

Professional Autonomy Lens

Professional Issues Advisory Committee (PIAC)

Professional Autonomy—Introduction

“Autonomy refers to thinking for oneself in uncertain and complex situations in which judgment is more important than routine. For teachers, the nature of their work and its social context complicates this definition. Teaching involves placing one’s autonomy at the service of the best interests of children.”—Anne Phelan and Alice Pitt.¹

The purpose of this document is to support teachers in being consciously reflective of their professional autonomy as well as their rights and responsibilities as a teacher. Development of this document articulates some best practices identified by PIAC on the following topics:

- the value and purpose of public education
- the meaning, importance, and practice of teachers’ professional autonomy
- professional autonomy in terms of collective agreements and bargaining
- professional autonomy as it relates to the union’s priorities and commitments to reconciliation, solidarity, and social justice.

¹ Phelan, A., & Pitt, A. (2008). “Paradoxes of Autonomy in Professional Life: A Research Problem,” *Changing English*, Vol. 15, No. 2, p. 189–190.

Professional Autonomy

Professionalism as a teacher

- Teachers' professionalism relates to the following: their knowledge of the standards of practice, openness to change, commitment to wellness, contributions to the profession, pedagogical and practical knowledge, professional relationships and chosen commitments beyond the classroom.

Professional autonomy in the profession

- Professional autonomy is the freedom for teachers to exercise their professional judgment to meet the diverse needs of students, determine their pedagogical approach, and decide the instructional and assessment strategies to deliver the curriculum. Such teaching decisions should be made thoughtfully and with consideration for their formal training, the professional standards, their colleagues, and their knowledge of their students.
- Professional autonomy lies within the boundaries of the local collective agreement, local policies and procedures, school district by-laws and policies, BCTF Code of Ethics, BC Teaching Standards, *the School Act*, Ministerial Orders, *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA)*, and the *BC Human Rights Code*.

Professional autonomy as it relates to professional development

- Professional autonomy is the freedom for teachers to choose professional development that will best support them to meet the diverse needs of students and to implement the curriculum within their collective agreement as well as their district and local union policies and procedures.

Professional autonomy as an employee

- As professional autonomy language varies with each local collective agreement, teachers, are subject to reasonable direction by the employer within its confines. If members believe they have received a direction from their administrator that is contrary to their professional autonomy rights, they should contact their local union for advice.

Principles of Professionalism

Authority and trust

- Teachers' professional autonomy ensures the independence of the teaching profession, and, in turn, teachers are entrusted to serve the public interest through the provision of public education.

Duty and purpose

- Teachers' professional autonomy enables teachers ethically to fulfil the duty of providing students with equitable access to public education.

Responsibility and rights

- Teachers' professional autonomy supports teachers to ensure that the educational needs and rights of students are provided.

Diversity and universality

- Teachers' professional autonomy respects the diverse needs of students and communities while ensuring access to universal public education.

Professional Autonomy—Foundations

Union of professionals

- Professional autonomy is individual action grounded in collective responsibility.

Recognition of the profession

- The public recognizes the value of teachers as professionals and supports the profession because of the benefits they collectively provide to the public.

Collective bargaining rights

- Through collective bargaining, teaching and learning conditions are protected in ways that enhance teachers' professional autonomy in support of public education.

Public education system

- Teachers' professional autonomy both stems from and animates the public education system.

Professional Autonomy

Foundations



Teachers' Professional Autonomy Discussion Questions

<p>Principles and values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How am I supporting the values of equity, diversity, respect, dignity, integrity, and inclusion? • How am I supporting student learning and well-being? • How am I supporting my own and my colleagues' well-being? • How do I recognize being part of a collective? 	<p>Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the needs, rights, and interests of students reflected in my professional practice? • What support and agency do I have in student assessment and evaluation? • How am I able to foster a work-life balance?
<p>Responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How am I demonstrating professionalism with other members in building a community of practice? • How am I respecting individual differences of colleagues and students, advancing pluralism, and abiding by the local collective agreement, local policies and procedures, school district by-laws and policies, BCTF Code of Ethics, BC Teaching Standards, <i>the School Act</i>, Ministerial Orders, <i>Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA)</i>, and the <i>BC Human Rights Code</i>? • How am I collaborating with other professionals to support teaching and learning of the provincial core and curricular competencies? 	<p>Professional development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is this activity voluntarily chosen following the language of the local collective agreement? • How does this activity help me improve my professional practice? • How does this activity support my colleagues and their professional autonomy?

“Whatever the limits and travails we face, we want to retain the autonomy—the freedom to be the authors of our lives. This is the very marrow of being human.” - Atul Gawande²

² Gawande, A. (2014). *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Toronto: Doubleday.

Statutes and Regulations

In addition to the provincial and local collective agreements, the BCTF Code of Ethics, the BCTF *Members' Guide*, and relevant arbitration cases, teachers must also comply with the following statutes and regulations:

Teachers Act

School Act (Part 3–School Personnel)

17(1) A teacher's responsibilities include designing, supervising, and assessing education programs and instructing, assessing and evaluating individual students and groups of students.

School Act–School Regulation

4(1) The duties of a teacher include the following:

- (a) providing teaching and other educational services, including advice and instructional assistance, to the students assigned to the teacher, as required or assigned by the board or the minister;
- (b) providing such assistance as the board or principal considers necessary for the supervision on school premises and at school functions, whenever and wherever held;
- (c) ensuring that students understand and comply with the codes of conduct governing their behaviour and with the rules and policies governing the operation of the school;
- (d) assisting to provide programs to promote students' intellectual development, human and social development and career development;
- (e) maintaining the records required by the minister, the board and the school principal;
- (f) encouraging the regular attendance of students assigned to the teacher;
- (g.1) evaluating each student's intellectual development, human and social development and career development, including, as required by the minister, administering and grading Required Graduation Program Examinations;
- (h) providing the information in respect to students assigned to the teacher as required by the minister, board or, subject to the approval of the board, by a parent;
- (j) regularly providing the parents or guardians of a student with reports in respect of the student's school progress;
- (k) attending all meetings or conferences called by the principal or superintendent of schools for the district to discuss matters the principal or superintendent of schools considers necessary unless excused from attending the meeting or conference by the principal or superintendent of schools;

(l) admitting to their classroom, to observe and practice teaching, student teachers enrolled in a university established under the *University Act* or in an institution for training teachers established under any other Act, and rendering the assistance to the student teachers, and submitting the reports on their teaching ability or on other matters relating to them or to their work, considered necessary for the training of teachers by the university or institution.

BC Human Rights Code

Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA)

Relevant orders regarding reporting

- Individual Education Plan Order
- Student Learning Assessment Order
- Student Progress Report Order

Ministerial and district policies

- BC Graduation Program: Handbook of Procedures Grades 10 to 12
- Professional Standards for BC Educators

BCTF Documents

The following BCTF documents provide professional autonomy policies for members:

BCTF Code of Ethics

BCTF Members' Guide

Education Policy

9.A.17—Assessment/Evaluation/Reporting

7. That the BCTF supports the professional autonomy of the member in assessing, evaluating and reporting the progress of students. (1994 AGM)

9.A.24—That the BCTF advocate and support planned and responsible approaches to the implementation of change in education policies, practices, and curriculum.

Specifically, implementation should adhere to the following principles:

Professional autonomy—The implementation recognizes the diverse talents, interests, and experiences of teachers. Members can adapt and implement change in a variety of ways. (89 AGM, pp. 13–15) (14 AGM, pp. 26–27)

9.A.52—That members not participate in any action or decision on educational matters that may impinge on the professional autonomy of any teacher; that school staff decisions may not compel the pedagogical practice of any teacher. (09 AGM, p. 11)

9.A.54—That the BCTF insist that the provincial government recognize teacher professional autonomy in the use of marks programs of their own choice for assessing students and reporting to parents. (09 AGM, p. 12)

9.B.13—Educational Leadership

4. That the BCTF and its locals continue to be advocates for professional autonomy that encourages members to be involved in innovative teaching practices. (May 94 RA)

Goals of the BCTF

11.01—Goals of the BCTF:

9. To ensure, through the development of democratic processes, professional autonomy for teachers and protection from capricious or malicious action, unjust regulations and the abuse of authority. (74 AGM, pp. 53-54) (May 80 RA, p. 16)

Professional Development

30.A.03—That the BCTF perspective of professional development may include:

1. advocacy for professional autonomy.
2. advocacy for the rights and responsibilities of members.
3. advocacy on social justice issues.
4. advocacy for public education.
5. ongoing examination of the purposes of public education.
6. workshops, seminars, conferences, and action research.
7. teacher inquiry, mentorship, and others. (Jun 06 RA, p. 8) (Jan 10 RA, p. 10)

30.A.17—Members of the BCTF have the right to five professional development days within the school year book ends of the first working day after Labour Day, and the last Friday of June, and have the professional autonomy to plan those days. (Nov 84 RA, p. 3) (Jan 06 RA, p. 12)

Technology

51.C.03—That the professional autonomy of teachers includes deciding on whether using information and communications technology is the most appropriate method of communication with parents. (01 AGM, p. 43)

51.F.03 (MyEDBC)

6. That beyond providing a narrow range of information on students (as defined in 3. above), the use of any particular technology or software to maintain a teacher's records on students should be determined by a teacher as an element of professional autonomy. (May 09 RA, p. 16)

Arbitration Cases

The following cases highlight selected arbitration awards and Labour Relations Board decisions discussing teacher professional autonomy:

Case 1: *British Columbia Teachers' Federation v. British Columbia Public Employers' Assn.*, [\[2009\] B.C.C.A.A. No. 115 \(Dorsey\)](#).

- Arbitrator Dorsey: “An essential element of individual professional autonomy is teachers having the assurance they are free to exercise professional judgement in teaching students assigned to them. This professional judgement is a critical element of the quality of public education.”
- However, “teachers do not have unfettered discretion to comply with or refuse to comply with employer policies or directions on all matters that relate to teachers’ duties and responsibilities.”
- Teachers are employees and operate within a system in which legislation, regulation, policies, and collective agreement language all intersect.

Case 2: *British Columbia Public School Employers' Assn. v. British Columbia Teachers' Federation*, [2020 CanLII 89915 \(BC LA\)](#).

- Arbitrator Hall noted the employer accepted the four propositions of professional autonomy articulated by the union:
 - Autonomy to determine when assessment is appropriate for each student
 - Responsibility to fairly and accurately assess students and ensure integrity of process
 - Responsibility to provide accurate reports
 - Right to consultation prior to administrative action that interferes with teacher professional autonomy.
- A teacher’s right to professional autonomy implicitly requires employers to recognize the independent judgement of teachers and not take steps which undermine the teacher’s authority or reputation, such as removing students in response to parent or student complaints, instead of discussing this with the teacher and allowing the teacher to address the concern.
- However, “teachers have a commensurate obligation to engage collaboratively and professionally with their principals in order to resolve outstanding differences, and that they should not be ‘hypersensitive’ to legitimate inquiries from their principals.”

Resources

Assiniboine South Teachers' Association of the Manitoba Teachers' Society v. Assiniboine South School Division No. 3, 1997. CanLII 22661 (MB LA), <https://canlii.ca/t/hpdr>, retrieved on 17.02.2022.

British Columbia Public School Employers' Association (School District No. 73 Kamloops/Thompson) v. British Columbia Teachers' Federation (Kamloops Thompson Teachers' Association), 2020. CanLII 89915 (BC LA), <https://canlii.ca/t/jbp8p>, retrieved on 17.02.2022.

British Columbia Public School Employers' Association v. British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2013. CanLII 104965 (BC LA), <https://canlii.ca/t/hpc61>, retrieved on 17.02.2022.

British Columbia School Employers Association, School district No. 73 v. British Columbia Teachers Federation, 2011. CanLII 22936 (BC LA), <https://canlii.ca/t/fkl1h>, retrieved on 17.02.2022.

British Columbia Public School Employers' Association v. School District No. 36 (Surrey), 2002. CanLII 52797 (BC LRB), <https://canlii.ca/t/20s16>, retrieved on 17.02.2022.

British Columbia Public School Employers' Association v. British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2001. CanLII 32918 (BC LRB), <https://canlii.ca/t/25z04>, retrieved on 17.02.2022.

Clarke, P., & Trask, R. (2014). Teachers' Freedom of Expression: A Shifting Landscape—Part Two—Curricular Speech to Students and Recent Developments. *Education and Law Journal* 23(2), 85-120.

Tessler v. British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 2005. CanLII 1031 (BC LRB), <https://canlii.ca/t/1jm37>, retrieved on 17.02.2022.