



British Columbia (BC)

Population: 5,214,805

Number of K-12 Schools: 1,945

Number of K-12 Students: ~667,000

Number of K-12 Distance Learning Programs: 71

Number of K-12 Distance Learning Students: 73,744

Governance and Regulation

Historically, the Ministry of Education had regulated distributed learning (i.e., a term used to include both distance and online learning) through legislative language in section 3.1 and section 75 (4.1) of the *School Act, 2006*, as well as section 8.1 of the *Independent School Act, 2006*. Both pieces of legislation contain similar language concerning the establishment of distributed learning schools “only with the prior agreement of the Minister” and ensuring that students may exercise their rights under legislation to choose distributed learning instruction within a coordinated province-wide distributed learning system. Districts and independent school authorities that entered into an agreement with the Ministry are required to meet a variety of criteria to be approved and funded.

A transformation of online learning delivery in the province began in 2018 with the appointment of an independent panel to review and provide recommendations to the way funding is allocated in the K-12 public education system. This process culminated in the passage of the *Education Statutes Amendment Act, 2020* or Bill 8 on March 4, 2020. Bill 8 changed distributed learning in the School Act and the Independent School Act in three key ways:

1. changed the term “distributed learning” to “online learning;”
2. enabled School Districts and Independent School Authorities to offer online learning courses and programs to some students without an agreement with the Minister
3. required online learning schools to have an agreement with the Minister in order to enrol students from outside their district boundary (i.e.: out-of-district enrolment) or to enrol students who are simultaneously enrolled with another board or independent school authority (i.e., cross enrolment). (Government of British Columbia, 2020)

Bill 8 was fully enacted on July 1, 2021 marking an “interim” year that began in 2021-22. The former distributed learning policies were replaced by interim online learning policies that will be in effect until June 30, 2023. The 68 online learning schools that held Minister’s Agreements under the distributed learning policy were issued interim Agreements for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. These schools may continue to cross enrol and/or register out of district students (while also serving local, in-District students) until April 30, 2023. In 2021-22, three public online learning schools closed, and three new District Online Learning Schools (DOLS) were established. These new schools did not require Minister’s Agreements.

In 2021-22, there were 21 public online learning schools operated by 18 boards and 16 independent online learning schools operated by 16 authorities selected to become Provincial Online Learning Schools. The Ministry continues to work with sector partners and Indigenous Rightsholders to develop a single, comprehensive online learning policy and procedures guide, a governance framework for provincial online learning schools, and an accountability and quality assurance framework and process for online learning.

These regulatory changes also include updates to the funding mechanism. Funding for online learning schools is somewhat different from traditional brick-and-mortar schools. In brick-and-mortar schools, full-time K-12 students are funded one time in September at 100% for a program of studies. In online learning schools, there are variations because online learning affords students options such as continuous and cross-enrolment. Another factor is the School of Record (SOR), which is the school at which a student is taking the majority of their courses. For example, with respect to online learning students:

Kindergarten-grade 7: have three funding opportunities depending on when the student meets eligibility requirements:

- September (30th): online learning schools receive 100% of per pupil funding
- February: online learning schools receive 50% of per pupil funding
- May: online learning schools receive 33% of per pupil funding.

Grades 8-9 (full-time): the SOR is funded as above

Grades 8-9 (cross-enrolled): the cross-enrolling online learning school (not SOR) is funded per enrolled online course(s) in July of the following year at the per course summer school rate.

Grades 10-12: funded per enrolled course and can receive 100% funding in September, February, or May.

During the 2021-22 school year, the basic allocation per student (i.e., full-time equivalent or FTE) attending a public brick-and-mortar school was \$7,885 vs. \$6,360 per public online learning student. Group 1 independent schools receive 50% of the public online learning per student amount (i.e., all independent online learning schools in the province have Group 1 Certification)

K-12 Distance and Online Learning Activity

The Ministry tracks student enrolment through the 1701 data collections that occur in September, February, and May. These collections show the schools attended along with the demographic characteristics of students, and programs provided to students. In 2021-22 there were a total of 71 online learning schools comprised of 55 district-level public distributed learning schools and 16 independent distributed learning schools that enrolled approximately 73,744 unique students in one or more courses.

In addition to programming provided by the 71 public and independent online learning schools, Open School BC also provided provincial content and online hosting services on a cost-recovery

model to school districts lacking the capacity or desire to manage their own distributed learning program. Finally, the Western Canadian Learning Network is a consortium of school districts providing online courses and digital resources for use by distributed learning schools in British Columbia, as well as Alberta and the Yukon.

K-12 Blended Learning Activity

As online learning is defined as primarily online and/or at a distance, there is implicit acknowledgement of the existence of blended learning in the province. Both online learning and in-person schools are able to offer blended programs. However, the Ministry of Education does gather data on separate blended learning program enrolment.

Remote Learning

Fall 2021 Reopening

Schools in British Columbia went back in-person for the 2021-22 school year. This plan did not include cohort learning groups or physical distancing, but did include mandatory masking. A distance learning model (or homeschooling option), either through the public school districts or independent online schools, was available to students who chose to stay home. However, these students would no longer be affiliated with their neighbourhood school. Students in grades 8-12 could still enrol in a school for in-person learning while taking some distance courses. Any actions due to health orders that might affect schools or school districts was left to the individual schools and districts, in conjunction with health officials, to implement any further health and safety restrictions (e.g., a return to remote learning). School programs (e.g., music and physical education, assemblies, and sports) continued with extra health and safety precautions (LaBonte et al., 2021).

2021-22 School Year

As the new school year progressed, school closures for COVID outbreaks continued and the province maintained its mask mandate for all indoor spaces for grade 4-12 students, later expanded to grades 1-3 October 4. The province relaxed capacity limits in most regions other than those with low vaccination and higher transmission rates. Schools remained open to in-person learning until the return to school from December holidays when, due to increasing community spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, school reopening was delayed until January 10, 2022, however schools were open January 4 as planned for children of essential workers and children with special needs. Schools used the time to implement enhanced safety plans and prepare for a possible return to remote learning given the community spread of the virus and potential staff shortages. February saw the gradual release of community restrictions across Canada and the BC government allowed the resumption of sport tournaments for children and youth while beginning the distribution of rapid antigen test kits on February 1. The mask requirement for everyone, including school students and staff, was relaxed on March 11 (LaBonte et al., 2022).

References

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