

The work and responsibilities of school leaders can vary greatly from elementary to middle to secondary, from region to region, and from school to school.

A Day in the Life offers a snapshot of BCPVPA members in their roles, and shares their thoughts on their path, their practice, and why they love what they do.

In our ninth installment of the series,
we meet Riley McMitchell, Vice-Principal of
Dr. George M. Weir Elementary School
in Vancouver, SD 39.

When Riley McMitchell first set out, his career path was a lot different than the one he walks today. Riley first trained as an opera singer, completing an undergraduate degree in Opera Performance at UBC, and embarked upon a performance career that took him back and forth to Europe. But the reality of days, weeks, and months on the road took its toll. “I realized pretty quickly, after a few years, that they don’t talk about the life that goes with that career,” says Riley. “It was pretty lonely, and as much as I love music, and I love singing, I couldn’t see myself doing that for the rest of my life.” Riley returned permanently to Canada. With his background, he began teaching voice and realized that he loved inspiring both adults and kids, and connecting with people. He started conducting choirs and, for four years, was a student service worker supporting kids with special needs in Vancouver, before enrolling in the bridging program at SFU where he became a teacher.

After teaching for nearly ten years – music in elementary school, in the classroom, and as a K -5 learning support teacher– Riley obtained his master’s degree and began a role in staff development in the Coquitlam school district. “I worked as a curriculum coordinator and then as a mentor teacher, someone who works with new-to-role teachers who are seeking a critical friend or partner to help them develop their practice. I also developed curricular initiatives and professional development as part of an amazing team of people, and I learned so much there. One of my jobs was supervising the 13 Strong Start sites in Coquitlam. We would get together for

A Day in the Life of an Elementary School Vice-Principal



Riley connecting with Dr. George M. Weir Elementary students

staff meetings, I would visit their learning environments and get to know some of their kids, and we had set professional growth goals together. I also did all the hiring and the budgeting which was a real departure from my previous experiences as an educator. It was really like having a mini team of remote classrooms, and I loved it. I learned a tremendous amount from those early childhood educators, not only from a pedagogical standpoint but also from a people standpoint of how to work with others, specifically groups of professionals.”

Riley moved into the role of a Vice-Principal in 2020 and continued his leadership journey. “When you’re working with adults, there’s a balance between having people be a part of a bigger collective vision, but making sure that people have their own professional autonomy within that. It’s a balance of singular versus collective: it’s really important, and people need both. I’d say that’s where you learn that leadership is really a service role. You’re there to support people and help people, and

that looks different depending on the types of people that you work with. People have different needs, and some people need more support. Some people need you to stand in the background to just observe and encourage... I loved the process of thinking this through and getting a sense of being responsive to what people need. I would say that I’m still continually realizing that a lot of the things that I learned in my earlier roles do directly transfer into my role as an administrator. Everybody leads in a different way and, for me, people are people. So much of the job is about people, and about building a team.”

“A lot of it is informal and you have to start with building relationships and establishing trust. Just like with kids, you start from a strength-based perspective. I try to go around and notice and name things, because what you shine a light on says a lot about what you value. Everybody needs to be validated; everybody needs to know that they are bringing their own unique

strengths and skills to their work. I try to think about the public versus private acknowledgement of that; some people prefer just a little tap on the shoulder, a little post-it note that you stick or hide somewhere. For some people, I'll take pictures of things that I see and reflect them back in PowerPoints and staff meetings. I think it's really about building and recognizing lighthouses of strength everywhere, and that says a lot about us as educators because the things that you highlight are the things that you value."

With Riley's move to Dr. George M. Weir Elementary in early 2020, his prior experience in supervising the Strong Start sites was going to come in handy. Alongside Principal Heather Gascoigne, Riley found himself in a unique situation. "Not all seismic upgrade projects are created equal," says Riley. "There are some situations where you build a new school across the field and then – when it's ready – you just move across, but that wasn't our reality. We are split into three sites: we have five divisions at the local high school, five more divisions at one elementary school, and five more divisions at another elementary school."

The seismic upgrade began during spring break, right at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; in total, it will be about two-and-a-half years of disruption. Riley smiles. "I'd say that any new Vice-Principal has a steep learning curve, but I feel like mine's been super-sized! And, I was coming from working in Coquitlam, so it was a switch of districts as well. I stepped into my new role in Vancouver, and at that time we hadn't had all of the kids return yet because of the pandemic. You want to still make a place feel like one school when you're split three ways during a pandemic. The regular ways that you would find to keep people connected weren't possible, because we couldn't physically gather."

In September 2020, there were many details to figure out with Dr. George M. Weir Elementary split over three sites. There were 150 kids online under Vancouver's Option Four program, where some kids stayed at home to learn when families didn't feel ready to go back to school. Students were busing to

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two of the sites, and one site was a high school. "I was getting to know the staff, and getting to know the kids – with masks on! I was learning kids' names and faces by what's up here (Riley gestures to his eyes and forehead, and laughs). And I wasn't able to connect or meet up with families either, because they weren't coming into schools at that point. It was a tremendous job to figure out ways to keep our community connected and feeling like one place. The creativity that was required was something that I really loved."

"All of these challenges were stressful; when members of our teaching staff would call in sick, there were a number of times that, due to the high volume of absences on a particular day in our district, we would not have a replacement for them, so we all had to work together to fill the gaps. I filled 37 days of teaching in the classrooms, but there's a silver lining there, because you get to know the kids in a different way when you spend the day with them. I got to appreciate the inner workings of a teacher's classroom, and the invaluable role of the support staff. In a way, it was stressful, but I'm glad it happened because it allowed me to get to know both staff and students in a deeper way. And, with this project, I've learned that there is nothing that you can take for granted, from a communication perspective. We don't have a staff sign-in book in the morning where you can just jot down some notes. You can't necessarily

A Defining Moment

just run down the hall and chat with someone. You have to think through your communication process and make things very clean and clear. You have to say the same thing in different ways and multiple times so that people get the necessary information, feel informed, and aren't left guessing about things."

Riley found that connection was the most critical element to keeping the students and staff feeling like a community, even over three sites. "We hold regular staff meetings virtually, but we do a lot of community and team building during them. We start with fun engaging opening activities. Also, we try to bring in a lot of humor, music, and photos. I build a week-at-a-glance each week with things that we need from all three sites. We use Microsoft Teams a lot. We hold virtual assemblies once a month that have been key to feeling like one school. The classes contribute – I get a group of kids from a class to be hosts. We do a lot of photographs, pictures, and videos from different places so that the kids can see each other, and staff can see what is happening in the classrooms at the other sites. Anytime that we've been able to physically meet, we really take advantage of that. I know now with in-person meetings that we can't start right away, because people haven't seen each other in a few months: you've got to give it 20 or 30 minutes, you have to weave that time in, and that's probably the most important part of getting together - people just reconnecting."

The challenges of distance and being in motion between three sites has meant that parents and families have also needed that mindful connection, as many families have children at more than one site. "Every day, I start my morning at the high school and Heather starts at the buses. That is an informal time, outside, where we can chat with families. They know where we are every day, that if they need to find Heather, families can go to the buses, and if they want to chat with me, they can walk to the outer courtyard of the high school. That consistency and visibility is so important right now. That way, you're not always dealing with families when things go wrong. And if you do get to where you have challenges, you have

"I was working as a student support worker in a kindergarten classroom. There was a boy in the kindergarten class whose dad was in the military, in the Canadian Army, and he passed away in service. When Father's Day came around, I thought, how are we going to support this kid? We asked him about a person in his life that he really looked up to, and who helped him with all those kindergarten things. A person he could talk to if he needed help: that was who he should make his project for.

"And then, on Father's Day, he had put his project on my desk. He made me a little card, and did a little art project, and I realized in that moment just the type of effect that you can have, and how powerful that is. That's the first conscious moment that I can

think of where I said:

I want to be a teacher."

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that pre-established relationship that helps ground the work together."

"The project is scheduled to be completed this summer and we are crossing our fingers. Right now, it's still a construction site; there's a building there now, they're putting the siding on, they have the roof on, but it's really hard to know for sure, because the construction industry also has staffing challenges due to COVID-19. But I will say that *another* silver lining of being placed here is learning about the whole project management side of the school district. I had no idea: I've never worked with architects before, or the project manager of a construction company... It's a whole other side of education: buildings need to be built! This isn't something I thought I'd ever get exposure to, so I'm really grateful for that too."

Alongside the new learning of being a part of a seismic upgrade, Riley has been deeply involved in professional development both at his schools, and with the BCPVPA. "When I worked in staff development, I saw how having instructional leadership and learning something collaboratively, really builds teams and can transform schools. People go into education because they like to learn and they care about learning. When you build a common vision that involves learning together, amazing things can happen and a school starts to become more than the sum of its parts. For

me — as a teacher, and from a curricular perspective — I was always involved in professional development. I loved learning and finding innovative ways to lift kids up as readers, and find engaging ways to inspire kids to love mathematics and to think both creatively and critically. I find now that my interest in professional learning is more geared towards people. It's less about curricular areas, and more learning how people work — I find that fascinating. It's had an impact on my work in staff development, as an instructional coach and in learning how to be a good listener. How to hear what people are saying — and how to hear what they're *not* saying — and to be a mirror back to them. Those are really useful skills that can bridge over into your personal life. You always want to be a better listener, and ask thoughtful questions to learn more about other people's perspectives in gentle ways. I love learning about people, and I love learning about how groups of people function, where things started, what makes things fall off the rails. I think I have made a lot of mistakes along the way but that is probably true for most people. I feel like the 'people learning' is something I've become really passionate about."

Riley recognizes that this small shift in his leadership, and that heightened awareness of collaborative learning, has had an impact. "I think it helps me establish credibility, because I have a strong pedagogical background as an educator. I also understand a little bit — and I'm still learning — about how to resolve conflicts, and how to have difficult conversations. There are some times when people come to you, and their motivation for talking to you is for you to help them solve a problem. But there are other times when people come to you because they just want you to hear them. Sometimes, you're *just* there to listen and reflect. It's important to know the *difference* between those situations and decide which route is most helpful. That's something that I was consciously doing before going into administration, and I find myself continuing to try to weave it in as much as I can."

There are a few key things that make Riley proud of the work that he is doing. "The first is building and



Riley "on set" with BCPVPA's Andrea McComb during a virtual PLD event

maintaining trust and relationships with the people in this community. A seismic upgrade is a really trying event for a community, especially during a pandemic. Heather and I have worked really hard to keep that cohesion, that feeling of being 'one place', even though we're spread over three places. The other thing that I'm really proud of, as being a queer person and a part of the LGBTQ community, is being a visible leader. When I grew up, I didn't have anybody who I could look up to in that way. There were no gay role models – I didn't see anyone and say, "I could be like that". To think that I, as my authentic self, could be that role model for kids is really important to me. Attached to that, I think we need to be really careful – and to continue to be really thoughtful – about making sure that we are supporting all kinds of leaders; that we're making sure that all different people are given those leadership opportunities, not even just becoming a Vice-Principal, but as leaders within our school system. It's critical to lift everybody up, because that

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Children's Book Project

“A way to address issues and inclusion in our schools is through harnessing the power of stories. It's accessible, and it makes told in a narrative form, powerful stories in your that you *do* with those the discussions you have, that



Fauja Singh Keeps Going
By Simran Jeet Singh
Illustrated by Baljinder Kaur
Penguin Random House 2020

really make it meaningful. I've known Harjinder Sandhu in the Vancouver School District for a long time. She was the Principal at a school where I was a special education assistant, and she's one of those people who is not afraid to face issues head on. She's very connected with the South Asian population in Vancouver and abroad, and she knew of someone who was writing the book **Fauja Singh**. It's about a Sikh man who runs a marathon at more than 100 years old – I was immediately interested, because we have staff and students who are part of the South Asian population, and for me visibility really matters. Harjinder bought a copy of the book for every school in Vancouver out of her own personal funds, and I got a copy for each of our sites. I wanted to do something important with this book, but as we are split over three sites and can't gather, what would we do? I was talking to a few teachers and we came up with the idea of getting kids to read aloud and record it. During the pandemic, and during staff development work, I learned how to use iMovie pretty well; I recorded some kids reading pages of the book and put it together, and then we showed it at one of our virtual recognition assemblies. It was powerful! So, every month, as part of our virtual recognition assembly, we think as a team of a story that addresses and makes visible the kids in our school. We get different kids reading the stories, and they love seeing themselves – and, they love seeing each other because they're all watching it at the same time. Now the kids come up to me, and they suggest books to read, and they always want to read; they know I'm coming, and they all volunteer.

Underneath this, I try to choose kids that aren't always recognized. I deliberately pick kids that have learning challenges – our English language learners have special needs – and make them visible. What you sometimes don't see in the recordings are some of our special education assistants (SSWs) holding up the words that they've been practicing, and it's a really powerful experience. Then, all the other kids in the school see those kids as capable and contributing. It's been one of the key ways that we keep our community connected, because the kids at different sites can't see each other in person.”

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**WEIR
ELEMENTARY
ONLY**

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Wonder Child

“One big thing that I took from my time in staff development was for every team member in our school to choose a ‘wonder child’. A wonder child doesn’t necessarily mean the child is wonderful. It means that it’s a child that the person wonders about, when working with them and looking at them through a lens of social emotional learning and self-regulation. We’re using a book to guide us right now, and we have book clubs about it, but every six weeks we get together and we talk about our wonder child: the things that we’re trying with them, what’s going well, what can we do differently. It helps us to look at kids from a strengths-based perspective and meet them where they’re at. All of the staff fill out a very informal observation sheet, and I collate the data and reflect it back to them with the themes that are emerging. It helps us to look at kids in a different light, to observe closely and think outside the box about ways that we can help them. And, when we look at one kid that way, the sneaky part is that it actually helps us to look at all the kids that way.”

traditional paradigm of the intimidating suit and tie leadership doesn’t need to be the default anymore. There is space for all different kinds of leaders, and schools need different kinds of people to support and serve them.”

For the students that Riley works with each year, he feels the most important thing is for them to know themselves, and to feel safe, both physically and emotionally, at school being themselves. “I want them to know what they’re good at. I want them to feel hopeful about their future. I would say that my biggest hope is for them to understand the potential they all have to make an impact in their own special way and to be seen for who they really are at school. That’s at the root of the school-wide read-aloud project (see sidebar, *Children’s Book Project*): to make all of the kids in our community visible (not just the white kids). We are made up of such a diverse population of kids and families from all different backgrounds and we need to reflect that in schools.”

For his own leadership development and exploring the impact he can make, mentorship has been a constant in Riley’s learning journey. “I have to say that I’ve had an amazing group of mentors. Most of them are women; it is both sad and awe-inspiring to hear about the perseverance and grit required to work through many of the obstacles they encountered as women in leadership. They make up the bulk of the people who have mentored me; it’s really important to acknowledge the incredible role that women play in education and as educational leaders.”

Riley adds, “It’s also important to note that it can be a challenging circumstance to be placed in, to learn as a leader, but my Principal – Heather – is one of the longest-serving Principals in the district. It’s been a huge gift: she is one of those incredible female leaders that I am blessed to have in my life. Heather is a quiet leader who prefers to support people from the background. And, she is intensely humble; there are some people who may think that if she’s been a school administrator for 30 years, she might be stuck in her ways, but Heather is incredibly flexible and

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open-minded, and so supportive of the things that I'm suggesting, and that we're trying. She is a perfect mix of someone who is incredibly experienced with years of strategic decision-making under her belt, and who has an openness to new ideas. As she's nearing the end of her career, she's shared that the opportunity to be a good mentor to me has been one of the most important and enjoyable opportunities of her career. As well, through our discussions and planning as administrative partners, she is appreciating the mentorship experience as an opportunity to reflect on the priorities we bring to the craft of school leadership. Between learning from Heather and the administrators at the other swing sites, I really have to say I have won the lottery."

Riley feels that every leader has a different perspective on the leadership role. "For me, I would say that you're a caretaker of a community. That's pretty broad and means a lot of different things, but I do believe that your job is a service job, and your job is to take care of people: staff, and kids, and families. For me, it's a privilege to do that." And, as with any role, there can be the challenges. "I can only speak to the last couple of years of leading during the pandemic but staffing and operationalizing your school can be challenging. You also have to acknowledge that people's baseline for stress is different right now. We're not in a field where we can work from home; we're in a living, breathing community where people's stress affects

other people. So, you need to acknowledge that sometimes people may have reactions that are bigger than what you expect them to be, and to provide space for that. You need to know that sometimes if someone is having a meltdown about a coffee cup, it's not about the coffee cup."

"I think you can tell that I am not into the hierarchical model in education. To me, it's important to be somebody that people can talk to; it takes longer for some people than for others, and I'm still always a bit shocked when I realize that the role that I hold can get in the way of people letting their guard down. You understand that you have a role and responsibilities, but you don't want people to feel ill at ease. Sometimes that's from their prior experience with leadership, and it's important to give people space, and trust that over time they'll feel comfortable with you. I'm honestly not used to people feeling ill at ease with me – I'm not someone who is formal in my role – so when I experience that, I do what I can to make people feel comfortable over time, and that's just building relationships."

Riley has some words of advice for influencers in the sector, and educators considering school leadership. "I'd say that being a school leader is a humbling experience and it is a service role. So, if you're going into school leadership thinking that you want to be the boss, that's probably not the right motivation to go into this role. I would say that, as a *system*, it's really important for us to broaden our scope of who we are lifting up as leaders. An educator shouldn't be thinking, "I'm not the stereotypical version of a leader". That's wrong. You can be any type of leader that you want to be. But it's a responsibility. You really are a caretaker of a community, and you need to make the decision as to whether you're willing to hold that. And then, if you are certain you want to take it on, you probably already are a leader in your context, and it becomes a more formal version of that."



@McMitchellRiley

A Day in the Life of an Elementary Vice-Principal

5:30 am	Wake up, check Teams, email, and staff absences Have espresso
6:00 am	Go to CrossFit
7:00 am	Eat breakfast and get ready
7:45 am	Arrive at Weir@Killarney (high school site) Check employee absences and communicate plan to cover any unfilled roles Put out school sandwich boards Check in with Weir@Killarney staff
8:30 am	Supervise outside area of Weir@Killarney
9:10 am	Chat with Heather (Principal) about plans for day and any issues with buses
9:30 am	Leave for Weir@MacCorkindale. Check on primary students with special needs and Weir staff at site Meet with site Principal, Jim. Review latest H & S guidelines and prepare PPT for next virtual staff meeting

"I get up at 5:30 am: (Riley laughs) It's sad, but the first thing that I do in the morning is to check Teams, check my email, and check our employee management system to see who is away. Most districts are experiencing staffing challenges right now. I want to know as soon as possible if there are people away, because I need to figure out a plan for coverage. I am a CrossFitter, so I down a shot of espresso when I go to the gym, and I work out from 6:00 – 7:00 am. I race home to shower and eat breakfast then try to arrive at work at about 7:45 am. I then use that time to check if there are any changes, or any 'must-dos' that have emerged. There are emails from families, and I also use that time until about 8:30 am to check in with our staff at the high school, as we are in one wing of the high school. From 8:30 to about 9:10 am, I supervise outside at the high school – that was part of the deal with the families, as they wanted to know that there was an administrator there at the beginning and end of every day. With our grade fives, sixes, and sevens at the high school, families wanted that potential mix with the high schoolers to be supervised. It's also my chance to chat with the kids as they're lining up to wait for their teacher, and with some of the SSWs. We have a 'walking school bus' from our old site up to the high school, and I have my eye out for them as they walk up the pathway.

At about 9:10 am I head inside, and Heather comes up from the buses. We usually chat for about 20 minutes about what we need to do, coordinating when we will be at each site, and then at 9:30 am I am on my way (to one of the other sites); I usually go to Dr. H. N. MacCorkindale Elementary School, which is where our youngest classes are. We have a lot of complex kids in kindergarten and grade one, and a lot of support staff, so I go there and connect with people. One thing I find – because you're not physically in their building all day long – is that when you arrive at the door, if the team has something to talk about, they are there right away. I also get to connect with the site administrator at the school, because that's the other thing: I'm not just learning from one administrator, I've got three different teams of people, and people who choose to lead in totally different ways with different communities. They're incredible supports, of course, when we're not there. They're helping us and helping the kids.

I usually supervise recess, and then I make my way to the other sites, and go through a similar process. In between, we don't really have an office, so I set up camp wherever I possibly can. And, of course, over the day, some of our little friends make poor choices and there are going to be some behaviour challenges. I'll definitely spend some time in my day walking them through that, and what to

do differently. And throw in some resources and teaching there as well, because I do have a teaching load that is mostly resource, ELL (English Language Learner), and learning assistance. I connect with the staff at the third site over lunch, and head back to the high school in the afternoon to do the end of day supervision. From 3:30 pm to 5:00 pm, I work on the 'must-do' list, which can range from needs assessments, to the beginning of the year planning, to things with school-based teams, to corresponding and connecting with families. Something like planning our virtual assemblies is a huge job, along with enrollment registration, coordination for grade sevens moving to high school. I go home and make dinner, and then I leave one thing to do in the evening. Sometimes it's a small thing. Sometimes it's a big thing; because of our crazy work circumstances and not really having a space, I often leave the thing that requires 'big thinking' until the night when I can have some quiet.

It is challenging, and it's never boring. One of the biggest things I've learned is that it doesn't matter that you have all these things to do; you still need to slow down, and live in the now, and make space for people when they're coming to talk to you. It doesn't matter about all the things on your list. It doesn't matter that you really should be on the road to the next site. That time with people counts. I've learned from Heather that, sometimes, going slow is the best thing you can do. Making space – taking everything out of your hands and being a mindful listener – really goes a long way with people.

Staffing has been the biggest thing that can change the day. When our support staff, or special education assistants, or SSWs are away, we have a real shortage and I'm doing a lot of coverage. One of the teachers laughed because they saw me playing in the kitchen and having an imaginary tea party with the kids, sitting on the carpet because our SSW is away. But it's always an opportunity to connect to those kids and see how they function in the classroom. It's a stressor, but it's also a gift. Sometimes it's that we're short for breaks; because our staff are divided in thirds, we can't cover for each other in the same way. I'll cover a lot of breaks, just so that people can connect at the same time.

I try to connect with every teacher on staff every day, and I'd say that I get to most of them. And then, there's that 10% of kids that need the extra connection for a number of reasons. Those are my kids: I have a handful that I seek out every day to be pre-emptive, to talk them through some of the things we've been working on, or to ask how everything is going at home. If you're one of those trusted adults in the building for those kids, I think it's really important that you get regular face time."

A Day in the Life of an Elementary Vice-Principal

10:50 am	Recess supervision
11:10 am 12:00 pm	Teach resource block Leave for Weir@Champlain Connect with site staff Chat with site Principal, Nik
12:50 pm	Support restorative circle involving a student issue at lunch
1:10 pm	Work with student with special needs while SSA is on 20-minute break
2:00 pm	Return to Weir@Killarney Check Teams and emails, and eat something Meet with student hosts of next virtual assembly
3:00 pm	Supervise dismissal of students at high school site
3:30 pm	Various admin tasks
5:00 pm	Go home, have coffee, make dinner, connect with husband
7:00 pm	Do ONE thing on To-Do list (usually something that requires quiet so I can think)