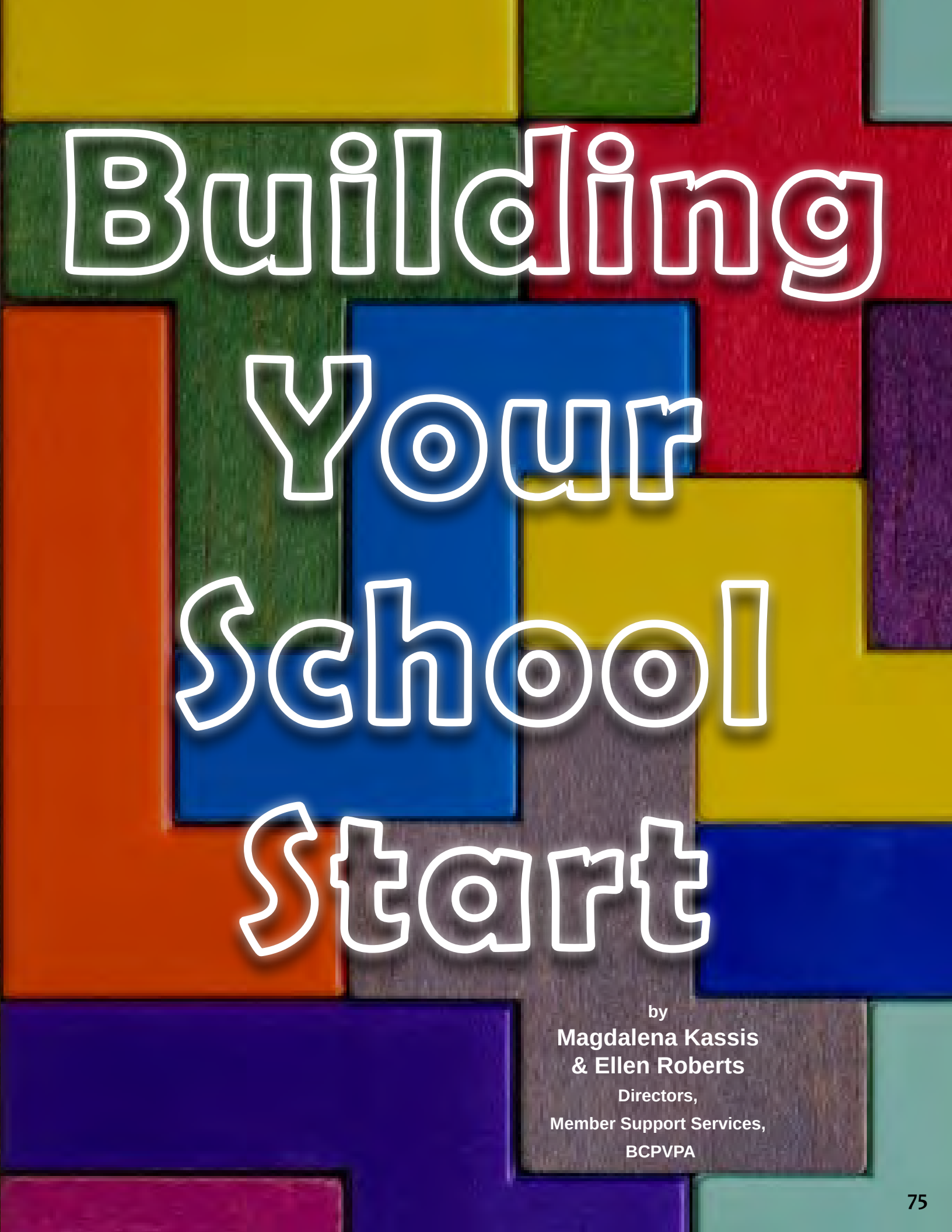


The background of the cover is composed of various colored rectangles and squares in shades of yellow, green, red, blue, orange, and purple, arranged in an abstract, overlapping pattern.

Building Your School Start

by
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For Principals and Vice-Principals, September heralds a mixed bag of thoughts, emotions, and tasks. It is a time of renewal, hope, and new beginnings... especially this fall! The actions Principals and Vice-Principals choose to take in September can set the stage for the year ahead – and for years to come – in the school community. Each Principal and Vice-Principal brings their own unique ideas and strategies to ensure a smooth start-up and a successful year, and there is value in sharing ideas with colleagues and learning from each other.

With this in mind, we canvassed our BCPVPA colleagues – many of whom came from the ranks of Principals and Vice-Principals – for ideas to help with your back-to-school transition. We thought about the proactive activities and strategies that we used when we were in schools. What were the valuable tips that helped us in those first few days and weeks? What advice could benefit our colleagues across the province?

When canvassing our colleagues for their ideas, we did not anticipate that each response would touch on being purposeful in setting aside time to build relationships. Yet, without exception, we all described what we did in our practices to focus on establishing strong working relationships with the different groups in our school communities.

We have grouped our BCPVPA colleagues' words of wisdom in two sections: ideas related to 'people', which include establishing, developing, and enhancing relationships with staff, students and families, and community members; and ideas related to 'personal preparation', which include the technical preparation that will be of benefit at the start of a school year.

Depending upon your role, the current pandemic context, or district policies, some of these ideas may not be directly relevant. But we hope that this snapshot of suggestions may spark new ideas, or simply reaffirm the strategies you currently have in place.

In a perfect world, you would have uninterrupted quality time with your admin team or – in the case of single-administrator placements, with your office staff – to do nothing but get yourself organized for the start of the school year. However, there are a million things to achieve in those days in August and early September. So: what are the 'non-negotiables'? We suggest that taking the time to intentionally build relationships, and defining roles among your team members can be critical.

Building relationships with your administrative teams and/or office team

- Plan intentional meetings or sessions early on where you can have fun, get to know each other, vision, strategize, plan, and share ideas.
- Schedule regular weekly meetings throughout the year, and keep the communication lines open and trusting. The benefit of creating a strong school leadership team is that it sends a message to the staff that there is a unified voice among the leaders – a team that is moving the school in the same direction – and leaders who, despite their individual skills and personalities, value teamwork and each others' contributions to the team.

Building relationships with your teaching and support staff

- Send out an opening letter to staff with a personal message, a welcome, and an

introduction to yourself for those who are new.

- Be well prepared for the first staff meeting, with everything your teaching staff will need when they arrive. Plan fun activities as well!
- Be **PRESENT & VISIBLE** to the staff. The office work can be done early or late in the day; even when there is a lot of work you need to do, be 'present' for staff members who come in to see you.
- If you are new to the school, consider surveying staff to find out about their priorities, what they value at the school, and what they see as challenges.
- Try to meet with each staff member if you can. In a large secondary school, this may not be possible, but in a smaller school, set up meeting times just to get to know your staff. Remember to include support staff, too.
- Consider taking photos of staff for a 'welcome wall'.

Building relationships with students

- Especially in the early days, make sure you are visible to students – before school, break time, lunchtime, and after school.
- Pop into classrooms, and introduce yourself to all classes. Make that personal connection.
- Ensure students (and staff) know the school expectations and Code of Conduct.
- Try to find a way to communicate any expectations in a fun and engaging way with students.
- A multi-age stations approach early in the year can be a great way for students and staff to get to know each other and the school.
- In an opening assembly, consider producing a fun video or game to engage the students in the school culture and expectations.



Building relationships with your PAC

- Meet with the PAC Chair early in the school year or – ideally— before the year starts.
- Get to know each other, and review the school goals and needs.
- Ensure that you keep the communication lines open.

Building relationships with families

- Send a welcome/introduction letter to families at the beginning of the year.
- Make sure families are aware of the school's communication system, and the best method for reaching you.
- Connect directly with families whose children struggled the previous year; connect prior to start-up and see if there is anything they may need to help them with a successful return. You may decide to enlist in your support staff (Counselors, Indigenous Support Workers, Child and Youth Care Workers, Resource Teachers) to reach out to these families in the first few weeks of the school year.
- Ensure families know how they can best support their children and the school.

Building relationships with other relevant teams or individuals

Every district and school context are unique. Take the time to be intentional in building relationships with those who will be part of your daily work contacts – either directly or indirectly. For some, that might be your district's Inclusive Education or Indigenous Education department staff, or it might be the staff at the community

centre or daycare next door. You will know your community best. And if you are new to your site, take the time to ask questions to ensure you are reaching all key people who support your school community.

Being intentional about relationship building early in the school year is essential for everyone's success. The time you take building relationships early on with stakeholders and community members will make difficult conversations later in the year easier to manage. It can also help to set a trusting and positive tone among the staff, encouraging individuals to feel comfortable and confident, to take risks, and to be involved. It may also reduce the likelihood of legal and formal issues down the road.

And while building relationships is important at the beginning of any school year, it is equally important to take the time to prepare yourself for the formal and legal aspects of the job to ensure all-round readiness. We recommend that whether you are a seasoned administrator, or new to the role, that you make the time each year to review the documents and strategies which will support the more technical aspects of your work:

- Familiarize yourself with your district's **Policies and Administrative Procedures**. These are often sent out by district staff but are accessible on the district's website. From a Member Support Services perspective, policies and procedures that relate to Human Resources and staff, and to respectful workplace issues such as harassment and bullying, are especially relevant.
- Take time to look through the **Collective Agreements**, especially those of the teachers and support staff. Review clauses pertaining to class sizes and composition, hours of work, working conditions, and expectations around areas such as meeting attendance.
- Meet with your **Staff Reps** early on, and

on a regular basis: it's a best practice to keep the communications lines open! Don't wait to be approached with a problem – be proactive, genuinely curious, and committed to working together.

- Meet early on, and regularly with your **office staff and custodial staff**. Regularly scheduled meetings can be a crucial piece in ensuring that your school runs smoothly.
- Review your **own employment contract**. Make sure you have a copy. Is it current? Are you aware of all the clauses in the contract? Familiarity with your own contract is a helpful proactive measure.
- Review the **School Act** – specifically sections that relate to your work as a Vice-Principal or Principal (Section 5).
- Ensure that you and the teachers on your team are familiar with the **TRB Professional Standards**. This is a crucial step in ensuring that the Standards are being upheld and can pre-empt formal complaints being lodged.
- Ensure that you and the teachers on your staff review the **BC redesigned curriculum**.
- Take the time to review the **BCPVPA Leadership Standards**. These form the basis for the work that you do as Principals and Vice-Principals, and in many districts, they are the criteria for hiring and evaluation.
- Look at the school organization structure in the Collective Agreement – there may be language on how **Staff Meetings and Staff Committee Meetings** are structured. Keep in mind that different districts often have different structures and clauses in the Collective Agreement when it comes to staff committees. If you have changed districts, it is possible that the language is different from what you are used to.
- Plan the year's **calendar** collaboratively as early as possible: ensure important dates from previous years (reporting dates, regular meetings) are

planned and publicized well ahead of time.

- Ensure that your **school plan and district plan** are accessible, and that staff are aware of these important plans.
- Meet early on with your **PAC Chair**, and set regular meetings if you can: communication is key!
- Familiarize yourself with the **confidential files** and gain an awareness of the students and families as best you can. Ensure that students who require IEPs are appropriately matched with case managers.
- Ensure that office staff (and other relevant staff) know about court orders, safety alerts and other immediate **student safety issues**.

September is a busy, complex time for all Principals and Vice-Principals. Your role is pivotal in ensuring a safe and smooth start-up for students, and success for staff. Your community needs you, so remember to look after yourself and your own well-being. Know your limits, and show compassion to yourself and to others: be calm, kind, and safe! Set personal boundaries and maintain healthy living when it comes to sleep, exercise, and nutrition. Engage in self-care or learn more about what you can do to be proactive. Remember to connect with professional and personal support networks when help is needed. As a BCPVPA member, you have access to **humanworks** and the **Early Intervention Program (EIP)**, the support of the Member Support Services Team, and other resources.

Whether you are a Principal with years of experience, or a Vice-Principal new to the job, remember that the **Member Support Services** team is here to answer any questions or concerns related to your professional role. *We all wish you the very best in this new school year – filled with hope, health, and renewal!*

