer said he received 13,584 responses to the proposal, 69 per cent of which "could be coded indicated satisfaction with the proposed goals."

Another 17 per cent, he said, indicated that only one goal out of 13 should be reconsidered.

"A great deal of constructive advice was provided not only on the reaction sheets (provided in the booklet), but also in the form of letters and briefs from individuals and organizations," McGeer said. "The largest number of recommendations were for additions in the areas of reading and writing skills, the numbers system and healthful living.

"Most of the recommendations did not imply dissatisfaction with existing goals, but suggested they could be strengthened."

McGeer's department has defined the core curriculum as "that which must be learned", to include "skills and knowledge generally accepted as fundamental for or basic to education of all children and youth within the province."

In addition to the goals mentioned above, the core curriculum also includes science, cultural and physical heritage and analysis, research, study and problem-solving.

McGeer said another concern mentioned in the responses, the needs of exceptional children, is being considered for inclusion in the core curriculum.

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Another area of interest, he said, was the teaching of French.

"There were two other frequently-recurring suggestions," he said. "The first had to do with strengthening and expanding the goals in particular areas, notably mental and physical health, economic education, consumer education and career counselling," he said. "These areas are already under study by the ministry.

"The second was in the field of creative arts, where some respondents urged that more importance be attached to this field for every student. Existing core proposals do make some reference to this field, but it has not been interpreted as being accorded sufficient priority."

McGeer said his department is now working on a document for use in all classrooms, listing all the goals of a revised core curriculum.

"A great majority of the goals are already covered by material (now) in use," he said. "The new document will pinpoint it, particularly for new teachers."

The core curriculum was surrounded by controversy earlier this year, after the BCTF conducted an advertising campaign pointing out that only average children will benefit from the core curriculum.

The government was also criticized for not distributing the booklets widely enough and for leaving public meetings on the core proposal too late — with little time for parents to respond before the March 1 deadline. (Most of the meetings were held in February).

Meanwhile, the BCTF, in the June edition of B.C. Teacher, also published some reactions to its advertising campaign on the core curriculum. Following are some of the responses:

"Many teachers have felt for some time that a positive statement of direction from the ministry of education was long overdue."

"We have been invited by Dr. McGeer to respond to core curriculum proposals, yet the questions and comments of responsible, concerned teachers will go unheeded."

The core curriculum: expedient politics?

By MARVIN LAZERSON
and JANE GASKELL

THE MINISTER of education, Dr. Patrick McGeer, proclaims it an educational breakthrough. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation calls it coercive and hostile to good teaching practices. The media daily discuss it. But the public — parents, students and teachers — remain profoundly confused as to what the core curriculum means.

Let us start with what core curriculum is not.

It is not a dramatic revision of the curriculum. Nor does it add anything new to our understanding of how children learn or the best ways to teach.

The guidelines that have come out in support of core sound like motherhood: few parents or teachers would oppose them. Most school districts already include them as part of their existing curriculum. To tell teachers to get children to "follow simple oral directions" or to "adjust the speed of reading to the purpose," as the core guidelines do, is about as instructive as telling service stations to sell gas.

The provincial learning assessment tests have not helped much either. The tests do not show a major decline in literacy skills. This is not to say that our students do not need to learn more; only that the test results are ambiguous, and the department of education is misinterpreting them to the public for its own ends. The one thing the tests did show, that school districts with disadvantaged children did worse than those with wealthy children, the department has chosen to suppress — thereby preventing any pressure from building to improve learning conditions in these poorer districts.

There won't be wholesale changes

So, the first thing to be clear about is that the new core curriculum is not going to lead to wholesale changes in the way most teachers teach or in what our children learn. It may improve levels of literacy, but not significantly, and it certainly will not teach children how to think. Most schools and classrooms will look pretty much the same after the core curriculum as before.

If this is so, why the controversy?

Marvin Lazerson and Jane Gaskell teach in the faculty of education at University of British Columbia.

Why has Victoria felt it so necessary to proclaim a new era in education? Why has the BCTF made core the centre of its opposition to the department of education? And will core have any effect on the children in our schools?

To a great extent, the core curriculum is motivated by political expediency. With the public hostile to the costs of social services and with parents genuinely concerned about how their children are doing in school, a reform that is cheap and sounds like a major change is attractive politically.

Parental concern over schooling is itself rooted in the diminishing value of school credentials. Schooling has traditionally been the ticket to high paying, high status jobs. But in the midst of an economic crisis with massive numbers of unemployed and underemployed, going to school and receiving a degree are not the guarantees they once were.

Parents sense this, and much of their concern is over how schooling will affect their children's futures. The minister of education is playing on these anxieties, and is scapegoating the schools and teachers for social and economic problems they have little control over.

Division among the teachers

The assumption is that changing the curriculum will benefit the young in terms of the discipline and the skills they will need to be successful in the future. Since most of us feel helpless about many social and economic trends, we are ready to jump at the chance that an educational reform, particularly one that is being sold as a low-cost change, will bring our children under control and provide them with the jobs to make their lives more decent.

It is, we are afraid, a false hope.

When one turns from the roots of the core curriculum controversy to the teachers' response, one finds division. Many teachers support the core curriculum. They are confused by the changes of the last decade, uncertain about what they are supposed to teach, and unclear about whom they are accountable to. Core curriculum reaffirms much of what they have always done. It thus allays their anxieties about having to deal with larger social issues, new programs and more individualized instruction.

Many teachers, however, are upset by the new prestige core curriculum gives to educational practices held over from the 1950s. They have struggled to introduce

new techniques and new materials, and have tried to reduce the joylessness and boredom of many classrooms. While some teachers ended up using films and collage-making as a substitute for teaching reading and writing, they more often retained an emphasis on teaching children basic skills using interesting materials and methods.

These teachers have taken their professional development seriously, and believe deeply that the schools are better today than they were a decade ago, despite the hostility of the public and the media. For these teachers, core curriculum threatens a reduction in the flexibility they now have, and an increase in the power of the more traditional, less imaginative teachers and administrators.

Much of this has been lost in the conflict between the BCTF and Victoria.

The teachers' federation is suspicious of Social Credit policies, remembering that W.A.C. Bennett drove the teachers into a concerted effort to elect the NDP. To the federation, the core curriculum and the attack on the teachers that has gone with it, along with attempts to roll back salaries and refusals to provide adequate funding for education, are part of a general Social Credit policy to undermine unions in the province. The BCTF has thus acted like any self-respecting union when confronted by a hostile employer, and has attacked back.

While relations between the BCTF and Victoria worsen, the core curriculum debate threatens to polarize relations between teachers and parents, with what may be disastrous consequences for school children.

The minister of education has capitalized on public and media hostility to the schools by selling the core curriculum as the only path to learning and improved standards. He thus implies that the teachers have not been teaching and that students have not been learning. The BCTF's campaign against the core curriculum seems to confirm the view that teachers are against standards of learning.

Most parents like the teachers they know

As for the parents, they are once again caught in the middle.

Most parents like the teachers they know, and in small group meetings usually discover that their children are being taught basic skills. Yet they are being barraged by Victoria and the media with assertions that their children are not learning.

TEACHERS HAVE STRUGGLED, say the authors, to reduce the joylessness of many classrooms.

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Given this highly dangerous game of education politics, will the core curriculum actually have any effect on what happens in schools? While it is difficult to predict these things with total accuracy we suggest these likely occurrences. First, a movement away from interest-based, inquiry learning. Second, a tightening of controls over teachers and students. And, third, the introduction of large-scale, provincial-wide standardized tests.

The learning goals defined in the core curriculum guidelines emphasize knowledge — about the solar system, the Renaissance, parallelograms, prefixes and suffixes—over critical inquiry. We do not dispute that knowledge of history and science, grammar, and computational skills is important. But we side with most recent educational theory which stresses that this knowledge be learned as a tool for understanding.

Memorization as an end in itself does not help us think or understand ourselves or the world around us—though it may be impressive to hear a student reel off a list of grammatical rules.

What will be thrown out?

At the same time, the core curriculum guidelines suggest that some subject areas are acceptable, others are not. In practice, this seems to mean that major efforts in the creative teaching of English, multidisciplinary courses, the new women's studies course, and a host of other unpublicized activities that have emerged recently are about to be thrown out. Art and music similarly seem like to get short shrift. This unfortunate.

The new programs have allowed teachers to expand their professional interests and build on their competencies and students' interest. It is especially unfortunate since one of the few things we know about learning is that it occurs when students and teachers are enthusiastic about the subject. Throwing out subjects of interest and relevance and substituting a standardized curriculum undermine some of the best chances we have to improve learning.

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Finally, to understand the core curriculum, one must recognize its intimate connection with standardized tests. We cannot go into all of the complex issues that surround testing. That they are complex is important to keep in mind, since there is a great deal of simplistic jargon circulating about how the tests raise standards. Here we simply note some of the most likely outcomes.

Large-scale tests are inevitable

Given the department of education's commitment to measure the success of its innovation, large-scale standardized tests are inevitable. The use of these tests will lead teachers to narrow what they teach to what will be on the tests. If the tests actually examined all important learning goals, like critical thinking and inquiry skills, the ability to make judgments, or to engage in creative activity, teaching to the tests would not be a problem. But the tests either do not measure or do a very poor job of measuring what may be the most important goals of learning.

That means that teachers will be preparing their students to memorize mountains of data, much of it trivial, which will be forgotten within weeks if not days of the test. Thus we can safely predict that the present government will institute a massive testing program at great financial cost (while cutting funds in other educational areas), the results of which will tell us very little about how children learn or about how well they think.

In fact, the only clear result of standardized testing is likely to be an increase in the social class bias of the school system.

The basic problem in our schools is not some mythical "declining standards," but the inequalities that pervade the educational system. We know that children from disadvantaged homes do more poorly on standardized tests than children from middle and upper class homes. We do not need more testing to show that. Using the tests to place students in educational programs and ultimately to control access to the universi-

ty reinforces already existing inequalities and discriminations.

Since the department of education is doing almost nothing to improve learning conditions for poor children, many of whom speak English as a second language, standardized tests will largely compound an already bad situation.

On the whole, a large number of people in British Columbia support what we believe will be the outcomes of the core curriculum. They do not especially want youth to think critically; they want them to score high on traditional examinations. They believe teachers and children have too much freedom and should be disciplined. And they do not care that vast inequalities in our schools exist or that minorities are discriminated against, so long as their children get the better half of the stick. We are sorry people believe this but these at least are the real issues behind the core curriculum.

What has been frustrating about the core curriculum debate has been its dishonesty, its over-simplification of complex issues.

Razzle-dazzle PR but no understanding

A razzle-dazzle public relations campaign has been mounted from Victoria designed to convince us that great educational gains will accrue from the core curriculum. But in none of this is any effort being made to understand how children learn or how and why some teachers are effective. Instead, attractive phases—"standards," "core curriculum"—are being substituted for analysis of serious and complex educational and social issues.

All of this makes us wonder if British Columbians really want literate students. Being literate means being critical, articulate, and able to understand how the world works. But if the young are literate, they are likely to challenge adult standards and behavior. A literate population means one that is self-aware and knowledgeable, sees behind the self-serving rhetoric of politicians, and asks questions about the inequalities around us. But then, do we really want that?