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Overheard today: "I'm looking forward to 'precedented' times..."



Precedented *TIMES*

by
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From September to June, since I was five years old, every Sunday has been a school night. For me, Sunday has been a field of battling tensions: a day of leisure, overshadowed by the evening homework or preparations for the inevitable Monday feeling of back to school. Lazy Sunday had a shelf life, and would certainly expire. And August is the Sunday of summer.

It was at lunch on a day in late August 2020 that I heard a lovely young woman named Sophie, an Education Assistant working in a Vancouver school, make a declaration that spoke to me and captured a sentiment shared by many: "I'm looking forward to 'precedented' times." I remember laughing at her clever wordplay, having grown exceptionally tired of everything being **unprecedented**. At that moment in time, it already had been a long haul since COVID-19 profoundly affected our personal and professional lives. We were yet unaware of the journey ahead for 2020-21, and blissfully unable to foresee the apex of Day 141, on which 179 Principals would issue exposure notifications to their communities. As we moved through to June of 2021 and put closure to the school year, it seemed that 'precedented times' awaited us on the other side of August.

As June ended, The Honourable Jennifer Whiteside, BC Minister of Education, announced that educators and families could look forward to a 'near-normal' return to school in September. The news was received with optimism, and hope for a more settled future. Near-normal is an interesting term, both attractive and curious. Attraction lay in the word 'normal', something all of society has been pining for: a return to a life

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resembling one we had before March of 2020. Our curiosity is piqued as we contemplate just how 'near' to our former lives we will be. Soon after the Minister's announcement, a BCPVPA member shared with me her intent to reject the description of near-normal for the coming fall, choosing instead to look forward to something more **typical**.

She argued that there is no such thing as normal, particularly in a system that has a hard reset each September: students arriving new to the buildings or even the community; teachers and supporting staff moving to new schools or beginning a new career direction; Principals and Vice-Principals assuming the leadership of buildings new to them and, in some cases, buildings that are new to the entire community! Changes and transitions among senior leadership of our school districts further contribute to the reboot. Alongside this change will be those who are returning to a familiar setting; yet they, too, will experience a shift, surrounded by many new faces, creating new dynamics, and traversing unknown landscapes.

Whether typical, near-normal, orprecedented, in September of 2021 we find ourselves in a 'Back to School' season that looks and feels closer to those of our past.

Inprecedented times, the waning summer and the anticipation of a return to classes clashed within me. Back to School was an excuse for shopping, the delicious anticipation found in gathering up fresh supplies for school – the pens & pencils, rulers, cases, protractors, and paper – not to mention the new school clothes which, I must confess, were my favourite part. The clothes purchased in August were off-limits until school began, and I couldn't wait to wear them. New duds contributed to that sense of a

fresh start. The satisfaction I felt was not diminished when I had worn all the new clothes by Thursday of the first week.

Back to School 2021 will find families supply shopping for a near-normal year – more students returning to in-school instruction makes the Zoom wardrobe insufficient again! – but new items could appear on the supply lists of old. We may continue to carry a supply of masks as they can offer a sense of security as we recover our comfort with each other in our buildings. There may even be times, in different places around BC, when local guidance will call for a brief implementation of safety measures. While buildings and classrooms will continue to encourage diligent hand hygiene, our lists will still certainly include cloths and sanitizers for personal use.

After the shopping is a memory, students and staff will arrive on school doorsteps. And while a new school year typically begins with some apprehension, Back to School 2021 may arrive with more than its typical share of anxious moments. Struck to advise the K-12 Education Steering Committee, the Mental Health School Start-Up Working Group cited a number of research and data collection projects which spoke to the impacts of COVID-19 on students, families, and educators. While there is not yet a complete understanding of both short-term and long-term mental health impacts, the Working Group noted that students reported an increase in stress and a decrease in well-being; and educators reported that their mental and physical health worsened during the pandemic.

The Working Group brought together partners in education, mental and public health, and government. Their collaborative efforts identified key principles, strategies, recommended actions, and resources to support the 'near-normal' school start and a recovery from the pandemic. Those principles, [a guide for educators and school leaders](#), are meaningful in any and every September; however, 2021 may require that they are more duly emphasized.

We have important work ahead. When it comes to understanding another's experience of the pandemic, it will be crucial to humbly acknowledge ourselves as learners. Members of our school communities have

"...THE WORKING GROUP

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been impacted in different ways by the pandemic, and we must provide supports and services proportional to the impact or the need. We must each make a personal commitment to be culturally responsive. We must pay particular attention to students who have not been connected to school and develop specific plans to connect with them. We must take time and ensure a shared understanding when teaching or discussing trauma, anxiety, and stress. And, we must pay particular attention to identifying and reflecting upon the strengths of individuals so that we may mobilize resources in ways to complement those existing strengths.

The strategies noted by the Working Group are also found in the Ministry's Mental Health in Schools Strategy document. Among them is a subset of seven strategies, particularly focused on the integral and interrelated components of **resilience**:

- build **competence** through inquiry, exploration, and new learning;
- build **confidence** by providing scaffolds to support learning;
- build **connection** with opportunities that foster connection and understanding;
- build **character** with practice that promotes responsibility and self-regulation over compliance;
 - make room for **contribution** to classrooms, school, and community;
- support healthy ways of **coping** with stress and anxiety for children and adults; and
- provide appropriate opportunities for choice and voice to support a sense of **control**.

Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe offers powerful thinking about resiliency in her book *Calm Within the Storm*, an excellent addition to our resources for 'near-normal'. BCPVPA member Margaret Paxton reviewed Dr. Hanley-Dafoe's book in the June edition of *Principled*.

In *Calm Within the Storm*, Dr. Hanley-Dafoe conjures the metaphor of lighthouses. She says they are her favourite "type of structure in the world... spellbound by their grandeur, beauty, strength, and purpose." She further unpacks the analogy, encouraging her readers to identify their lighthouses: "From what do you draw direction, connection, strength, and focus in your life?" She asserts that we can do hard things; we are brave and courageous in the face of change and uncertainty, and we will rally, reclaim, rise, and thrive. "We are enough. We have always been enough just by virtue of our existence." I think it not a coincidence that BCPVPA Director of Member Health & Wellbeing Rochelle Morandini adopted this same metaphor in her summary of the results from our spring Thriving in Education Survey. An intent of the survey was to uncover workplace factors and environments which contribute to a school leader's state of thriving. Rochelle used the metaphor to describe our 2,600 members, for they have been the lighthouses for students, staff, and parents during the storm of COVID-19.

The survey revealed very interesting information. Better than three-quarters of respondents indicated a strong confidence in their capacity to handle the many expectations of their roles. However, a somewhat greater proportion of respondents also stated they have felt overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of their work through the spring of 2021, ending their days feeling mentally and/or physically exhausted. It is unquestionable that the work intensification for Principals and Vice-Principals has significantly increased in recent years. Perhaps the most telling discovery in the survey came when respondents were asked if they were willing to give extra effort at work as needed, despite their fatigue: 92% answered that they would give more.

Our members offered rich anecdotal comments

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and insights. One survey question asked, "What services have you received from the BCPVPA that you believe supported your workplace wellbeing?" As I read through, one response to this question surfaced and it has become a personal lighthouse for me – as Robyne would say, something to "look out for and pay attention to." Our member answered,

"... can't think of any, I delete the emails without reading them because I am overwhelmed with real work, don't have time

to read them, and don't feel they align with the realistic nature of my day."

Simon Sinek writes that "fulfillment is not a lottery" and that, as leaders, we have a responsibility to create "an environment in which the people in your charge feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves..." This is as true for the president of an association as it is for the Principal of a school.

A second response to the survey question noted above called for the presence of the BCPVPA in our chapters, when and as needed. I have often shared the story of my 'why', and it is bound in servant leadership. As we engage in 'Leading Back to School' in this last year of my term, I re-commit my energies to establishing meaningful connections with our membership. It is my sincere hope that the year ahead provides many opportunities for me to meet with our members, face to face, in order to serve their needs and align with the realistic natures of their days, be they typical, near-normal, or unprecedented.



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