

The Mourning After: Critically Analyzing the BC Conservatives' Education Promises

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On October 24, 2026, the Conservative Party of British Columbia secured a majority government. The BC Conservatives—a phoenix that rose from the ashes of the BC Liberals in 2023—not only embrace the same harmful neoliberal education reforms pioneered by Gordon Campbell and Christy Clark between 2001 and 2017, but their [election manifesto](#) also features several socially conservative education policies that place already marginalized students, teachers, families, and communities at further risk. Therefore, in this paper, we critically analyze a brief selection of the education promises made explicit in the BC Conservatives' election manifesto. It is our hope that such a critique can inspire awareness, resistance, solidarity, and political action as we work to protect and sustain public education over the next four years of BC Conservative rule.

The BC Conservatives state: *“We will get education back to basics and teach literacy, mathematics and subject knowledge”* (p. 45).

We have not strayed from a “back to basics” approach. The current BC Curriculum explicitly states that [“The redesign of curriculum maintains a focus on sound foundations of literacy and numeracy.”](#) Therefore, the BC Conservatives' promise to “get education back to basics” demonstrates, at best, that they are unaware of what the BC Curriculum actually states. At worst, they are intentionally stoking fear and misinformation about what is being taught in schools in an attempt to fabricate a crisis that is, in turn, [used to justify curriculum reform and privatization](#).

We believe that literacy and numeracy are important. However, “back to basics” reforms are disingenuous because they are not concerned with robust and holistic engagements with literacy and numeracy. Instead, they are code for traditional, top-down, teacher-centered pedagogies; standardization; test-taking; memorization; reintroducing traditional values into schools; and defunding and eliminating subjects not considered “core” (including, for example, the arts).

This rhetoric also veils the ways that “the basics” are used as a code for aspects of education that align with dominant ideological views. It is a way to smuggle and naturalize ideological stances into public education under the guise of educational fundamentals. Yet, fundamentals like literacy and numeracy are always already tied to identity, ideology, and hegemony. “Back to basics” provides cover for value-laden curriculum and policy, and it simultaneously positions any curriculum outside of the “basics” as extraneous, unnecessary, and political—if not dangerous.

The BC Conservatives state: *“We will repeal SOGI 123”* (p. 45).

The repeal of SOGI 123 is a direct attack on 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, teachers, families, and communities. SOGI 123 recognizes the lived experiences, value, and human rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ people. By repealing it, the provincial government is ignoring provincial human rights legislation, undermining the rights of individuals protected in The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and undercutting the principles of public education. They are placating *the assertion of rights* being made by some traditional (religious) conservative parents at the expense of the *real enshrined rights* of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in public schools. As [cases surrounding the religious rights of parents in public schools have made clear](#), the rights of religious students are not undermined by the recognition and rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

The BC Conservatives claim that they will “instead address bullying directly.” The move toward generic anti-bullying language is purposeful. It offers the government cover because it gives them a policy they can point to as something they are doing to challenge homophobia and transphobia (even though generic policies do little), while simultaneously providing educators and school districts an out from actually recognizing the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Challenging anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric and violence demands a unique approach and resources—one already provided by SOGI 123—but BC Conservative MLAs’ acceptance and normalization of [homophobic, transphobic, and otherwise discriminatory bullying](#) does not inspire confidence regarding their ability to do so.

The election manifesto also states that “we will ... proudly fly our Canadian and BC flags at every school.” Although this statement may appear unrelated to the repeal of SOGI 123, the Alberta government [recently introduced similar legislation concerning flags](#) aimed to ensure schools remain “[politically neutral](#).” Neutrality is yet another term used by education reformers [to position certain curriculum as ideological, veil the way the status quo is political, and distract from all of the obvious ways that public schools take political stances all of the time](#). [Neutrality is neither possible nor desirable](#). It would be unconscionable for public schools to remain neutral about child trafficking, or slavery, or residential schools, or gender-based violence, or—and the list goes on. Specifically, Alberta’s legislation was used to ban pride flags under the guise of neutrality, thereby prohibiting an important way for students and teachers to recognize and celebrate queer identity in schools. Given the BC Conservatives’ dehumanizing rhetoric about 2SLGBTQIA+ people, as well as the manifesto’s emphasis on only flying the national and provincial flags, such anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislation may be soon to follow in BC.

The BC Conservatives state: *“We will increase parental transparency and choice, including access to curriculum materials, appropriate notification and opt-out rights”* (p. 44).

There are several keywords in this short statement that signal connections to right-wing ideologies and movements. First, [drawing on the fundamentally homophobic and](#)

[transphobic “parental rights” movement](#), using the language of “rights” is a rhetorical move that constructs a parent’s ability to opt their child out of sex education as inalienable and indisputable. However, public schools have a responsibility to deliver research-informed curriculum that advances children’s rights, human rights, and public health and safety. The [research clearly demonstrates that comprehensive sexual health education saves lives, reduces homophobic and transphobic violence, lessens gender-based discrimination, and helps students understand how to foster healthy relationships](#).

Moreover, public schools have a responsibility to uphold children’s rights, not fuel a narrative about the legality of boundless “parental rights.” While genuine queries from parents and guardians about school curriculum and classroom pedagogy are a welcome and expected part of public education, there are undeniably limits on how private parental values can be accommodated in public education. Schools cannot curate curriculum to mirror the values of individual parents, especially when those values conflict with The Charter, human rights legislation in the province, and UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which Canada ratified in 1991. Curating curriculum to align with parental values is not only unfeasible, but it denies children and youth their rights as individuals. The UNCRC recognizes a child’s right to education, access to health information, and protection from harm and abuse. By permitting parental opt outs, the BC Conservatives are denying children these rights, making them more vulnerable to abuse and creating risks for other children.

Second, the language of “choice” positions parents as consumers who have the [“right” to choose what type of school is best for their child](#), whether public or private. Yet, [choice is not equally accessible to all families](#), which exacerbates inequities between those who have the necessary resources to choose and those who do not. School choice is aptly named because it is also the schools that choose the students. Unlike public schools, private schools are licensed to discriminate against students based on factors such as disability, gender, religious affiliation, or scholarly ability. “Choice” also positions schools in competition with one another since they now have to compete for student-customers, thereby remaking public education in the image of the corporate world. Because the BC Conservatives believe in parental choice, it can also be assumed that they will [continue to provide \(if not increase\) public funding for private schools](#).

Third, that the BC Conservatives “will increase parental transparency and ... access to curriculum materials” once again stokes fear that teachers are somehow hiding what they teach. Notably, [all BC Curriculum documents are fully accessible online, teachers are required to report to parents about their child’s learning at least five times per year, and parents are always welcome to connect personally with their child’s teacher](#). With the increased use of digital technologies in schools, communication and transparency has never been clearer. But the BC Conservatives use these claims to increase suspicion about public education and public school teachers in order to mobilize and rationalize school choice. In the US, where they are much further along the line of choice, parents have been left holding the bag; inequity has increased, and the repercussions of unregulated schools and uncertified teachers have resulted in consequences for student learning and safety.

The BC Conservatives state: *“We will restore academic standards ... and bring back consistent, supervised, curriculum-based provincial examinations to raise standards”* (p. 44).

Standardized exams cannot raise standards, nor do they increase the quality of education. As their name implies, they merely test students on a narrow set of predefined topics. Advocates for provincial or standardized exams position them as valid indicators of achievement despite evidence to the contrary. They are invested in exams because they offer an easy way to measure and rank students in ways that have nothing to do with the broader purpose of public education. They are an indicator not of learning, but of socio-economic status and cultural capital.

Conversely, standardized exams have several negative consequences. First, data from standardized tests are often (mis)used by [right-wing groups and think-tanks to once again manufacture a crisis about public education](#), which is then used to justify privatization. Second, with standardized exams, “teaching to the test” becomes the default pedagogical mode, which is inherently deprofessionalizing because it erodes professional autonomy and subject expertise. As a result—and echoing the “back-to-basics” approach—teachers are positioned merely as technicians who, under the disciplinary gaze of their employers, [are only allowed to deposit pre-approved facts and knowledge into the minds of their students](#). Consequently, teaching potentially “controversial” topics puts teachers at risk. Third, standardized exams perpetuate the flawed neoliberal logic of accountability, wherein [student test scores are directly tied to teacher competency](#). Within this model of accountability, poor student achievement is understood as the outcome of poor teaching rather than as a result of systemic inequities, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of supports, and the chronic underfunding of public education.

The BC Conservatives state: *“We will restore pathways into trades and work: bring back shop classes”* (p. 44).

For decades, [economic prosperity has been public education’s *raison d’être* in BC](#), and students have been consistently subordinated to the provincial economy. This reality is no different in the BC Conservatives’ election manifesto. For example, the rhetoric of “bring back shop classes” signals an even greater return to linking the purpose of public education to the economy. To be clear, Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies (ADST) courses are meaningful and allow students the opportunity to build, create, and explore in tangible ways. However, reduced merely to “shop classes,” they represent an essential aspect of the school-to-work pipeline that neoliberal governments love.

With the manifesto’s fundamental emphasis on public education being about skills and job training, students in BC are only understood in economic terms, such as employees, workers, apprentices, or entrepreneurs. Consequently, the BC Conservatives only value students for their future potential economic contributions; anything outside of this economic realm has little to no value.

Finally, ADST classes never disappeared and are an integral part of current BC school programming. This once again demonstrates that the BC Conservatives are either ignorant of what is going on in schools today, or they are engaging in a disinformation campaign in their effort to lay the groundwork for sweeping education reforms that further link the purpose of public education to the economy.

Conclusion

This is just a small selection of the many problematic plans and promises the BC Conservatives made explicit within their election manifesto. We also have many concerns about what is absent from their plans for education. Moreover, we would be naïve to think that the BC Conservatives will limit their vision of education to what they were willing to say out loud before the election. Yet, we can learn from various education reforms and policies enacted by conservative parties in other provinces.

In particular, the Conservative government in Ontario is currently in the process of [taking over democratically elected school boards](#), thereby centralizing control and undoing local democracy. In 2025, the United Conservative Party in Alberta [used the Canadian Charter’s notwithstanding clause](#) as a political weapon several times, including to force teachers back to work as well as to police, surveil, and limit transgender students’ use of preferred names and pronouns, participation in sports, and access to gender-affirming health care. Similarly, in 2023, the right-wing Saskatchewan Party [used the notwithstanding clause](#) to pass the “Parents’ Bill of Rights,” legislation which targets and potentially outs trans and gender-diverse youth through name and pronoun policies.

Without providing any justification or support, the BC Conservatives claim that “we are slipping in education” (p. 43), thereby using the tired playbook of manufacturing a crisis in order to rationalize significant reforms to the public education system. Although we do not yet know exactly how the BC Conservatives will reform education throughout the next four years, it is likely that the changes will have harmful consequences for students, teachers, families, and communities across the province. The next provincial election is scheduled for October 19, 2030. Until then, we must remain vigilant, embrace resistance, reject despair, foster solidarity, and practice hope as we continually work toward a future where public education is equitable, justice-oriented, and accessible to all.

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Note: No generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the development, writing, or editing of this paper.