

# Associations Meet with Minister Abbott

By Errin Morrison.

## Meeting with Minister

On Thursday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011 representatives of the BC Library Association (BCLA), the BC Library Trustees Association (BCLTA) and the Association of BC Public Library Directors (ABCPLD) met with Education Minister George Abbott to welcome him back to the Ministry of Education and the public library portfolio, to re-introduce our associations, and to discuss some of the priority issues, concerns and developments in the public library sector.

## Minister Abbott's Vision for Libraries

BCLTA President Ivan Idzan opened the meeting by asking Minister Abbott about his vision for B.C.'s public libraries. Minister Abbott began by stating that he is a big fan of libraries and does a lot of reading. In terms of his vision for public libraries, he is interested in breaking down barriers between public, school and other types of libraries and favours seamlessness in library service. He approves of the trend toward providing library services in conjunction with other community facilities, such as school and recreation centres and would love to see more partnerships between the K-12 and public library sectors in particular.

Minister Abbott acknowledged that there are sometimes barriers to co-location and partnerships and that he would appreciate hearing from the library community about structural or systemic issues getting in the way of partnering. Minister Abbott added that he believes momentum builds through success stories and Assistant Deputy Minister Paige MacFarlane noted that the Ministry would be happy to share stories and examples of innovative and inspiring approaches to library partnership.

## Stable Funding for Libraries

Ivan Idzan expressed thanks for the Ministry's strong leadership and continued support of public libraries, particularly the invaluable services provided by Libraries and Literacy. Minister Abbott responded by acknowledging the recent financial challenges government has faced – the worst of which are hopefully behind us – and stating that he hopes government can at least offer stability of funding to libraries in the future. The Minister also mentioned he would like to maintain stable funding for literacy

initiatives through Decoda Literacy Solutions, literacy being a continued priority of government.

## Value of Public Library Services

Michelle Wong provided the Minister with a handout detailing the excellent value of public library services for dollars spent and the significant contributions made by libraries to the provincial economy. She noted that library usage is increasing and that libraries are becoming even more relevant as they adapt and keep pace with technological advances. She advised that B.C. public library electronic collections are the highest in Canada and in fact account for more than two thirds of the total electronic holdings nationwide. She also stressed the important role the Ministry has played in facilitating success in the electronic realm through the provincial Strategic Plan for Public Libraries. Michelle ended with the observation that, in addition to providing a wide variety of electronic resources and access points, the library is playing an increasingly important role as a community hub and gathering place for British Columbians – providing space to congregate, study, read, learn and access valuable programs and services. Michelle closed with the message that public libraries have always been very good at partnering with other agencies and groups to deliver community services, which the Minister acknowledged to be true.

## Provincial Funding and Equity of Access

Lynne Russell brought greetings from ABCPLD and stressed the importance of provincial funding in ensuring equity of access to library services throughout the province. She reflected on the days before province-wide resource sharing initiatives among library systems and noted the great strides that have been made in ensuring all British Columbians – no matter where they live – have equal access to library materials and resources. Lynne made special mention of the provincial OneCard initiative, which enables library users from anywhere in B.C. to borrow and return materials wherever they happen to be in the province. Rob O'Brennan added that, along with OneCard, the Sitka and PLOT library website initiatives supported by Libraries and Literacy are valuable provincial contributions to B.C.'s public library sector which help to level the playing field between small and large systems.

In considering the seamless service provided through BC OneCard, Minister Abbott inquired as to whether or not the group felt that school libraries and university libraries might also merge their lending into this program in the future. Lynne and Rob noted that although this might be a possibility down the road, this kind of partnership arrangement would have to be determined on a case-by-case basis. Suitable collaboration for some libraries may not be suitable for others.

### Services to Children and Vulnerable Populations

BCLA President Christopher Kevlahan spoke next on the topic of children's services and drew attention to the very valuable pre-literacy programs on offer at public libraries, as well as the highly successful Summer Reading Club, and the close partnerships between public libraries and the K-12 school system in supporting and fostering literacy. Christopher went on to discuss the progression of literacy services, noting that there are programs available to people of all ages and reading levels at the library.

Minister Abbott expressed strong support for early childhood services and made special mention of the value of services available to vulnerable populations struggling with literacy and numeracy. He inquired as to any partnerships, pilot projects, or programs available to assist B.C.'s most vulnerable young people. Christopher stressed that close collaboration between schools and libraries exists from the earliest grades up, and Lynne Russell noted the success of programs such as "Reading Buddies," which partners teens with young children needing assistance with their reading. Michelle Wong noted that other vulnerable populations are also well served by the public library and gave the example of the much-loved Greater Victoria Public Library bookmobile service, which lends materials to homeless and at-risk people, with no requirement to provide identification or proof of address. Michelle confirmed the public

library system's commitment to serving vulnerable populations of all kinds. Minister Abbott thanked the group for this input and encouraged the associations to give some thought to how public libraries could work with the Ministry of Education to better reach and serve vulnerable and at-risk populations.

### Information and Technological Literacy

Lynne Russell and Rob O'Brennan provided the Minister with further details on literacy initiatives for adults and expanded this to include the library's role in teaching information literacy and technological literacy – including computing basics, email use, etc. – to those who experience technology as a barrier to employment and other opportunities in today's society. Through funding and assistance provided in part by provincial equity grants, libraries are helping to address this new digital divide – that is, to assist people who are marginalized through their lack of technological skills and ability. Rob gave the example of the Fraser Valley Regional Library's new travelling van which goes to high-traffic locations such as community centres to teach literacy and technology skills.

### Partnerships and Working Together

Minister Abbott thanked the delegation for its time and commended the public library community for its efforts on behalf of British Columbians. He encouraged the attendees to think about what more the Province can do to assist libraries and stressed the importance of the Ministry's focus on personalized learning in the Ministry of Education Service Plan. He ended with a request that the associations provide their input and thoughts on library partnerships, which remain a key Ministry priority.

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