

MEET CHRISTINA ZACHARUK

DEPUTY MINISTER OF
EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE

Christina Zacharuk was appointed the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education and Child Care in January 2022. Now that she's had several months to settle into the role, we invited Christina to answer a few questions about herself and share her thoughts on upcoming priorities for K-12 education in BC.

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF

I was born on the traditional territory of the Katzie, Semiahmoo, and Kwantlen Nations before moving to the traditional territory of Secwépemc people, where I was raised and graduated from Kamloops Senior Secondary. My transition into public service was in 2004 after completing a Masters in Public Administration, including co-op placements with both the federal and provincial governments. I spent my first couple of years working in the area of Crown agency governance and accountability before I joined the Public Sector Employers' Council Secretariat (PSEC), where I was involved with the coordination of all public sector labour relations. These early years provided me an opportunity to work with the K-12 sector before joining the Ministry of Education in 2011 to lead the transition of the Teacher Regulation Branch into government. I was then recruited back to PSEC in 2012, becoming the CEO in 2015, where I remained until 2020 when I joined the Premier's Office. That experience provided me with insight and in-depth experience of the decision-making process of government and the vast and varied issues it needs to contend with on a day-to-day basis. I was then offered the opportunity to join the Ministry of Education and Child Care as Deputy Minister last January.



WHAT HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE AS DEPUTY MINISTER BEEN LIKE SO FAR?

From Day 1 it has been amazing – and what a time to start! Re-joining the Ministry at the height of the Omicron variant in January 2022, I was immediately impressed with the sector's experience, resilience, and compassion in supporting students and their families and in keeping our schools running as normally as possible. Having very few functional-related closures last year is a testament, in large part, to the excellent leadership and steady presence provided by our province's Principals and Vice-Principals. Thank you!

Every day I learn something new and feel like I have a better understanding of how this big and very complex K-12 education system of ours works. I still have lots to learn and am thankful for having such a strong team to help me. The relationships I'm building with partner groups, such as the BCPVPA, is also critical. I look to you and your members to keep me informed on the issues that are important to you. You are the front line, leading schools, connecting with parents, and supporting teachers and learners. That experience and perspective is vital to bring to our provincial tables.

WHAT ISSUES ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU IN THE YEAR OR YEARS AHEAD?

After two-plus years of pandemic disruptions, the time has come for us to put our efforts first and foremost back into the learning agenda. Our focus – once again – needs to be squarely on the needs of our students to ensure they are provided with the optimal conditions for learning and are on the path to a successful future.

There is a lot of work underway to make sure that happens. This includes the completion and implementation of the new K-12 Student Reporting Policy. The policy update is the result of extensive consultation and engagement with the education sector, including the BCPVPA. The redesigned provincial curriculum, introduced in 2016, requires a corresponding change to student reporting policies and practices. The framework (released in May 2022) provides an overview of the upcoming changes to the Student Reporting Policy, set to be implemented

in the 2023/24 school year. During the 2022/23 school year, a development team of teachers and school and district administrators will develop supporting documents and resources to help school administrators, teachers, parents, and caregivers, as well as students, understand the changes to student reporting and guide implementation processes. Policy implementation supports will be released to the sector in December 2022.

The Minister has also reconvened the Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment, comprised of rightsholders and sector partners, to provide advice as to how to continue to improve our provincial assessment system. This work will also ensure that our provincial assessments are well-aligned with the redesigned curriculum, advance equity, and meet the needs of all students, educators, parents, and administrators throughout the province.

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THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE HAS BEEN WORKING CLOSELY WITH PARTNERS AND RIGHTSHOLDERS TO FULFILL ITS COMMITMENTS IN THE *DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ACT ACTION PLAN*. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THIS?

The *Declaration Act Action Plan* identifies a number of important actions we need to take to advance meaningful reconciliation with our province's Indigenous Peoples. We take this work very seriously and are working closely with our partners and rightsholders to fulfill these commitments. This includes collaborating with the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) to develop an Indigenous-focused graduation requirement for all BC students. Set to come into effect next school year, this new requirement will deepen students' understanding of the cultures, histories, and worldviews of Indigenous peoples.

We are also working closely with FNESC to develop and implement a strategy and related policies to

support the negotiation and implementation of Local Education Agreements between First Nations and their local school districts. This is an important mechanism to increase accountability and to promote and achieve effective working relationships in support of First Nation students. We are also especially proud of recent legislation that gave four First Nations law-making authority over K-12 education in their jurisdictions. This includes responsibility for things like teacher certification, school certification, graduation requirements, curriculum, and course approvals. We look forward to more agreements like this in the future where First Nations who wish it can attain greater self-governance over the education of their students. This is just the tip of the iceberg of what we're working on with rightsholders and partners in this important area.

THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION RECENTLY EXPANDED TO INCLUDE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILD CARE. WHAT IMPLICATIONS DOES THIS HAVE FOR THE K-12 SECTOR?

This transition formally acknowledges that child care is an essential part of a child's learning journey, delivering important learning opportunities and supporting future educational success. It signifies our goal of ensuring BC's youth have a seamless transition into the K-12 system.

As the Ministry of Education and Child Care, we are committed to working with you to determine how we can improve access to child care for families, and to make the transition into schools easier for BC's kids. Though schools and school districts are not required to provide before and after school care under the School Act, we know that many have already embraced opportunities to provide this much-

needed service for families. We encourage schools and school districts to work with the providers in their communities, as well as with their municipalities and First Nations to uncover opportunities where they can work together to expand access to before and after school care on school grounds. We are here to support you in that important endeavour.

Each district will receive funding in 2022/23 to complete an environmental scan of existing Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) on school grounds and to engage across the district and with partners in search of opportunities for expanding ELCC on school grounds. We thank you for your leadership and important role in helping facilitate this work.

"THIS TRANSITION FORMALLY ACKNOWLEDGES THAT CHILD CARE IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF A CHILD'S LEARNING JOURNEY ..."

WHAT ELSE IS ON YOUR RADAR AS WE MOVE AHEAD?

One thing that is top of mind for me – and I know for all of you as school leaders – is how we respond to an extremely challenging labour market. Stats show that in any given month there are more job vacancies in Canada than there are people willing to fill them. And the BC education and child care sectors are certainly not immune to this problem: we are working with sector partners to better understand the context, and government is working to develop strategies to address key workforce challenges and labour market demands. Look for more information on that in the months ahead.

Another major challenge we're facing is a struggling global economy. Families are really feeling the pinch right now, and our government is doing what it can to help. The recent Student and Family Affordability Fund is a great example of that, with \$60 million being allocated to school districts to use at their discretion to support students and families in overcoming some of the economic hardships they face so students' learning is not adversely impacted. Thank you to the BCPVPA and its members for helping determine how to best utilize this funding in your schools.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH US?

Just a thank you for all you do in support of our province's students and their families. Your leadership in our schools is a critical element in kids' success and we greatly appreciate everything you do. Please continue to let us know what we can do to support you in your critical role as school leaders – we're here to help.



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