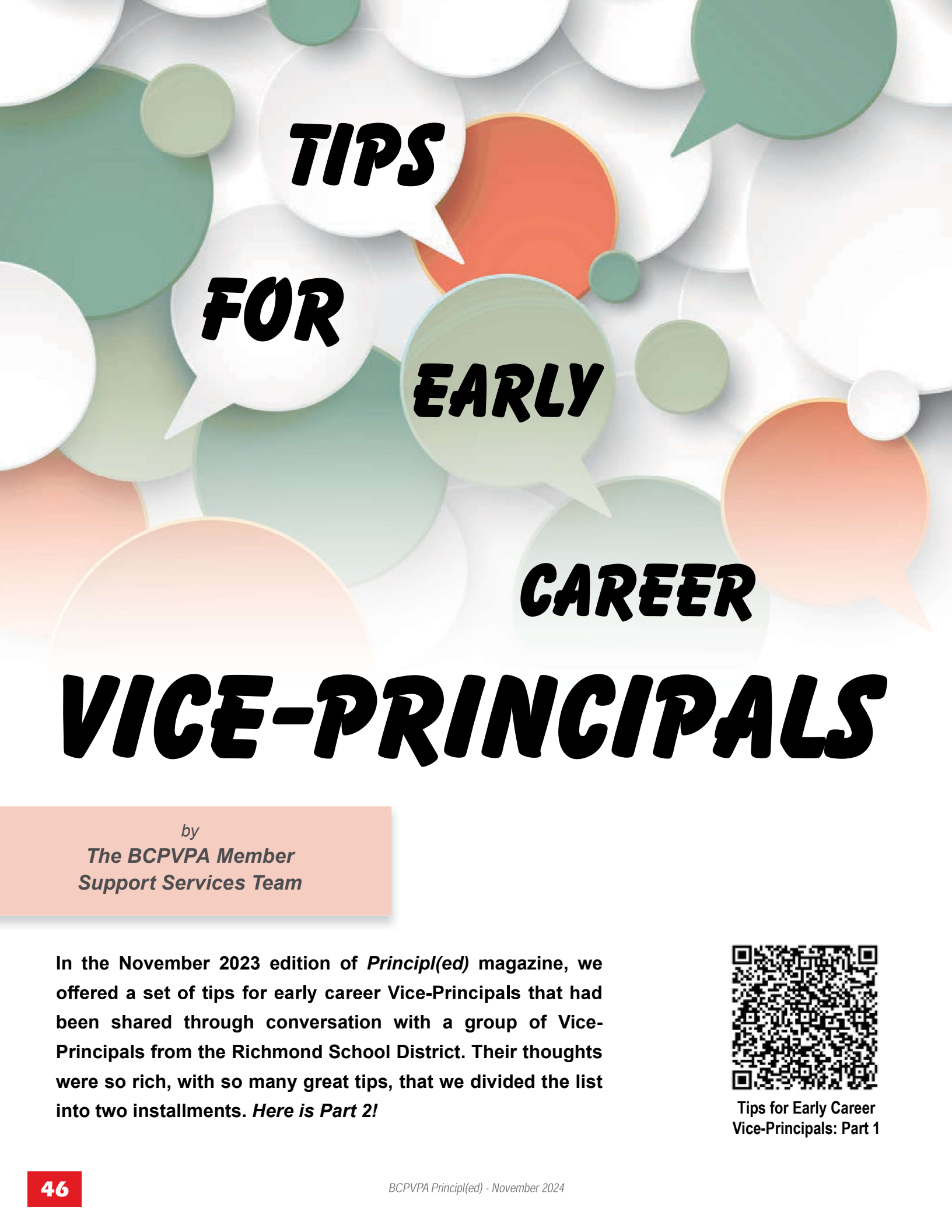




TIPS FOR EARLY CAREER VICE-PRINCIPALS

by
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In the November 2023 edition of *Principl(ed)* magazine, we offered a set of tips for early career Vice-Principals that had been shared through conversation with a group of Vice-Principals from the Richmond School District. Their thoughts were so rich, with so many great tips, that we divided the list into two installments. *Here is Part 2!*



Tips for Early Career
Vice-Principals: Part 1



PART 2

1. PRIORITIZE DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP OVER EXERTING POSITIONAL POWER

As a new school leader, it is easy to rely on your new-found positional authority as you make decisions and work with staff and community members. New leaders who over-rely on that power, however, do so at their own peril and risk damaging relationships with those they serve as a leader. As one Vice-Principal put it, *“exerting positional power should come as a last resort and should occur extremely rarely, if ever.”*

School leaders who practice distributed leadership are there to ensure that the needs of those they lead are met first. They tend to forge deep and sustained positive relationships that last over time. They rarely, if ever, feel the need to say, *“do it because I said so”*, because those they lead want to follow them out of a sense of mutual care and respect. The irony is that those who lead through a ‘positional power’ lens rely increasingly on that power because they have neglected the critical relationships with those they lead. They have missed out on the true ‘power’ that will develop through distributed leadership.

2. PAY ATTENTION TO THE DIVERSITY THAT EXISTS WITHIN YOUR STAFF AND SCHOOL COMMUNITY

As a teacher, you likely paid attention to the diversity that existed within your classroom, and planned lessons and other activities that honoured and respected that diversity. As a school leader, it is equally important to acknowledge, support, and celebrate that same diversity that exists within your staff and school community. Effective school leaders take the time to analyze their community through multiple lenses, and are responsive in how they plan school-wide events and communicate with their staff and community.

This could take the form of school-wide events that celebrate your diverse community, involving parents, staff, and students who can share their own backgrounds and experiences in ways that are comfortable for them. It may also mean planning your school calendar carefully to avoid conflicts between events such as parent-teacher conferences or school photo day, and faith-based dates of importance to members of your community. Harness diversity, and use it as a way to build and strengthen your school culture.

3. TAKE THE TIME YOU NEED TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS

As one Vice-Principal recalled, *“Early on, my Principal shared with me that if the school is on fire, get the kids and the staff out right away. Otherwise, there are very few instances that require you to make an instant or very quick decision.”*

Rather than jumping to a quick decision, take the time to take a deep breath, gather information, consult with those who can assist you in your decision-making, consider options, and reflect on what would make the most sense. Although members of your community may pressure you to make a quick decision, be clear with them that you want to make the best possible decision and that may take some time. Don't be afraid to say, *“I don't know, I'll find out,”* instead of pretending to know and regretting it later.

4. BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Being a school-based administrator can feel overwhelming at times for even the most seasoned Principal or Vice-Principal, and being new to the role can take that feeling to a whole new level. Remember to be patient with yourself as you learn the ropes. Your job is complex, and most people will not expect you to know everything on the first day. You will likely make mistakes and that is okay, as long as you acknowledge them and learn from them.

Remember to also practice patience with others. Meeting people 'where they are at', whether they are a student, staff member, or parent, demonstrates kindness, respect, and understanding and will lead to others being patient with you when you need it most.

5. CHOOSE WHERE TO FOCUS YOUR TIME, ENERGY, AND ATTENTION

As a new Vice-Principal, you may feel a bit like you are drinking from a fire hose for the first few weeks and months of the job. Distinguishing between what is important, what is urgent, and what can wait is one of the most important skills you will develop as a new Vice-Principal. It is easy to fall into the trap of focusing first on paperwork and other 'tasks' that trap you in your office during the school day. Although that aspect of your job is important, nothing will replace the time and energy you put into being available and visible to your staff, students, and school community. As one Vice-Principal put it, *“how you spend your time demonstrates what you value most to the people who are watching.”*

In addition, when you join a school staff, there may be an existing culture of 'The Way Things are Done', and that institutional inertia can sometimes be tough to overcome. It is wise to step back and learn more about the culture that

may have existed for a long time. Ask questions and be curious, rather than jumping to a place of quick judgment or initiating change early in your time at the school. With that being said, as one Vice-Principal put it, *“if your spidey senses are tingling – especially if you see a shortfall in the way students are being supported – don’t hold back just because you are new to the role.”*

6. REMEMBER YOUR FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITIES

One of the biggest challenges reported by new-to-role Vice-Principals is adjusting to the transition from being a member of a union to being a member of the management team.

Remember, as a Principal or Vice-Principal, you represent your school district, and are an agent of the Board of Education at all times. You are no longer a member of the collective bargaining unit and as such you are expected to uphold the policies and practices of the district, regardless of whether or not you agree with them. Your district leadership team has the right and authority under the BC School Act to direct the work of school Principals and Vice-Principals. Criticizing the Board, senior staff, or your colleagues – especially in public or online – can lead to disciplinary action against you. If you feel you have a significant legitimate concern about a direction being given by the district, handle that concern professionally and respectfully. If you are unsure about how to manage that process, reach out to a respected colleague or to the Member Support Services team at the BCPVPA for guidance.

7. DOCUMENT YOUR SUCCESSES

Being a new school administrator can be exhausting – you are actively learning the job, while those around you may expect that you already know how to do the job. Feedback at the beginning may not always feel supportive and it can be easy to get dragged down by criticism. Try keeping a journal of ‘aha’ moments where you learned something important or made a difference in someone’s life. Take the time to acknowledge and document your successes, no matter how small they may seem. Hang on to those positive emails or cards from staff members or community members, and take the time, at least weekly, to reflect on your successes. When the days get tough, re-read some of your positive emails and cards, and remember that you *are* making a difference in your school.

With many thanks to the early-career Vice-Principals of the Richmond School District (SD 38) for generously sharing their their experiences and new-found wisdom with us.

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advice to a
new VP?*

Share it with us!

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