



Briefing Note (for information)

To: CUPE and other Support Staff Unions in K-12
From: John Malcolmson, CUPE Research Representative, K-12 Sector
Date: March 16, 2010
Subject: Shared Services in the K-12 Sector

Introduction

BC's 2010 Budget contains numerous references to government initiatives on the "shared services front". The purpose of this briefing note is to explain the concept in greater detail, and to examine its concrete implications for the K-12 education sector.

Broadly speaking, "shared services" is a concept referring to administrative actions and changes which look to create greater financial efficiencies in the way public services are delivered. Within K-12 education, the concept is sometimes confused with the idea of school district amalgamation. District amalgamation refers to the merging of two or more school district entities into a single larger district entity. Shared services, on the other hand, looks to changing the way existing structures administer public services without necessarily changing the overall character of these structures.

BC's 2010 budget makes no reference to planned amalgamation of BC school districts. This would suggest that a push to further amalgamate BC districts is not in the cards, at least for the coming fiscal year. The Budget does, however, have much to say about plans for shared services, although none of this is directly targeted to public school education.

Share services within the provincial government

The fiscal plan included as part of the Budget documentation includes provision for the government to realize net savings of \$59 million over next three years fiscal years, through re-organization of leasing arrangements and space management, and through changes to information technology services. This work is being spearheaded by Shared Services BC, an agency located within the Ministry of Citizen's Services. The Budget describes a plan to centralize within Shared Services BC responsibility that currently reside within individual government ministries. The agency's website (www.sharedservicesbc.gov.bc.ca/) offers the follow description of its mandate.

“ Shared Services BC supports government as the lead agency for procuring and supplying the technology, accommodation, products and services required by government and the broader public sector to provide services to the people of British Columbia.”

Specific areas of Shared Services BC focus are described below (paraphrased from information found on the agency's website).

- Technology - Information Technology (IT) infrastructure support services for the B.C. government and the broader public sector. These include: data centre services, desktop support and service desks, voice and data networks, electronic messaging and directories, applications and service integration, and security/virus protection.
- Office space – Accommodation and real estate services to ministries and the broader public sector. Also management, on behalf of the BC Government, of a diverse real estate portfolio of leased and government owned properties.
- Purchasing – Provides a corporate solution to accounting services and infrastructure by managing the production, maintenance and development of the corporate financial accounting and financial management applications for ministries, and provides the official financial book of record for government.
- Payroll – Provides payroll and human resource information systems services serving over 30,000 employees in a wide variety of public sector clients at locations throughout British Columbia.
- Accounting – Provides a corporate solution to accounting services and infrastructure by managing the production, maintenance and development of the corporate financial accounting and financial management applications for ministries, and provides the official financial book of record for government.

Shared services in the K-12 sector

While the 2010 budget was silent on any shared services plan for K-12, the concept does have relevance to public school education in the province. At this time, the only tangible shared services connection into the K-12 sector has been BCeSIS, although that may change in the future given the broad mandate and increased organization role currently given to Shared Services BC.

BCeSIS stands for BC electronic Student Information System and represents the development and implementation of a common student data system throughout all of the province's 60 school districts and single educational authority. Work on this initiative started in since 2004 and has gained major momentum over the past three years. While there have been issues related to training for and implementation of BCeSIS, support staff within the K-12 sector report few significant problems with the system. On the other hand, BCeSIS has provoked a stronger reaction from teachers and the BCTF who see the system as creating additional data entry workload demands on teachers already facing major under-resourcing challenges in classrooms.

The 2010 budget makes no direct reference to any further shared services work in the K-12 system. However, it can be expected that, given the overall mandate of Shared Services BC to seek greater efficiencies across the spectrum of provincial public services, K-12 will likely see a future shared services push that could impact areas such as school district procurement or payroll systems.

Indeed, it is known that the Ministry of Education is currently researching the applicability of an Integrated Business Administration System (IBAS) aimed at standardizing payroll operations across BC's 60 school districts. In addition to achieving a higher level of cross-district standardization, IBAS holds out the promise of a "just-in-time" system of funding disbursement to boards of education, one that may close off the possibility of boards earning interest revenue on short-term deposits of allocation monies with financial institutions.

The IBAS concept is currently being floated as an idea. It would face a difficult implementation if a decision is made to proceed. There are currently 50+ support staff collective agreements whose endlessly varying provisions would make development of a common "shared services" payroll system across the province's school districts especially challenging. Variances that exist with respect to teacher agreements and the employment contracts used with administrative and exempt staff would also serve to complicate implementation.

Issues of concern

- As suggested, shared services is not the same as school district amalgamation. This being said, shared services does hold some worrying implications for the K-12 sector and the employment of support staff within this sector.

- There is significant future shared services potential in K-12 in areas such as procurement and payroll. CUPE and its locals will have to work to ensure that any shared services plan does not impact the K-12 system negatively or have a deleterious effect on support staff jobs and services in areas that stand to be affected.
- The implementation of a future K-12 shared services plan could also be a precursor to privatization of support and ancillary services, especially given the technology focus of current shared services work at the provincial level and in other jurisdictions. CUPE along with its local unions in the K-12 will have to maintain heightened vigilance for any signs of movement in this direction.

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