



Leadership Competencies for BC Principals and Vice-Principals

A close-up, low-angle shot of a wooden canoe paddle. The paddle is made of light-colored wood and is covered in water droplets, suggesting it has been in the water. The paddle is positioned vertically, with the handle at the top and the blade pointing downwards. The background is a blurred, greyish-blue, likely representing water or a sky.

**BEING
IN THE
CANOE**

OCTOBER 2024

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We give thanks and acknowledge that our
BCPVPA office is located on the
unceded traditional territories of the
xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam),
Sk̓wxwú7mesh (Squamish), and
səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.



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A serene sunset scene with a small boat on the water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow across the sky and water. A small, dark-colored boat is positioned in the lower right foreground, its reflection visible in the calm water. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

"The importance of story as pedagogy...

Stories grow from the communities and contexts in which we work...

The Competencies cannot be static, as engaging voices creates renewal..."

Design Process

In 2020, the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA) began the process of revising our foundational documents through the lens of equity. A callout was issued for members who wanted to serve on the revision working group. The revision team that was formed recognized that they did not represent those with the lived experience to critically revise the documents, so they committed to Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion training. They provided guidance to form a process for gathering diverse voices in the BCPVPA membership that could help guide the work.

We then embarked on developing an Equity Theory of Change (ETOC), which outlined core values to form the foundation of the BCPVPA's work: Recognition, Right Relations, Responsibility, Humility, Distributed Power, and Collaboration. This process led to a competency-based approach and a new perspective on professional growth.

Dr. David Burns from Kwantlen Polytechnic University was engaged to support the Equity Theory of Change and to ensure that competency development aligned with the BCPVPA's values, aiming to create a more equitable system. Dr. Burns was contracted to conduct a jurisdictional scan of Canadian and international frameworks, review literature on the professional growth of school leaders, integrate the values of the Equity Theory of Change, and align with the BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) Spirit of Leadership: Leadership Competencies for System Leaders.

Throughout the 2023-2024 year, the BCPVPA's draft Leadership Competencies were field-tested, and various groups provided analysis and feedback. The BCPVPA Professional Learning and Development Advisors and Representatives participated in a design thinking session to operationalize the Professional Growth Plan resources.

The Land, and the First Peoples

The BCPVPA honours the wisdom that has guided life on these lands since time immemorial, and commits to long-term allyship in service of equity and respect for the First Peoples who share this wisdom, and their land, with us.

This document draws its early guiding priorities from the [First Peoples Principles of Learning](#). These principles, developed by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), represent not only foundational commitments to changing how this document and education itself are understood, but were developed on the lands that host the work of BC Principals and Vice-Principals. This commitment to local and land-based knowledge, rather than pan-Indigenous approaches, is a priority for the BCPVPA.

We are in the process of working with an Indigenous Focus Group. From the engagement so far, three key pieces of guidance are influencing the approach to the Leadership Competencies. First, the importance of story as pedagogy. Second, stories grow from the communities and contexts in which we work. Third, the Competencies cannot be static, as engaging voices creates renewal.

The BCPVPA Leadership Team

As we engage in the work of defining leadership competency, we commit to core values of recognition, right relations, responsibility, humility, distributed leadership, and collaboration. In developing the Competencies, along with a framework for engagement, the BCPVPA is providing a path for professional learning and development. The Equity Theory of Change underscores the importance of listening, reflecting, adapting, and communicating effectively to continually reflect and renew our foundational documents. This approach is not static; it is a dynamic journey that evolves through the shared experiences and stories of our members, ensuring that the Competencies are not only relevant to the work, but also resonate with the collective voice and vision of the organization. This is the beginning of a transformative process that will continue to shape and refine the Competencies, reflecting the living, breathing nature of the work and its impact on the member community.

What We Are Learning

The Equity Theory of Change process is a launching point into countless conversations with members all over British Columbia around the future we see for our organization. We are grateful to our community for the many opportunities to listen to the ETOC Project Advisory Team, Student Voice, Professional Learning and Development Advisors and Reps, Indigenous Leadership Advisory Committee, the Ad Hoc Anti-Racism Committee, and the BCPVPA Board of Directors and staff. On the basis of these conversations, we set out to draft a framework of Competencies that aligned with the standards our members identified.

These Competencies are also informed by a research project that was conducted as the Equity Theory of Change process unfolded, and that sought recent scholarly literature on educational leadership. The research compared approaches to Principal and Vice-Principal competencies (henceforth, “school leaders”) across Canada and in several international contexts, such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, Finland, Denmark, China, South Korea, England, and Australia.

From this consultation and research, we learned that, in order to create a competency framework that lived up to the values of our community, and that reflected what is best about existing systems, we needed to start with several key themes. While these will surely be imperfect and will not represent the precise suggestions of all BCPVPA members, all members should see in these priorities an earnest and spirited effort to wrestle with the key challenges of our time and the deep commitments of our community. We take these not as the end of a period of listening but, rather, as markers on a road we intend to walk indefinitely.

1. The First Peoples Principles of Learning.

The wisdom of the First Peoples must take centre stage in representing the ways in which we not only proceed towards decolonization and Indigenization, but also in the ways in which we reconsider and enrich education for all.

2. Being and Leadership.

Who we are as leaders, and how we carry ourselves in both our personal and professional lives, has been a consistent theme of our consultations. It is clear that, in an era of reckoning with justice, identity, reconciliation and, often, institutionalized hate, what we carry in our hearts is more a part of our leadership than ever. We must proceed with a consistent emphasis on our genuine commitment to our values and to our humility as leaders.

3. Connected To, But Distinct From, Superintendents.

Our members tell us, and the scholarly literature confirms, that Principals and Vice-Principals have similar leadership priorities, competencies, and challenges. They are not, however, the same. The BCPVPA Leadership Competencies connect to the BC School Superintendents Association standards ([The Spirit of Leadership](#)), but draw clear distinctions both in recognizing the unique competencies required of Principals and Vice-Principals, and in identifying the key ways in which the same competencies need to be differently understood.

4. Between the System and Students.

We have heard, both from our members and from educational leadership scholars, that school leaders in their roles are the central junction between the education system (both in government and at the district level), the people the system serves (students), and the people in positions of front-line service (teachers). This role carries unique responsibilities and challenges.

5. Acting, and Helping Others to Act.

Our members clearly feel a deep commitment to act, in the most direct ways possible, to improve their school communities. They also feel, through their commitment to equity, that they need to focus on empowering others to act by distributing leadership and empowering equity-seeking groups. The roles of school leaders are, in this respect, oriented strongly to concrete, active leadership.

6. We Are What Our Community Makes Us.

In nearly all of the frameworks reviewed for this document, there is an underlying assumption that competencies are ultimately held – or not held – by individuals. Our members see themselves as individuals, but also as defined by their relationship to their school communities. They speak not only of the competencies that they have, but also of the competencies that their school communities exhibit.

The Philosophy of ‘Being in the Canoe’

How this document is read makes all the difference in how it is used in the practice of school leadership in British Columbia. For this reason, we would like to share the philosophical and design choices that have emerged from our learning so far.

We call this, in short, Being in the Canoe.



"We are all paddling together through changes in the waters and weather, are coordinating with others within and beyond our vessel, are continually defining our direction of travel, and will face moments when moving forward, backward, or sideways are all natural choices."

On 'the Canoe'

The use in this document of narrative terms, such as story, is intentional. This is not a linear system in which one moves from one competency to the next, or one stage to the next. We should not self-assess a letter grade for a particular competency. We are all paddling together through changes in the waters and weather, are coordinating with others within and beyond our vessel, are continually defining our direction of travel, and will face moments when moving forward, backward, or sideways are all natural choices.¹

We will, at times, reconsider where we are going as our hopes for our careers and education systems change. For example, from the beginning of this project to its first draft, artificial intelligence emerged to profoundly change thinking about the future of work, and we continue to face painful reckonings with Canadian history and the ways our history impacts our shared future. If we had formed a clear direction a year ago, it would by now have changed many times.

This metaphor also allows us to highlight one of the key shifts in emphasis between district leaders and school leaders. School leaders are, to a greater degree, in the canoe alongside teachers, staff, and students. They face not only broad systemic issues but also the complex and urgent challenges that characterize daily school life. They can afford neither to be solely focused on policy nor on practice: they must synchronize these different ways of paddling.

This is what it means to consider the work of self-improvement through the lens of a journey by canoe. We need the aid of others, our route is fluid, and our destination changes over time. We need to take into account the other boats on the river, but we need not mimic their direction. All the while, and through all this confusing change, the things that make us good partners on the water remain.

1. We will coordinate the journey of BCPVPA members with the journey of BCSSA members but will chart a unique path. We will build on, reconsider, and extend, the work already done by the BCSSA.
2. Building on the BCSSA framework, we will extend the emphasis on contextual literacy to contextual agency to reflect how active these roles truly are.
3. We will add a new competency on navigating the connection between policy and practice to replace the strategic leadership competency of the BCSSA framework. The planning components of the former competency will be integrated into this new one.

On 'Being'

The First Peoples Principles of Learning teaches us something that also arose in our conversations with members, though in different words, and with different emphases. The Principles teach that our learning both supports and reflects the entire web of connections around us: connections to others, to the land, to the past, and to the

¹ For this explanation, we are deeply indebted to teachings shared with the authors by Cyril Pierre, Elder of the Katzie First Nation, and Spencer Pierre, member of the Katzie First Nation. The BCSSA framework also draws upon the imagery of the canoe.

generations to come. Truly competent leaders understand the centrality of learning in all these directions and are able to consider their impact relationally as it arises from the past, is lived in the present, and impacts the future.

That relationality depends, in part, on our ability to genuinely unify the professional self we seek to be – one that is just, critical, and empathetic — and the personal self we are outside of the school environment. To meet this moment of educational and social change requires not just that we sincerely live our stated values, but also that we interact genuinely and transparently with our communities. This carries with it a fundamental humility – both in personal terms and in cultural terms. For this reason, each Competency begins with a note on its background, and on the role of genuineness and humility in practicing it.

We also need to think not only of our own growth, but also of our role in fostering collective growth and in empowering others to act. For this reason, we speak both of advancing our own individual competencies and our collective competencies. While the individual leader does not exist alone, some attributes make more sense as properties of a single person, while others represent ways in which a school community may be described.

In the context of these Leadership Competencies, this is what is meant by being. This document² includes many statements about the importance of considering ourselves in relation to our leadership. We see these Competencies not as a checklist, but as a series of themes in a story of evolving leadership.

1. Instead of the tripartite division described in the BCSSA document (leading self, leading teams, leading organizations) we use a division between the self and the school community.
2. We have written the entire document to encourage deep and sincere thought about how these Competencies feature in the unique story of each leader in their communities. We have avoided narrowly or technically phrased statements (e.g. “complete a 5-year school improvement planning document”) in favour of broader statements open to a wider range of manifestations (“...lead conversations about planning for the future”).
3. Genuineness and humility will be the touchstone for all of the Competencies and will serve as the entry point to learning and growth in each.

² In an effort to promote system coherence, this document reproduces the indicators used by the BCSSA. These are, unless otherwise noted by italics, directly reproduced. What these indicators mean in the context of the self and community has been written specifically for the BCPVPA audience.

“... our learning both supports and reflects the entire web of connections around us: connections to others, to the land, to the past, and to the generations to come.”



Stewardship for the future of all children

School leaders are stewards of the future. They lead a school community that fosters the life opportunities of its children and prepares them to take care of themselves, each other, and their environment. In order to be good stewards of this school community, and the communities outside of the school that sustain it, school leaders must be **genuinely** committed across their lives to valuing each individual student, to modelling the ways in which diverse and safe communities are sustained, and to building a more environmentally sustainable society. This requires of the leader the ability to be **humble** in the face of complex experiences of marginalization and trauma that may not be within the leader's own experience.

First Peoples Principles of Learning inspiration:

(1) *"Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors."*

Stewardship for the future of all children	Self <i>The school leader...</i>	Community <i>The school leader is part of a school community that...</i>
Ensures that each child is supported in their journey to a more secure sense of themselves, their learning, and their well-being.	• Learns through empathy and humility from student experiences. • Models the complexity and limitations inherent to their own identity.	• Provides connection, safety, and support to all students. • Demonstrates the value of diversity through its actions and choices.
Ensures that each child values diverse peoples and seeks justice in their communities and beyond.	• Is a model of, and critical thinker about, the school's values. • Is a leader, empowering agent, and follower, of just causes in the school community.	• Empowers students to take action for justice inside and outside the school. • Bravely names, investigates, and acts on issues of injustice.
Ensures that each child is a steward of the natural environment, and that the <i>school's</i> own impact on that environment reflects this commitment.	• Monitors and minimizes their impact on the environment. • Leads critical conversation and action to reduce the school's environmental impact.	• Critically reviews its impact and the ways in which that impact can be lessened. • Empowers students to connect their learning to their environment.

Fostering a culture of curiosity and inquiry

School leaders model curiousness and rigorous inquiry and ensure that the efforts of others to do the same are welcomed, supported and safe. They model and support curiosity, direct that curiosity in service of students, collect and share rigorous evidence, and ensure that the direction of the school is critically questioned and accountably reviewed. In order to do these things school leaders must practice, model, and encourage **genuine humility** not just in the face of the difficulty of understanding richly complex educational and social issues, but also in the face of the breadth of perspectives and approaches to inquiry practiced in diverse communities. They must, in other words, not only be humble about what they know but also about the ways through which they came to know it.

First Peoples Principles of Learning inspiration:

(2) “*Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational...*”

Fostering a culture of curiosity and inquiry	Self <i>The school leader...</i>	Community <i>The school leader is part of a school community that...</i>
Creates and maintain a culture of trust, innovation, and curiosity.	• Poses and investigates critical questions about the school, pedagogy, the curriculum, and their own leadership practice. • Supports teachers, staff, and students in posing critical questions, testing unusual solutions, and sharing marginalised perspectives – with particular attention to teaching and learning	• Reacts to new, challenging perspectives with support, respect, and safety. • Rewards innovative risk-taking and creativity. • Values centres of innovative leadership outside of the Principal's office.
Models and encourages evidence-informed decision making.	• Identifies, collects, assesses, and employs appropriate and diverse forms of evidence in making decisions both about teaching, learning, and school operations. • Forms transparently evidence-based decisions.	• Collectively discusses important decisions and the ways in which those decisions are guided by evidence.

Fostering a culture of curiosity and inquiry	Self <i>The school leader...</i>	Community <i>The school leader is part of a school community that...</i>
Uses inquiry to transform educational outcomes and life opportunities for all learners.	• Applies skills of critical inquiry to problems that concretely impact student educational outcomes. • Draws attention to challenges in need of critical attention.	• Consistently monitors the ways in which the school's services impact all students, but also how they differentially impact diverse learner groups. • Celebrates diverse forms of inquiry.
Effectively shares evidence.	• Clearly cites evidence used in making significant decisions impacting the school. • Makes evidence used in decision making available, when possible, to teachers, staff, and students. • Supports others in critical discussion of evidence.	• Makes a wide range of data available to all members of the school community. • Empowers members of the school community to present new evidence and question commonly cited evidence.
Fosters ongoing inquiry on the links between strategic priorities, actions and outcomes.	• Actively monitors the ways in which district and school priorities are acted on in the school. • Measures student outcomes using broad and diverse indicators.	• Holds itself collectively accountable for student outcomes. • Critically assesses new initiatives in light of evidence.

A wooden oar with a smooth, light-colored blade and a darker handle leans against a wall made of horizontal wooden planks. The planks show natural wood grain and knots. The oar's blade is on the left side of the frame, and its handle extends towards the bottom left corner.

"We see these
Competencies not as a
checklist, but as a series
of themes in a story of
evolving leadership."

Growing the capacity of self and others

School leaders practice **humility** in their leadership by, in part, pursuing their own growth opportunities and through hearing, with **genuine** appreciation, feedback about opportunities they might not see. They engage in professional development in a wide range of capacities including both technical management techniques (such as budgeting, hiring, reporting, etc.) but also the broader skills of leadership (such as articulating reform agendas and theories of change). They also distribute leadership and empower members of the school communities to take leadership not just in addressing identified challenges, but also in articulating what the school's challenges might be. The school leader supports, through role modelling and direct support, the efforts of their colleagues to engage in their own programs of professional development.

First Peoples Principles of Learning inspiration:

(8) "Learning requires exploration of one's own identity."

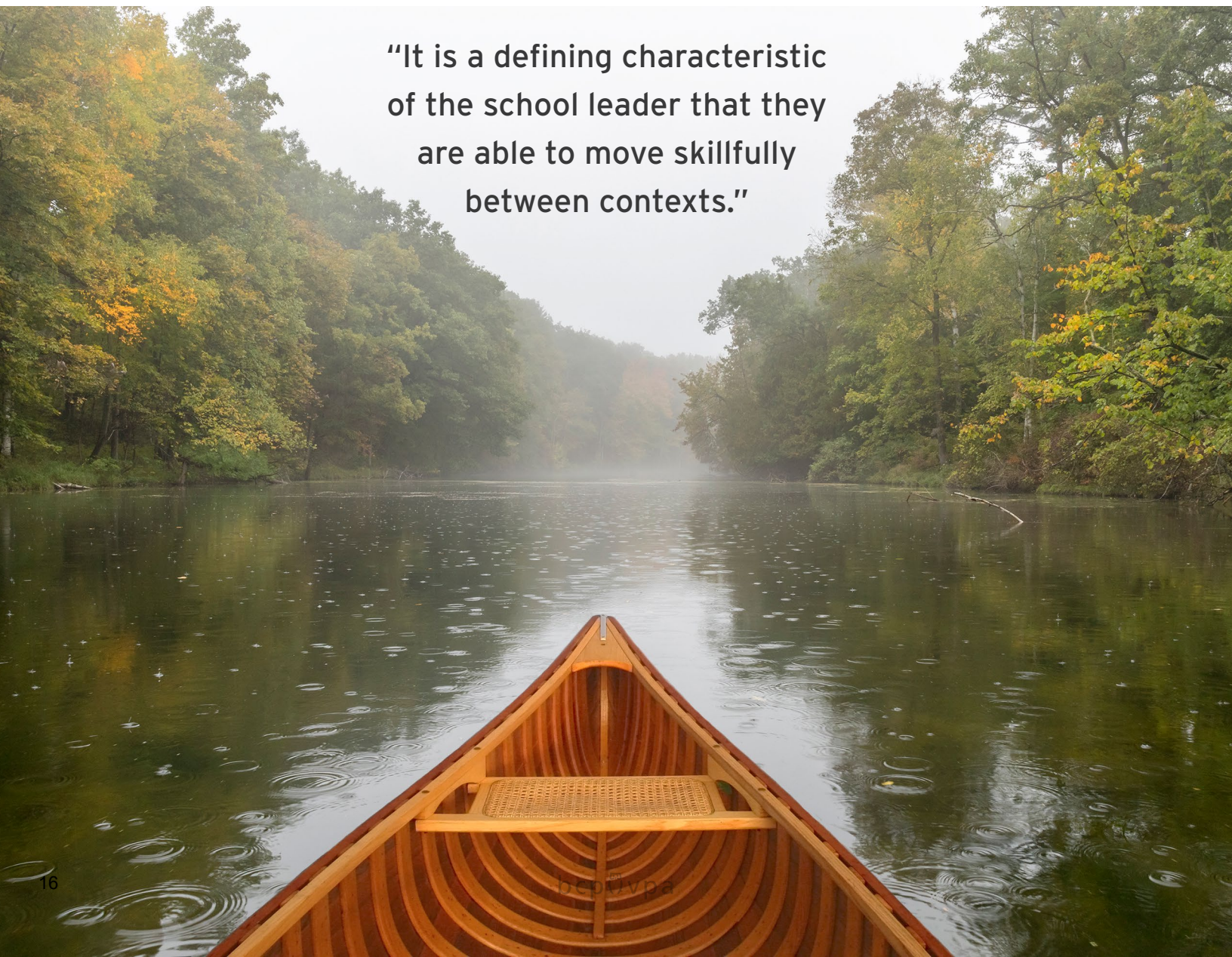
Growing the capacity of self and others	Self <i>The school leader...</i>	Community <i>The school leader is part of a school community that...</i>
Supports and empowers persons and groups.	• Supports and engages with teams of students, staff, and teachers without assuming primary leadership. • Recognizes emerging and established leadership skills in their colleagues. • Effectively guides the professional development of their colleagues.	• Practices meaningfully distributed leadership between diverse participants and groups.
Models and informs change leadership and change management.	• Collects varied initiatives into coherent and effective programs of change. • Articulates plans of action that motivate and empower teachers, staff, and students.	• Aligns its values and stated goals with meaningful and impactful actions. • Prioritizes wide and deep participation in leadership and change.
Models and supports professional learning.	• Seeks out professional learning that both enhances and challenges personal knowledge, skills, and abilities. • Seeks out, and reacts with humility to, feedback.	• Features and supports a wide range of conventional and unconventional professional development activities in support of high-quality teaching and learning. • Offers rich opportunities to draw on internal and external professional development opportunities.

Contextual literacy and agency

One of the defining features of school leadership is the diversity of contexts in which it is practiced, both professional and cultural. A school leader needs to not only understand the complex language and practices of a variety of professional domains – including finance, human resources, pedagogy, and education politics – but must also understand the diverse communities with which the school interacts in a way sufficiently meaningful to allow them to **genuinely** hear and value what they are told by these communities. As leaders at the front line of the education system, they need to be contextually literate in both professional and cultural contexts, and to practice agency in those contexts. They need to not only be in dialogue, but must also be active participants in solving problems across a wide range of domains. This is where the practice of **humble** leadership is most important. There will always be professional contexts in which additional development is needed, and human experience is so richly varied that building understanding with others is a permanent component of the human experience. It is a defining characteristic of the school leader that they are able to move skillfully between contexts.

First Peoples Principles of Learning inspiration:

(9) *“Learning recognizes the role of Indigenous knowledge.”*

A photograph of a wooden canoe on a calm river, surrounded by dense forest with autumn foliage. The water is still, reflecting the surrounding trees and the sky. The canoe is in the foreground, pointing towards the center of the image. The text is overlaid on the upper part of the image.

“It is a defining characteristic
of the school leader that they
are able to move skillfully
between contexts.”

Contextual literacy and agency	Self <i>The school leader...</i>	Community <i>The school leader is part of a school community that...</i>
Engages effectively with internal systems <i>and groups</i>.¹ ¹ This has been amended from the BCSAA version to include groups (not just systems).	• Articulates and consumes ideas and information using professionally and contextually appropriate language, skills, and knowledge. These include language and skills of pedagogical practice, but also those related to financial management, human resource management, and policy. • Builds strong relationships with students, staff, and teachers both individually and as members of different school interest groups and professional bodies (such as unions or subject teams). • Acts effectively both in particular professional and cultural contexts and, in service of school objectives, can operate between those contexts.	• Speaks to, hears from, and acts on, the perspective of students, staff, and teachers both as individuals and as members of different school interest groups and professional bodies. • Recognizes in its actions its commitments to decolonization and Indigenization inside the school. • Enacts active programs of change through consensus building.
Engages effectively with external systems <i>and groups</i>.	• Employs contextual literacy skills to build relationships with system leaders, parent advisory councils, professional bodies, and community partners. • Nurtures right relationships with the local Indigenous nations. • Engages with district systems and departments effectively.	• Ensures all relationships between the school and external parties foster just, reciprocal relationships. • Centres the school as an important node of community action and resilience.

Bridging policy and practice

School leaders sit between the complex and far-reaching systems that structure and support education and the day-to-day activities of educators and support professionals. They need to be representatives of the system's values and policies – including those of governments and school districts – while also providing feedback to these same systems about the ways in which practice and the reality of work in communities should challenge and inform shared values and practices. In order for systemic values and priorities to have real meaning in schools, school leaders must be **genuine** in their role modelling. For example, students, staff, and teachers can see when a leader does not feel the deep purpose of a strategic plan, and will themselves feel even more distant from these examples of shared purpose. This work comes with a commitment to **humility**, however, as the school leader listens deeply to concerns and different ways of approaching the practical reality of what these systemic structures mean in the school and community.

First Peoples Principles of Learning inspiration:

(3) *"Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions"*

A photograph of a wooden canoe on a calm lake at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm orange glow across the sky and reflecting on the water. A dense line of trees is visible in the background. The quote is centered over the image.

"In order for systemic values and priorities to have real meaning in schools, school leaders must be genuine in their role modelling."

Bridging policy and practice	Self <i>The school leader...</i>	Community <i>The school leader is part of a school community that...</i>
<i>Models the values of education system.</i>	• Genuinely manifests through their actions the priorities of the education system. • Articulates in compelling terms the philosophy behind the guiding documents that structure school practice (such as curricula, governmental and district policy, etc.).	• Explicitly discusses the ways in which the community can reflect and support educational excellence. • Disseminates widely, and discusses deeply, information about educational priorities.
<i>Aligns school resources to strategic priorities.</i>	• Ensures school-level resourcing reflects a localized vision of the system's priorities. • Empowers, through resourcing, plans made at the school level.	• Ensures all members can articulate the ways in which the school's activities contribute to the shared priorities of the education system. • Supports teachers and staff in their own use of strategic priorities to guide their work.
<i>Anticipates future challenges.</i>	• Identifies the ways in which the school is changing, the potential challenges it faces in future, and leads conversations about planning for that future. • Builds capacity to respond to emerging challenges. • Monitors key data on school performance and draws inferences about change over time.	• Is prepared to serve students in moments of strain and emergency, such as a pandemic. • Changes its service to the community as that community itself changes.
<i>Sustains effective policy-practice planning and conversation.</i>	• Identifies the ways in which key policies and priorities interact and the objectives they are intended to pursue. • Solicits, collects, analyzes, and disseminates feedback on the implications of practice for the setting of future policies and priorities.	• Sustains rich dialogue and substantive action on how systemic policies and priorities can be enacted. • Uses insight from practice to inform critical dialogue both internally and with system leaders.

Key Assessment Considerations

Assessment of these Competencies is fundamentally contextual and is focused on self-assessment and dialogue.

The Competencies are intended to:

1. **Focus attention** on key areas of practice, and to name them, but not to measure them in generalizable, numeric form. This document should help start and sustain diverse conversations – not reduce the diversity of understandings we develop.
2. **Organize mutual support.** Used as #Tags, these Competencies can be used to organize support around BCPVPA members. This could be organizing between members for local, informal support, it could be large scale conferences, or it could mean new digital resources.
3. Form **shared narratives.** The structure of the document is intended to encourage members to form and share stories of their own progress (past, present, and future) and to create collective stories of progress.

One approach to utilizing such tools in practice is to ask three key self-assessment questions, and to use the answers to these questions to seek support, provide support, and question assumptions.

1. What is the story of myself and my school community **I can tell** with this Competency?
2. What is the story my community and **I want to tell**?
3. What **needs to happen** to move from 1. to 2.?



To find out more about our programs and events,
visit www.bcpvpa.org/professional-learning

Contact pldinfo@bcpvpa.bc.ca

