

Principl(ed)

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"The Best Laid Schemes..."

by
Darren Danyluk
President, BCPVPA

With a daughter studying in Victoria, and with other family and friends who call Vancouver Island home, I have lost count of the times in the last two years I have driven the route from Vancouver to the Tsawwassen ferry terminal. And it never seemed to fail that I would drive, racing against traffic and time, to board our planned sailing. Most often we were successful, with only minutes to spare. However, a recent trip was delayed when, on that particular morning, I lost the race.

We had a reservation for the first morning crossing. It was the first day of spring, and we set out in the dark on deserted highways. Even with counterflow in effect through the tunnel, I raced the clock with confidence. In the final approach to the terminal, drivers play the odds when choosing a ticket window. Several kiosks flash the destination name, but which line will move most quickly? I made my choice, and then fumed as the line of vehicles to my right advanced, while I remained motionless with three cars ahead of me. When I finally pulled up to the ticket window, our designs and commitments for the day were thrown into disarray when the ticket agent said the time for reservations “has ended”. We missed the boat... by four minutes. To further salt the wound, the agent informed us we may have a “one sailing wait” as the next scheduled ferry may already be full. As I drove into my designated lane, with a potential wait of four hours, I thought of Robert Burns.

As a lover of literature, I appreciate the economy and rich meaning achieved through allusions. And a line of Burns’ poetry has certainly become a proverb, if not an idiom, for our times. In his poem “To a Mouse”, written more than two hundred years ago, the speaker expresses sorrow for having destroyed the home of a “tim’rous beastie” with his plow. The mouse is made vulnerable, its winter shelter destroyed. The poem offers reflection on the circumstances both “o’ Mice an’ Men”. As a lover of literature, I cannot help myself, and I audibly correct those who misquote Burns’ insightful observation of our existence: it is our *schemes* which are, at times, painfully upended by the indifference of fate... not our *plans*.

It may be a subtle difference and, like so much of language and literature, a debatable point. However, for the sake of this reflection, consider a scheme to be larger, systematic, and more detailed than a mere plan. A scheme implies a calculation and contrivance for a result, not always nefarious. A plan may lack dimension and detail. ‘Plan’ is not the word Burns chose, and it fails to grasp the human investment that is stymied by life’s unpredictable turns. The unforeseen turn in the spring of 2020 is difficult to quantify in terms of its impact. Added to the global pandemic, the layered effects of extreme climate events and international conflicts further challenge any known metrics. Combined, they may defy calculation. We will each have to take inventory as we persist to understand our passage through this time in our history and who we have become, personally, professionally, and collectively. And here, at the end of my term as president for the BC Principals’ & Vice-Principals’ Association, I have been taking myself to account... an inventory of two years served.

In June of 2019, I was excited to be President-Elect following the BCPVPA elections. In the mix of emotions felt – which included humility, trepidation, and gratitude – I began scheming, but not in an evil genius way. Our Association held grand aspirations and significant priorities – big rocks – for our members, and the work of school leaders was more complex and voluminous than it ever had been. Advocacy and representation for Principals and Vice-Principals with

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government and our sector partners was also more complex and sensitive than perhaps it had ever been.

Of particular concern for school leaders was the impact of the 2017 Memorandum of Agreement, which served to provide a process for the restoration of language deleted from teacher collective agreements. Members' concerns were not so much for the restoration of contract language as they were for the dramatically increased demand upon administrative time that came as a result.

The numbers of Teachers Teaching On-Call (TTOC) were all but depleted by the thousands of classroom teacher vacancies created to address restored language. BC Principals and Vice-Principals were spending significant portions of each day reorganizing schedules to cover for staff absences left unfilled. It was frequent and common that 'fails to fill' were ultimately filled by school leaders, which added teaching responsibilities to the day, and left less and less time for all other responsibilities. This stressor was taking its toll, and the Association was concerned for our members' health and mental well-being. This was a big rock.

Contributing to the challenge of being a school-based leader in BC was the inequitable landscape across sixty school districts with respect to terms and conditions of employment. Remarkable variance can be found between districts when it comes to certain clauses of Principals' and Vice-Principals' personal services contracts, clauses which arguably should be universal. This patchwork of agreements exposed members, leaving many vulnerable. Since 2014, the Association has advocated with government for a

contract negotiation model which better serves our members and the system, as a whole. This, too, was a big rock.

The fall came and went, winter break passed, the new semester started, and we were eagerly awaiting the arrival of spring break. The new role I was about to assume for the Association was looming on the horizon, and I spent as much time as I could scheming for how I would pick up the challenge and move some rocks. And then it was Friday the 13th, in March. As we dismissed for spring break, I overheard a student in grade 12 say, while closing her locker, "This might be the last time I close my locker in high school." She said it aloud, to no one in particular, with a tone of incredulity. I remember the words of Robert Burns coming to mind then, too, as much for myself as for my student. The days ahead confirmed suspicions that some new big rocks were about to take precedence over all others.

So it was when I stepped into July of 2020 with a very uncertain and much altered path before me. While living and working through a pandemic would dominate nearly every aspect of the day, nearly every interaction and thought, July arrived on the heels of a watershed moment: the murder of George Floyd. A demand for all of society to unlearn a colonial history and to make Anti-Racism, equity, and justice paramount, would neither be ignored nor deferred, even for a pandemic. This voice called for all – especially someone like me – to prioritize this work, beginning within. Through the passing months, the voice gained volume and urgency as Canadians uncovered truths long known by Indigenous communities, and a Minister forged ahead with an action plan. As the number of my days passed, the rocks along this pathway of mine cast long shadows, and I felt their weight. I am about to step into another July, and out of this path. Looking over my shoulder at the rocks, I strain my eyes and it is difficult to see if they have moved.

For certain, the volume and complexity of school leadership has only increased in the last two years, and not entirely due to COVID-19. The work of

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Principals and Vice-Principals in their communities has been spotlighted, and we have heard sincere appreciation for this work. The critical role of school leaders is perhaps better understood now than before; however, the demands of this work remain at unsustainable levels, and the big rock of health and mental well-being persists. As does the big rock of negotiation agency, and the prospect of a fair and equitable model for securing conditions of employment that promote *thriving*. We have felt deep disappointment as many hopes have not been realized. However, with renewed partner relations, I believe – if I squint – that I can detect a forward movement of this rock.

The work of Anti-Racism, equity, and inclusion remains, too. Personally and professionally, I have learned a great deal, and my movements through this world are not the same. The Association, too, has learned much, both from within our membership and from our national colleagues. While this big rock remains, it has neither been diminished nor ignored, and I detect movement. In addition to professional learning opportunities which focus upon leading for equity, the BCPVPA has established an Anti-Racism Advisory Committee. These initial steps are modest and tentative, but introduce momentum for future action.

Glancing backward, that field of rocks is also littered with the opportunities I had to both spend time with, and learn from, the remarkable school leaders in BC. While the schemes I envisioned for how these times would look were much altered and impacted by life in a pandemic, they have been none the less rewarding.

The virtual medium allowed for more members to participate in meetings, particularly for those distant Chapters. In some cases, a virtual option allowed a greater frequency for meeting than in earlier times. And due to restrictions, the fewer opportunities to connect in person with members were profoundly meaningful. I was very happy to play second fiddle, and be the excuse to bring people together... people who were much happier to see each other than to see me!

And time and time again, as I met with members online and in person, a line from something I read surfaced. It is a line I have kept on my desktop for most of the last two years. It comes from an article written by Carol Kauffman, and it reminds leaders that "Without Compassion, Resilient Leaders Will Fall Short" (bit.ly/WCRLWFS). The author emphasizes that leaders must not coldly pass judgement on the people they lead, misreading indicators of stress or uncertainty as weakness. In our system, there are those whose leadership would benefit from Kauffman's lessons; BC's Principals and Vice-Principals are not among them. For two years, you have thought, "about what prepared you for the experiences that have made you stronger," and have used this, "to create an environment for [your communities] to be stronger." The line from Kauffman which I keep on my desktop is an apt description for the school leaders I had the privilege of meeting, the Principals and Vice-Principals putting everything before themselves, even when running on fumes: "There are few people with more fortitude than you have. And that means you aren't the normal one here." It means you are exceptional.

I am attracted to metaphors for the same reason I like allusions, and I have been preoccupied with a metaphor for my two years as president. Drawing from images of drilling down and striking paydirt, I entertained the comparison of schemes and plans to excavation or dowsing. And these thoughts inevitably lead me to a story of friends who built a home in the Kootenays. The neighbourhood in which my friends built their home is not serviced with town water. Each of the homes built along this stretch of gravel road



must provide their own water. To this end, my friends decided to drill a well. The property was properly 'witched' with willow branches, and the drilling began. This neighbourhood is perched at the western edge of the Rocky Mountains. Perhaps because of this proximity to the iconic mountains, a clean supply of water eluded my friends. They finally had to make the difficult decision to pivot and stop the drilling, leaving them with a hole in the ground.

This metaphor may at first seem ill-suited and somewhat negative. But the more I reflect upon it, the more I am drawn to it. Our best laid schemes "gang aft agley," and we are compelled to evaluate, re-set, adjust, and continue. And it is the emergence from these experiences that makes us resilient. While after two years the big rocks still litter the pathway, I have confidence the BCPVPA, its leadership, and its members will take up their weight and move them as far as possible.

As you read this, I may well be on my journey home, returning to BC valleys, "the moon could be rolled in." Once there, I will immediately embark on another journey, as I assume a new role within my district; I am excited for this opportunity. My journey as president for the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association will recede in time and memory. Like all experience, the sharp contours of its images will blur and dull with age; however, the poignant emotions of these two years will remain keen. And, when evoked, they will remind me of the blessings I realized in the service of our members. In all the words I have written, and all the words I can know, a simple pair best serve to convey my sincere gratitude: thank you.

***Darren Danyluk is the
2020-2022 President
of the BCPVPA.***

***We thank Darren for his
committed work, and the
words that he has shared with
our members in each issue
of Principl(ed).***



@bcpvpapresident

connection

"All the topics were perfect! The forum came at a great time, during a very busy and stressful time of the year. It gave me the opportunity to take a step back and reflect on our practices. Most importantly, it re-energized me and I am ready to face the rest of the school year."

(Member Event Feedback)



BCPVPA offers BC Principals and Vice-Principals opportunities to learn, but also to network and collaborate with colleagues from across the province. Those shared experiences bring our 2,600 members closer together and help to strengthen BC's K-12 public education system.

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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**

**WEIR
ELEMENTARY
ONLY**

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

"...that 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."

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."



@McmitcheIIriley

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)



Partners

the equity journey

by

Irfan Toor

*Director of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
Ontario Principals' Council*

*The BCPVPA is engaged in the critical process of deepening our focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion in our programming, and embracing and embedding these principles in all of the work that we do as an Association. We are in the early days of our own equity journey, and to bolster our learning we looked to the important work being done by our colleagues at the **Ontario Principals' Council**. We are grateful to **Irfan Toor** for sharing the OPC's story, and tracing the path they have traveled so far.*

The Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) is a voluntary professional association that provides professional services and supports to practicing principals and vice-principals in English public schools across Ontario. These supports include professional learning and accreditation, protective services, and bargaining, to ensure our Members can provide exemplary leadership in public schools. The organization was founded after principals and vice-principals were removed from the bargaining groups that were representing teaching staff in 1998. Our governance structure includes a Provincial Council (Board of Directors) made up of practicing school leaders from every English public district school board in the province, and a Provincial Executive elected from within that group. We also have about 30 organizational staff who keep the operations going and provide support to our 5,400 Members through extensive professional learning opportunities, protective services, advocacy, communications, and membership services.

I have the great fortune – and also the significant responsibility – to guide the organization in my role as Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, as the OPC endeavours to foster not just exemplary corporate leadership, but also promote equitable and anti-oppressive leadership in our Members.

So where do you start?

A few years ago, conversations around equity and inclusion were occurring at our Provincial Council meetings to help increase the knowledge and understanding of equitable practices. These included conversations around supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students. We discussed things like pronouns, gender identity, and the practices that were being implemented in different schools and school boards. Given the size of Ontario, and the range in size of communities within Ontario, there were a lot of differences in knowledge, understanding, and response. On another occasion, we did some learning as a group on unconscious bias and how it shows up in educational practices, and how it fosters systemic oppression such as anti-Black or anti-Indigenous racism. Again, there was a large range in the prior knowledge and experiences of the participants. It was evident that many of our Councillors had not been exposed to these conversations within the context of their own professional learning, or system or school experiences.

We did what many organizations do when they realize they have work to do – we set up a committee. The leadership, including the elected Presidents, Executive, and the Senior Staff, recognized that there was work to be done and there were some gaps in the knowledge of the Members and in the practices of the organization. Committees are great, because they bring some issues out into the open and create opportunities for different voices to be heard. But we all know that many committees struggle in defining their actions and in the resistance they receive from the structures and power embedded in the organization. As products of a colonial system, we are also all influenced by our own experiences as students, and now as school leaders; we unintentionally reinforce some of those inequitable practices.

We also conducted a Census to collect demographic data on our Members, as we needed to know who we serve. As much as the Census confirmed our observations (we know that there is a relative overrepresentation of white, male identities – especially in leadership positions – as compared to

"As products of a colonial system, we are also all influenced by our own experiences as students, and now as school leaders; we unintentionally reinforce some of those inequitable practices."



Irfan Toor
Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
Ontario Principals' Council



"There is a tension that exists here. When there is an identified role, some organizations default to that person and say, "this is an equity thing, pass it over to them," so many members of the organization never challenge their own thinking or reflect on their divisional practices."

overall representation in the education sector, and a corresponding underrepresentation of Indigenous, female, queer, and racialized identities), it serves to provide a baseline to see what kinds of changes we might observe when we repeat the Census over the next few years. The consultant who managed the data and results also provided some recommendations. These included targeted efforts for representation of different identities; reviewing all policies, procedures, and professional learning; and influencing Members and school districts to create equitable and inclusive environments. The recommendations reinforced what the committee members had been thinking, and also helped us define some of our strategic priorities.

We started to embed some practices, such as encouraging pronoun use in email signatures and on Zoom calls, and regular and consistent use of land

acknowledgements. Did we do some things right? Yes. We consulted with community and Indigenous elders to try and honour the correct people, land, and treaties. We accessed the diversity of our membership to provide some learning for colleagues based on different lived experiences. But we also received some feedback and were even called out by some Members who felt our actions were superficial and tokenistic, or even oppressive. Recognizing that this is an ongoing journey, we've been trying to approach each challenge as an opportunity for more learning, continuous review and reflection, and regular revision.

The real changes, though, started to occur when we reflected on some of those practices and asked ourselves whether they were good enough. And we rarely used the work we were doing as examples or justification that we were far along the journey of equity and anti-oppression. I'm proud of the fact that we approached the work with humility and an authentic interest in improvement.

For a while, we were trying to add, change, and adjust our practices from many different directions. This can be a good thing, but I also describe it as 'leapfrogging over ourselves'. Somewhere in this web of competing actions, it was identified that there needed to be a person who had the dedicated time, knowledge, and experiences to coordinate and guide this process. There was some conversation as to whether this should be an elected or a staff position with 'both' as a potential result.

There is a tension that exists here. When there is an identified role, some organizations default to that person and say, "this is an equity thing, pass it over

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to them," so many members of the organization never challenge their own thinking or reflect on their divisional practices. One of our key actions has been to build the foundation of knowledge throughout the organization so that we can access the strengths of our diverse staff and truly effect organizational change. I feel confident and proud that the staff and the OPC Executive are all able to notice and name inequities and are willing to engage in the reflection and actions it takes to address them.

Another tension is balancing the need to do something now (given the context of COVID-19, the murder of George Floyd, the discovery of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children), with making sure you are being authentic and responsive, rather than just reactive. Your actions and decisions must be rooted in some consistency that is reflected in your values. That is why the foundational work is so important.

Since we've started on this journey, here are some of things that are visible in what we've done:

New structures:

- creation of the senior staff position of the Director of EDI
- elected representatives within each district executive (District EDI reps)
- staff focus groups to provide feedback with an equitable lens regarding all graphics and publications

- focus and feedback groups within the Professional Learning department to influence and review all courses and learning opportunities
- committees and sub-committees to create action plans related to the recommendations from our Census report (EDI Advisory Committee)

New practices:

- regular and ongoing review accessing diverse perspective of all professional learning opportunities
- regular and ongoing opportunities to engage with community to listen and learn from their feedback
- identity-based affinity groups for Members to provide spaces for healing and belonging
- a commitment to regular implementation of the Member Census
- intentional advocacy within the greater educational community (post-secondary, Ministry, research, etc.) to increase our scope of influence

New learning:

- equity, anti-oppression, and Indigenous rights learning sessions to increase the individual and collective capacity of Members
- regular learning sessions for OPC staff
- learning sessions during Council and Executive meetings to increase the individual and collective capacities with respect to equity, anti-oppression, and Indigenous rights

The invisible aspects of our growth are evident in our attitudes and approach. Many people don't see the behind-the-scenes efforts to examine, discuss, and dismantle processes. And, often, changes to process aren't really recognized for the long-term impact that they may have. Attitudinal shifts are important for this work to be successful. Unconscious bias is



at the root of the maintenance of many inequitable practices, so to be able to shift that thinking can also have exponential impact. Building the foundation and maintaining it is crucial.

Some of the steps:

- **Acknowledge that there is a problem** and a need for improvement. Some people are looking for justification, evidence, or data. The research has been done, and has existed for more than 50 years. If you are having trouble accepting that a problem exists, then you probably need to be reflecting on your own privilege and lack of awareness of the experiences of others.
- **Be willing to engage as a collective.** Yes, many organizations have a designated person, whether that is a system principal or a director, but one of the keys to our progress so far is the collective responsibility taken by all areas of the organization – the staff, the elected representatives, and the local leaders.
- **Build your foundation** by engaging in personal and collective reflection and learning. It's not just about organizing a workshop and a guest speaker. The learning and the conversations need to be ongoing and reflective. As Glenn Singleton (*Courageous Conversations about Race*) says, "prepare for discomfort."
- **Bring in more voices.** Some people have been actively engaged in the internal and external operations of the OPC for years. But many different voices and identities have not seen a place for their voices. Many of our structural

changes have created those opportunities and spaces for more voices to be heard. As well, we are working to become very intentional about decentering dominant identities and accessing diverse identities in the external resources we access.

- **Be vulnerable.** One of the hardest parts of leadership is acknowledging that there are more voices and perspectives than just your own. As well, we have all participated in practices – knowingly or unknowingly – that have reinforced systemic oppression. Be prepared, and accept that along your journey you will be reminded of those practices, and that some of your efforts will be criticized and doubted. It will take time to build trust and demonstrate your commitment. Social injustice has been occurring for centuries. It won't get fixed overnight.

It's always messy. You can't wait until you're 'ready' – who even knows what that looks like? And every day that education systems delay the reduction of oppression is another day students, staff, and communities will experience harm.

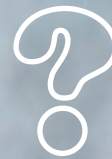
To follow the OPC's journey
or to connect with Irfan, visit
principals.ca/en/who-we-are/EDI.aspx

 @OPCCouncil

WHY



FranklinCovey™



The BCPVPA's journey to source outstanding educational leadership resources for our members achieves a new landmark

by

Peter Johnston

*Director of Professional Learning & Development
BCPVPA*

We have recently introduced many changes to BCPVPA's Professional Learning and Development offerings, and there will be more to come! Our direction includes an intense focus on educational leadership, the development of Principals and Vice-Principals as district and regional facilitators for many of our offerings, and the delivery of programs on various modalities. So, when we had the opportunity to acquire exclusive access to all of FranklinCovey's leadership training – we jumped on it!

FranklinCovey has been helping schools and

school districts for nearly three decades, providing a combination of the world's best educational leadership content with solutions for developing school leaders who will help lead staff, students, families, and communities. FranklinCovey educational programming fosters the expansion of leadership capacity in school districts, increases leader health and wellbeing, and builds a common learning experience within districts.

With learning solutions based on more than 30 years of research and refinement, FranklinCovey is

generally regarded as the world leader in helping school districts and schools develop the required leadership behaviours that result in lasting changes.

The BCPVPA is certifying members who can facilitate and deliver content, and help to design leadership journeys that will have an impact. Content will be accessed in a variety of formats, from on-site training, coaching, and blended learning, to webinars and on-demand digital learning. All of this will ultimately be available from the PLD tile within our BCPVPA Member Portal.

We have a mission and a passion to bring our members the best in educational leadership principles and practices. My PLD colleague, Dr. Andrea McComb, and I are excited to use our educational leadership experience, coupled with the content, tools, and methodology offered by FranklinCovey, to further hone educational leadership training for our members in a British Columbia educational context. We can offer full one-day or two-day workshops – in person or in a virtual format – with outstanding learning guides and materials that act as a lifelong personal reflective resource. We will also incorporate some of the FranklinCovey leadership principles within our own highly successful BCPVPA core programs.

As school leaders, you are always learning, and seeking knowledge that will make you a better leader of yourself and others. Andrea and I have learned that:

- The “strategic hand” dealt to thriving educational leaders was not materially different from that dealt to struggling educational leaders. Thriving educational leaders simply did more with the hand they were dealt.
- There are pockets of thriving educational leaders in every school and school district, and the thriving leaders didn’t typically have more basic know-how than the struggling educational leaders. Thriving educational leaders were simply much more successful at implementing what they know. They were better at putting educational leadership theory into action, and better at reducing inconsistency

and getting the middle 60 percent of their staffs to operate at levels much closer to that of their leaders on staff.

Andrea and I believe and value the following educational leadership principles (not an exhaustive list), and use them in our design of PLD content:

- Principals and Vice-Principals are inherently more than capable, want to learn, and have the power to choose their own learning.
- Educational leadership principles are timeless and universal and are the foundation for lasting educational leadership effectiveness.
- Educational leadership is a choice built inside-out on a foundation of character.
- Thriving educational leaders unleash the collective talent and passion of staff toward the right goal.
- Habits of educational leadership come only from the committed use of integrated processes and tools.
- Sustained thriving educational leadership comes from the health and wellness of the Principal (e.g. Sharpen the Saw means preserving and enhancing the greatest asset you have — you. It means having a balanced program for self-renewal in the four areas of your life: physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual).
- Highly effective Principal leadership development is presented by Principals to Principals (whenever possible), in a way that is similar to all other leadership professions: for example, teachers teach teachers, firefighters teach firefighters, doctors teach doctors, lawyers teach lawyers, all in trusting environments.

We aim to change the behaviours of educational leaders who participate in a BCPVPA leadership program, in ways that have a dramatic and positive impact. We work together with the leaders to help

identify their most pressing concerns through self-reflection and coaching. This takes place in a non-posturing, trusting, safe, and caring learning environment with no unconscious bias or judgment. We know that changes in behaviour begin from the inside out, with who you are, and how you see things as an educational leader. This then translates into how the educational leader engages and leads others. We meet educational leaders where they are at in their leadership journey, with transformative learning experiences and content that touches deeply on the challenges that matter most to your context, in your school and district.

We recognize that you have experienced the greatest educational leadership challenge ever over the last two years; this educational whirlwind has never been

seen before, and only other school leaders can truly understand the leadership challenge that you have faced. The toll on our mental and physical health will not be known for years, but we do know that those Principals who have followed sound leadership principles have appeared to fare better during this storm. Through our BCPVPA and FranklinCovey leadership development programs, facilitated by your expert colleagues in a virtual or in-person format that best suits you, we hope to offer the guiding principles and specific strategies that will help you in your school, no matter how hard the wind is blowing.

Visit the PLD tile in the Member Portal and click on the PLD tile to find a leadership development program that piques your curiosity.



Featured One and Two Day Workshops

Leading at the Speed of Trust®

Introducing a powerful framework that enables educational leaders to increase their personal credibility, engage their staff in a new and different way, and be more committed and accountable for results.

The 4 Essential Roles of Leadership™

Even in the most turbulent times, there are four roles educational leaders play that are highly predictive of success: essential, because conscious alignment with these roles lays the foundation for effective leadership.

Unconscious Bias:

Understanding Bias to Unleash Potential™

How do we counteract the potentially harmful impacts of unconscious bias, and create learning environments in which everyone feels valued and able to offer their best? Learn to identify bias and cultivate connection.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People®

Develop leadership effectiveness at three levels — individual, staff, and organizational — and learn to lead yourself, influence and engage with others, and continuously improve and renew their capabilities.

Visit the BCPVPA Member Portal, or contact

pldinfo@bcpvpa.bc.ca





CREATE

- one-stop access to resources shared by other educators, in your district and province-wide
- share resources directly with students and families: no passwords required
- record Zoom or YouTube instructions, and set meeting times for feedback and check-ins

COLLABORATE

- work with multiple creators in one space
- chat with other educators and explore ideas
- use topics and tags to categorize resources
- create resource bundles
- use easily on all devices, and integrate the platforms you choose

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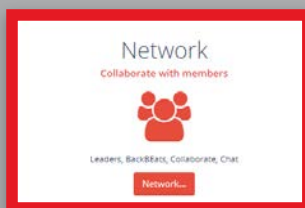
Create a personal profile with your biography, photo, and experience

Build your Personal Growth Plan



Create, co-edit & share resources, share existing resources using topics & tags

Build your School Plan



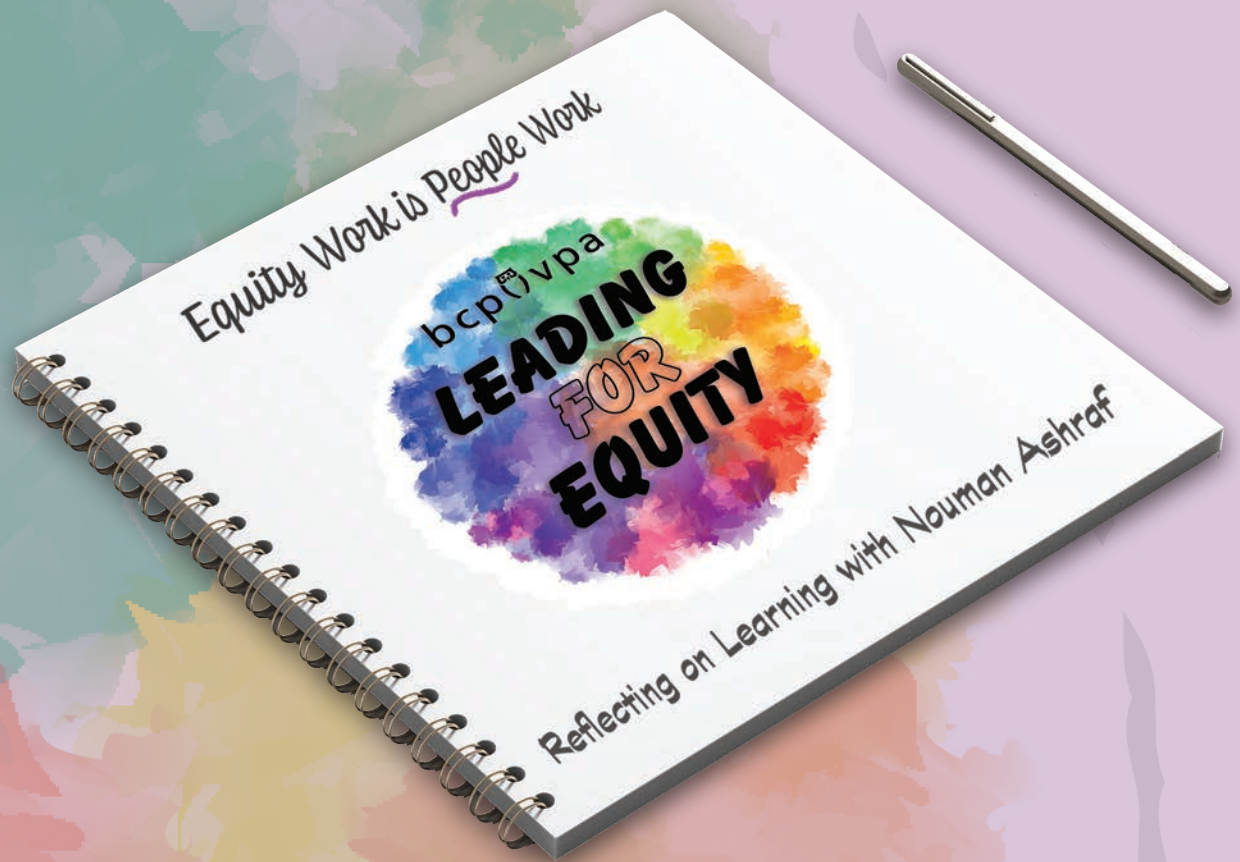
Search, connect, and network with other educators, collaborate, explore, and discuss



The BCPVPA's 2021-2022 Leading for Equity series has deepened our focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion, and helped spark the journey of embedding new ways of being into our identities.

On the following pages, we hear from staff, members, and workshop presenters with thoughts about the intent, impact, and learning of the Leading for Equity series, and the process of change that we are experiencing and embracing.

Equity work is ongoing work and, as we learned from Nouman Ashraf, equity work is people work.



If language fluency is based in attachment, Nouman Ashraf has taught us that equity is based in connection, relationship, and love. He is shifting the frame from guilt and shame, to commitment and engagement.

The work of leadership is equity: it is people work. If you have a commitment to the growth of others, you need to care about them. This is our duty of care as Principals and Vice-Principals. As leaders in our schools, we have privilege, and we need to use that privilege in the service of others.

In our hands we have an impact on the culture of our school. Nouman says, "I don't care what is written on your walls; I care about what is happening in your halls," and, "the behaviour you walk past is the culture we enable." So: who do we need to be as leaders to create equitable environments? Nouman brings to life a model of understanding how identity frames our contribution.

Andrea McComb
*Director of Professional
Learning & Development*
BCPVPA

***“I don’t care what is
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I care about what is
happening in
your halls.”***

Identity:

Who am I? What is my story?

Identities are complex. Identities are not static, because they are linked to our experience and context. There are many intersectional and overlapping vectors of identity that help define who we are in relation to our experience. Leadership is about knowing how you have come to be where you are; it is about owning your story. We are all continually learning, so growth is about owning our mistakes and owning our learning story.

Aspiration:

Who do I need to be, to lead this work?

To lead across difference, Nouman shares a quote,

“Leadership is about the courage, capacity, curiosity and commitment to work with, learn from and give voice to the ‘other’”.

Gianpiero Petriglieri

We can be leaders who value curiosity, and accept the growth edges of imperfection, and leaders who are open to the perspectives and lived experiences of others. Leaders who can let go of the need to defend their ‘good personhood’, while listening deeply for impact. Leaders who position themselves to listen to the experience of another, instead of concerning ourselves with the nature of their own intent.

Capacity:

**What capacities do I need
to activate for impact?**

Nouman talks of the need for leaders to be healers. This entails moving from Eurocentric, decisive action to listening and holding space for the ‘other’. We can be leaders who understand how safety is created and are curious about how safety is experienced by others. Leaders who can set aside problem-solving actions to create conditions for others to be themselves openly and unapologetically in community.

Opportunity:

**What opportunities are
right under my nose?**

Nouman outlines three things the pandemic has illustrated:

- 1.** Privilege and equity are real.
- 2.** The good old days were not so good for some.
- 3.** When it comes to building back better, muscle memory is not a good thing.

To build back better with a deeper sense of equity, we design *with* not *for* those we lead.

Contribution:

**How do I move from allyship
to accomplice?**

Jully Black was quoted as saying, “We’re looking for accomplices, not allies.”

Speak up in the meeting, echo the voice of ‘the other’. Do not wait until after the meeting and check-in; support the thinking, the ideas, and the voices in the room. Accomplices ask, “What do you need to get that done?” Do not allow opportunities to pass by.

School culture can move inspiration to impact. Nouman makes a distinction between the terms 'cultural fluency' and 'cultural competency.' As we all strive to become more competent, we make mistakes, so it is not a matter of being competent or incompetent. He prefers the term 'cultural fluency.' He likens cultural fluency to language fluency which begins with attachment. Cultural fluency begins with love for those you lead.

Cultural fluency requires skills, understanding, and awareness. We learn to do better and be better through experience. Like attachment, cultural fluency begins with observing, inquiring, and engaging. To begin that journey, we must embrace discomfort, move beyond tolerance, and design from a place of love, not guilt.

Nouman talks about how cultivating our cultural fluency can grow our impact. By developing our awareness of our biases and privileges, we can choose to lean into discomfort. As an example of leaning into the discomfort where learning lives, Nouman quotes Abraham Lincoln as saying, "I do not like that man. I must get to know him better."

The distinction Nouman made between comfort and safety helped frame the mindset of emancipatory leadership. He described discomfort as a part of learning, growth, and change; and, he described safety as the freedom to speak, question, discuss, and evaluate without fear of negative consequences. Growth and change happen in safe spaces, out of our comfort zones.

***Cultural fluency
begins with love for
those you lead.***

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and Inclusion initiatives
at the Rotman School
of Management.**



THE PERFORMANCE



Courtesy Jason Leung_unsplash.com

OF PINK

SOME REFLECTIONS ON PINK T-SHIRT DAY

Bryan Gidinski

*Intermediate Elementary School Teacher
& District SOGI Support Teacher
for Elementary Schools*

I always find it difficult to articulate my feelings around Pink T-Shirt Day, but this year I thought it was worth the effort. Recently, I was involved in a seminar for Simon Fraser University Student Teachers in the Faculty of Education, and someone posed the question: “How do you feel about days of recognition like Pink T-Shirt Day?”

If I’m being honest, I simultaneously hate them, AND recognize the need for them. I’m networked to other LGBTQ+ advocates and activists who find the day cringe-worthy and, for many of us, there is frustration and trepidation as the day approaches. Though well-intentioned, I struggle with the way that the day is often handled in schools. Lately, I have Lin-Manuel Miranda’s song from “Encanto” in my head, but I’ve replaced the lyrics, “We Don’t Talk About Bruno-no-no” with “We Don’t Talk About Homo-pho-bia.”

My frustration from days like Pink T-Shirt Day comes from the potentially performative aspect involved. I worked at a school that participated in a Pink T-Shirt Day flash mob event. We rehearsed choreography to perform in the stands at a Vancouver Giants game (back when they hosted their games at The Coliseum). The opportunity to be part of a flash mob is a powerful thing. There is merit in the sense of community experienced as being part of a collective energy that is hard to capture in other contexts.

What I struggled with was the discrepancy between the number of hours invested in learning and practicing the dance in comparison to the amount of time spent developing understandings about the origins of the day, or what we were attempting to communicate by participating. Even the song selection became quite sanitized, focusing on the inspirational, but somewhat superficial, and failing to centre the music of queer artists who might have commentary on the kind of bullying the day is supposed to address.

I was a student in the elementary schools that I now work in. I experienced the kind of bullying and harassment that Pink T-Shirt Day is a response to. While we have taken strides to make progress, I’m consistently reminded of how misconceptions about gender expression and sexual orientation are still

as pervasive as they were when I was a student. I experienced homophobic harassment long before I understood or could articulate my own sexuality. So, it wasn’t even necessarily about being gay. It was about being *perceived* as being gay. A lot of boys who demonstrate stereotypically feminine traits or feminine preferences often have their masculinity and their sexuality questioned. These perceptions about their sexuality are often weaponized against them. Decades later, I still have very vivid memories of some of those exchanges, and the feelings associated with them. The incident in Nova Scotia in 2007, where a boy was subjected to homophobic taunts for wearing a pink shirt to school, prompting Travis Price and David Shepherd to take action, is a fairly routine example of this.

We’ve all probably had those moments where we’ve felt guilt about interactions we’ve witnessed, and lacked the courage to intervene. Those teens took action and should be applauded, but I struggle with the Random Acts of Kindness narrative attached to Pink T-Shirt Day. It wasn’t a random act. It was a targeted and purposeful response with an objective. It was a product of observing hurt and isolation that conflicted with their values and that they wanted to do something about. It was a response to witnessing homophobic taunts, and engaging in a peaceful and productive demonstration to combat that specific behaviour and to communicate a sense of “you are not alone” to the young boy who was targeted. When we don’t include that part of the narrative, and we separate the victim from the event, we potentially end up with just another ‘saviour’ narrative.

There are many ways in which we continue to perpetuate the idea that it’s okay to hurt queer people. You don’t have to look too far to find examples that include politicians and parents objecting to the presence of LGBTQ+ identities in books, faith-based opposition to banning conversion therapy, and the inordinate number of anti-trans bills being proposed or enacted south of our border.

In the last few years, I’ve noticed a shift in the conversation to celebrations of kindness. I want to be clear that I’m NOT saying that conversations

about kindness aren't important. I acknowledge that they are. But celebrating a day which was inspired by a response to hurtful and homophobic behaviour without mentioning or exploring homophobia feels somewhat disingenuous; it does feel like the day has been appropriated. It's a little like talking about finances without ever mentioning money.

We use words like 'diversity' that dilute the conversation, so it becomes a 'sanitized' version of only the differences that don't challenge or offend us. I don't mean to say we shouldn't talk about diversity, but I am saying that there are occasions where we need to name and specify the diversities of which we speak. What we choose not to name or speak about is as significant a part of curriculum as what we promote and celebrate. Part of what we communicate when we choose not to address the homophobic origins of the day, has the potential (even if unintended) of saying that we don't talk about the experiences of queer people, and we don't promote their protection.

It's not that we shouldn't talk about, or put an emphasis on, kindness. My concern is that when we limit the conversation to kindness, we leave a lot unresolved and unmentioned. We've witnessed a number of celebrities and public figures being held accountable for their words or actions, whether accused of being homophobic, transphobic, racist, sexist, misogynistic, or otherwise. We've also observed other celebrities and public figures coming forward to defend them, dismissing the accusations because said celebrity has always been kind to them, negating the victims' stories because it wasn't their experience and, consequently, resulting in some pretty glaring examples of gaslighting. It becomes a little problematic if we're not having a more nuanced conversation about kindness, and the recognition that some people who are perceived to be kind are quite selective about who they are kind to.

I'm happy to encourage students to wear pink, but I struggle with pressuring them to do so, particularly without a deep and purposeful understanding of why they're being asked. I get frustrated by schools that offer prizes for the class with the most pink t-shirts, because one demonstration of genuine support

"I'm happy to encourage students to wear pink, but I struggle with pressuring them to do so, particularly without a deep and purposeful understanding of why they're being asked."

can be more meaningful than twenty four that lack understanding or conviction. Heck, my niece would gladly wear a pink t-shirt every day. I'd just appreciate that when she wore pink on this day, that she understood that it meant something more. My hope is that she'll understand that it is a way of saying, "Hey: I recognize some of the pain people experience, and I'm going to stand up for them so they don't have to feel alone," or "I want people to know that I love my uncle, and it's not okay to say hurtful things to him or to people like him." That's a message that many LGBTQ+ students and their families would love to hear that is not quite covered by 'kindness' or by generic conversations about bullying.

It's not my intention to suggest that we shouldn't be combatting all forms of bullying. We absolutely should, but I feel like the piece of the conversation that is often missing is how specific people are targeted and harassed for things that are aspects or perceived aspects of their identity. When we acknowledge that by targeting people by their sexual orientation (or perceived sexual orientation), by their disability, by their gender, by their race, by their socio-economic status, or any other aspect of their identity, we are dealing in the realm of values and that's much more complicated to navigate than when we make our

conversations generic. Generalizing the origins of the day offers permission for many to avoid uncomfortable topics, while ignoring how uncomfortable it is for those who are subjected to chronic, targeted harassment. And, while I understand that it is important to show compassion to the bullies and to address whatever is going on for them, it's difficult to watch concerns about the well-being and outcomes for the bully prioritized over victims they targeted.

In the context of conversations about kindness, I've heard extensions about healing and uplifting others. Ambitious and well-intentioned objectives, but it's tough to heal from something when that trauma continues to be surfaced and we collectively decline to acknowledge or specify the things that cause the trauma (in this case, overt homophobic behaviour). It's like attempting to do Truth & Reconciliation, without addressing the Truth.

It's not my intention to derail conversations and learning opportunities about kindness, but rather an attempt to encourage others to consider how they recognize this day, and invite them to complement those conversations with extensions that deal with deeper understandings about how people who are targeted feel – particularly because they are often

targeted for things they cannot control. I encourage people to consider how they engage with this day to avoid powerful opportunities for advocacy, and opportunities to engage in genuine allyship, and, inadvertently, killing them with 'kindness'.

This lesson at this link bit.ly/JeromeParCoeur is helpful for young students to better appreciate the origins of the day and the role that homophobia might play in how we perceive, react to, and treat others.

My hope in you having taken the time to read this, is that you extend the learning beyond Pink T-Shirt Day and beyond conversations about kindness. One of the most powerful engagements about the origins of Pink T-Shirt Day that we had in a school I taught at was that we used the February date as a catalyst, and The International Day of Pink (celebrated in the second week of April) to frame our explorations. It allowed educators to make plans for developing understandings intermittently and over a number of weeks. We recognized the learning with regard to homophobia, empathy, and understandings in an assembly in April to honour the International Day of Pink – a similarly themed day, but initiated by gay student, Jeremy Dias:

"After coming out in high school, Jeremy faced extreme cases of discrimination by students & school officials. At 17, he began a legal case against his school and school board, and at 21 won Canada's second-largest human rights settlement. Jeremy used the money to found the Canadian Centre for Gender & Sexual Diversity, the International Day of Pink and the Jeremy Dias Scholarship." ccgsd-ccdgs.org

My hope is that we recognize that kindness and action do come from places of purpose, and that recognizing harm and responding with empathy is important. My hope is that we strive for allyship and advocacy that is genuine and respectful of the LGBTQ+ experiences and voices that endure the emotional labour that days like this attempt to acknowledge. My hope is that we engage in meaningful exchanges that centre progress over performance and that, ultimately, we avoid the performance of pink.

"It's not that we shouldn't talk about, or put an emphasis on, kindness. My concern is that when we limit the conversation to kindness, we leave a lot unresolved and unmentioned."

Angela Bragg
Principal
SD 51

Stepping into discomfort is not comfortable, but it is the only path to growth. I've been stepping into discomfort for a while now. First, taking steps to become more aware of what decolonization could look like in classroom practice and reflecting upon my own privilege, second, jumping into an ever-evolving leadership position and, finally, sharing both my words and visual reflection in this article. That discomfort is only a fraction of what I imagine many Indigenous students feel as they walk through school communities, and encounter a variety of educator attempts at Truth and Reconciliation.

We are all at various points along the journey to hopefully co-creating educational practices that work more respectfully for all learners. As a new Principal, I am insatiable in attending webinars to grow my understanding of how to be a better school leader. To that end, I attended a webinar in January called the Decolonizing Together Symposium which featured the amazing Carolyn Roberts. Some of you may have also attended the recent BCPVPA webinar, Leading for Equity: Decolonizing and Indigenous Education, where Carolyn discussed similar thoughts with a focus on leadership.

Personally, I was inspired by the ideas presented in both webinars. When inspired, I reflect on things that I have learned, and record it in visual form to help me grow my understanding. In my visual reflection, I identified the ideas that came up for me. Carolyn's sessions really have served to highlight essential questions that need to be asked within school contexts to ensure that the work of decolonization of educational practices is not cast aside to avoid discomfort, which only reproduces the status quo.

Stepping into Discomfort

In words and images,
author Angela Bragg offers her
impressions of the deep learning
gained from two recent webinars
led by Carolyn Roberts



One of my favourite ideas from Carolyn's presentations was that we start creating leaders as soon as students walk through the school doors, and into classrooms where those with Indigenous heritage may find it difficult to see their worldviews respectfully represented. A 'one-size fits all' curriculum, where individuals are judged and graded based on compartmentalized subject matter, defined by a ringing bell to indicate a shift in activity seems, upon reflection, ridiculous. However, much of our current school practices are aligned to what can appear as a series of check boxes, comparisons, and alarm bells. The nullification of identity and assimilation into a dominant, oppressive system continues each time this cycle is repeated.

In contrast, Carolyn also presented an anti-colonial view of education where community is built first. Having spent many a September/October building community in a classroom with students learning

about each other's gifts, I immediately paid a great deal of attention to what followed with Carolyn's presentation. Too often, it seems like a few weeks of intensive community building is ultimately followed by the expectation that it is now time to buckle down and start working with curriculum. The anti-colonist view of education followed community building with an understanding of the collaborative, and the notion that it takes everyone to do the work.

At that point, I was hooked. Group work, collaboration, and connection have always seemed to be the gold standard for helping students and staff see great leaps in progress and benefit from the healthy formation of relationships that result. Even better, in this model, the next steps focused upon how collaboratively built knowledge could be used to benefit the greater good, and all share the responsibility for passing it on. Carolyn revealed that in many Indigenous languages, there is no word for 'mine'. Knowledge is meant to be shared with others for the betterment of all.

In thinking about where I have seen students shine this year, it was in those opportunities where this model has been unwittingly followed. What could students and staff accomplish if an anti-colonial approach to education were the norm, rather than the rarity? Could this be a starting point for helping Indigenous students feel a greater sense of belonging as learners, to know themselves deeply, and to have more opportunities to develop confidence through seeing themselves in the curriculum?

Grow, learn, pause, reflect, repeat. As school leaders let's shine a light and be inspired by Carolyn's approach to knowledge and considerate next steps well. How can we collaborate with staff, students, and the larger school community to start to change the narrative? Whose stories do we include? How do we step away from the proverbial table to make room for Indigenous voices to be heard? The great thing about this work is that there are many access points for change agents to take.

"One of my favourite ideas from Carolyn's presentations was that we start creating leaders as soon as students walk through the school doors ..."

"What could students
and staff accomplish
if an anti-colonist
model of education
were the norm, rather
than the rarity?"

The superficial toolkits that have been used in our daily practice are not enough. We all need to have the humility to recognize the privileges that we have been afforded as an educator within a colonial system to begin to see that classroom spaces have not been

safe places for Indigenous students. As Carolyn also stated eloquently in both webinars, we have all been impacted by settler colonialism, and possibly also exposed to the trauma of Indigenous history (residential schools, sixties scoops, the legacy left by brutal governmental policies), and have not spent enough time learning about the truth, or Indigenous brilliance.

In the words of one of my own teachers, Dr. Andrew Campbell, we have become very good at moving on – that is why it is important to sustain courageous and brave conversations. Let's keep the conversations going to ensure that we are moving beyond guilt or shame, and co-creating educational spaces where children or youth can grow together in respectful spaces that address inequity. Every small step is still a step forward to find our path; within the messiness of the work ahead that has no quick fix, our objective is to affect positive systemic changes for all learners.

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STOP DOING THE WORK

START BEING THE WORK

Beth Applewhite
District Principal
Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
SD 41

Recently, a colleague asked me, *"How do you keep going? You're putting yourself out there constantly, risking push back and anger – you're a stronger person than me. Aren't you tired of making people uncomfortable?"*

There is some truth within his question. Doing Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression work in education is often exhausting, offensive, hurtful, awkward, and – at times – shocking, and even scary. However, I am certainly not any stronger than my colleagues. In fact, as a Bi-racial Black woman working in a systemically racist system, I often face intimidating and stressful spaces where dominant biases and microaggressions have me in knots. So many folks have the misunderstanding that this work is easier for IBPOC administrators, that we have some special ability to discuss equity, inequities, and all things racism related. This is a detrimental myth. Racialized leaders are no more equipped for this work than their white colleagues. True: their lived experience can bring them some deeper understandings, some empathy for the struggle, and some regard from racialized communities. However, these are not a given as all racialized people are not a monolith. We are resilient, but we have had no choice in that; we have been forced into resiliency. Yet we, too, struggle with this work. In fact, because of our lived experience, the nuances, push back, resentment, and all of the micro/macro-aggressions that come with the work often cut quite deeply, and into so many complicated layers. Our race and/or culture does not magically repel criticism or accusations of discrimination. We are part of the system's leadership; thus, by default, most see us as part of the problem, not recognizing our lived experience. Pause for a moment and think on that – what it must be like for our racialized colleagues who are asked to face the brunt of concerns and complaints from racialized students and families. It is time we stop assuming that the racialized leaders should do this work, and accept that all school leaders must **be** the work. Besides, there are so few Indigenous and Black administrators that it is beyond offensive to expect them to be responsible for this work; it is hurtful.

When school leaders are authentically *being* the work, then there is no opting out of using an equity and/or Anti-Racism lens. If they are just *doing* the work, then it becomes too easy for leaders to choose *not* to do the work any time it becomes too uncomfortable or unpopular, or when it contradicts their own needs. What I now see happening, too often, is folks doing the work when it works for them, when it is not too disruptive, when they think it will bring them respect and kudos, or when they have been called on the carpet because of an incident. When we are the work, there is no opting out of being equitable, and there is

"We are part of the system's leadership; thus, by default, most see us as part of the problem, not recognizing our lived experience. Pause for a moment and think on that – what it must be like for our racialized colleagues who are asked to face the brunt of concerns and complaints from racialized students and families."

no picking or choosing when we will be Anti-Racist and when we won't. We must, for example, stop waiting for the next racist or discriminatory incident to occur in our schools and *then* do the work. Leaders need to show up, each and every day, *being* the work. It is the smaller moments, the daily decisions, the inclusive gestures, and supportive greetings that make the greatest EDI impact, shift the school culture, and begin the systemic change. This means we show up to graduation ceremony meetings, scholarship and awards meetings, class-loading

and composition meetings, PAC meetings, school-based team meetings, staff committee meetings, budget meetings, suspension meetings, and school-planning meetings, not asking, “*What are we doing to be more equitable?*” or, “*What are we doing to avoid accusations of discrimination and exclusion?*” but instead asking, “Are we *being* equitable... are we *being* Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive? **How** are we *being* equitable? **How** are we *being* Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive?” And school leaders need to share that ‘how’, so all school community members are aware of the work being done. The more they know, then the more that trusting and reciprocal relationships can develop. Leadership is not taken. People give leadership to those they trust and with whom they feel safe. School community members will allow those they trust to have influence over their studies, their practice, and their lives.

We can no longer hide behind the fear of getting it wrong. Too many leaders are more afraid of being called a racist than they are of racism in their school. When leaders start *being* the work, they become far less anxious about making mistakes, because they expect to make them and know what to say and how to be when they misstep. And because they *are* equitable and because they *are* Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive, most students, staff, parents, and community members will give them the space to grow and do better. We must start *being* the work instead of waiting for the elusive moment when we feel we can start expertly *doing* the work with success. There are no experts in this work, and we cannot expect it to be

"We are resilient, but we have had no choice in that; we have been forced into resiliency. Yet we, too, struggle with this work."

"Leadership is not taken. People give leadership to those they trust and with whom they feel safe."

uncomplicated or stress-free. We often teach students to not fear failure and to not stress about making mistakes because we know that is where the growth and learning lie – within the flops and missteps. Why, then, when it comes to Anti-Racism, do we not adhere to that same wisdom? When leaders are *being* the work, they have the courage and the resolve to see past the norms, accepted traditions, and assumptions of the dominant culture. They are not afraid to be innovative and take risks. They begin to recognize the inequities within the system, within their school, and within their own leadership. For example, each year, many schools book a bag piper for their school leaving ceremony. Has the school considered a South Asian Drummer, an African Drummer, a Steel Pan Drummer, an Indigenous Drummer, or some other amazing cultural music that would reflect their school community? My mother is Scottish, and I love the bag pipes (an acquired taste), so I am not recommending that Principals rip the piper’s name from their list of contacts. I am suggesting, however, that such an addition is an easy way to be more inclusive, simply by being more culturally responsive to the school community. One who is *being* and leading through this work would not be able to move forward another year without questioning and unpacking leaving ceremony traditions.

Change is hard. Fighting to disrupt and reimagine our school system’s culture can be a fierce battle. Leaders who commit to this work need to be courageous (for-real courageous). It is time to flip the script on this,

and stop pretending that the school leaders who do this work are weak, pander to the 'woke', and/or are too sensitive to liberal leftist ideologies. The truth is that they are brave, and they bring humanity to their leadership. This work is not for the faint of heart – one has to have tough skin and a firm resolve. But I can promise, from much first-hand experience, that it does not have to be dreadful – not if leaders expect and embrace the disruption, and not if they have the courage to *be* the disruption. I commend the brave leaders who are *being* the work – especially the administrators who belong to marginalized groups – because their schools are not always safe spaces for them. It is especially challenging to make the school culture welcoming, and to ensure that staff, students, and families feel a sense of belonging, when they themselves do not always feel welcome and supported. This is another reason why we cannot rely on them to carry this work.

When we start truly *being* the work, we begin to see and experience the joy in this work. I love writer and activist Loretta J. Ross's comment that "Fighting racism should be fun! Being racist sucks." No doubt, it will be a bumpy journey. This work is new, so there is no manual, script, or playbook I can share that will explain in detail what to *do* because we need to *be* human. *Be* a decent human being who wants fair and equal access to educational opportunities for all children and families. Have high hopes for long trajectories of success for all students regardless of their race, gender, culture, sexuality, ability, mental health, or religion/spirituality, and the journey will

"Change is hard. Fighting to disrupt and reimagine our school system's culture can be a fierce battle. Leaders who commit to this work need to be courageous (for-real courageous)."

have more positivity and the work more affirmation. It is so easy to say we are committed to equity and Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression, to write it in our vision and mission statements, in our school and professional growth plans, but to truly and authentically *be* the work, we must actually believe we should and can do better. We must trust that things will improve. We need to believe we can *be* equitable – that we have it in ourselves to become Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive. If we keep trying to protect ourselves from getting it wrong, we will continue to hold ourselves back from real transformative change. We need to ease up on the controls, and stop judging the success of our leadership by weighing our failures against our achievements. Leading with equity, humanity, and compassion is greater than any success or failure. Such leaders do not ask staff and students to *do* equity; they ask them to *be* equitable. Leaders who help their school community become equitable and Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive leave a legacy of equity and justice when they retire or leave to lead elsewhere, and that legacy will be far more sustainable and enduring than a school full of well-intentioned folks performatively doing the work. Leaders need to ensure we are leaving a stable and lasting legacy of support, not harm. If the work stops, whether suddenly or gradually, it is a great loss to the community and the marginalized members suffer most.

Two years after the racial reckoning caused by George Floyd's murder, and in this era of truth and

"There are no experts in this work, and we cannot expect it to be uncomplicated or stress-free."

reconciliation, just *doing* the work is performative and can cause much harm. Advocates for equity and justice are now being more direct, and saying, “*Good intentions are not good enough anymore.*” Our culture of niceness and kindness needs to morph into a culture of courage and boldness. Leaders cannot avoid the fact that members of our school communities are experiencing pain, oppression, hurt, and harm. *Be* the work, face the discrimination and feel the injustice. As Dr. Gholdy Muhammad argues, “The very definition of equity is when one feels and acts on that feeling.” However, it is not enough to feel that discrimination is wrong. Equitable and Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive leaders need to act with their voices, their words, their pens, their hands, and their decisions. When I began to *be* the work, I started to

see past my blind spots, unpack my implicit biases, and recognize the many inequities in education and school cultures. I embraced the challenge to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression. As I continue to decenter and reimagine, I appreciate the joy in receiving support and encouragement, and walking alongside and supporting others as I strive to help them feel welcome, valued, and safe enough to have hope for a successful future as their authentic selves. We need to stop placing this work at the peak of anxiety. There is joy in this work. There is joy in great conversations, our hope for the future, creative initiatives, the pursuit of justice, inclusion, celebrations, and in the strength of holding space for each other. The poet Toi Derricotte wrote, “Joy is an act of resistance” — as we strive to *be* the work, we all need to lean into that joy.

Courageous Leaders who are *being* the work:

Know/Unpack Their Own Biases:

<https://youtu.be/BFcjfqmVah8>

<https://youtu.be/egw-iheD1Mc>

<https://youtu.be/D9lhs241zeg>

https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf

Know Vulnerability is Strength:

<https://youtu.be/AO6n9HmG0qM>

Learn Cultural Humility:

<https://youtu.be/H4iltVqkSKY>

<https://acei.org/innovation/cultivating-cultural-humility-in-education/>

Understand Intersectionality:

<https://youtu.be/JRci2V8PxW4>

<https://youtu.be/WzbADY-CmTs>

Learn Cultural and Historically Responsive Literacy:

<https://youtu.be/cfDDnkOTIPI>

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-author-interview-with-dr-gholdy-muhammad-cultivating-genius/2020/01>

<https://youtu.be/UM3Lfk751cg>

Get Used to the Discomfort – Normalize it:

<https://youtu.be/woEh1blQFKs>

Learn How to Call People In, Not Out:

https://youtu.be/xw_720iQDss

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html>

Understand the Pain and Trauma of Discrimination:

<https://youtu.be/aV4Hk4PQ4Tc>

Critically plan for Incidents of Racism/Discrimination:

<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/navigating-responses-to-racism-in-your-school-community>

mentorship

“I have found it valuable to learn from someone outside my district, in an authentic way. The real-life experiences of my Mentor put my theoretical learning into perspective.”

(2020 Mentee)

Mentorship is just one of the professional learning and development opportunities that the BCPVPA offers to more than 2,600 Principals and Vice-Principals in BC's public education system.

bcpvpa.org



*We are delighted that Jesse Ruben will join us
as Musician in Residence at the
2022 BCPVPA Connecting Leaders
Conference, October 20 – 22
at the Victoria Conference Centre.*

*BCPVPA Director of Professional Learning and
Development, Andrea McComb, spoke with
Jesse about stepping outside of his
own comfort zone, and how it inspired him
to invite others out of theirs.*



Courtesy Jesse Ruben

WE CAN: A Kind of Wonderful Thing

Jesse Ruben has become the person he himself wanted to meet as a quiet, shy, creative kid. Somebody to inspire him. Somebody to believe in him. Somebody to see in him, his gift of creativity. Somebody who was not his family. Jesse says, "If only someone that wasn't my parent or teacher had come to my school to tell me that it's okay and that all those things are totally normal and okay. I wish someone had just given me permission to be myself."

Jesse is a singer/songwriter from Philadelphia who currently lives in Brooklyn, NY. He writes songs that make a difference for people. He plays music for a living, and has created the We Can Project program for kids. To date, thousands of students across the US and Canada have participated in The We Can Project, and the number of schools involved continues to grow every year.

Jesse tells his story:

"I ran the New York City Marathon because I was raising money and awareness for spinal cord research for one of my best friends who has been in a wheelchair since we were about 18. I really wanted to make a difference. I wanted to do something to help spinal cord research; I started talking to one of the charities, and they invited me to run the marathon. The first time they asked I said no; and then, they asked again, and I said no. And then, they asked again, and I said yes, hung up my phone, and then screamed because I was terrified. I was not a runner.

"I was a nerdy, quiet, shy, creative kid who was terrified to be in my own skin. Training for and running the marathon, I really learned a lot about the limitations I had placed on myself, and the amazing reward you get from being committed to something big and scary over a long period of time.

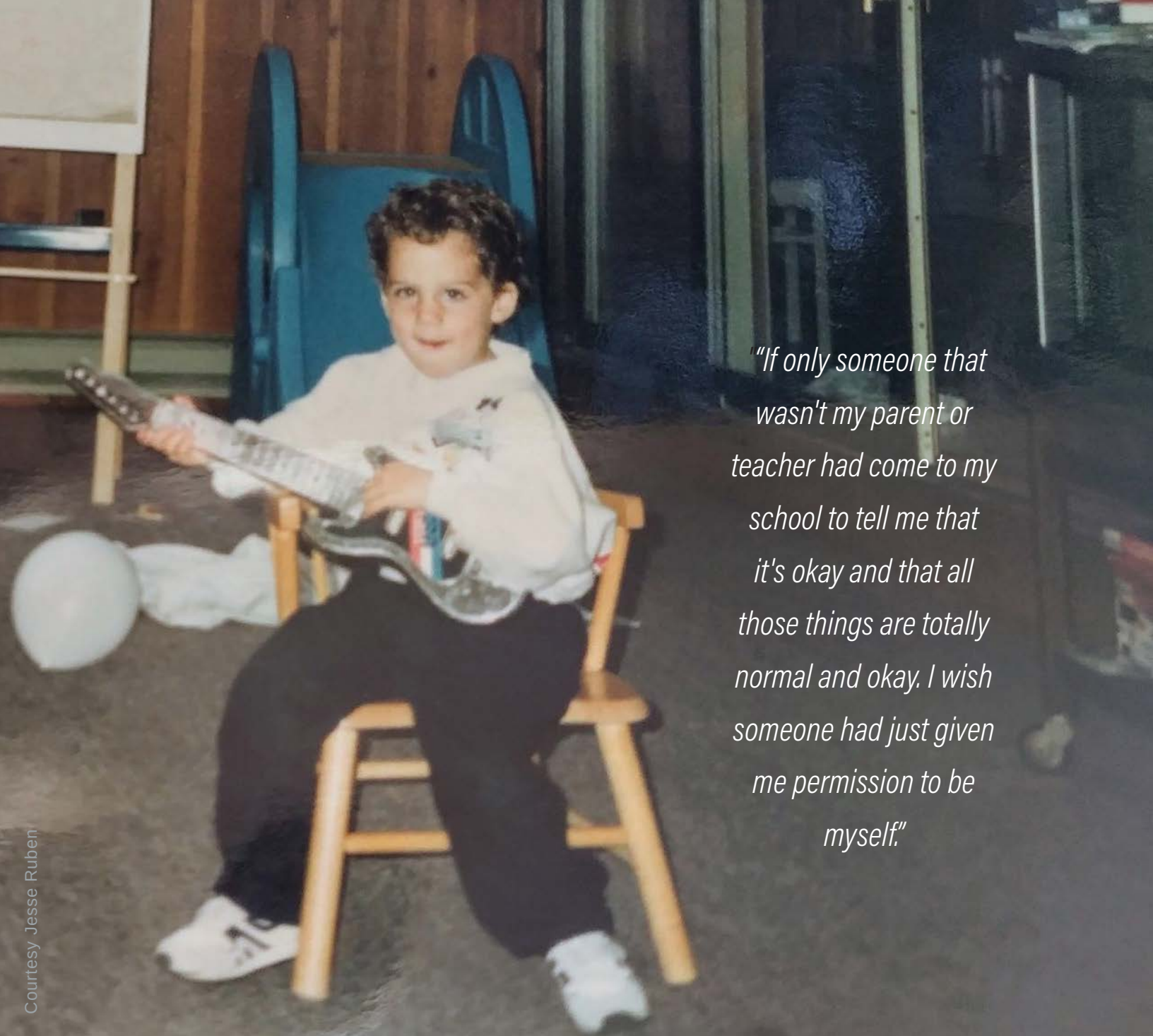
"I wrote a song that gives people permission to do crazy things. I released it. I inspired some people to run, and I received some nice messages. One day, I got an email from a teacher named Jen Turner in Vancouver Island in Canada. She said, "Jesse, I was just writing to let you know we found your song, and

*A service learning initiative that
inspires and profoundly connects
students of all ages to the difference
they can make in their lives, their
communities, and in the world.*

www.wecanwecanwecan.com

THE
WE
CAN
PROJECT

Andrea McComb
*Director of Professional
Learning & Development
BCPVPA*



Courtesy Jesse Ruben

"If only someone that wasn't my parent or teacher had come to my school to tell me that it's okay and that all those things are totally normal and okay. I wish someone had just given me permission to be myself."

we've been playing it for our students, and they really love it and they've really connected to it, because the theme of the song is 'we can', and it's about doing crazy, scary things. I promised my students I would ask you if you would want to come visit us".

I am in my apartment in Brooklyn, thinking this is the best email I've ever gotten in my life. I agreed to go visit.

It took three airplanes, and the last one was a six-seater. I landed in Comox, and got off the plane to

see 400 kids and their parents at the airport waiting for me. It was such a special experience to be so far away from home, and to have a response like that. What a special place, and what a special community. I still get chills when I see the music video we produced at Puntledge Park Elementary. I got back to New York, and other teachers started watching the video, and I was getting emails asking, can you come do that here?

"I was getting enough reaction to it that I started calling my educator friends and I said this is what

I'm trying to do: I really want to make a difference, and what's the best way to do that? We created the We Can Project, based on the song. It is a service learning and a growth mindset program. We really want to give young people an opportunity to give back to their communities, where they live, and to teach kids at a young age so that they can make positive changes in their communities. We wanted to give kids opportunities to explore things that they've never tried, whether that's creativity or athletics or language or meeting and making friends.

I went back to Vancouver Island three times over four years, and it is one of my favourite places on the planet. It is amazing to think that creativity is a superpower, because I wrote that song in an apartment in Brooklyn, and on the other side of North America this entire school had planned the whole school year around this song in a way that I never would have imagined when I was writing it.

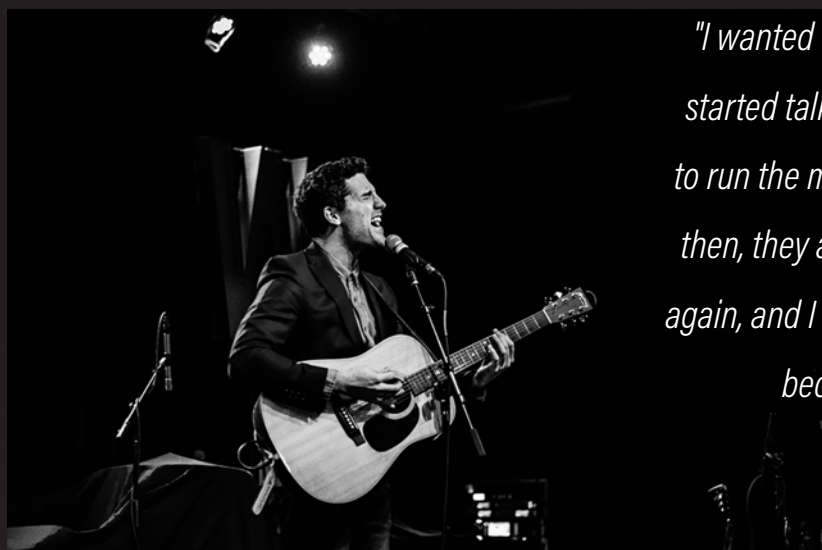
"The We Can Project website is filled with resources. We have sheet music and the lyrics in a bunch of languages. We have project ideas broken down by grade, lesson plans, and online worksheets. We have an sample timeline of what you can do throughout the year. It is all free.

I have visited schools everywhere, from some of the poorest to the wealthiest school districts in the country. The thing that I really love is no matter what socio-economic background, culture, city, country, farmland area, Native American communities, South Side of Chicago – this song, and this message, works.

"We work with each school to figure out what works for them. My desire is to connect with people through these songs and stories, and to share my experiences. I have spoken to students who have told me doing the We Can Project was the first time anyone had ever asked them what they were interested in. There was a student at a school I went to who was completely nonverbal. He never spoke. He had two aides that were with him all day. He was a sweet kid. The first time any of his teachers or classmates heard him say a word was singing We Can. Everyone was crying.

"There was a school in Mississauga outside of Toronto whose We Can Project was 'we can build a house'. Over the summer, one of the families in the community lost their house to fire. Throughout the school year, the school did fundraisers. The teachers and students would go and literally hammer in the boards and the nails. In May that year, we presented this giant cheque from Habitat for Humanity to the family. What was amazing was that it was not one of the teachers or the Principal who thought of it. It was a third-grader. His classmate was one of the children in the family. That is what is so great about young people, this third-grader said, "We can build them a house", and the teacher said, "Oh, I don't know, that's a lot". The other students responded, "Why not?" I get to see people push themselves outside of their comfort zone and see what's on the other side of it. And on the other side of that is just miraculous."

If you are interested in Jesse visiting your school as part of his BC tour October 2022, please reach out to him through his website: www.jesseruben.com



"I wanted to do something to help spinal cord research; I started talking to one of the charities, and they invited me to run the marathon. The first time they asked I said no; and then, they asked again, and I said no. And then, they asked again, and I said yes, hung up my phone, and then screamed because I was terrified. I was not a runner."

WE CAN by Jesse Ruben

A lot of people doubted me
They laughed in my face
Said there ain't no way
I would finish that race
But I kept my head down
And laced up my shoes
I ran a marathon,
When no one thought I could
I didn't always want to
But I said that I would
And I learned a lot about what I can do
It doesn't matter if they don't believe

It doesn't matter if they do not understand
Cause every dream that I'm trying to achieve
I can, I can, I can
I can, I can, I can
So make a list and do not make it brief
Write down every single wish
and every little thing that you want
Don't sell yourself short
Don't ever hesitate if people turn you down
Do not settle, do not wait, don't ever turn around
Cause you're almost there, I swear
I swear it's yours



Watch the video recorded at Puntledge Park Elementary
bit.ly/WeCanWeCanWeCan

And all that matters is there's no regrets
It doesn't matter if they do not understand
Cause everything you want you haven't gotten yet
You can, you can, you can
You can, you can, you can
Right now on this planet there are things that we can fix
There are people going hungry, a lot of them are kids
And it's so unfair
They're scared and all alone
Wars are being fought over land and over God
And we need a different plan,
Cause I think that we've forgot

That we're all the same
We're just love and blood and bones
It doesn't matter if they think we're wrong
It doesn't matter if they do not understand
Cause every obstacle we need to overcome.
We can, we can, we can
It doesn't matter if they think we're wrong
It doesn't matter if they do not understand
Cause every obstacle we need to overcome.
We can, we can, we can
We can, we can, we can
We can, we can, we can
We can, we can, we can



Support

CONVERSATIONS

THAT

BUILD

RELATIONSHIPS

by

Carmen Eberle

Director, Member Support Services

BCPVPA

Have you ever walked away from a conversation feeling uncomfortable, asking yourself how did we start here, and end up there? Have you ever wanted a 're-do' when the conversation took a wild and unexpected turn? We have conversations all the time, but are they effective? Given how many conversations leaders have in a day, we are bound to have missteps along the way. Conversations are the catalyst for building strong relationships: your next conversation just might be the most important conversation you will ever have with an individual. So, when given the opportunity to engage, I propose that you participate fully and dare yourself to be vulnerable in order to see vulnerability. By inviting someone in, we can increase our chances of having a conversation that is mutually satisfying and rewarding.

In this article, I will offer strategies to create the conditions for positive outcomes, highlight the different types of conversations leaders may encounter, and share approaches that lead to an increased likelihood for successful outcomes. Having knowledge of these skills can better prepare leaders for productive dialogue within our daily interactions.

Interpersonal communication skills assist leaders in addressing hard issues with compassion, while maintaining positive professional connections. Refining these skills takes time, and requires continuous self-reflection, learning, and relearning as a professional. While remaining truthful, it is imperative to balance compassion and empathy for the other person. It is through this approach that educators can engage in dialogue that values the person and envisions the person's potential for growth. Without candour and standards, relationships and teams can become dysfunctional. Without care, relationships can become distant and strained. From my perspective, the ideal place to be is in a position where we can grow toward and learn from each other.

Creating Conditions for Safe Conversations

Before initiating any conversation, do a self-check on your bias, or how you use assumptions, by asking yourself:

- How am I bringing my view into this situation?
- How might my view be biased?
- Where are my blind spots?
- What are some key questions I want to ask?

Next, take an inventory of the current relationship. Ask yourself what you can do to ensure that the conversation is psychologically safe. It is important that people feel safe in your presence, and can speak up and share thoughts and ideas without feeling overlooked, excluded, or unheard. A few ground rules to create a safe environment include:

Lead by example and set the norm for others	Why is it important?
Ask for upward feedback to gain insight into your own skills as a leader	Increases credibility when actions are based on feedback
Consistently give everyone a voice	Models what you represent and demonstrates respect for others
Acknowledge and own mistakes	Places more validity behind your words and provides a sense of safety for those around you
Encourage discussion and dialogue amongst the whole team	Increases decision making power and builds understanding

Listen to make others feel valued

Why is it important?

Ensure adequate time and space that is free from disruptions or distractions

Helps us focus on the conversation and shows that others are important enough to have your full attention

Check for understanding

Provides real time feedback to determine next steps, and ensures common understanding

Encourage people to share and ask questions

Signals that the conversation is important to you and that the other person matters

Be open-minded and willing to consider new ideas that differ from your own

Supports insight to make informed decisions

Create a safe environment to express selves

Why is it important?

Be receptive to a wide variety of ideas and constructive criticism

Encourages conversations that lead to high functioning teams

Welcome curiosity, and ask questions such as “Why do you think that?”

Generates new solutions and promotes creative problem-solving

Encourage thinking that is outside the box

Ensures diversity of ideas

Allow healthy debate

Supports learning more about yourself and others

When there is psychological safety on a team, team members and individuals will feel that they can comfortably share thoughts and ideas without retribution. With that comes confidence to take risks, offer ideas, and share concerns. Having psychological safety fosters creativity, and builds a culture and climate on a team that is characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect.

Now that we are aware of the need for psychological safety, the next step is to identify what kind of conversation is necessary. I will introduce four types of conversations that leaders may encounter in the workplace: team conversations, learning conversations, delegate conversations, and issues-based conversations. Identifying the type of conversation in advance is essential so that you can identify the purpose and better engage in – and speak to – the core of the issues.

“Do your research first, you need to have a really good handle on all perspectives and have a game plan that is understood by everyone for the discussion. What is the goal of the discussion? To hear each other and learn, or to make a decision? Personally, I like to be the public note taker as it forces me to listen carefully and clarify information as I document it.”

Sarah Husband, Principal, Coquitlam



TEAM CONVERSATIONS

One of the most common conversations for educators is a team conversation. Sometimes we lead the team, and sometimes we are learning alongside the team. In both scenarios, team conversations need to be a place where ideas and thoughts can be freely expressed, and dialogue and debate is created. No one voice should dominate, and all members on the team need to be able to express themselves, and to share and contribute in meaningful ways. The sharing of both positive and constructive ideas can strengthen a team and improve communication. Improving communication is a complex process, and below are some highly effective ways to facilitate and contribute to successful team talk:

Develop norms.

- Co-create and establish the rules of engagement.
- Ensure every member contributes and that there is process for developing consensus.
- Focus on norms that are intended to improve interactions amongst team members.

Listen first.

- Ensure that every member on the team is given an opportunity to talk and share.
- Allow everyone to speak once before any individual on the team speaks twice.
- Be curious by asking thought-provoking questions: "Why do you think that?" "Can you give a specific example?" "What tangible outcome would be ideal for you and why?"

Embrace feedback.

- Encourage candid and constructive insight.
- Consider feedback as a tool that can help us evaluate ourselves, the results of our work, and how others perceive us.

Through shared leadership and successful team talk, everyone is grounded in common interests, purpose, and priorities. One of the most important elements of a high functioning team is the encouragement of high levels of communication and shared leadership opportunities. Team culture is everyone's responsibility, and leads to better overall organizational performance. As a team, it is important to commit to and agree on clear accountabilities while having regular discussions and follow-up conversations to ensure engagement and accountability.

- Accept constructive insight and view it as a growth opportunity or a way to improve.

Focus on strengths.

- Start from a place of strength to make people feel valued for what they can contribute on the team.
- Identify strengths to give everyone on the team a better understanding of how yourself and others operate.
- Align strengths with priorities to exemplify the culture and to change the dialogue from, "what do I need to be successful?" to, "what does the team need to fulfill their responsibilities towards the vision and mission?"

Encourage perspective taking.

- Visualize another person's point of view to help validate other thoughts and feelings.
- Encourage people to share perspectives to better understand the reason behind their thinking or actions.
- Seek more information by asking follow-up questions such as: "How is what is being said landing with you?" "Can you elaborate on the point you made?"

"The most important aspects of a productive conversation are withholding judgment, being curious, listening deeply, and refraining from becoming defensive. Remember "were we to fully understand the reasons for other people's behaviour, it would all make sense." (Sigmund Freud)

Sarah Petrisor, Principal, Prince George



LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

“Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).”

First Peoples Principles of Learning, First Nations
Educational Steering Committee, FNEESC, 2015

Through learning conversations, school leaders can purposefully engage with others and strengthen their relationships. Many times, individuals and groups of people will want to talk about work with someone who they trust, and who will listen and challenge thinking.

When a learning conversation is initiated, ask the individual what they hope to get from the conversation, and help individuals to self-identify problems and find solutions. This can be done by asking questions, while encouraging the other person to pause and reflect. This approach can also help to improve someone's understanding of an issue, or a project they want to advance or resolve. Learning conversations can be formal or informal, and within or outside the office walls. These types of conversations are best when someone wants help to think things through, or is seeking to bounce ideas off another to challenge their own thinking. In these moments, leaders can turn a typical conversation into a learning conversation while keeping the following key elements in mind:

Seek first to understand. Allow the person to think, reflect, and express themselves. Listen to understand, and do not make assumptions as to where the conversation will go, or what the conversation is about. Pay attention to facts, listen for value statements, barriers, or reservations and any emotions that have been brought to the conversation. Having a deep understanding of the issue will allow for better questioning that can lead to stretching another person's thinking.

Respond thoughtfully. Inspire the person to explore the issue or problem more fully. Through inquiry and positive questioning techniques, you can uncover more details. To start the discussion, ask open-ended questions.

Some examples include:

- “Where would you like to start?”
- “What is at stake?”
- “What role do you think you have played in this?”
- “What else occurs to you?”

These types of questions can be particularly powerful as the person starts relaying additional information to help with their thinking. Allow as much time as needed to respond without agreeing, disagreeing, or interrupting. Just listen, and give the other person space and time to express themselves.

Resist imposing your own solutions. Being in a helping profession makes it difficult to refrain from giving advice or offering solutions. Although difficult, remind yourself that the learning conversation is not about you or your professional opinion, but rather the other person's learning journey.

Ultimately, the learning conversation requires an appropriate combination of challenge and support. It is essential that individuals not only feel heard, but feel understood. When you can authentically listen without imposing your own thoughts and ideas, you have mastered the key elements. Whether you are in a pre-planned discussion – or find yourself engaging in an impromptu conversation in the hallway – trust the process, and fully engage in these wondrous opportunities for self-discovery.

“Ensuring I create a safe space for discussions, followed by identifying and defining the problem, to determine – and outline – a clear and focused conversation of all possible solutions”. Kim Parker, Vice-Principal, Chilliwack

DELEGATED COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATIONS

One of the primary responsibilities of an educational leader is to ensure tasks are completed and assigned to achieve the strategic goals of the school or district.

The art of delegation does not always come easily, but it is an important method of communication to empower and entrust those working alongside you. “Effective managers know what responsibilities to delegate to allow themselves time to plan, to collaborate with others in the organization, and to monitor the performance of their employees, making sure to give them adequate feedback and development opportunities” (Sam R. Lloyd, *Accountability: Managing for Maximum Results* 2002).

Effective managers also provide clarity around roles and responsibilities to ensure accountability and clear direction on who is responsible for what, and when tasks are to be completed. When delegating, it is important to remember that these conversations also require creation of the right conditions and environment for everyone. If you are in a position to delegate, be mindful of the following strategies:

Be transparent

Include reasons why a task needs to be done

Clearly identify the goal and objectives

Articulate timelines and priority of importance

Why is it important?

Identifies value of task and confirms understanding of importance

Ensures responsibilities are understood

Increases work efficiency and targets for monitoring progress

Inspire Commitment

Describe what needs to be done and the role others can have in making it happen

Allow space and time for people to ask questions and make suggestions

Provide specific details

Why is it important?

Confirms commitment and understanding

It allows the team to uncover challenges, ask clarifying questions and brainstorm ideas

Provides clarity and increases the chances of the team or individuals to experience success

“For me, being present is an important part of a rich and engaging conversation or discourse. I take the time to deep breathe and sense how I am arriving – literally in the day and moments in the day. The self-awareness helps me to be present with fewer internal distractions.” David DeRosa, Principal, Kootenay-Columbia

Align work with peoples' strengths

Why is it important?

Pass on work to people who have the skills

Develops employees and increases efficiencies

Invest in others who are motivated to contribute

Increases engagement, follow-through and commitment

Provide ongoing support and regular check-ins

Builds trust and creates opportunities to provide guidance and feedback to reinforce or adjust

Consider others

Why is it important?

Check with the team to identify others who can help

Strengthens connections, builds capacity, and boosts morale by working together towards a common goal

Co-create a list of resources and identify training or support that may be needed to complete a task

Provides greater access to expertise

Allow everyone on team to have the opportunity to contribute

Creates increased opportunities to engage and learn from one another

Let leaders lead

Why is it important?

Strike the balance between support and independence

Inspires confidence in ability to lead

Define authority levels

Establishes boundaries and how much decision-making power a person has

Allow others to take different approaches

Creates a positive organizational culture that promotes diversity and leading to various potential solutions

Managers and leaders who delegate believe in their employees and value what they contribute to the workplace. Over-involvement may lead to micromanaging, yet not being involved enough can lead to missed moments where critical feedback could be helpful. It is important to strike the right balance and stay involved while allowing the delegate to lead the way. Staying mindful of the above strategies will contribute to a positive working environment that supports and empowers others. Delegating empowers others, and it develops future leaders. Building the capacity of others to lead on the team inspires commitment that can lead to optimal long-term benefits for everyone.

"The most important role I have in a productive conversation is providing space and time to truly listen with an open heart and an open mind. This allows me to make a more informed and unbiased decision."

Sanj Johal, Principal, North Vancouver

ISSUE-BASED DISCUSSIONS

Lastly, one of the most challenging conversations a leader faces is one that requires engaging individuals and teams in conversations that are related to performance or behavior. Through thoughtful preparation, an issues-based conversation that is direct can be high-yielding. Issues discussions are difficult because if the message is too soft, it may not affect change. If the message is too harsh, the conversation may stop and the relationship could be damaged, resulting in a loss of trust. So, how do we have an issue discussion that allows for productive conversations that provoke and move learning forward? In my experience, I have always tried to keep messaging about the issue – not the person – with a focus on results, growth, and positive outcomes for students.

Before going into the conversation, it is important to know for yourself what the issue is and what problem you are trying to solve. It is key to be self-aware and prepared to listen to perspectives that may differ from your own. Effective issue-based conversations are ones that name and address the issue honestly and in a timely manner. When discussing an issue, consider context and intent while being present and aware. Be prepared to help ensure coherent or complete explanations of an issue. A leader's role in an issue-based conversation is to engage fully and make it real, and to avoid talking for the sake of talking. Being present and aware creates an environment that encourages participation and utmost attention to the conversation.

Having a framework is helpful when preparing for an issues-based conversation. By mapping out the conversation, one can make good use of time to succinctly and accurately describe and identify an issue that needs to be resolved. Below is an adapted version from the book *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott (2011):

Issue-Based Discussion Framework

Define the most pressing issue:

Be concise and accurately describe the issue.

Define its significance:

What impact is the issue placing on services, people, community, or other relevant factors?

What is the future impact if this issue is not resolved?

What results do you want?

What is the ideal outcome?

What information needs to be shared?

"When it comes to preparing for an issues discussion, I used to have the mindset that I was about to 'embrace chaos', but over the years I have seen patterns emerge, and have learned that my mindset is actually 'to trust the process' – to use active listening strategies; to enable all participants to have an opportunity to have their voice heard; and to use wait time and not fill in the gaps." Ian Landy Principal, Powell River

Relevant background information?

How did the issue start?

Who are the key players, and who can assist?

What are the differing, opposing, or common interests? What are alternatives and/or options?

What has been done?

What has been done so far?

What questions need to be answered?

If nothing changes, what is likely to happen?

The help I want from the individual, group, or team is:

What level of commitment is needed from myself or others?

What feedback is needed in return from the team or individual?

When the issue is resolved, what difference will it make?

Self-reflective questions:

Have I accurately and succinctly captured the issue and potential solutions?

Have I approached the issue objectively?

Having a framework helps you to prepare for a conversation. We prepare for staff meetings so why wouldn't we prepare for an issue-based discussion? There are no guarantees that any given conversation will be as effective as you hope, but being prepared can help prevent any misunderstanding, and can provide coherence to the conversation and an increased likelihood of a positive outcome. Once you have your talking points in hand, you can be intentional with your message, and it is then up to you to approach the conversation with confidence and care. By engaging in conversations with compassion and support, I believe that you can increase employee capacity, build a confident team, and positively impact effective change leadership.

"In preparation for an issues discussion, I like to be prepared from two perspectives. First, I do my homework on the issue in question to familiarize myself with the different points of view on the issue. Who are the stakeholders, what exactly is at stake for each, and what does the research say about the various aspects of the issue? Second, I set aside the time and space to have an authentic discussion that honours the time and viewpoint of the person with whom I am engaging. This means a private venue without interruptions, adequate time set aside for the discussion, and a relaxed, welcoming space that allows participants (myself included!) to feel valued and at-ease. Finally, I feel it is more important to listen in these discussions than to talk. Issues discussions are a fantastic opportunity to learn from someone else's perspective, but you have to actively engage in that listening to realize the full benefit of it."

Paul Hembling, Principal, Kamloops

Conversation Etiquette

RECAP

- ❖ schedule adequate time and space to have the conversation
- ❖ create an agenda and allow others to contribute so that everyone knows what to expect
- ❖ shift mindset from positional to relational
 - ❖ make a choice to care about others
- ❖ identify the issue succinctly and accurately
 - ❖ value a person's potential to grow
- ❖ strike the balance between candor and care
- ❖ manage emotions and identify triggers within self
 - ❖ refrain from subjective, personal, or contradicting comments
 - ❖ allow for 'wait time' to process information and respond thoughtfully
- ❖ actively listen and refrain from interrupting
- ❖ use a calm tone and be aware of body language
- ❖ place yourself in the other person's situation
- ❖ have empathy for yourself, and allow time to decompress after the conversation
- ❖ be prepared to receive information that is unexpected
- ❖ check for common understanding throughout the conversation
- ❖ brainstorm solutions together
 - ❖ create an action plan that is mutually agreeable
 - ❖ schedule a timely follow up meeting on the agreements
- ❖ create environmental conditions that support others in the way you would want to be supported

*"During my master's program, one of my professors shared that if we remember one thing, remember that "It's all about relationships". So, when having a **difficult conversation**, I want to better understand their story and perspective. I do my best to listen wholeheartedly and, when needed, ask curious questions. Listen more and talk less."*

Mike Pue, District Principal, Langley

"From experience, I recognize that no matter how well the conversation is launched or how many positive aspects there are to the conversation, the person is going to struggle with the information. I always enter the conversation with the intent to preserve the relationship no matter the eventual outcome. With these two thoughts in mind, I give as much time and space prior to the conversation as the context warrants so that the person can prepare themselves and bring their best self to the difficult conversation"

Karin Kroecher, Principal, Langley

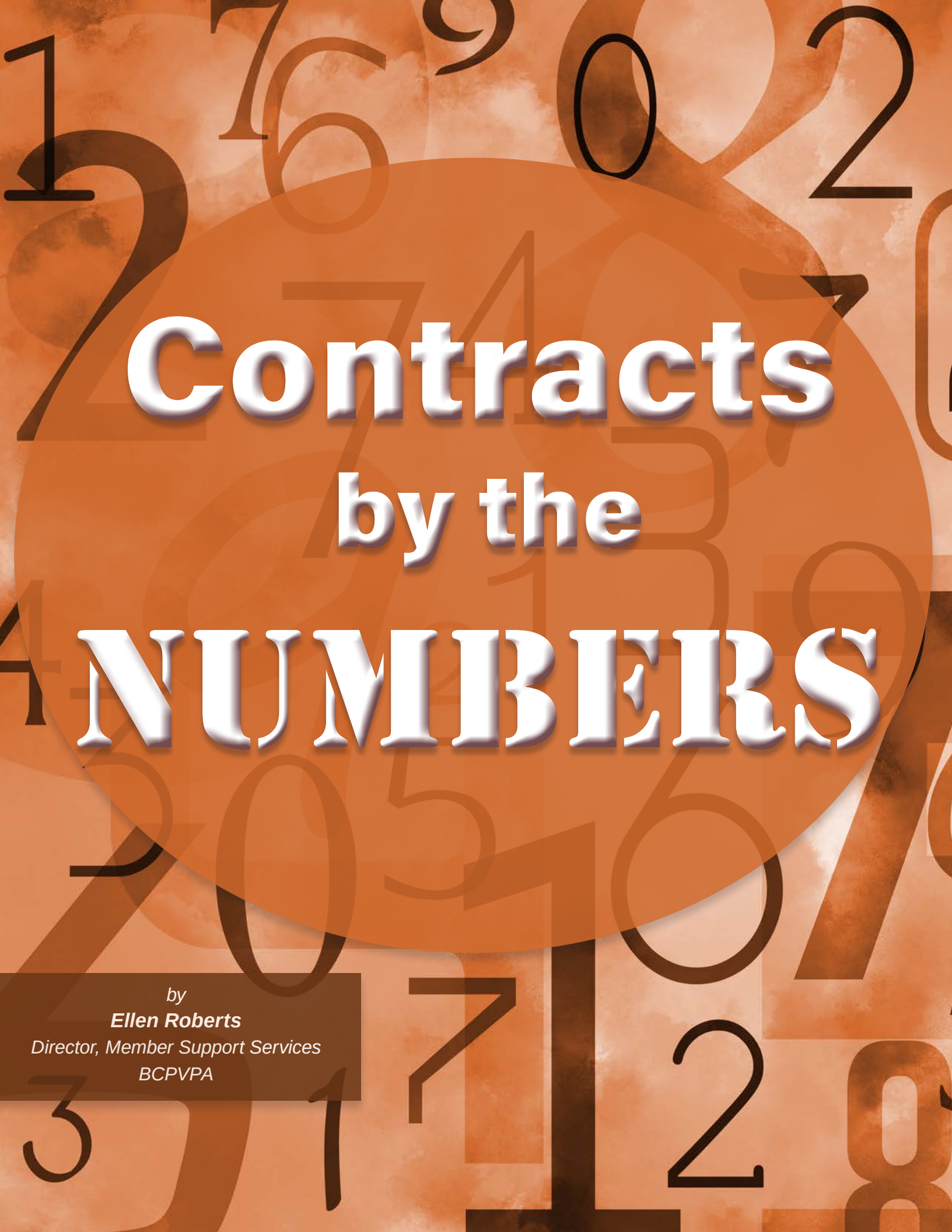
"Give the participants your full attention. Take notes during the meeting and make sure to explain the purpose of your note taking, so that you can get down all of the information and truly understand the issue. By the end of the meeting, establish a plan for moving forward and try to be solutions-based. Make sure to explain the role that you will take in the plan."

Carol Petek, Principal, Chilliwack

"For me, the most important thing I need to consider when entering into any conversation at work is knowing my audience. If I don't have a relationship with the person I am speaking with, I need to be more cognizant of choosing my words carefully and considering how my words will land for the other person. This reminds me that if I don't have a relationship with people I converse with at school (which should be everyone), then I should be working on building one."

Paul Marsden, Principal, Surrey

Special thanks to Sanjeet Johal, Karin Kroecher and Sam Muraca for their contributions to this article
Interested in more on the topic of navigating conversations? Read Kendra Simonetto's review of
Fierce Conversations by Susan Scott on page 96



Contracts by the NUMBERS

by

Ellen Roberts

Director, Member Support Services

BCPVPA

When we talk about the **numbers** associated with our contracts (employment agreements), it is likely that most people jump to the page outlining their salaries and some of the benefits they will be entitled to in their employment. There is nothing wrong with ensuring that Principal and Vice-Principal salaries and benefits are fair, reasonable, and consistent, but there are other **'numbers'** in these contracts that are important, as they also impact conditions of employment. Not all members' contracts look the same, but there are common elements and clauses among them. This article will identify some of the key *number-related* pieces that are worthy of our members' attention.

QUERY:

Does my contract have an expiry date?
If so, when is it?

Contract Term / Contract Renewal Process

Particularly true in the case of newly-appointed Principals and Vice Principals, a member's contract may be for a set term of, for example, 2 or 3 years, or it may be a 'continuing' contract that does not specify a term or have an expiry date. Each 'term' contract should indicate the date by which the contract will be renewed, and the date the member will be informed if the employer does not intend to renew the contract. In the latter case, the member should also be informed of the reason that the contract will not be renewed. On occasion, an employer will inform a member well in advance of the required date so that the member has the maximum time to consider their options.

QUERY:

When is the next date that my contract or my Chapter's contract will be reviewed?

Contract Review

The contract may indicate the frequency with which the contract may or will be reviewed.

QUERY:

According to my contract, when will I be notified that I am being transferred?

Transfer process

Contracts generally indicate a date by which Principals and Vice-Principals will be notified that they are being transferred to a new work location for the following year. That notice is generally longer in districts that span large geographic areas, as members may be required to move to new communities. There are also emergent situations that may necessitate a transfer of a Principal or Vice-Principal where that notice is not possible. Language in the contract will often include a clause that indicates that exceptions may be made in the case of an emergency.

QUERY:

If I am reassigned, will my salary be 'red-circled' and – if so – for how long?

Re-Assignment

Re-assignment tends to occur in the spring for the following school year, although it may happen at any time. If a member is re-assigned to a lower position with a lower salary, notice and a rationale must be given as per the language in the contract. Look for language around 'red-circling' of the current higher salary for a set period of time, as is common in many districts. Similarly, administrators assigned to positions with higher salaries should find language indicating how their salary is affected moving forward.

QUERY:

Where am I in the cycle of evaluation?

Evaluation

Contracts may indicate the frequency of performance reviews / appraisals / evaluations that the Principal or Vice-Principal can expect in their term.

QUERY:

What notice must I give if I choose to terminate my contract?

QUERY:

If my employer terminates my contract, what severance will I be eligible to receive?

QUERY:

When must I notify the district of my intention to retire? Am I eligible to receive any kind of payout at retirement?

QUERY:

How many sick days do I currently have in my bank? If fewer than 120, will my district bridge me to LTD?

Termination without Cause

Termination without cause refers to bringing the current contract to an end, but not necessarily a termination of the Principal or Vice-Principal's employment altogether. Numbers come into play in terminations without cause in:

- The required notice period for the **Principal or Vice-Principal** to terminate their own contract (= resignation). There may be limited dates during the year when this may occur;
- The required notice period for the **employer** to terminate the employment agreement;
- The length of time the Principal's or Vice-Principal's salary may be 'red-circled' when they assume a teaching position;
- The length of severance available to the Principal or Vice-Principal if they do not return to a teaching position.

Termination for Cause

Terminations for cause do not occur often. They do not require notice by the employer, and employees terminated for cause are not eligible for severance. There are no particular 'numbers' involved as there is no notice or severance for employees terminated for cause.

Retirement

Like termination or resignation, employers stipulate in contracts both the time of year (month/date) and the number of days' or weeks' notice required for retirement. Adherence to this date is especially important for members who may be eligible for a retirement gratuity, or who are planning to take advantage of an Early Retirement Incentive (ERIP), which are available in some districts, as written notice is required for receipt of these benefits.

Sick Leave

Contracts stipulate the rate at which members accrue sick days – the number per month or year. Some districts have a maximum number of sick days an individual can have in their sick bank, whereas in other districts, members continue to accrue sick days their entire career. An employee can use a maximum of 120 sick days in a calendar year before going on LTD. Employees who do not have 120 sick days have a shortened elimination period of 117 calendar days to qualify for LTD.

Sick leave accrual has particular significance for members who are in new districts as a Principal or Vice-Principal and are without the sick bank they accrued as teachers. Employees who move into new administrative positions without a sick bank may be offered some days to start them off – sometimes one years' worth,



and up to 60 days. Employers may refer to these sick days as 'ported' from the previous district; this is not accurate, as the old district does not actually 'give over' any time to the new district. Rather, it is the new district acknowledging that the employee has accrued days, and choosing to honour them.

There are instances when members require more sick days than they have in their banks to carry them through a difficult time. Approximately 1/3 of school districts provide Short Term Disability (STD) benefits for their Principals and Vice-Principals. These members are able to access STD leave if/when they run out of sick days before they can qualify for LTD. In some districts without STD, employers state in contracts that they will 'bridge' the member through the 117-day elimination period when the employee can qualify for Long Term Disability (LTD) benefits. In still other districts, Principals and Vice-Principals have no coverage after they have exhausted their sick banks until they reach LTD. All members are eligible for LTD up to age 65, or 35 years of service.

QUERY:

What is the maternity leave benefit according to my contract?

Leave of Absence

Information regarding the application deadlines for personal leaves of absence – including educational leave and self-funded leaves, as well as the details on the length of various leaves – are outlined in contract or sometimes the accompanying appendices / employment plans. It is important to note that employees are eligible for some leaves through the Employment Standards Act (ESA) of BC or Canada, including maternity / paternity leaves, and compassionate care leaves. The ESA determines the length of the leave an employee is eligible for, and the employer determines if the leave is paid or unpaid, or if there is a top-up (Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB) Plan) to EI benefits, such as with maternity leave.

QUERY:

How many vacation days am I entitled to each year? Can I also access discretionary days?

Vacation Time

Vacation entitlements vary greatly for members across the province. Some districts include the two-week winter and spring breaks; others do not. Some do not specify any numbers at all – days, weeks, or dates. For Principals and Vice-Principals in other districts, each specific vacation date is listed in the contract. Some districts offer one to five discretionary days for Principals and Vice-Principals to take, usually at the discretion of the Superintendent or supervisor.

QUERY:

What is my Pro-D funding allotment this year?

Professional Development

Most contracts or plans will specify the amount of funding available to individuals or Chapters each year for their professional development.

There are many numbers in an employment agreement. If questions arise about any numbers, BCPVPA encourages members to reach out to the Contract Chair of the Chapter, or directly to a Member Support Services Director in the BCPVPA office.

bcpvpa.org/about-bcpvpa/contacts/staff

NEGOTIATION REPRESENTATION

What BC Principals and Vice-Principals
are seeking in their
Employment Relationships

Principals and Vice-Principals should have
**fair and reasonable influence over the
terms and conditions of their employment.**

If you agree with that statement, there is no need to read any further: you can move on to the next article. If you disagree, or want to better understand the employment relationship history for school leaders in BC, and how the Canadian courts now interpret this approach, then I encourage you to read on.

Let's first look at both the history of employment for Principals and Vice-Principals in this province, and what courts across the country say about fair and reasonable expectations for employee groups. In 1987, Principals and Vice-Principals were members of the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF), and had employment protections members of a provincial union. That same year, the Social Credit government of the day passed the *Teaching Profession Act* that chose to exclude Principals and Vice-Principals from being unionized employees by defining them as school administrators, and not teachers. At the same time, an amendment to Section 20 (2) of the School Act removed the ability of Principals and Vice-Principals to bargain as a collective, and all

Principals and Vice-Principals were required to enter into individual personal services contracts with their employers. Thirty-five years later, that amendment still exists in the School Act; the amendment stands out as questionably defensible from a constitutional perspective, when viewed alongside the many contemporary court rulings related to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

With that singular act of legislation in 1987, an entirely new and untried employment relationship model was introduced, and – in the 35 years following that critical exclusion – Principals and Vice-Principals have continually struggled to influence their terms and conditions of employment. When the apparatus for collective negotiation was removed in 1987, the government neglected to replace it with a tool or mechanism that would mandate fairness and equity in the working lives of Principals and Vice-Principals. In those 35 years, all aspects of the employment relationship have been under the direction of Boards of Education whose composition can change with each municipal election, along with the district's superintendent as the designate of each Board in BC's sixty school districts.

We do not take issue with the Labour Relations Board legislation that states that worksite managers cannot organize as a union under the Labour Code. What must be considered is the definition of the term 'manager'. In the scope of their responsibility for running a school, Principals and Vice-Principals have the same responsibility as any CEO. However,

by
Kevin Reimer
Executive Director
BCPVPA

WHEN THE APPARATUS FOR COLLECTIVE
NEGOTIATION WAS REMOVED IN 1987,
THE GOVERNMENT NEGLECTED TO
REPLACE IT WITH A TOOL OR MECHANISM
THAT WOULD MANDATE FAIRNESS AND
EQUITY IN THE WORKING LIVES OF
PRINCIPALS AND VICE-PRINCIPALS.

alongside that, they have very little inherent authority to carry out that work. In Canada, the benchmark for a being a manager is having the ability to hire and fire employees, and to determine a budget. Principals and Vice-Principals do not have the ability to hire, to fire, or to set their own budgets. And while it is true that Principals and Vice-Principals do the comprehensive background and investigative work related to these HR practices, ultimately the power to make decisions about employment rests with each district.

Managers are not expected to perform the same tasks as the employees that they manage. Yet 65% of BCPVPA members teach; in some instances, Elementary Vice-Principals teach 100% of the time. There is an interesting opposing scenario where BCTF members can take on acting Vice-Principalships, essentially performing all of the duties of a Vice-Principal, while remaining a member of the BCTF. Readers who have persisted: are you feeling confused? *Then we are on the right path!*

Since 2014, the BCPVPA has advocated on behalf of our 2,600 members for a provincial negotiation framework that would establish some common terms and conditions in the contracts of Principals and Vice-Principals, and provide the right to collective negotiation as a means to redress the inequities and variances in the employment relationships of BC school leaders.

Critics of the BCPVPA's approach to establishing

reasonable standards of employment contend that Principals and Vice-Principals are managers, and not entitled to bargaining rights like those of unionized employees. When viewed through the lens of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, it is clear that the BCPVPA's advocacy is not about unionization, salary, and benefits; it is about the troubling infringement upon the Charter Rights – Section 2(d) the Freedom to Associate – of BC workers who are Principals and Vice-Principals.

If you have read to this point, and are a BCPVPA member, you are currently exercising your Charter Right to be a member of – or, to 'associate' with – the BCPVPA. Recently, Canadian courts have determined that the right to associate on its own is not enough; there must be a demonstrable action that comes along with the freedom to associate, and for Canadian courts that is the right to negotiate as a collective.

From the perspective of the courts, the game changed in 2007 with the landmark *Health Services* by the Supreme Court of Canada. In *Health Services*, the majority of the Supreme Court of Canada defined "collective bargaining" as "the right of employees to associate in a process of collective action to achieve meaningful workplace goals." You will note that the Supreme Court did not speak specifically to unionization, but more about the collective approach to negotiating in order to achieve meaningful workplace goals. In this, the Supreme Court ruling clearly aligns with the goals expressed during the BCPVPA's seven years of advocacy.

"...Collective bargaining is not simply an instrument for pursuing external ends, whether these be mundane monetary gains or the erection of a private rule of law to protect the dignity of the worker in the face of managerial authority. Rather, collective bargaining is intrinsically valuable as an experience in self-government. It is the mode in which employees

2022

Chapter applies for judicial review.

2021

The Labour Relations Board dismisses the Chapter application in May 2021, and denies leave for reconsideration in November 2021.

2020

BCPSEA confirms that all negotiations with BCPVPA members will remain at the local level.

BCPVPA consults with a labour law firm. One Chapter applies for certification.

2019

BCPSEA issues an AGM resolution that commits to non-binding discussions with BCPVPA to establish a structure and process for discussion. One meeting takes place.

2018-2020

BCPVPA meets with education sector stakeholders including BCPSEA and the Ministry of Education, BCSSA, BCASBO.

2018

BCPVPA members representing all 60 districts vote 97% in favour of proceeding with advocacy for negotiation representation.

2014

The BCPVPA begins to work towards advocacy for negotiation representation for BC Principals and Vice-Principals.

1988

The BCPVPA is created as a non-profit professional association representing school and district-based school leaders.

1987

BC's Social Credit government tables Bills 19 and 20. Principals and Vice-Principals are expelled from the teacher bargaining unit as a result of Bill 19 and are no longer protected under the Labour Code.

1919

BC Teachers Federation (BCTF) is incorporated as a society.

Vice-Principals and Principals in BC are members of the BCTF, with accompanying employment protections.

participate in setting the terms and conditions of employment, rather than simply accepting what their employer chooses to give them ..."

Supreme Court of Canada decision in Health Services & Support Facilities Subsector Bargaining Assn v. British Columbia (2007, SCC 27, p. 33)

While the employment relationships of Principals and Vice-Principals were not under examination in this decision, the Supreme Court opinion on the dignity conferred under a collective process speaks volumes about the failings of the current personal services contract model that is, in a word, vulnerable.

The right to collectively negotiate has been upheld in a number of Supreme Court cases. In the *Mounted Police Association of Ontario v. Canada*, the Supreme Court, in referencing the RCMP's ability to negotiate as a collective, stated:

"[Freedom of association] stands as an independent right with independent content, essential to the development and maintenance of vibrant civil society upon which our democracy rests."

Mounted Police Association of Ontario v. Canada (Attorney General) (2015, para. 49)

With the Supreme Court of Canada clearly upholding the fundamental freedoms of employee groups in health care and policing, and evoking the bedrock of democracy, just what is the impediment for Principals and Vice-Principals to be represented as a collective, both by the BCPVPA as the provincial association, and by our members' regional chapters? We must return to Section 20 (2) of the School Act, passed 35 years ago in 1987. Modern case law is clear that Section 121 'interferes' with Section 2(d) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and infringes on the rights of Principals

and Vice-Principals. It is also clear that the Supreme Court does not make the distinction that collective bargaining is only reserved for unionized employees. While the Court does not refer to a specific labour relations model, it guarantees a "right to a general process of collective bargaining, not to a particular model of labour relations, nor to a specific bargaining method." The ability to negotiate as a collective can be established outside of BC's Labour Code that is reserved for unionized employees. What the Charter guarantees is a *right* to a process, not necessarily an outcome, and a process is what we are seeking. All other Principals and Vice-Principals in Canada – whether unionized employees or not – have the ability to negotiate as a collective. In every other province or territory, Freedom of Association is upheld.

MANAGERS ARE NOT EXPECTED TO PERFORM THE SAME TASKS AS THE EMPLOYEES THAT THEY MANAGE. YET 65% OF BCPVPA MEMBERS TEACH; IN SOME INSTANCES, ELEMENTARY VICE-PRINCIPALS TEACH 100% OF THE TIME.

For seven long years, the BCPVPA has advocated with government and within BC's education sector that the negotiating model for Principals and Vice-Principals must be Charter compliant in order to be fair and equitable. The BCPVPA, in representing its members, is pushing the system to change; not unexpectedly, the system continues to push back. The current employment relationship is built on a decision made in 1987, for political reasons of that time. 1987 was the year that Windows 2.0 and the first Nike Air Max model were released; the year when Hooked on Phonics hit the market, Red Bull

gave us wings, and Miss Vickie's came through in the crunch. We believe that a 2022 solution – reflective of the complex and important role our members play in BC's successful education sector, and the value that they have proven to the system during the years of the pandemic – is long overdue.

In this seven-year journey, we have heard from some critics that this is just a bid for unionization. We have been openly adamant from the start that we don't believe that unionization is required in the establishment of a Charter compliant mechanism for provincial negotiations. The model that we hope for is one that recognizes and protects the dignity of

ALL OTHER PRINCIPALS AND VICE-
PRINCIPALS IN CANADA – WHETHER
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OR TERRITORY, FREEDOM
OF ASSOCIATION IS UPHELD.

Principals and Vice-Principals as stated so clearly by the Supreme Court of Canada when referencing the case of *Wallace v. United Grain Growers (1997)* in the Court's *Health Services* decision:

"The right to bargain collectively with an employer enhances the human dignity, liberty, and autonomy of workers by giving them the opportunity to influence the establishment of workplace rules and thereby gain some control over a major aspect of their lives, namely their work."

If you have read to the end of this article, thank you. But the end of the article is not the end of the narrative. We hope that you will stick with this story as we continue to write it.

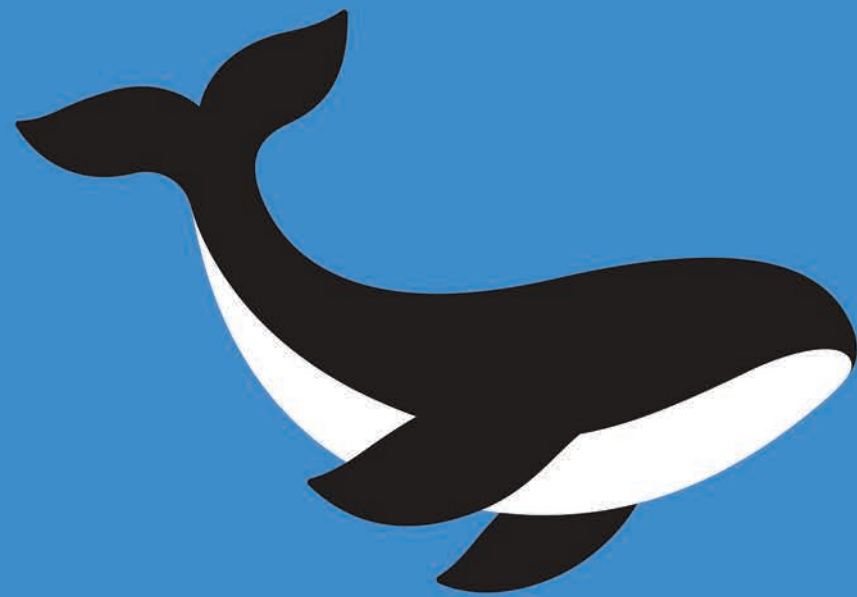


learning

“Time to meet, talk, and debrief
in our groups has been valuable.
My 'table family' will be a group
to connect with moving forward.
(Our facilitator) guides the conversation,
offers thoughts and ideas,
but his best attribute is that
with simple questions,
he is able to force us to dig
just a little deeper in our thinking.”

(BCPVPA Program Attendee)

Lessons from the Orcas



by
Anthony Rempel
Retired Principal
SD 73

Anthony Rempel was an educator and school leader in the Kamloops/Thompson school district for 28 years. Recently retired, Anthony is sharing some of his experiences with colleagues who are just setting out, and those who have been in schools for many years. He is currently writing a book to share some of the lessons he's learned through informal stories, like this one.

Recently, my wife and I went on a trip to northern Vancouver Island, where we spent a few days on a remote island. Orcas have been visiting this location for years, attracted by the smooth pebbles of the beach on its northern shore and engaging in an activity known as 'rubbing'. The orcas move their bodies against the pebbles on the beach, often rolling upside down as they rub along. Each day on this island, we invested several hours beachcombing and waiting for the magical moment when the resident orcas would appear. On our final day on the island, we were told that the whales had been spotted just a few kilometres away.

We packed a lunch and hunkered down, enjoying the warm sunshine, cool breeze, and gorgeous surroundings. The first three hours were glorious and relaxing, but then – as is frequent in this region – the weather began to shift. The wind picked up, and we felt a few drops of rain on our shoulders. Swiftly, a full-blown squall arrived, and we were compelled to take cover under the giant Sitka spruce trees, amidst the dense salal bushes. We hung in for a half hour, as

the rain continued to pound down. I was reluctant to leave, knowing that it would be some time before we would return to this island, but the grind of the wait and the uncertainty of a favourable outcome won out.

The next morning, over breakfast at the local cafe, we overheard someone mention that the orcas had appeared for an 'epic rub' about 90 minutes after we had left the beach. I wished I had not heard that, as we had accepted the likelihood that the orcas had not arrived that day. Knowing we had missed something so special felt incredibly deflating, and it took several days to get past the disappointment and regret.

I suspect that most people can identify with that feeling, the desire for a 'redo', the opportunity for a different choice. As the old saying goes, "Hindsight is always 20/20"; I don't get to relive that moment where I could decide to hang in there. Instead, I get the opportunity to reflect on the experience, and think about what I might have learned from it.

Had I not overheard the conversation in the restaurant, I would not be writing this story. Life is full of moments where we never find out what we might have missed, and that's okay. As a school Principal, I knew that there were many special breakthrough moments occurring over the course of each day. I was not able to witness each one, yet it filled me with joy to hear about these moments from teachers and students. When I was invited to classrooms to witness or take part in special lessons or celebrations, I would find a way to make it happen. With the orcas, a lack of patience and unwillingness to sacrifice my own comfort caused me to miss out on something truly special.

The other lesson I learned was the importance of patience and perseverance. When we arrived on the island, we were told the best chance of spotting these whales was to put in the time. There was no guarantee they would appear, but it required faith in the process.

As a Principal, I had to have faith in the vision that was established for the school. In a results-oriented world, it's easy to get discouraged and abandon a course you believe in when there is pressure to produce strong data and adopt new research-based strategies touted as the best way to engage learners and improve your school results. In the first year at my most recent school, a group of teachers and I attended an inspirational conference, and the enthusiasm for this new vision and the commitment from staff was contagious. Through my five years at the school, we stayed the course and continued to build on this vision despite pressures from many quarters to shift our focus to different initiatives. This was not a 'performance-based' vision, but rather one that was built on meaningful learning and thinking. In their book, *Ten Mindframes for Leaders*, John Hattie and Raymond Smith write that, "All performance is threatened by the possibility of failure. Teachers and students are not meant to perform." I like that quote for its authenticity and encouragement of faith in the process of persevering with a powerful, practical vision.

I had faith in the vision and the process of our school's vision for learning, and because my faith didn't waiver, it gave the teachers confidence that we were doing the right thing. Over time, we saw some wonderful results, even if they weren't clearly visible in the district assessment data.

That brings me back to the orcas.

I can be philosophical, and believe that we did our best to be there for the magical rubbing event. But the truth is, we aborted the mission even after one of the locals encouraged us to stick around. Sometimes you have to put your own impatience and skepticism aside, and put your trust in someone who has been there and has the experience. In that instance, we made a decision that we later regretted. Next time, we will be prepared to go the distance.

support

The BCPVPA is all about people, and making sure that our members are successful and supported in the important work they do.

Our Member Support Services team is here for members who have questions about their employment relationships, their contracts, their pensions and retirement plans, and their health and well-being.

The BCPVPA offers support and advocacy to more than 2,600 Principals and Vice-Principals in BC's public education system.

bcpvpa.org

bcpvpa

With a most-welcome summer break just around the corner, we can turn our attention to attending more to our own needs. Like never before, navigating the 2021-2022 school year has been very taxing for many educational leaders. Focusing on our own personal and family needs, and prioritizing those over the summer holiday, can be the best remedy for overcoming the rigors of a demanding past school year.

Wrap

Plan in advance

Wrapping up the school year in a way that lets you be free of further work obligations is step one. Establish an end-of-year priority list and task sheet that you can physically check off.

Creating healthy 'book-end' work boundaries and realistic goals allows for greater work separation and downtime over the summer. Set daily/weekly goals through June into early July to ensure you are 'on track' to end the school year with a more purposeful sense of completion.

Reflect

Be mindful

Spend some time on the weekends through June identifying what you truly need over the summer to get recharged and rejuvenated.

Many have given more of themselves than ever before to meet the needs of others over this past school year, often at the expense of their own needs. It might be helpful to take stock of that awareness while you are still in the midst of the demands and pressures of your role.

Pay attention to what you are needing – and lacking – beyond sleep and rest. It's time to prioritize your needs and those of your family. When you create a list of actions that you can reliably review and revert to, it can take the guesswork out of what you need once you have the time to focus on yourself and your family.

Release

Disconnect / Connect

We have been bombarded with so much news of conflict, angst, fear, and loss. Take time to disconnect from electronic devices and media/social media feeds. One's perception of threat and fight-or-flight activation can remain artificially heightened even after you've left the work setting for summer holidays. Give yourself a break from what can be an unsettling and disruptive relationship for a while. Do make a point to connect with nature and healthy relationships. With COVID-19 slowly taking a backseat in our lives right now, find connections that are affirming, nourishing, and nurturing over the break. This will help you settle into a state of being and grounding that will serve you well in reclaiming greater vitality and the sense of community we've all been dearly missing.

by
Jack MacNeill

*MEd (Coun.Psych.),
RCC, CVRP, RRP
President, humanworks*





I'm not sure

Great! a bit frustrated today!

NOT SO GOOD I'm exhausted

pretty good

Enjoying the day

It would help to talk

Connected for Well-Being

**An Update on the
WelTel Pilot Project**

by
Rochelle Morandini
Director, Member Health and Well-being,
BCPVPA

We are sure you will agree that there is a critical relationship between healthy leaders and healthy schools. The BCPVPA's investment in WelTel is part of our Association's work to support our Principals' and Vice-Principals' health and well-being, and to help them to thrive in BC's public education system so that they can continue to positively impact the climate in their schools. Ultimately, we see this as an investment that also benefits BC's students.

For those not familiar with WelTel, it is a leading evidence-based digital health solution for equitable, relationship-based care. Although the service is primarily used in the health sector, we quickly saw an opportunity to extend this innovative platform within the education sector. Using two-way text messages, we could maintain a connection to members and quickly respond to arising needs.

BCPVPA launched the WelTel text messaging support to a pilot group of 100 members in late April 2021. Our initial objectives in launching the WelTel pilot included:

- **Helping members feel connected**, particularly those in isolated communities and sole leaders within schools.
- **Early identification of members who may be struggling**; as our *Thriving in Education* research has demonstrated, Principals and Vice-Principals are a population who will continue to show up to fulfill their purpose, regardless of the impact on their mental health and well-being. If the WelTel tool could identify those members in need, we could quickly bridge them to help.
- **Promotion of member resilience** and, in some cases, prevention of workplace absence.

BCPVPA Long Term Disability (LTD) Plan claims have been increasing steadily – particularly since the onset of the pandemic – with an alarmingly accelerated rate of mental illness. By the time a Principal or Vice-Principal requires time away from work, they are burnt out and this can result in a long and difficult recovery. We were interested to see if the WelTel pilot

would make it easier and safer for members to reach out for help.

The BCPVPA Experience

Every Monday at noon, the WelTel system sends a text to all participants, simply saying, “How are you?” The intent of this message is for the Member to pause and reflect on how they are doing. When the member has a moment, they may respond to the text in as little – or as much – detail as they like. The system then sorts their text responses into three different categories:

Green Doing OK

A response of “Good”, or “Fine”, or “OK” would get logged into the green area.

Yellow Unrecognizable

Often our members' responses end up in yellow, as they provide a lengthier response and the system cannot differentiate between OK and Not OK. This is fine, and we value the opportunity for deeper dialogue.

Red Not OK

Responses such as “Tired” or “Exhausted” would show up in the Not OK section.

The intent of the system is to reach a large number of respondents in an efficient manner. In the health sector, if a response is categorized as red, or even possibly yellow, the health expert would reach out with a return text to query what is needed. Green responses would not require the time needed for health intervention outreach.

For our BCPVPA pilot, we decided that we would respond to everyone, regardless of how their response is categorized.

BCPVPA Executive Director Kevin Reimer and I share the responsibility for responding to members on WelTel, and we feel that the project has helped us in establishing and strengthening relationships with the members. Even early in the project, participants

seemed to welcome the regular and immediate dialogue.

Members were invited to share as much or as little as they would like. The intent of the process was to support their own reflection, and offer the opportunity to respond as needed. Each week, there were regular responses from about 75 – 80 members.

We quickly saw an openness in being vulnerable, and a willingness to share both work challenges and personal challenges. Kevin and I really honour this trust and openness. It has enabled us to reach out swiftly to offer support, or direct members to resources. In particular, we have referred many members to the BCPVPA Early Intervention Program for immediate coaching and counselling. We have also been able

to quickly respond to workplace challenges, and refer members to our Member Support Services colleagues to help address any district issues, or concerns related to conflicts with staff or parents.

Participant Experience

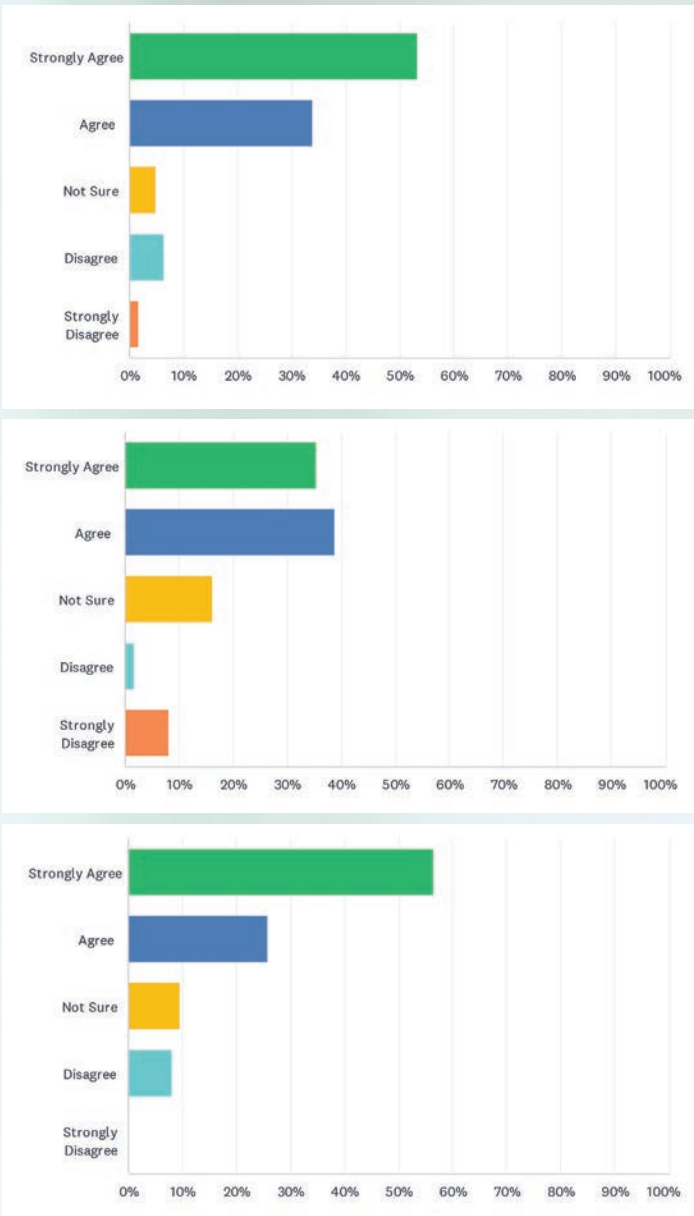
When we launched this pilot, we were not sure what to expect, and what the full value would be for our members and the BCPVPA, but we embraced this innovation with hope.

We issued a feedback survey in late February 2022 to measure how our pilot participants felt about the experience. More than 75% of pilot participants who respond regularly provided their feedback, and here is what we learned.

The weekly text message "*How Are You?*" does make me **stop to reflect** how I am doing

The process of receiving and responding to the text message has been valuable to my overall well being

I would recommend the BCPVPA / WeITel reach-out if a peer was interested



BCPVPA WeITel Project Survey February 2022 - 62 participant responses

"The responses from Rochelle and Kevin were often encouraging, humorous or thought-provoking. It helped me to be candid about how I was truly feeling."

"Thank you. I valued the minute I took each week to really ask myself to answer the question with reflection."



"I liked knowing I was being checked on. I felt supported. It made it easier to ask for help rather than making a call directly to the BCPVPA. I don't think I would have. I would have felt my issue wasn't big enough (even though the PVPA encourages us to reach out)."

Participant Comments

The survey included open-ended questions that allowed members to share their experience.

There were a handful of responses stating that those members did not find the process helpful. However, the majority of responses were very positive. Themes from the feedback include:

- A feeling of **connection**, particularly for those who are lone school-based leaders
- A feeling of **appreciation**, that someone reached out and cared
- Feeling **heard** and **supported**
- Gratitude for a **safe space** to share
- Acknowledgement of the **relationships** created through the project, and their value, particularly during this difficult past year.

Other Benefits We Experienced During the Pilot

At the BCPVPA, we were pleasantly surprised by other learnings gathered during this process:

1) Each week, Kevin and I notice patterns of activity or concern that our members are experiencing across the province. One week, things appear to be going well overall with most members. Another week, the majority of members are struggling. It has been interesting to see that there is often a 'theme' to the week – for example, in one week we may see many responses mentioning the need to fill in for staff shortages. We have gained more insight into what is happening on the 'frontlines'.

2) I personally take the opportunity in the dialogue to share health tips or resources based

on general comments that arise. Members may not be in immediate need of support, but may benefit from some content, direction to publications, or simply a discussion on health tips. This has provided me with an opportunity to establish a presence, a relationship of trust, and a sense of safety for members who may in future need to reach out for help with their health, well-being, or disability concerns.

3) Most importantly, WeITel has helped us to create a psychologically safe place for members to state exactly how they are feeling. We began the pilot thinking that people would say “I’m good”, or “Tired today”, or “Struggling”. What we have found is that members have been very ‘raw’ in their responses, very vulnerable, and feeling the safety to vent as they need. Even if nothing further is needed, just having that listening ear available seems to be enough for some members.

One learning that we anticipated was the number of increased members we directed to our Early Intervention Program through humanworks. This pilot has demonstrated the clear need for members to have readily available psychological health supports from experts who are knowledgeable of the challenges faced by school leaders. However, as a member-funded organization, we have a limited budget. This pilot has clearly highlighted the significant need for increased mental health resources to be provided through public health, as well as by school districts. The BCPVPA continues our efforts to advocate for these types of support at the Ministry and district level.

Expanding the WeITel Outreach

We will be expanding the WeITel outreach to another 100 members, and have already sent out the invitations for those to participate. We appreciate that this may not be a tool that suits everyone.

“I enjoyed the experience and feel that touching base was helpful in reflecting on my feelings, strength, physical health, and gratitude.”

“Empathy is appreciated. Recognizing challenges and understanding frustration. Suggesting supports if necessary.”



Courtesy Anthony Tran, unsplash.com

“I have gone through several unexpected difficult situations and have found tremendous support through the weekly check-in. The staff responding have been caring and concerned and have supported me through their personal reaction as well as directing me to further support/resources when necessary. I am so very grateful to be part of this weekly check-in.”

The BCPVPA's ideal goal would be to have this outreach available for every interested member. We are, however, constrained by the limited resources (*primarily Kevin's and my availability*) to respond to each WelTel text.

We are looking at ways to fund an expansion through grants and Ministry requests. The BCPVPA has also been partnering with WelTel to meet with other decision makers in the education sector to explore ways of bringing this concept forward to support vulnerable students and teachers, and demonstrate the overall need for people to feel connected and safe to reach out for help.

The BCPVPA and WelTel are also looking at different ways to efficiently utilize the tool to reach more members in need. Initial ideas being considered include:

- Reducing the frequency of outreach from weekly to bi-weekly, and outreach to groups in alternating weeks, to facilitate reaching more members.
- Setting up members on the platform for short periods of time when support is needed most. For example, when there are natural disasters in a region of the province, inviting Principals and Vice-Principals in those areas to join the platform for a few months of regular support.

- Arranging for a health expert to respond to the text as required to give immediate support and/or direct to other resources.

If you are interested in learning more, or interested in participating, please reach out to Rochelle Morandini at rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca

Final Thoughts

Studies show that people who are more connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier, and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected.

Check out more on the value of relationships and your mental health by reading "The Learning Brain: Investing in Relationships While Social Distancing" bit.ly/TLB_IRWSD.

We also know that taking a pause in our day, and being self-aware, is important to how we assess and regulate our own well-being and how we identify when we may need to reach out for support.

The WelTel experience has demonstrated the value of taking this quick time out for self-reflection, and the uplifting health experience of feeling connected, both for the pilot participants and for our staff.



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WelTel story:

www.weltelhealth.com



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Learning from the Land

Courtesy Farm to School BC

AN INTERVIEW WITH FARM TO SCHOOL BC, A PROGRAM RUN BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF BC

Aaren Topley
PHABC

former Capital Region
Community Animator

Addie de Candole
Farm to School BC

Food Literacy Advisor

Marcus Lobb
Farm to School BC

Capital Region
Community Animator

Richard Han
Farm to School BC

Provincial Manager

This past summer, I learned that one of my favourite Instagrammers – @queerbrownvegan – had begun a journey to reconnect with his heritage by learning about local fauna and foraging for food. My view of the world began to morph as I absorbed this new information: how brilliant would it be to go out into the modern world, and identify food at your local park? The idea of becoming a walking encyclopedia of

Pacific Northwest flora and fauna was alluring, and trail walks with my dog became expeditions of 'I Spy'. I would scan the forest floor for the ochre tendrils of chanterelle and continue my assessment of fallen, decomposing trees, hoping to see the yellow shelf of a chicken-of-the-woods. However, I usually left with more questions than answers: what were those tiny mushrooms that looked like a baby jellyfish?

by
Erin Hughes
Communications Assistant,
BCPVPA

Walking one day, I finally spotted something I could identify. "Witches Butter!" I cried out, running over to the trunk of a fallen tree to admire the orange jelly mushroom that looked as though it had bubbled out between the lips of bark. I felt that I actually knew something about the regional habitat in which I lived, and I felt a connection to the forest.

There was a missing link that I hadn't made on my own – why did it feel so powerful to be able to identify that mushroom in Pacific Spirit Park? My conversations with Farm to School BC led me to understand my own relationships with the land and place more deeply, and it is encouraging to know the next generation of K-12 learners will benefit from this niche education model.

Encouraging the development of food literacy, healthy eating, connections to environment, and community relationships is the 'business' of Farm to School BC. They support BC schools and districts, providing the knowledge, connections, and programs for schools to start projects that include gardens, indoor microgreen towers, salad bars, seasonal learning activities, and beekeeping.

The Farm to School movement began originally in the United States during the late 1990s as a response to the rising level of processed and unhealthy foods in school cafeterias. In 2007, Farm to School BC was established as a program administered by the Public Health Association of BC; in recognizing that BC is diverse in geography, needs, and interests, the program was built with a focus on food literacy education and healthy eating that could be adaptable to a local context.

"STORYTELLING IS SO POWERFUL. IT'S A BIG PART OF THE CURRICULUM, BUT IT'S ALSO A HUGE PART OF PART OF ORAL HISTORY. HUMANS LIKE STORIES, SO LET'S SHARE THEM! WE HAVE A STORY FOR EACH OF THE LESSONS, AND I THINK IT REALLY BRINGS THESE IDEAS TO LIFE"

FARM TO SCHOOL BC REGIONAL HUBS

Capital Region

SD 61, 62, 63, 64

Central Island Region

SD 68, 69, 70

Kamloops Region

SD 73, 83

Northwest Region

SD 52, 54, 82

North Central Region

SD 28, 57, 91

Lower Sunshine Coast

SD 46 – pilot

Surrey Region

SD 36

Vancouver Area Region

SD 38, 39, 44, 45, 48

If you reside outside of any school districts that are not a part of the Farm to School BC Regional hubs, you can still access grants, food literacy resources, and virtual workshop opportunities through the program. To find out more, go to www.farmtoschoolbc.ca.



Administered by Public Health
Association of BC

About the Farm to School BC Program

Farm to School BC is a program that brings healthy, local and sustainable food into schools across British Columbia and provides students with hands-on learning opportunities that develop food literacy, all while strengthening the local food system and enhancing school and community connectedness.

“The Farm to School BC model helps bring children and communities together. We form relationships by doing what's tried and true – being visible and present in school communities. One of the ways we achieve this is by having Community Animators in Regional Hubs across the province. These Community Animations live and work in the communities they serve.

“Currently, there are eight regional hubs across the province servicing multiple school districts, including public, independent, and First Nation schools. The Community Animators are the connective tissue between the schools, community, and broader network. That's really where the flexible adaptive model of Farm to School BC comes into play: we recognize that in order for any program to be successful, it has to be locally adapted, and the sense of ownership has to be strongly embedded within the school and the broader community.

“Community Animators are in the communities, building relationships – whether it is through one-on-one conversations in the school hallway, having coffee with a community member, or showing up at a local farm. Those connections that you build can help spark new and exciting projects if there's a grant opportunity that comes up in the local community; the Community Animator is tapped into all the right stakeholders.”

Richard Han, Farm to School BC Provincial Manager

“A key way Farm to School BC Community Animators develop relationships and stay connected to the local community is through regional Farm to School BC Advisory Committees. These Advisory Committees include local stakeholders interested in healthy, local food and often include non-profits, farmers, public health dietitians, and school staff. The Advisory Committee helps identify community needs and opportunities and guides planning and decision-making.”

Marcus Lobb, Capitol Region Community Animator & Team Lead

FARM TO SCHOOL BC LEARNED FROM INTERVIEWS WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY MEMBERS THAT THEY FOUND IT, “IMPORTANT TO SEE LAND RECLAIMED.”

Food is our great connector, and at Farm to School BC, they see it as a way to bring together all aspects of curriculum to form positive relationships between K-12 students and food.

Aaren Topley, former Capital Region Community Animator explains, “We work with teachers to find ways they can embed food into all areas of learning. Our goal is for students to enact healthy lifestyles once they graduate. Through Farm to School BC, students learn where their food comes from; how to connect with the land; and how to grow, prepare, and eat food in ways that are good for them, and their families.”

Recognizing the need for programming that both inspires and supports educators to connect students to the land, Farm to School BC started with the idea of showcasing Indigenous plant pedagogy projects that were already happening in BC schools. This led to two projects that engaged with this type of teaching – Harvest4Knowledge running out of the Greater Victoria School District, and the Indigenous Foodscapes projects from the Vancouver School Board. Initiating these two projects was just the starting point.

Farm to School BC wanted to highlight Indigenous-led programming, so they collaborated with Indigenous elders and representatives, Indigenous Education Departments, and teachers across the province. After many years of implementing land-based projects, they shared their journey and lessons through the Learning from the Land Toolkit.

The Learning from the Land Toolkit is a written compilation of resources and stories highlighting programs related to Indigenous plants and pedagogy within schools located in what is colonially known today as British Columbia. It provides specific lesson plans for K-12 students, with direct curriculum connections that go beyond traditional learning guides and create a tangible way for schools to integrate the First Peoples Principles of Learning into classrooms. Each lesson plan is about 45 minutes and connects educators and students to the land through stories and teachings about native plants, preservation techniques, and traditional territories. Addie de Candole, the Food Literacy Advisor with Farm to School BC, expressed her passion about connection. “We really wanted to showcase thinking about territory acknowledgments in a real, meaningful way. I think storytelling is so powerful: it’s a big part



Courtesy Farm to School BC

PROGRAMS

In the garden – In your schoolyard

school and community gardens
greenhouses
beekeeping

In the classroom

indoor grow stations
tower gardens
microgreens



On the land – Beyond your schoolyard

farm visits
foraging
Indigenous plant walks

In the kitchen

cooking classes
salad bar
food preservation



of the curriculum, but it's also a huge part of part of oral history. Humans like stories, so let's share them! We have a story for each of the lessons, and I think it really brings these ideas to life, and students can learn more about the land that they live on as well as different parts of the province."

The Learning from the Land Toolkit supports the work of educators in creating direct action to make their classrooms and schools places of reconciliation. Farm to School BC learned from listening to Indigenous community members that they found it, "important to see land reclaimed."

When a school decides to commit to this process, it is an ongoing journey to forge a deeper connection to community and land. To start, a school may talk to their District Principal of Indigenous Education to support consultation with



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Courtesy Amy Lynn Grover on Unplash

Indigenous community members about the creation of a garden that would include plants native to the area. Outreach to the local Farm to School BC Community Animator is an invaluable tool for support and further connections.

Aaren Topley talked about those connections:

“When a school in the Greater Victoria School District was ready to build their school garden, Farm to School BC connected with the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations to talk to elders from those nations about the garden. The elders from those nations came to the school and blessed the land, which was an important protocol before disturbing the land or breaking ground. This can be powerful for students and staff to witness, and is very important for respecting First Nations.

“Elder Mary-Anne Thomas did a land blessing with a group of students that would be most engaged with the project. Afterwards, the teacher asked the students what they remembered from the blessing. The students told the teacher that they remembered her calling them ‘little flowers’, in the Lekwungen language.

“There were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students present at the land blessing. When echinacea was being planted, one of the non-Indigenous children reflected on how his grandma used to give that to him from her garden for sports injuries.

“Both of these stories show that learning from plants and from the land goes deep – we all have oral histories that we can share, and we build stronger relations when we do share them.”

When a school can gather the resources to build a garden featuring Indigenous plants or to organize a foraging tour, it creates an opportunity for new community relationships, and allows students to initiate a relationship with plants that are native to the region, and gain a new feeling of comfort and respect in being on the land. This feeling of connection

translates to understanding the history, present, and future of the land, encompassing not only the nature that has occupied it, but the people who live or have lived there.

When a school leader starts to calculate how much square footage needs to be allocated for a new school garden, or stresses about finding a builder to construct raised-beds, it’s important to take a moment to consider the ultimate learning objectives for the school community. Aaren Topley offers a reminder: “In our western mindset, we think of success in terms like: did you build something? What did that look like? Really, if we’re trying to achieve success, it is measured in relationships.”

A commitment to this project and the construction of a garden is a physical enactment of reconciliation. Just like the continual learning we all must commit to, the physical representation of that commitment needs to be cared for in the same way through a plan for maintenance, harvesting, and watering throughout the year. While there are complexities, the rewards of the learning last a lifetime.

Now, I better understand why recognizing Witches Butter filled me with joy. It was a sense of wonder that the forest could produce a colourful fungus that the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples have enjoyed for generations. There is so much for us to learn alongside our students.

To learn more about the Learning from the Land Toolkit and the other programs Farm to School BC offers, visit them at:

FARMtoschoolBC.ca

 @FarmtoSchoolBC

 @farmtoschoolbc

 @farmtoschoolbc

This program is supported by the Province of British Columbia.

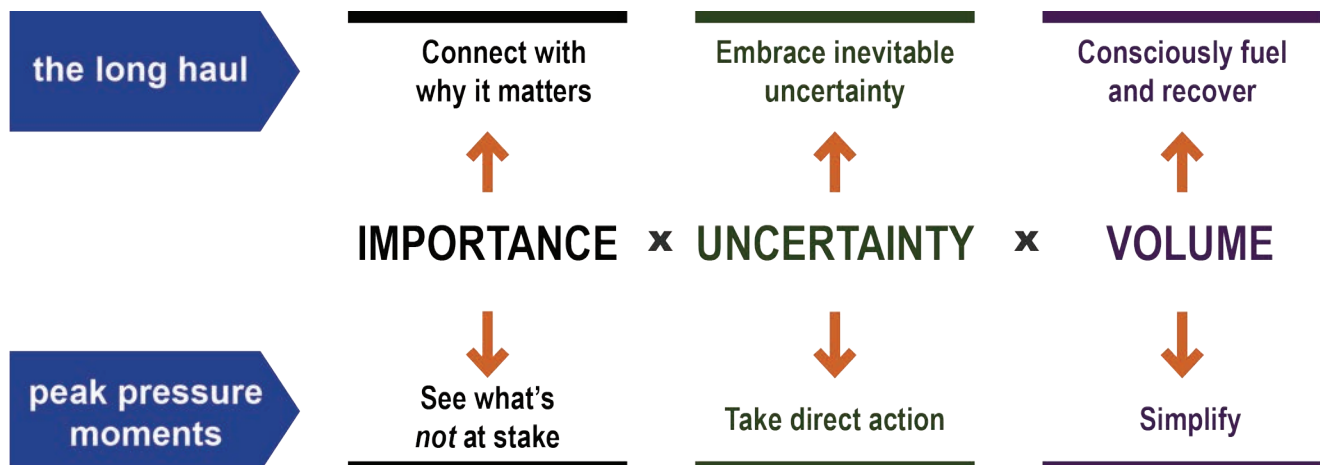
The Power of Pressure: Why Pressure Isn't The Problem, It's The Solution by Dane Jensen

Reviewed by
Dave Conroy SD 73

What's the most pressure you've ever been under?

For me, the answer is two-fold. Providing emotional and technical support to 35 staff members as we transitioned from in-class instruction to distance learning in March 2020 was a peak pressure moment for me. The ongoing, ever-shifting strain of COVID-19 since that point has been a long-haul pressure experience for all of us in educational leadership.

In his book, *The Power of Pressure*, Canadian author Dane Jensen provides a conceptual model and accompanying strategies to approach both peak pressure moments and long haul pressure experiences. A heady combination of high importance, high uncertainty, and high volume punctuates the times when we tend to feel pressure the most. These three factors form the backbone around which Jensen weaves stories and strategic responses that guide us to reframe situations of pressure into opportunities to impact outcomes.



Jensen researched and interviewed a broad range of athletes – including Hayley Wickenheiser and Rick Hansen – and business leaders – including Luc Mongeau and Ben Cowan-Dewar – in his quest to glean ideas from those who have not just endured pressure, but have found ways to thrive within it.

"The ongoing, ever-shifting strain of COVID-19 ... has been a long haul pressure experience for all of us in educational leadership."

Without naming them, Jensen's suggestions parallel current educational ideas regarding metacognition, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness. I strongly connected to Jensen's suggestions around managing uncertainty through focusing on what I have control over, building routines to redirect my focus from outcomes to behaviours, focusing on breathing, and shifting my perspective to choose how I view what I am going through.

In Chapter 9, entitled "Sleep And Other Inconvenient Necessities", Jensen outlines some potential hazards of not handling long haul pressure with a plan. He quotes his colleague, Kara Stelfox, who says, "Your body is a persistent messenger. First it knocks, then it rings the doorbell – and then it kicks down the door." Jensen moved on to presenting clear suggestions like setting the standard within your organization of not sending email after 5:30 pm, getting seven to eight hours of sleep each night, eating food that fuels your bodies in a healthy way, and ensuring that time is put aside for movement and exercise. He expands on each of these suggestions with practical applications and the encouragement to be gracious with ourselves when we stumble in our attempts.

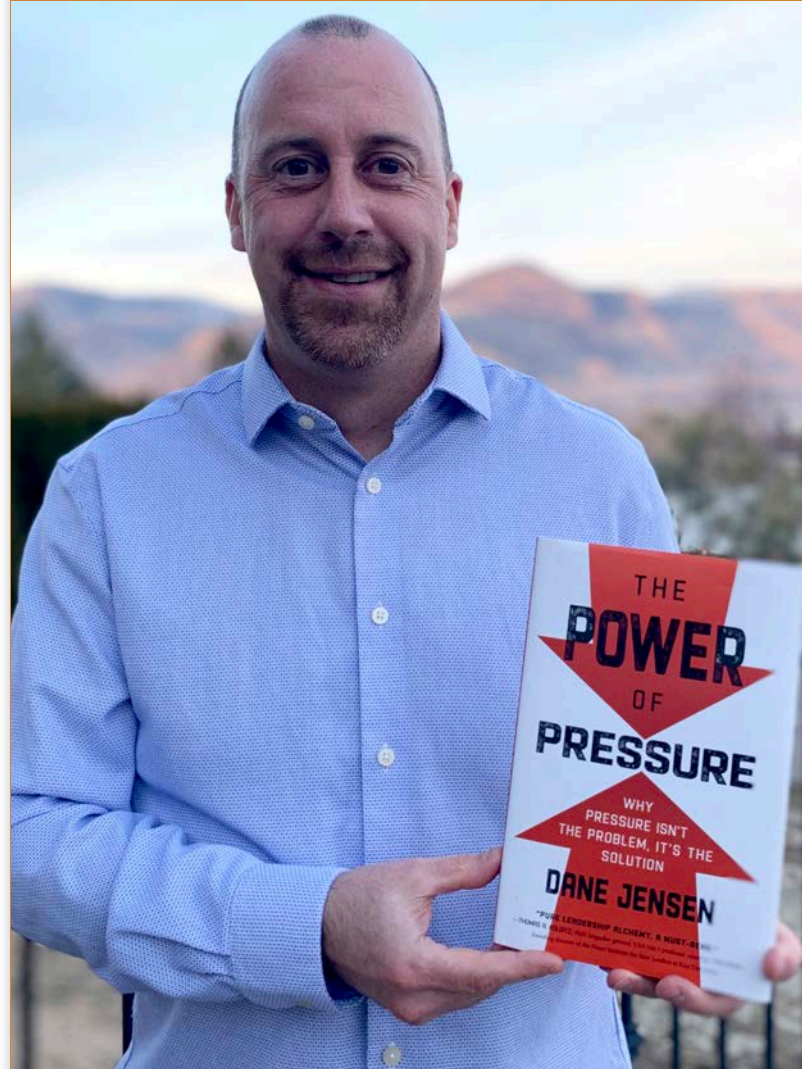
The Power of Pressure provides a much needed toolbox of strategies for any educational leader as we navigate through the everyday pressures of our roles and the ongoing pandemic drain that many of us are experiencing.

Reader? Writer?

Share what you love
as a Principled reviewer!

Contact

sandra@bcpvpa.bc.ca



Dave Conroy has been a Vice Principal in School District #73 (Kamloops-Thompson) for four years and an elementary educator for 19 years. He lives in Kamloops with his wife, Stephanie, and their three children, Kayven, Kirsten, & Luke.

*Fierce Conversations:
Achieving Success at Work and in Life,
One Conversation at a Time*
by Susan Scott

Reviewed by
Kendra Simonetto SD 35

*"Be brave enough to start
a conversation that matters."*

~Margaret Wheatley

*"As school leaders, we know
relationships are built one authentic
conversation at time. So, how do
we ensure that we are not shying
away from the most important
conversations in our lives?"*

I want to be truly honest... I have been the administrator who, at times, leaned away from difficult conversations. I have happily nestled into my comforting cocoon of avoidance when I knew confrontation was looming. I have sugar-coated my message to make it more palatable to staff members, I have repeatedly let my fear put off hard conversations that needed to happen yesterday and I have permitted silence to seep into the tiny fractures of a relationship only to have it result in a giant crevasse beyond repair. I have learned the hard way that avoiding real conversations can damage relationships.

As school leaders, we know relationships are built one authentic conversation at time. So, how do we ensure that we are not shying away from the most important conversations in our lives? How do we assure ourselves that we truly are brave enough to engage in these Fierce Conversations?

Susan Scott, the author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*, provides leaders with the very tools we need within our roles to help us engage in the most necessary of conversations. In reviewing this

book, I do feel compelled to dive into Scott's definition of "fierce", as at first blush it can be misinterpreted as aggressive or confrontational. In contrast, Scott addresses her choice terminology head-on and notes that, "a Fierce Conversation is one in which we come out from behind ourselves, into the conversation, and make it real". As Scott metaphorizes so perfectly, "the conversation IS the relationship" and there are four objectives in engaging in fierce conversations. Leaders must have conversations that Interrogate Reality, Provoke Learning, Tackle Tough Challenges, and Enrich Relationships. In reading this book I am reminded to constantly ask myself: What conversations am I having that are not producing the results I want? What conversations am I NOT having, at work and in my personal life, because I feel uncomfortable, nervous, fearful, or vulnerable?

In her book, Scott walks us through the 7 Main Principles within the Foundations of Fierce Conversations. Her book is organized clearly and is easy to read. She incorporates real-life scenarios into her teachings and provides readers with possible assignment tasks and reflections that help them to apply their learning in their lives. One of the

greatest gifts Scott gives are her words; the book is overflowing with noteworthy phrases and quotes that deeply resonate.

Here are some of my key take-aways and quotations within the Foundations:

o Master the Courage to Interrogate Reality

- Beach-ball Reality: Everyone owns a piece of the truth about reality.
- Make a proposal, check for understanding, and check for agreement.
- Conduct an Integrity Scan (personally and within your school).
- Mineral Rights Conversation Model: questions to drill down and increase clarity, improve understanding and impetus for change.
- Questions are much more effective than answers in provoking learning.

o Come Out from Behind Yourself, Into the Conversation, and Make it Real

- If your answer is “I don’t know”... What would it be if you did know?
- All conversations are with myself and sometimes they involve other people.

o Be Here, Prepared to Be Nowhere Else

- Decision Tree Model: Root, Trunk, Branch, and Leaf Decisions for delegating responsibility.
- If you, or someone else, feels that a conversation is needed... it is.

Start a Conversation
With your Colleagues
as a Princip(ed) reviewer!

Contact
sandra@bcpvpa.bc.ca



Kendra Simonetto has been an educator for more than 20 years in the Langley School District. She is currently the Principal of a dual-track K-7 Elementary School, École James Kennedy Elementary. Kendra is the proud mom to a 12-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter. In her spare time, Kendra is an avid reader, enjoys spending time with family and friends, and making music with her acoustic trio.

"Questions are much more effective than answers in provoking learning."

~ Susan Scott

- Soft eyes and ears in conversations; come into the conversation with empty hands. Bring nothing but yourself.

o Tackle Your Toughest Challenge Today

- The problem named is the problem solved
~ Pat Murray
- Confrontation Conversations: Come straight at the issue. Get straight to the point. All confrontation is a search for the truth.

o Obey Your Instincts

- There are things our gut knows long before our intellect catches on.
- Your confusion is an asset; in fact, your search for clarity may blaze a path for others.
- What are you pretending not to know?

o Take Responsibility for Your Emotional Wake

- An emotional wake is what you remember after I'm gone.

*"If your answer is 'I don't know' ...
What would it be if you did know?"*

~ Susan Scott

- Check in frequently with others to see what kinds of wake you are creating.
- For each of us, the challenge is to reconcile being real and doing no harm.

o Let Silence Do the Heavy Lifting

- The more emotionally loaded the subject, the more silence is required.
- Use silence to slow down a conversation so that you can discover what the conversation really wants to be about.

I am grateful to the SD35 District Leadership Team for introducing all Langley administrators to this book, and for supporting our ongoing work with *Fierce Conversations*. Scott's book is not one that you will read once and place on the shelf. Rather, it is a book that serves as a leaders' toolkit to help us "come out from behind ourselves", and get real with one another and overcome barriers. This book is the go-to guide you will revisit again and again to prepare for, navigate, and enrich the conversations you know you need to have... with bravery.



PLANNING YOUR SUMMER READING?

Share your picks and
your plans in a
Principl(ed)
book review

Contact
sandra@bcpvpa.bc.ca



The Last Word

Kevin Reimer is the Executive Director of the BCPVPA, a previous Director of the Board and served as President 2016-2018.



“To the person who
does not know where he
wants to go there is no
favorable wind.”

Seneca, Philosopher



Visionary Leadership

This spring, I have had the great pleasure of participating in our leadership development offering for aspiring teacher leaders. **Explorations for Aspiring School Leaders** is a BCPVPA leadership development program for current teachers interested in school leadership positions such as Vice-Principalships. As a BCPVPA staff member, and sometime facilitator, my role is to support the program and engage with the cohort of participating teachers as they learn more about the role of school leaders.

In 1999, I was a teacher at what was then Burnsvew Junior Secondary School in North Delta. Burnsvew is now a Grade 8-12 secondary school. At that point in my career, I was interested in furthering my school leadership aspirations, and I was focused on engaging myself in school-based or district leadership opportunities whenever they occurred.

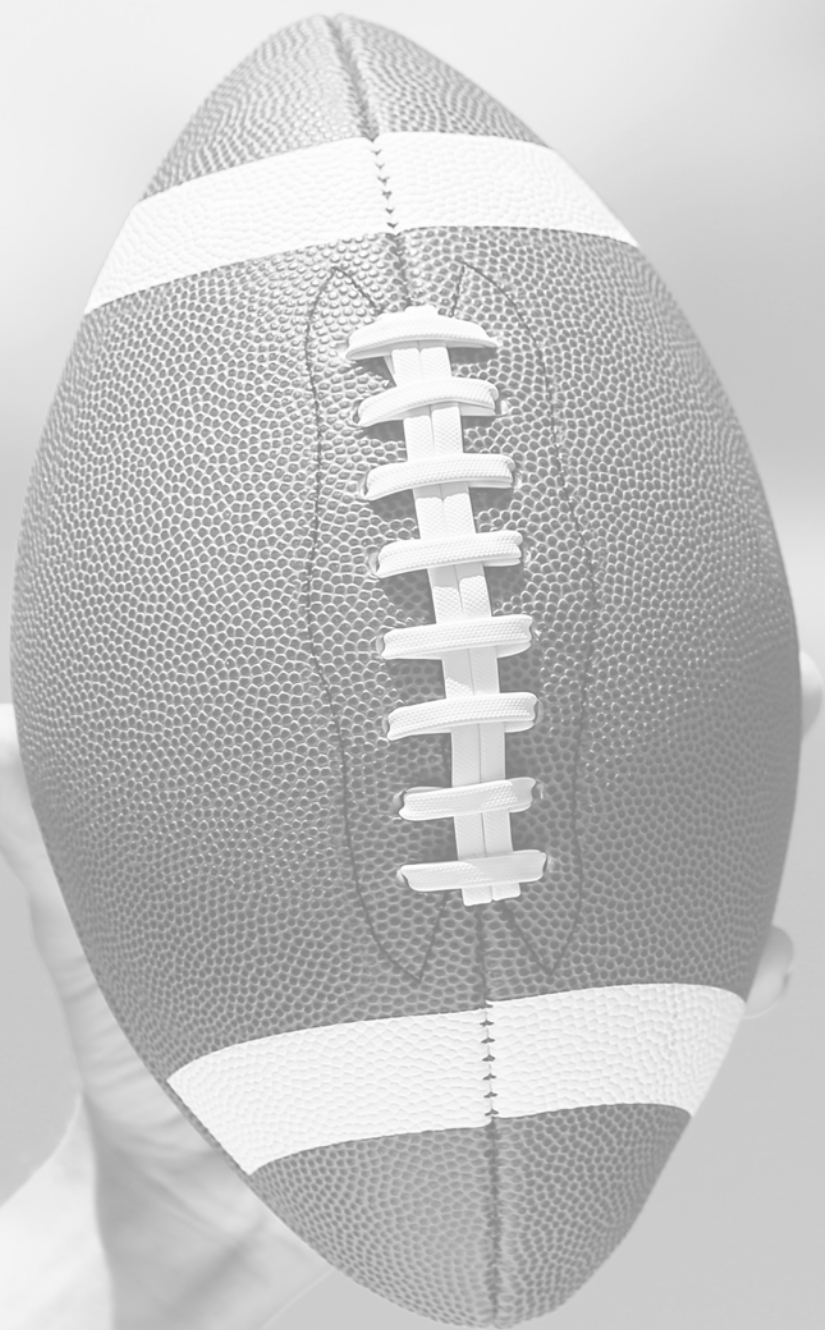
I was equally interested in raising my family in a smaller and more affordable community, so I began looking for Vice-Principalship opportunities outside of the Delta School District. In those days, teaching and Vice-Principalship opportunities were posted in the Vancouver Sun in the employment section, usually on Saturdays. So, on the weekend, I would scour the slim array of postings and opportunities across the province looking for the best fit. In the end, the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island became the most promising spot for relocation. My wife knew the valley well from her many summers spent at their family cabin on Hornby Island.

I applied for a House Vice-Principalship in the spring of 1999 at a Grade 7-9 school, and was shocked to be offered the position the day after the interview. I

was so surprised to be offered the position that I ashamedly told the superintendent at the time that I was going to respectfully request 24 hours to consult with my family before I gave him my answer. It was not supposed to work this way. This was the first of what I thought would be many interviews before I would be offered a position. To this day, that superintendent – who has long since retired – reminds me that I made him wait a full day before I accepted the offer. It was not that the opportunity was not appreciated: it was more about the finality of uprooting my family from our home in North Delta to a community and district that was largely unknown to us.

That spring I said goodbye to my colleagues and families at Burnsvew, and I spent the summer moving and settling into our new home in the Comox Valley and our Island lifestyle. In late August, the local Principals' and Vice-Principals' Chapter held a retreat at the outdoor school on Hornby Island for a day of teambuilding and conversations about the challenges and promises of the coming school year. We gathered on a school bus at the school board office in the early morning to take the two ferries across to Hornby Island for our retreat. Do I remember what we discussed, and how we prepared for the coming year? Sadly, I do not. The day was a blur of new faces, names, and attempts to familiarize myself with policies and procedures that I never had to fully understand as a teacher.

What I remember most about that first official day as a Vice-Principal is that a spontaneous touch football game took place on a large field next to the cafeteria during our lunch break. Out of a game of



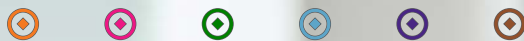
catch between a few Principals and Vice-Principals came a spirited touch football game filled with good natured taunts and laughter with my new school leader colleagues. I could barely remember all their names as we played together that lunchtime, but I do remember how fun it was to share this moment together. At the end of the day, we had dinner together at the Thatch Pub before boarding our school bus back to Courtenay. It was dark when we arrived, and after a long day of sharing and learning, people were tired and eager to head home. Now, more than two decades later I find it oddly amusing that I only remember the football game from that day but, as you would guess, it wasn't really about a pick-up game played by a group of middle-aged kids. It was the fact that I felt like I belonged to something of importance. I loved being a teacher, but what I wanted at that stage of my career was to broaden my influence. I wanted to do more for children and their families, and while I loved teaching I felt somewhat constrained by that role. I just wanted to be able to contribute more broadly to the success of students.

When I arrived home late that night from my first day with my new colleagues, my wife was curious about my day and everything that happened. I shared the story from start to finish, talking about all of the people that I had met, and the activities, conversations, and learnings from the day. Early that morning, I had left the house with some trepidation and anxiety about all the unknowns that lay ahead for me. I felt very much like I was the new kid in the neighbourhood on the first day of school. In the end, I had spent the day with like-minded people who had a passion for their work and a strong commitment to setting positive life trajectories for the children in their care. I returned home feeling much more content and confident that I had found the place that I was meant to be. I would never have guessed that an impromptu touch football game would be the thing that made the difference.



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