

More CanCon? More or less

B.C.'s new law mandating CanLit in the classroom is having little impact

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It was supposed to be a major step forward. Last summer, the B.C. Ministry of Education passed a new curriculum requirement mandating all Grade 8 to 12 language-arts courses to include at least one "significant" (i.e., full-length) Canadian text. The guideline was to take effect immediately. One fall school term later, though, B.C.'s CanLit quota looks to be largely symbolic: most B.C. teachers say their class work and reading lists have been modified little, if at all. "It's not a tremendous change," says Bal Panesar, English department head at Vancouver's Eric Hamber Secondary. "At Hamber, we do teach Canadian literature. It's part and parcel of what we do."

Like Panesar, many of the province's educators say they already highlight Canadian work. "It's something we've been doing all along," says Mara Brkich, head of the English department at Alpha Secondary School in Burnaby. In fact, all teachers contacted by Q&Q say they regularly teach books by writers ranging from Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, and Al Purdy to Joseph Boyden, Lee Maracle, and Gary Gottfriedson.

Even if some English programs in the province are light on Canadian content, the new guideline alone may not change that. That's because it wasn't backed with additional funding earmarked for new copies of Canadian books. "Teachers, to a certain extent, are constrained by what they have in their book rooms," says Iain Fisher, an English teacher at Fraser Heights Secondary in Surrey. So while B.C. publishers may have been hoping for a sales spike last fall, that didn't materialize. "I think it was rather ill-considered to announce such a wonderful initiative as getting teachers to teach more Canadian literature in the schools, but not to put any more money behind it," says Margaret Reynolds, executive director of the Association of Book Publishers of B.C.

B.C. Minister of Education Shirley Bond counters that the provincial government gives education boards the flexibility and autonomy to allocate resources where they're most needed. "While the ministry is responsible for setting the curriculum standards, implementation of the revised curriculum is the responsibility of teachers, schools, and boards of education," Bond said in an e-mail to Q&Q.

Furthermore, every school and district manages funding in a different manner. Germaine Tsui, English department head at Vancouver's Sir Charles Tupper Secondary School, says her annual budget of around \$1,200 generally covers classroom and computer supplies for the department's six teachers, teaching resources, and some small student awards. After that, there's rarely money left over for new books. Requests for new books go to a learning resources committee, which consists of an administrator and several department heads. Over the past four or five years, the school's English department has been allocated no money for new texts, because math, science, and French curricula "gobbled up the entire learning resources budget, and then some," says Tsui. "Changes in the English curriculum are never given the same kind of priority, since we do not use one standard text throughout the course, and the general feeling is that there will be something in the book room that can meet the new criteria." (In cases of extreme need, Tsui concedes, the principal may free up some money to ensure a full class set of books, even if no funds had been previously allocated.)

"We know that the lineup to the principal's office is long," admits consultant Jean Baird, who lobbied for the CanLit mandate through ArtStarts, a provincial non-profit arts organization for children and youth. Baird argues that the ministry-issued CanLit requirement will give teachers more clout to request new books and replace tired class reading sets. But so far there's little evidence that this is happening on a large scale. "[Funding is] the huge issue," says Panesar, whose department is currently using copies of a reading anthology that were purchased in the mid-1990s (the anthology itself was first published in the 1970s). "We'd love to have new texts. Absolutely."

The ministry also has no way to track whether more Canadian and B.C. books are actually finding their way into schools, or whether the CanLit quota is being universally followed. Responsibility begins with teachers and ends at the school board level, says ministry rep Tasha Schollen: "The mechanism lies with principals and superintendents to monitor." Districts and teachers don't have to report what texts they're buying, and most stakeholders don't believe they should have to do so. "There are no 'curriculum police,'" says Leyton Schnellert, president of the professional association B.C. Teachers of English Language Arts, who adds that he can't imagine a school that wouldn't want to teach Canadian texts.

For teachers who do have a chance to up their CanLit quotient, there are resources available to help with title selection. In 2006, The Educational Resource Acquisition Consortium – an association of B.C. public school districts – launched a process for co-operatively reviewing potential works against set criteria (including audience suitability, literary merit,

support for the philosophy and goals of the B.C. language-arts curriculum, and other “social considerations”). Canadian English novels on the 2008 ERAC-approved list include *Stanley Park* by Timothy Taylor, *Crow Lake* by Mary Lawson, *King Leary* by Paul Quarrington, and *Lullabies for Little Criminals* by Heather O’Neill, as well as such children’s and YA novels as *The Droughtlanders* by Carrie Mac, *The Lottery* by Beth Goobie, and *The Hollow Tree* by Janet Lunn. (The list also includes lots of non-Canadian content.) The catalogue is not intended to be an exclusive list, and ERAC acknowledges that teachers and local school administrators are best equipped to address their students’ needs. To help promote Canadian reading, the ABPBC distributes 3,500 copies annually of its B.C. Books for B.C. Schools catalogue, and 12,000 copies of the Canadian Aboriginal Books for Schools catalogue to schools across the country.

Many classrooms are still dominated by U.S. books, says Baird, because of sheer economics. “You can replace those beat-up copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* for \$5.95 or \$6.95 each,” Baird says. “Very few Canadian publishers can compete with that price point.” But the ABPBC’s Reynolds suggests that plenty of Canadian options fall in that price range. “There’s really no excuse for using non-Canadian books when you can get reasonably priced [YA] books at that level.”

And despite the sense of business as usual in the classroom, most teachers contacted by Q&Q are enthusiastic about the new requirement. “I thought it was a positive thing,” says Cindy Miller, who teaches English at Fort St. James Secondary, about 160 kilometres northwest of Prince George. Like many of her colleagues, Miller says the government mandate provides support “to move away from the traditional British literature that tends to occupy Canadian classrooms.” In the end, it may turn out to be a matter of semantics, but Baird and others say it’s still necessary. “We need the curriculum change,” Baird says. “We need legitimacy from the ministry to say, ‘This is important.’”