



Open School BC: Celebrating 100 Years of Learning



Founded in 1919 as the British Columbia Elementary Correspondence School, Open School BC first offered printed courses to students in rural settings. 100 years later, Open School BC offers online courses, educational services and resources for both public and independent schools, as well as the public sector.

Filling a Need

B.C.'s correspondence school was born out of necessity. In 1918, a farmer named Samuel W. Spetch, fearing that his children would suffer from a lack of schooling, petitioned the government of the day:

“Dear Sir, we live in an outlandish place known as Pemberton Portage [where] there are not sufficient children to call for a school, none but ours at school age. Would it be possible to form a correspondence school for such cases as ours? I think you would secure the gratitude of a good many parents.” – Letter to B.C. Premier John Oliver from S.W. Spetch, 1918

Despite initial refusals, Spetch persisted until the Minister of Education relented and created a correspondence program for children like Spetch's. Based on a similar course already running for coal miners, B.C.'s correspondence school was only the second such program in the world.



By September 1919, 86 students were enrolled in the correspondence program, including 13 children of lighthouse keepers. The program took off from there. By 1929, they were serving 600 pupils and had begun offering high school courses. Courses were also made available to adult learners, and to new Canadians. During the Depression, free correspondence courses were offered to any citizen who could not afford an education, and after World War II, courses were provided to soldiers returning from service.

Transitions

For its first fifty years, the correspondence school was operated as a branch within the Ministry of Education. It went through many iterations, finally merging the Elementary and High School (Secondary) Correspondence branches in 1969 to become the Division of Correspondence Education.

Despite the wide distances that the school covered, the staff and instructors were invested in promoting a school culture that connected students across the miles. The elementary branch created the *ECS Round Up* magazine, while the high school program launched a magazine called *The Torch* in the 1940s. These magazines helped the school community share stories, celebrate achievements, pass on news and showcase student artwork and photographs.



The correspondence school was responsive to the events of the day, creating special courses to commemorate the Canadian and provincial centennials: *The Realm of Canada* course was introduced in 1967, while *British Columbia – Canada's Pacific Province* was released in 1971.

Decentralization

In 1984, B.C.'s correspondence programs began to decentralize. Based in Victoria, the programs were heavily reliant on the mail system, which often took a long time to traverse the province. The first regional school was successfully piloted in Fort St. John, leading to the establishment of nine Regional Correspondence Schools by 1990.



Over the next ten years, the organization had many names including the Education Technology Centre, the Technology and Distance Education Branch, and finally, in 1997, when it joined the Open Learning Agency, was renamed the Open School. In 2003, Open School was acquired by the Queen's Printer to work as a partial cost recovery business unit within government and became Open School BC.

Modern Open School BC



Moving beyond the boundaries of traditional correspondence education, Open School BC brought talent and versatility to the creation of more than 35 secondary resources and 18 primary courses in ten years. Open School BC launched and managed a variety of Learning Management Systems, including WebCT, Blackboard and Moodle. In addition to working in the K-12 system, OSBC widened its scope, working with other government agencies to create public sector courses for provincial employees. OSBC now has more than 45 public courses and resources in its portfolio.

Coming full circle, Open School BC returned to the Ministry of Education in 2010, where it continues to lead the way in content development and educational services.

Explore the Archives



Interested in learning more? Open School BC invites you to explore with them as they dip into their archives and bring you stories and pictures from its history. Visit Open School BC's 100 years website at www.openschool.bc.ca/100years. Here's to another century of learning!