

Brian Leonard began his two-year term as President of the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association on July 1, 2022. He has been an educator for 25 years in BC's public education system, serving as a K-12 teacher, middle, and secondary Vice-Principal, and as an elementary Principal in three schools, most recently at Pinetree Way Elementary in Coquitlam (SD43). Brian served on his local chapter executive for 17 years, and on the Coquitlam Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (CPVPA) Contract Committee for 15 years including six years as Chair. Brian served as a Director on the BCPVPA Board for 10 years.

We caught up with Brian in week two of his term.

How does it feel to now be the President of the BCPVPA?

A little bit surreal, and a bit overwhelming at times, but I try not to dwell on that thought! My initial experience was being at Foundations for New School Leaders July 4-8 – it was a wonderful week, but it was a bit like hitting the ground running. I went from packing up at school and wrapping up the year, and then I jumped right into it. But in the same sense, it was really great because I had a chance to meet all those members, the newest members, and some potential members. It was gratifying, and it really gave me a boost. The energy in the room that week was quite amazing, it was palpable. I hadn't been to Short Course – now Foundations — for a very long time, so I'd forgotten what it was like. But just meeting the people was really energizing. So, that's what I'm looking forward to in the new role.

In this second week, just being in the office, I'm getting things sorted out and getting settled in, transitioning to the tech. There I also feel a bit like being a fish out of water, because when you move from school to school within the district everything goes with you electronically. There was a time last week when I was disconnected from the district system, and not fully connected to the BCPVPA system, so I was a little bit marooned.



Brian Leonard
Coquitlam (SD43)
2022-2024 President
BCPVPA

What are you going to miss the most about being in a school?

I know it sounds a bit cliché, but it will be the kids. For 14 years, I've been an elementary Principal, and you get to know all the kids really well. It's neat to walk around the school, and everybody says, "Hello, Mr. Leonard!", and it's that connection with the kids. When you go into a kindergarten class, if you're the Principal, you're like a rock star. I've heard other people say it too, and it's true. If you're having a terrible day, just go down to a kindergarten class for a few minutes and you feel wonderful. I'll miss that. And it's a whole different agenda. When you're in this role as president, it's quite different from running a school.

What excites you most about your new role?

I think it's the same thing that got me involved with the Association to begin with, the chance to meet members around the province. And it will be exciting to actually go and meet members in their districts, and in their schools. I've attended Chapter Council for 17 years, so I've met lots of members there as we connected and talked about our experiences, but this is an important opportunity to go out and meet people in their workplace, in their community. The other aspect I'm looking forward to is representing members at the various provincial tables that the BCPVPA is involved with, and giving voice to the many successes, various concerns, and unfortunate frustrations of members, to try to make the system better.

What inspired you to be a teacher?

Teaching is a second career for me, I started later as I was originally a manager for Woodward's Department Stores. When Woodward's closed its doors, I had to make a decision. I had earlier taken a career counseling course at BCIT, and I had done

some staff training at Woodward's, and my aptitudes and interests all pointed to teaching, training, and working with people. My wife (at the time) was a teacher, and she encouraged me. So, I decided to go back to school. I got my teaching certificate and started teaching.

It truly is a gratifying experience to be a teacher and an educational leader, because you get a chance to make a difference in the life of a student; and, as a Principal, you have many chances to make a difference in the lives of many students. When I myself was in high school, some of my teachers had suggested teaching to me, and I liked being in school, but I thought that every year would seem like starting all over again! Would you get that sense of satisfaction? And then fast forward, with more maturity and more experience, teaching really pulled me back. It's been a very rewarding profession and, by extension, going into school leadership offered a bigger stage for making a difference.

What led you to become a school leader?

I've always considered myself very fortunate in – I won't say my choices – but I would say in the opportunities that were presented. When I started teaching, I was a TOC (now TTOC, Teacher Teaching on Call) in Coquitlam. When I'm involved with an organization, I tend to get *involved* as opposed to being more passive, and at the time I got involved with the TOC Advisory Committee. I was a History major – History and English were my subject areas – and back in the 90s it was a hard to get a job, *and* it was *really* hard to get a job in social studies. So I pursued an interest in elementary teaching, which is what my background was in my PDP (Professional Development Program) years. I got a job in a Coquitlam middle school, and because middle schools in Coquitlam are 6-7-8, I ended up teaching Humanities – which was right

up my alley – and that quickly led to a continuing contract.

It was very fortunate, and it was through working with a certain Principal who said to me, I have these jobs coming up and I want you to apply. I applied, and nothing happened; I applied again, and nothing happened. When a job came up for a reading program, I felt I didn't have the skills or training for that role. When the posting closed, the Principal called me, upset that I hadn't applied, and she said that they would train me and I had to promise to keep applying. So, the next job that came up was a Home Economics position; it was not my forte! But, I had a phone interview. I remember sitting at home when the Principal called. She said, can you boil an egg? I said, yes. Can you sew on a button? I said, yes. Congratulations, she said. You've got the job! So I was going to be a Home Economics teacher, along with doing some learning assistance, and it was a continuing contract. Two weeks in, I was declared surplus when enrollment didn't materialize in the school. But, this is where the opportunity part came in. I had a continuing contract, so the district had an obligation. At the school board office, the District Principal handed us the posting book, and I looked at all these middle school jobs and there was one at Gleneagle Secondary, teaching Social Studies and English. And I thought: I'm qualified; that's what I want to teach. So I applied, and that's how I got my job, in high school teaching Social Studies. You never know when opportunities are going to come, so take advantage of them.

From there, I became involved in school life. We had three Vice-Principals, and the Principal, and department heads. Partly because of my leadership experience in my previous role, I was nominated to be the Staff Rep, and then I was a department head. And there the pool of opportunities became larger and greater. I applied to be a Vice-Principal, mostly to see what the process was like. I thought I would put

my name in, and see what happens. And then, bang! I got the job. And *then* I thought, well: now what do I do?

I was doing my master's at the time, and I moved into a Vice-Principal role at the school where I was already teaching, which is unusual. But it was an opportunity, it was a transition. And that led to another opportunity, because my colleague in the next office, a Vice-Principal, was the local Chapter President, and she was scheduled to go to Chapter Council that weekend but couldn't make it and asked me to go in her place. That was 2004, and that was my first Chapter Council, and I've been there ever since. It was an opportunity, and I took it.

It was similar when I became a Principal. My Principal at the time said, you know, we have to get you your own school. At that time, I was the Vice-Principal at the middle school. I had gone from the high school to one of our larger middle schools to see the different ages of kids as I didn't want to go directly from high school to elementary. When I was ready, the next thing I knew I was an elementary Principal, and the rest is history. I always tell new teachers to take advantage of whatever opportunity presents itself, and to make the best of it. When you start out teaching, don't be in a hurry to get a continuing position. Take some time, get to know the different schools in your district, the classrooms, find out where you really want to work, and don't be afraid to TOC for a while, because it can lead to opportunities. In my case, it led to a continuing

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What else would you like to share with BCPVPA members?

One of the things I'm thinking about was actually from conversations at Foundations, that originally my family came from Scotland and we were immigrants to Canada, we came to Vancouver and have only lived in this part of BC. I came over as a child but this is my home. I am proud of my heritage, but also very proud of being a Canadian.

I used to be very involved in theatre; in my younger days I was involved in directing, and acting in plays, radio dramas on CKNW, and producing. As part of my proclivities, I ended up being involved with administration and on the board of several different groups, and on the Arts Council. I also served on a City of New Westminster Arts and Culture Commission for a number of years. I've always been involved in community organizations, but as the work of a Principal has become more time-consuming, I've had to scale back on my contributions to the community. However, I still support the arts, now as a patron, as opposed to a participant.

position. And then, literally, I practically fell into the job that I really wanted to do.

What is a memorable moment from your career so far as an educator?

As a teacher, and then as a Vice-Principal, seeing the kids crossing the stage to graduate was very gratifying. I regard it as a privilege having worked K to 12, seeing kids coming in at kindergarten and then seeing them graduate in grade 12, seeing kids develop all the way through. I remember several years ago as an elementary Principal when I had to go up and visit the high school, and I walked through the hall, there were kids there from when I had been the Principal at the elementary school, they were now in high school. It was great to see them at the latter part of their education, and grown up. It's seeing the kids as they grow, and develop, and succeed.

What inspired you to run for a BCPVPA Board Director role?

I was inspired by having been at Chapter Council for a number of years, and seeing some really good people. I remember Jameel Aziz when he was the BCPVPA President approaching our Coquitlam group at a meeting and saying, okay: one of you has to run for the board. We were all active as members, and not afraid to speak up or ask questions. I had just moved to my role as an elementary Principal, and I didn't feel ready to take that on yet. But my colleague Laurie Birnie did, so she became a Director. And, a couple of years later, when Laurie had to step back for personal reasons, I had been at my school for two years and felt a little more comfortable taking on more responsibilities. I ran for the board and I've been fortunate to be there since. It really was a chance to make a bigger impact for our members.

What inspired you to run for the presidency?

In a similar vein, I had been at the board table for a few years and learned more about how our organization works, and I've worked with some very good Presidents. I've really been able to see the kind of difference that we can make for our members by representing them and giving voice to their experiences in their schools. The President is literally the spokesperson for the Association; it's humbling, daunting, but always a privilege, and I hope to do the role justice.

What have you learned in your time as President-Elect?

The last two years with the pandemic for schools – and for our Association – required that everything had to be reviewed or redone. I would say during the last year in particular, it was challenging to be able to actually come together as an organization. Darren (Danyluk) was very generous this spring when things opened up a bit more, and I was able to come into the office a few times, we did a lot of Zoom calls and I started getting connected to the committees and Ministry staff and people that I would be working with in the next two years. Having been on the board for a number of years, I knew what the role could be like, and I'm looking forward to the fact that we might be turning the page and getting back to a more regular process. I appreciate that Darren was able to share with me a lot of what's been going on in the Association, and I feel as prepared as I can be.

Do you have goals that you've set for yourself during your presidency?

There are three areas I want to focus on as a board and as an Association. The first is **advocacy**. That's part of our mission. I'm quite pleased with the work

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we've been doing more recently as an Association, and working with Bluestone Government Relations, so one of my roles is to continue to advocate for our members. The COVID situation really underscored the importance of the role of a Principal or Vice-Principal in a school or a district. One of my goals is to continue that advocacy, and to remind our partners and particularly the Ministry of Education and Child Care, that the role of the Principal or Vice-Principal is crucial to a successful school. The second piece is building **influence**. I think that the best way to further our goals is to build influence not just with Ministry but with our partners. And the third piece – and certainly not the least – is **member support**, continuing to hear from members about what is going on in their schools, in their professional lives, in their careers, and how we can support them. That's another area where we've done a shift in the last couple of years, putting more resources into member wellbeing as changes happen, and change happens all the time.

What would you like to see as your legacy when you leave this role?

I'd like to see the whole agency question brought to a successful resolution. I think so much of our work as an Association is focused towards a good employment relationship. There are many good districts out there but what I've learned through my many years with the board and being on contract committees and the Contract Advisory Committee is that in a district,

things can be going really well between the local chapter, their executive, and their district leadership team, and then one key piece of that equation can change and all of a sudden, they're in a whole different relationship. I don't think an employment relationship with a particular district and their leadership team should be capricious. The idea of agency first came up during Shelley Green's term as President almost 10 years ago. We've been talking about it in one form or another since that time. We are at a crucial juncture, I think, with government, with BCPSEA (BC Public School Employers' Association), with the labour relations piece. I think we're on the threshold of making a breakthrough, but one of the things I would like to help bring to fruition is a successful conclusion to the issue – actually having a table where the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association can sit down with government on behalf of the Principals and Vice-Principals of our province to ensure that some key elements of our Personal Services Contracts are in place for all Principals and Vice-Principals. I don't think any one group of administrators in one particular district should be disadvantaged on certain key points; we're not all going to have the same contracts across the province, but there are certain key elements that everybody should have.

Where do you see the BCPVPA in 5 or 10 years?

I think we've made some significant changes in recent years, some prompted by the pandemic. Where we used to do a lot of interactions face-to-face, bringing people down, or over to Metro Vancouver for meetings, we have become a more nimble organization. You are working at home, I'm working at the office, but I could be at home, or we could be in two different countries, and we could still have this conversation. We've shown that we can connect that way, and it's a striking development, it is a legacy that we can keep. Another way that we have morphed as an organization is our

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Connecting Leaders Conference, which was always held in Richmond in October. We've moved to a regional model so that the conference moves around to different parts of the province. It will be in Victoria this fall, and next year it will be in Kelowna. That means that more members from different regions can physically attend, but those that can't attend in-person can attend virtually. I still think there's a benefit to the face-to-face experience, but can see that we are in the middle of a transformation for our organization.

So, where do I see us five to 10 years from now? I would like to see that all Principals and Vice-Principals in the province, regardless of what district they are in, would have a good Personal Services Contract. I think that the compensation issue, including benefits, would be satisfactorily resolved, and that some of our members wouldn't have to go cap in hand to their districts for some things. I think those opportunities are on the horizon, and I can see us achieving that. Education itself is changing, and so I can see that the way in which education system transforms will create opportunities for us as an organization. It's always important for us as an organization to align with that, and to mirror what's going on. I think we've been pretty good at adapting, and I hope that we will continue to do that.

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