

BCPVPA
A Word from the Executive Director
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Supporting the Next Generation

Helping New-to-Role Principals and Vice-Principals Thrive

In 1998, I was happily teaching at a middle school in Port Coquitlam. I was team leader of a small but intrepid group of energetic and passionate teachers, I was loving working with 'my kids', and I felt like I was finally hitting my stride after five years of being in the classroom. My Principal and Vice-Principal at the time were role models for effective school leadership; they were kind, knowledgeable, hard-working, and supportive of the staff in making good things happen for students.

Early in that school year, my Vice-Principal encouraged me to apply for a Vice-Principalship. My response? Not a chance! Why would I leave doing something I loved to take on a role that, frankly, didn't look like much fun. She laughed and encouraged me to at least consider the idea. A few months later, the Principal broached the same subject and, after a good deal of thought, I made the fateful decision to apply. One month later, I found myself packing my boxes over the winter holiday to take on a middle school Vice-Principalship. I still remember the feeling of "what have I done?" as I drove to work that first day of school in 1999, excited, petrified, and certain that I was an imposter.

Twenty-six years later, as I find myself on the other end of a long, winding, sometimes difficult, always rewarding career in school and district leadership, I reflect on that first year as a school leader and compare my experience to that of our newest members who are new-to-role Principals and Vice-Principals in 2025. Although there are many similarities, the job has also become dramatically more complex and, as a result, the day-to-day experience of our newest members has also become more complex and infinitely more challenging.



In recent years, the BCPVPA has noted an increase in the number of new-to-role Principals and Vice-Principals who have identified that they are struggling. Being new to a leadership role has always been challenging, and we may remember our own feelings of being in over our heads, mourning the loss of the support of our teacher colleagues, and feeling like we were drinking from a fire hose while barely keeping our heads above water.

For me, what made the critical difference that first year was the kindness and support of my more experienced colleagues who reached out, offered a hand and a listening ear, and encouraged me to stay the course, no matter how hard things felt. Looking back, it was that support that kept me afloat one day at a time, sometimes one hour at a time. I would not have survived without them.

Stepping into the role of a Principal or Vice-Principal is both an honour and a high-stakes challenge. Across British Columbia, as in many other regions, new-to-role school leaders are navigating increasingly

complex educational landscapes, characterized by the complexities of our post-pandemic society, equity and inclusion demands, staffing shortages, and heightened expectations for instructional leadership. While these new leaders bring enthusiasm and fresh perspectives, they also face a steep learning curve.

For experienced Principals and Vice-Principals, this is a moment that presents a critical opportunity for consideration: to mentor, uplift, and help ensure that the next generation of school leaders not only survives, but thrives.

The Complex Realities of Being “New-to-Role”

Regardless of their previous experiences, new Principals and Vice-Principals often quickly discover that the leap into school leadership is not just a change in responsibilities: it is a shift in identity. My current and past experience in leadership roles tells me that several challenges tend to surface early on:

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- **Isolation:** New school leaders often feel isolated in their roles, particularly in smaller or rural districts where peer support may be limited. The transition from being “part of the team” to leading the team can be lonely.
- **Decision Fatigue:** The volume and complexity of decisions required daily — from student discipline to staffing to crisis management — can be overwhelming, especially when every choice feels high stakes.
- **Imposter Syndrome:** Many new school leaders doubt their readiness, even when they have earned their position through years of hard work and preparation. The weight of expectations — real or perceived — can sap confidence.
- **Time Management:** The shift to school leadership brings an unrelenting schedule. New leaders often struggle to find time for strategic thinking amidst urgent operational tasks.
- **Navigating Relationships:** Establishing trust with staff while asserting leadership is delicate. Balancing collegiality with authority doesn’t always come easily, especially in some school communities.
- **Equity and Inclusion Work:** New leaders are expected to champion equity and reconciliation, often without the preparation or support to confidently engage in this critical work.

These realities are magnified in districts that may be facing unique pressures that can include declining enrollment, limited access to specialist staff, or community trauma, conditions that are not uncommon across BC.

What Experienced Leaders Can Do

Experienced Principals and Vice-Principals are uniquely positioned to provide the kind of practical wisdom, reassurance, and solidarity that new school leaders crave. Here are some ways to offer meaningful support:

1. Be Proactive in Reaching Out

Don’t wait for a new colleague to ask for help. A simple call, email, or coffee invitation can go a long way. Early in the school year, make it a point to check in with a new colleague. A quick, “How’s it going this week?” can open the door to more substantial conversations.

2. Normalize the Learning Curve

Remind new leaders that *no one* walks into this job fully prepared. Share your own early missteps — those moments when things didn’t go according to plan — and how you recovered. Hearing that respected colleagues also faced uncertainty helps reduce the stigma around vulnerability.

3. Offer Practical Advice Without Judgment

Sometimes, new leaders just need to be told, “It’s okay to leave emails unanswered for a few hours,” or, “Here’s how I prioritize my day when everything feels urgent.” Offer systems and routines that have worked for you, and be open to hearing their solutions too.

4. Acknowledge the Emotional Labour

Recognize that this work is emotionally demanding. Affirm the humanity of what they are doing. A simple message of, “You’re carrying a lot — and you’re doing the best that anyone could, given the circumstances,” can provide powerful validation.

5. Celebrate Small Wins

New school leaders often don’t pause to recognize what is going well. Help them celebrate their progress by identifying small successes and keeping their focus on the positives, despite the challenges.

Building a Culture of Collegial Support

Districts and schools thrive when leadership is shared, supported, and sustainable. While mentorship programs and formal supports are valuable, a culture of collegial generosity — where experienced leaders view the success of new colleagues as a shared responsibility — can have an equally powerful impact.

Supporting new leaders is not only about kindness; it is about stewardship. The health of our education system depends on retaining capable, compassionate leaders who feel confident and connected in their roles. In a time when burnout and turnover are real concerns, particularly in rural and high-needs contexts, experienced school and district leaders have an essential role to play in strengthening the bench.

Every school leader remembers their early days, when the job felt bigger than they were, and the stakes were impossibly high. In those moments it is people that make a difference. A mentor who listens. A colleague who checks in. A voice that says, “You’ve got this — and you’re not alone.”

So, to the seasoned school leaders across our province: your experience is more than expertise — it can be a gift. We know you are also busy, but we hope that by reaching out — even once or twice — to a new colleague, you will also reap the benefit of those new connections. We ask you to share your experiences generously. Our schools, our communities, our Association — and, ultimately, the students we serve — will all be stronger for it.

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