

2.3.4 British Columbia

British Columbia is the most westerly province in the country, and the largest and most populous of the Western Canadian provinces. The population of the province is 4,419,974 and a total area of just over 944,735 km² (Statistics Canada, 2009). This provides it with a population density of 4.7/km². The capital of the province is Victoria, and the metropolitan area has approximately 330,000. The largest city in the province is Vancouver, which is also the third largest in Canada, and the greater Vancouver region has approximately 2,300,000. If you exclude these two regions the population density drops to 2.1/km².

K-12 Online Learning

Category	Yes/No	Comments
Province-led programme	Yes	
Other online programmes	Yes	53 public & 12 independent
Provincial-level policy	Yes	School Act, Sections 3.1 & 75 (4.1) Distributed Learning Policy Independent School Act, Section 8.1

Online Programmes

The primary distance education programmes, or distributed learning schools (as they are referred to in the province), are at the district level. At present there are 53 public distributed learning schools and 12 independent (or private) distributed learning schools. LearnNowBC is a web portal and single point of entry to information about distributed (online) learning in British Columbia for students, parents and educators. This one-stop educational portal provides access to choices and free services such as tutoring, advising, homework help, etc. for learners of all ages. There is a searchable course database that lists courses from all 53 distributed learning schools. LearnNowBC.ca has signed-up over 50,000 users and many of the users have registered with one of the distributed learning schools for at least one online course.

Open School, previously supported with Ministry of Education funding and now operated on a cost-recovery model by another Ministry, provides provincial content and online hosting services to Boards without the capacity or desire to manage their own.

Provincial Policies

The legislative language in the *School Act, 1996* allows for a student engaged in distributed learning to enrol in educational programmes falling under multiple jurisdictions (or boards of education — see section 3.1 of the *School Act*), and that any school district wishing to establish a distributed learning school can do so “only with the prior agreement of the minister” (see section 75 (4.1) of the *School Act*). The *Independent School Act, 1996* contains similar language concerning the establishment of distributed learning schools “only with the prior agreement of the minister” (see section 8.1). As such, these agreements between the Ministry and the school districts or independent schools, combined with policy, serve as the main governance documents for distributed learning in British Columbia.

Funding

As was described in last year's report:

Funding for students in these distributed learning programmes comes from the province's allotted full-time enrolment (FTE) allocation. For Grade 10-12 students, each student's FTE is divided into eight components, with each course representing a component. If a student is enrolled in six courses in their brick-and-mortar school and two courses in their district's distributed learning program, then the school would receive six eighths of the FTE and the distributed learning programme would receive two eighths of that FTE. K-9 students, however, can only be enrolled in one school that receives the full FTE allocation. For the distributed learning programs, enrolment is counted three times throughout the year as a way to determine active attendance in the program. (Barbour & Stewart, 2008, p. 27)

This method of dividing the student FTE is combined with an open-borders model — where a student can enrol in any distributed learning programme in the province — as long as space is available if it is not the student's home school district. As such, the distributed learning programme receives the portion of the student's FTE based on their enrolment regardless of school district. There is no policy limit on the number of courses a student can take from a combination of schools, so a student taking eight courses in bricks-and-mortar and two courses through distributed learning would generate 1 FTE for the bricks-and-mortar school and 0.25 FTE for the distributed learning school.

Governance, Tracking, and Accountability

In addition to the distributed learning agreements between the Ministry and the individual school districts, the Ministry also has a series of policy documents that outline the regulations that distributed learning schools must follow. The key features of these regulations are:

- boards of education are responsible for distributed learning;
- boards must use BC certified teachers;
- students taking distributed learning must meet the same course requirements as any other student;
- courses taken through distributed learning are equivalent to the same course taken in a classroom; and
- students enrol at the school of their choice, not through the Ministry.

Links to all of the policy documents, along with the general agreements between the Ministry and school districts are available on the Ministry's website.

The Ministry tracks students enrolled in distributed learning programmes. In 2008-09, there were 59,345 unique students enrolled in one or more courses through distributed learning in British Columbia. In 2007-08 there were 48,941 students, up from 33,022 in 2006-07. The performance of these students — both in terms of individual course performance and graduation rates — is part of the quality reviews that the Ministry undertakes for quality assurance.

Quality Assurance, Teaching, and Curriculum

The responsibility for quality assurance falls upon the Ministry, which is undertaken through the use of compliance audits and quality review site visits that combine a series of quantitative and qualitative measures.

The audit programme checks for compliance with provincial funding rules (e.g., proof of attendance or participation) and other key statutory and policy provisions, such as:

- meeting provincial programme requirements (e.g., curriculum, graduation);
- residency;
- learning resources approved according to provincial policy, including ensuring that religious materials are not part of public programmes;
- teacher-led instruction rather than blatant home-schooling; and
- no financial incentives to parents to enroll.

All distributed learning schools in the province are subject to audits of this nature. At present approximately 6 distributed learning schools are audited every year. Poor audits have implications for the conditions of Distributed Learning Agreement renewal, apart from recovering enrolment grants. A detailed documentation of the criteria used for the 2008-09 audits is also available on the Ministry's website.

The quality review process is based on E-Learning Standards for Distributed Learning. The purpose of the Quality Review process is to foster improved quality in distributed learning practice while supporting implementation of Ministry legislation, policy, and DL Agreement requirements in K-12 schools. At its core is critical examination of instructional and leadership practices as reflected in the DL standards, research on practice, as well as new and emerging practices. Evaluative data such as student achievement results and responses to the DL Satisfaction Survey are also given critical consideration and reflection. The quality review model consists of three distinct parts:

1. Internal review conducted by all DL school staff as part of their annual planning,
2. An external review that validates the internal review through site visit by a team of DL practitioners, and
3. Sharing of emerging distributed learning instructional and leadership practices through an online community space and evolving practices document.

Finally, the selection of teachers and the creation of content is the responsibility of each individual distributed learning school, following the regulation set by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry has established digital content standards and through the LearnNowBC portal a learning resource repository for the sharing and exchange of commercially produced, and teacher-created, digital learning resources.