



**Notes from a Conference Call between
BCLTA, BCLA, ABCPLD and the
Ministry of Education**

May 19, 2011

Attendees

Library Associations

Lynne Russell, Chair, ABCPLD
Christopher Kevlahan, President, BCLA
Errin Morrison, Executive Director, BCLA
Ivan Idzan, President, BCLTA
Paul Tutsch, Vice President, BCLTA

Ministry of Education

James Gorman, Deputy Minister
Paige MacFarlane, Assistant Deputy Minister
Jacqueline van Dyk, Director, PLSB

Questions

1) What is the Deputy Minister's vision for public libraries?

The Deputy Minister sees public libraries as a critical community resource – one that is especially important in difficult economic times. He is aware that library usage is up – Jacqueline van Dyk, of the Public Library Services Branch, is diligent in bringing key statistics to his attention and is a vocal public library champion. As government attempts to navigate the new knowledge-based economy, public libraries are looked upon as a crucial piece of public infrastructure – able to facilitate access to information and provide technological support to those in need. Libraries are flexible and responsive to diverse communities, and the library sector is admired for its ability to continually adapt to meet the changing needs of the public. Government is committed to public libraries and the Minister himself feels strongly about libraries. He is working hard to “fight off the wolves” and maintain library funding at current levels despite very challenging economic times.

2) What is the funding outlook for public libraries?

Although reluctant to provide any predictions in light of the worldwide economic collapse and subsequent fallout of 2009, the Deputy Minister indicated he does not expect any reductions to

public library funding in the next year or two. Neither does he expect any increase in funding as government focuses its efforts on deficit reduction.

The library group was clear in communicating that the expectations placed on public libraries are increasing and provincial funding is not keeping pace with demand. The Deputy Minister answered that he understands the challenge and advised that there are many things government would like to do but just can't accomplish in the current economic climate. Health and Education Ministry budgets have in fact been protected as much as possible – remaining flat or seeing minor increases where other ministries have seen significant cuts. If the money were there, the Deputy Minister would love to invest in libraries, especially as they support some of the Ministry's key goals, such as personalized learning.

Topics for Discussion

1) Early Literacy/Family Literacy/Early Learning

BCLA President Christopher Kevlahan advised the Deputy Minister that many of the priorities identified in the Ministry of Education's current Service Plan are supported by public libraries. These include pre-literacy initiatives (e.g., babytime), early literacy supports (e.g., storytime, visits to preschool, elementary, and StrongStart classes), and programs such as the Summer Reading Club. But libraries need adequate funding support from government in order to provide these valuable outreach programs.

Mr. Kevlahan also encouraged the Deputy Minister to ensure that teacher librarians are adequately funded in BC's schools. Teacher librarians have a special skill set and school libraries fill a very particular role. While public libraries are complementary, they cannot take the place of library service in schools.

Assistant Deputy Minister Paige MacFarlane responded that libraries do very valuable community outreach and while the Ministry understands the concerns and financial needs of the library community, there are unfortunately limited resources available to respond to these requests. With regard to teacher librarians, Ms. MacFarlane advised that it is up to individual school districts to decide where to allocate resources. Education is essentially co-governed, with the Province setting policy and School Districts making budget decisions. Ultimately, the Ministry would like to see increased linkages between teacher librarians and public libraries.

2) Lifelong Learning and 21st Century Skills for Adults

ABCPLD Chair Lynne Russell addressed the topic of lifelong learning and 21st Century skills for adults – including the role that public libraries play in fostering information literacy. Ms. Russell thanked the Ministry for provincial Equity Grants, which assist public libraries in providing both traditional and new supports to adult learners. In many cases, libraries are helping otherwise successful adults for whom technology has become a barrier. These patrons don't have the necessary skills to access needed resources and are increasingly finding themselves at a disadvantage. Public libraries provide a safe, friendly, non-threatening environment in which to learn these new skills; many offer introductory and/or more advanced tech sessions, which are routinely oversubscribed. Providing access to, and instruction in the use of, e-books and e-book readers is another example of where public libraries are fostering information literacy. As well, when providing reference services,

librarians are cognizant of their responsibility to not just find the requested information but to help people become independent information seekers – ensuring they are able to navigate the world of information for themselves. A different type of digital divide is becoming evident today – those who know how to use technology and those who don't. Public libraries are increasingly taking on the responsibility of ensuring people have these crucial 21st Century literacy skills.

The Deputy Minister acknowledged, with gratitude, that public libraries are stepping up to fill this role and that people are consequently seeing the library as a place to attain skills as well as find information. He commended libraries for taking on this responsibility and advised that government supports this important work. The Assistant Deputy Minister concurred and mentioned that we are in the midst of a technological revolution – government sees this, but is finding it challenging to keep up.

3) Update on the Public Library Infrastructure Study

Paul Tutsch, Vice President of BCLTA, provided an update on BCLTA's ongoing Public Library Infrastructure Study. The first such survey of BC's public libraries was conducted two years ago, with a follow-up completed in the past couple of months. It is evident, from the new survey results, that there are still significant inadequacies in public library space, with only 50% of libraries having close to the amount of space needed to handle future growth. On a positive note, there has been an increase in the number of libraries developing facilities master plans – more and more libraries are becoming aware of the need for this kind of long-term planning. As well, a full 80% of public libraries report their facilities being fully accessible today – up from approximately 60% in 2009.

The Deputy Minister responded to this update with interest but advised that government will not be able to invest in public library infrastructure in the foreseeable future – although investments in other social infrastructure, specifically Neighbourhood Learning Centres (NLCs), may be a way to pick up some of this slack. Mr. Gorman suggested that libraries think about gaining additional space through this program, which is a good way to leverage infrastructure dollars unlikely to be accessible otherwise. Libraries maintain control over their own opening hours, entrances, policies, etc. but share space with schools and other partners, such as community groups.

A discussion followed on the viability of NLCs and co-location as an option for public libraries. Mr. Kevlahan noted that there are both pros and cons to consider and that differing school and library mandates can make sharing space difficult. The Deputy Minister acknowledged that NLCs will be an option for some, but not all – probably not even most – library systems. He would love for libraries to be a part of this development though and confirmed that government is willing and able to overbuild schools in order to provide space for libraries. Government is already doing so for community theatres and other groups and would love to be incorporating libraries as well. There are admitted concerns that need to be addressed, but there are also tremendous opportunities that make it worth working through the potential problems.

Follow-up on Items from October 2010 Teleconference

1) Neighbourhood Learning Centres

Ministry representatives recently held a session on NLCs at the BC Library Conference and have now visited Vancouver Island Regional Library, Fraser Valley Regional Library and the Kootenay Library

Federation to open discussion on NLC opportunities. Another session is scheduled for the Beyond Hope library conference, and a meeting with Okanagan Regional Library will take place this September. Library trustees and staff have been invited to these discussions; school boards have so far not been included.

2) ***Library Act Review***

Assistant Deputy Minister Paige MacFarlane advised that the proposed *Library Act* review will not be moving forward in the foreseeable future. The need for legislative reform in this area is not perceived to be urgent and will thus be handled over the long-term. With an abbreviated spring session and possibly an abbreviated fall session coming up, the *Library Act* will definitely not be on the legislative agenda for 2011.

3) **Providing government services in libraries**

The Deputy Minister has spoken with colleagues in other ministries and found support for the concept of providing government services in libraries. Fiscal constraints that initially made it difficult to spend time looking into this possibility, are now making it necessary to explore possibilities for enhanced efficiency and government is increasingly looking at shared office space and providing more services online. Mr. Gorman will continue exploring these possibilities and will keep the group apprised of any developments.

General Discussion

A general discussion followed the formal meeting. BCLTA President Ivan Idzan asked the Deputy Minister how the Premier sees libraries fitting into government's "families first" mandate. Mr. Gorman answered that the Premier is looking at ways to support families – essentially giving them back their time by ensuring that the services they need are readily available. In this sense, public libraries definitely fit with the agenda. Mr. Idzan said he would like to hear the Premier publicly articulate her vision for libraries and the Deputy Minister promised to encourage her to do so if the opportunity presents itself.

It was acknowledged by all in attendance that the bi-annual meetings of the associations and the Ministry are useful for both parties. The associations will follow-up with the Ministry in the interest of scheduling a fall 2011 meeting.