

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 twelfth installment of the series, we meet Iram Khan, Principal of David Branklin Elementary School in Surrey, School District No. 36.

From an early age, Iram Khan knew she would be an educator. Her journey has unfolded in some unexpected ways, and she has now been an educator for 26 years, 15 of those in administration. Iram grew up in Kamloops and Logan Lake, and that was home; while her practicum was in Surrey, her intent was to make her way back to the interior as soon as she had completed her education. But finding a role in a small town, rather than in an urban environment, was challenging at that time. “I eventually found a job up north in Dease Lake, teaching all of the kindergarten and grade one students in the community,” says Iram. “It was a great start to my career because I was jumping in with both feet, not knowing anybody, and moving so far away. Back then, there was nothing; this was before online shopping, and my mom needed to mail food, teaching supplies, and clothes to me, because the town store didn’t have everything I needed, and what they did have was expensive. But my husband came with me, and we loved it. We got to know everybody, and that was important – you had no choice; you had to get to know all the families, and kids would be knocking at your door all day and all night. Unfortunately, it was a maternity leave position, and there were no other jobs at the school when the time came to leave.”

Iram returned to Kamloops, and worked with an adult literacy organization that taught adults on Employment Insurance (EI) and income assistance to boost their skills so they could get into college and access other programs. “That was a really good experience for two years. I was in charge of teaching grade six to nine math and English language arts to adults from all walks of life, people recovering from addictions or those who had recently been laid off and had undeveloped skills. We would boost their skills so that they could get out into the workforce again. That experience for me,

A Day in the Life of an Elementary School Principal



Photo courtesy Zain Horner

as an elementary school person working with adults right at the beginning of my career, really opened my eyes about the importance of education. People are sometimes held hostage without education. If organizations are not there to help, and people don't know how to access the services, they can be stuck. It can hurt and literally kill people; I feel like lives are saved through programs like that."

After two years with the organization, Iram was missing the 'little ones'; she heard from a friend that Surrey needed teachers, and she again jumped in with both feet and moved to Surrey in 2000. "I haven't looked back. I love working in Surrey, I love the diversity and the immensity of it. It was comfortable to start my career in a small town with family nearby, but here I am exposed to diversity every day. In the small towns,

"I love working in Surrey. I love the diversity and the immensity of it."

I didn't see many people like myself. Here, there are so many people who come from backgrounds like my own, and who have the same story of being second generation immigrants. There is a connection there, but I also saw a way to support people who were just beginning their journey in Canada."

Like many second generation Canadian children, Iram experienced the pull of family expectations as she began to think about the future. "I have always loved school: it's been my comfort place, especially the coziness of the library. My family valued education; that's why they came here, they wanted a better life for their kids, and learning was important. But school felt like a second home to me. In elementary school, I used to hang out by the staff room; every time the door opened, I would hear the laughter, the stories, the sharing, and the support. Even the smell of coffee every time that door opened woke me up, and I just wanted to be in that room. I think that was my first sense of community, and it made me safe and comfortable; I knew that I needed to be in a job that valued that. For my own personality and emotional well-being, I needed to be in a community."

"My parents hoped that I would be a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer, so they were hesitant when I raised teaching as a profession. They said, no – you can do better; but I pushed and pushed and said, this is it. My family didn't understand the idea of having a passion for your vocation. I was not good at finance, or math, and they attributed that to not trying hard enough or not studying hard enough. It's the way they were raised, and reflects that they wanted the best for their kids. I think it really hit my parents when I got my master's degree, and they attended my graduation: I could see how proud they were. My mother was in the audience asking my dad to stop, but he was

telling everyone that I am his daughter. And now, anytime he introduces me, he says, 'my daughter is the Principal'. I think that before, they had a different perception of what being 'successful' means. I can really understand that from the immigrant perspective when kids are coming into *my* school, and the pressure they may get from their parents. I can help kids and families to understand that there are pathways to success beyond being a doctor, lawyer, or engineer."

From Iram's own perspective, that early family pressure of expectation was not a driver for pursuing school leadership. "I wanted to be a teacher, and that was it. That was my goal. I thought that if I became a Principal or Vice-Principal, that I wouldn't get to work with kids or be in the classroom. I was a kindergarten teacher, fully knee-deep in that world. Without knowing it, I became a leader in the kindergarten world.

"People don't understand the role of kindergarten in schools. Sometimes there are people in your communities who have never been to school; you're accepting families who are brand new both to Canada and to navigating the school system. You are helping families navigate our medical systems and therapy supports right at the beginning. You can be teaching parents about discipline, and bedtime routines. There is so much going on in kindergarten. I don't think that kindergarten teachers give themselves credit as really important leaders in a school. They take on things that no one knows about, like kindergarten orientation, and kindergarten interviews. That takes leadership and learning, and that's why the kindergarten world is a community in itself. We have kindergarten conferences and kindergarten networks, and that's something special that you don't see in any other grade. I was drawn to that, and I loved it."

While Iram did not see herself as a leader, others did. Her Principal and Vice-Principal at the time asked her to be a teacher in charge, and she agreed. When the Principal needed to take time away in the wake of a family tragedy, Iram was asked to be an Acting Vice-Principal. "I was working on my master's degree, and had no plan to go into administration;

What's in a Name?

I moved to Logan Lake when I was in grade three, and that is where I grew up. The teachers told my parents that my name would be really hard to say. So, they changed it to Irem, pronounced 'Eye-reem'. On the registration forms, it was all Irem. My parents wanted their children to succeed, and to fit in. Throughout my whole elementary and secondary life, I was Irem, and then when I went to college, it was a fresh break. I went by Iram, but no one could say it properly. So, I went with how everyone was saying it – "Ee-rum"; it wasn't until last year that I started to think really consciously about how my name is *really* said, with a rolled 'r'. I don't mind still also being called "Ee-rum", because that's now part of me as well.

I've run into people from my past, online and at conferences, and they'll greet me with my name as it was then, and I'll say that's not me anymore. But I understand, there needs to be grace and patience. We had a talk about this with our whole staff one day at school as an opening exercise: where did you get your name from, and how do we say it? The stories that came up were wonderful. There was one teacher who described how her name has been said, and then how it is *really* said. Our school counsellor asked the teacher if they gave us 'permission to practice', and we all liked that. We are going to get it wrong a few times, but eventually we'll get it right.

in fact, my master's was on the history of education, with a focus on immigration, multiculturalism, and parent involvement in education. I wanted to go into academia, to do research, and to write papers. But I appreciated that trust, and I worked in that role as the Principal needed time to heal and recover. The Vice-Principal then encouraged me to apply for an ongoing role; the support and encouragement that he and the Principal gave me changed my life, my whole direction." Iram laughs, "They also said, don't worry, just apply, you'll never get it; no one gets it on their first try. So, there I was: six months pregnant when I was offered a Vice-Principal position while I was graduating with my master's. It was a lot."

When Iram returned following maternity leave, with a year-old baby at home, she felt unanchored. Beaver Creek Elementary had been her life, where she knew all of the kindergarten students and families. Now, everything was new. "It was one of the hardest years

I've had, and I'm so thankful that my husband, James, recognized that, and decided to work from home. He eventually quit his job, and he's a stay-at home-dad. I am grateful for that, because he knew this was important to me. Despite the struggles, I loved the access to that bigger community in the school, and being able to lead and have an influence on how that community runs."

"The most difficult part is that I am not in the classroom as much as I would like to be. We have a lot of 'failed-to-fills' and I love the days when I can put myself in the classroom. It's exhausting, and I come out of it wondering how teachers do it! But I try to help out and to reconnect myself. All the kids love it: when I walk into the classroom, and they know the Principal is going to be their teacher for the day, they are on their best behaviour. They are so helpful, and they rise up to show me what they know."

Being with the kids is a tremendous motivator for Iram. “My Vice-Principal and I have talked about this. He’s in the classroom 80% of the time, and a Vice-Principal 20% of the time, so he’s seeing his kids in the classroom every day. There are some days when I am stuck in my office all day. So, I have scheduled intentional times throughout my day to greet kids at the door, or go outside for recess – there is no hidden agenda, I’m not out there looking for kids that are getting into trouble. I just love being around kids, and they energize me with their questions, their stories, their passion to be at school. That goes as well for those kids who are struggling, and who don’t want to be in school. They energize me because I want to help make it better for them. My concern is always about how to make this a happy place, and then that makes me happy. That includes doing fun things at my school, like dressing up as a gingerbread man, running around laughing, creating stories, jumping into classrooms, and encouraging that happiness within everyone.”

Iram’s joy of supporting others through leadership also extends to her peers, and to those just starting out in the profession. In 2022, Iram volunteered as a facilitator at BCPVPA’s Foundations for New School Leaders program, formerly known as Short Course. “I had never participated in the program myself, because Surrey is huge, and we have a lot of internal training. When I saw a call-out for Foundations facilitators last year, I thought it would be nice to mentor some new administrators in this role. It was a fleeting thought, but (BCPVPA Director of the Board) Paul Marsden talked to me about what a good experience it is, and that pushed me to do it. I didn’t expect to be selected, but I got the call. Unfortunately – and this is how life happens – shortly after that was confirmed, my 15-year-old son Zain ended up getting very sick. He started losing weight drastically, and became really emaciated despite all of our efforts. His heart rate was dangerously high and if he did not gain weight quickly his organs would start failing. Driving home one day from work, I got the call from the doctor saying that Zain needed to go to the hospital right away. That was early May, a busy time with hiring and all the year-end activities. My son went into the hospital, and he

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didn’t come out for a month. I want to add here how grateful I am for my husband. My first reaction was that I had to take a leave: I was so worried, I couldn’t carry on in my role. My husband encouraged me to continue working to the end of the year, that he would be there with Zain in hospital, and would support our 12-year-old daughter Zoey as she went to school. He was adamant that we could make it work, so I tried it for a week, but I knew I needed to be at the hospital. My Assistant Superintendent, my Vice-Principal, and my school community were so wonderful. I was able to say I wouldn’t come back for the rest of the year, and they took over. Zain ended up at BC Children’s Hospital, and we eventually found out that he has Crohn’s disease. Once diagnosed, he’s been doing so well with the medications.”

Through this time, Iram was receiving communications about the upcoming Foundations program. When Zain was released from hospital in June, Iram made a decision. “Okay. I’m going to do Foundations. I’m going to be away from home for a week, but I’m going to do this. I was nervous, and scared; I thought about dropping out. But knew that I needed this for myself, to be able to get back into work mode. I don’t think I could have had two months of leave, then summer, and then return full force in September. I loved every minute of Foundations. I loved connecting



Iram at the 2022 Foundations for New School Leaders program, with Scott Hughes, Suzanne Chisolm, Kelsie Pickens, Miriah Donnelly, Monica Padgham, Jessica Johnson, Suman Lali

with educators, and not just in my own group; the passion that everyone had in that room revived me. It reminded me of why I do this job, and why I love this job so much. Having a family emergency like mine puts you at risk of resenting work, because being at the hospital can make you reflect on all the time that you missed with your child. Could I have spent more time with him? Could I have been there more for my family? Should I go back to teaching, so that I can be there for my kids? I needed Foundations – more than my group, I think – because it was like therapy for me. My group pushed me into answering really deep questions, and it made me spend time reflecting about why I do this work. It was the time to connect with all of these people, but to also look inwardly at why we do what we do, and what keeps us going. It reinvigorated me.”

“It’s important for people to know that life impacts this work, and that we need to be conscious of that. We can’t push it aside. I’m glad I took that leave, and I hadn’t ever been in that position before. I tried to do both, and I just couldn’t. I think it’s important for

administrators to know that it’s okay to not be able to do it.”

Iram has also been involved in committee work both in the Surrey School District, and with the BCPVPA. She was part of the committee – comprised of CUPE members, teaching staff, parents, administrators, superintendents, and assistant superintendents – that reviewed Surrey’s Equity Scan report, getting to the heart of the accomplishments, and identifying the areas where work needed to be done. The Director of Instruction of Surrey’s new Racial Equity department, JB Mahli, will use the results from the report and the committee’s recommendations to further the district’s goals for racial equity. The committee experience for Iram was full of deep learning. “It exposed me not only to the stories of administrators in regard to racial equity, but to the stories of so many other people. I learned how much of this work involves listening to stories. I see it as ending that idea of, ‘this is a problem, we need to solve it’, because the solution isn’t going to come quickly. It’s going to take time, and we need to take time to really listen and look



Iram with Lara Robinson

Photo courtesy Iram Khan

into ourselves. I was really proud of our work, and how we came together from such a wide variety of experiences to come up with these goals.”

Shortly after concluding her work with the committee in Surrey, Iram had an opportunity to bring her experience to a newly-formed BCPVPA table, the Ad Hoc Anti-Racism Committee. “I have a passion for this work; I have grown personally, and reflected upon my experiences both as a *child* going through the education system, and an *adult* working in the education system. I want to be a part of this committee because I know that the BCPVPA has influence in the sector. It’s an exciting opportunity to look at how we navigate racial equity, and how we support our learners and our staff. We’re not just focusing on administrators, but on our students and families, and to help them navigate this education system that was created to cut them out. It’s not only about being an administrator, how to cope with racism, and how to encourage diverse leaders. It’s also about learning, and about the students.”

Iram has found that advocacy for students and their families is woven deeply into her role as a school leader. “I am most proud of the work I’ve done with our underserved families, particularly those who are new to Canada, those who come in with special needs, and parents who don’t have the experience of navigating the system. I can advocate for these families, find resources for them, and teach them about the education system. I know from my own experience that you need somebody in the school system to take an interest in this advocacy. We’re the first responders for these families; we’re the ones that they see every day. I’ve worked with some really good teams who have literally saved the lives of mothers experiencing domestic abuse who are looking for shelter, escape, and therapy, and supported families that are new to Canada, and who have been placed in a home that is full of mould and need another place to live. We are connecting families and creating a community within the school. We can help cushion their landing, get them going, and help them to succeed.

“One of the most challenging things in this role is

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navigating the systems. There are a lot of supports out there but, as we know, there are huge wait lists everywhere and barriers with locations and funding. I can support students and families to a limit, and our staff go above and beyond for our schools. But there comes a point where we hit a wall, and where it is beyond us. Children are on waitlists for two months or two years to see a pediatrician, a therapist, or a counselor. In the meantime, we don’t have the skills to support the child, and we’re in a holding pattern until they can get those external agencies. It’s encouraged me to rise up in learning. When I see a course or workshop that helps me better understand how to approach the complexities of these students’ needs, I take it so I can offer some sort of bridge until the student can get the professional help. I think as administrators, we could use some more support with those skills in providing that bridge. When a family is dealing with trauma, sometimes we’re just trying to provide safety and building relationships, but it’s outside of our expertise. We didn’t go to school for this, and we don’t want to do it wrong.”

When Iram reflects on the role of Vice-Principals and Principals, she realizes how much her early impressions differ from the work that she does each day. “I didn’t realize how much administrators are involved in the lives of families, and how much work I would still be doing with students. People always say they want to stay in the classroom so that they can continue to work with students, but being in the

Intensive Intervention Support Program

We have a really good team of very knowledgeable experts who work with children who have multiple disabilities and extremely complex medical/health and behaviour needs. That can be self-injurious behaviour, or behaviour that's harming other students and staff in schools. We take on the students from other schools in our district, and because we are known for this program and are experts in this area, many parents bring their children to our school. I am proud of the work that our school does for students who can't find a home anywhere else.

In my typical day, I am often pulled aside to help with dysregulated children, and you never know when it's going to happen. I deal with calming students down, keeping staff safe, and keeping other students safe. That can mean a couple of hours where I am sitting with a child who has ended up in a state where the only way they can

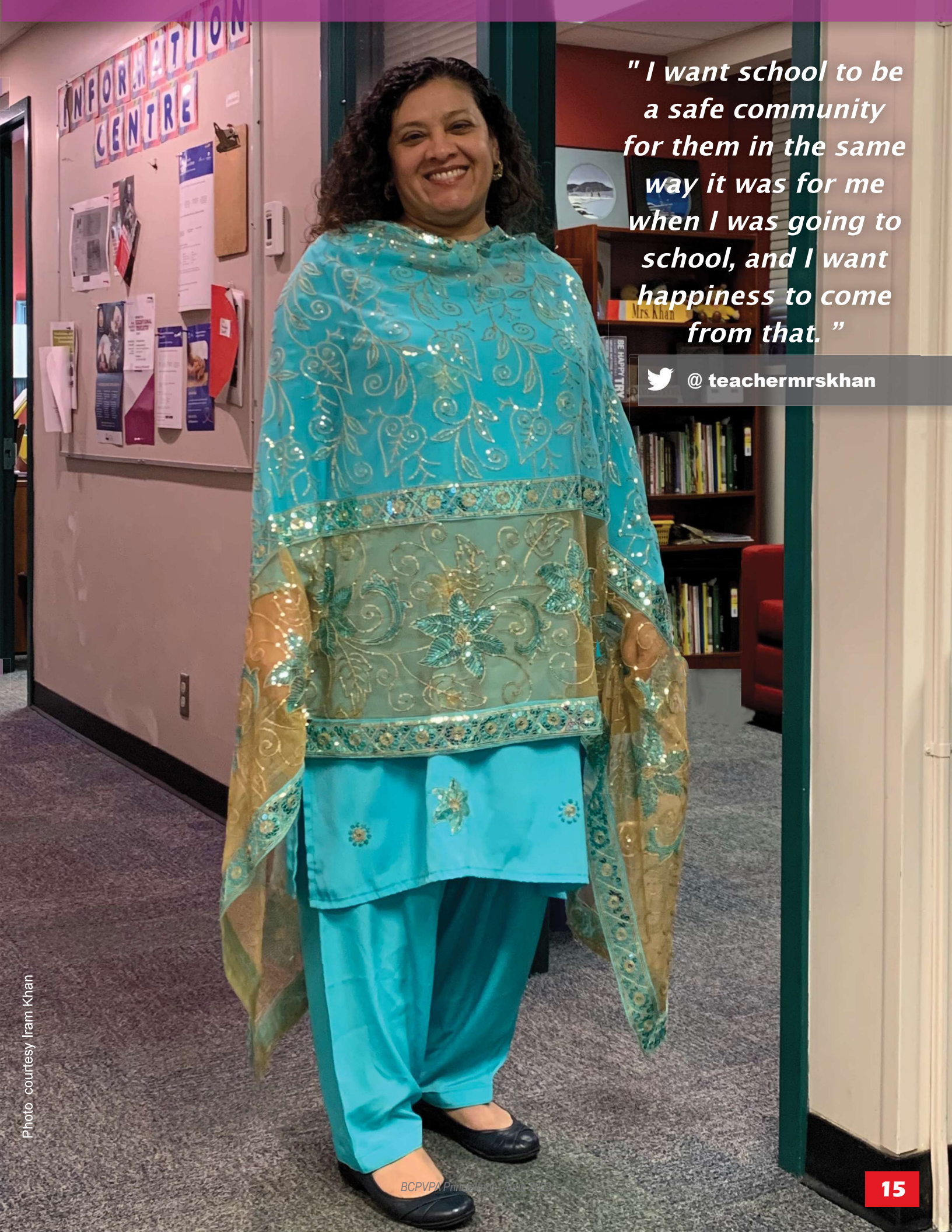
communicate their needs is to hit, kick, yell, and/or swear. Our team is fantastic. We go in there together, and we support each other, the whole team is called upon to support that child.

While my day can be derailed because of dysregulated children, I value how important we are in that moment for that child. We could instead observe what is happening, and could call the parents to come and pick up their child. But what that child is experiencing is the reality in that moment. That is the moment where we can use the strategies we've learned to create calm, to help students learn strategies to communicate their needs in less harmful ways, and to eventually become successful learners in our school community. In a nutshell, this is what our Intensive Intervention Support Program is all about.

classroom is not the only way or necessarily the best way to support every student." Iram recognizes that teachers may be looking for engaging work beyond their classrooms, and are often unsure if the role of a school leader is a next step they are ready to consider. "My advice to someone aspiring to the role is that you can't look at it as 'work-life balance'. I think some people try to promote that there are boundaries, but it's really more of a work-life *integration*. Sometimes work is going to take a lot out of you, and you are going to have to put the time in. And, sometimes, you can spend more time with your family and on yourself. But you have to recognize that there are times that this job is going to take a lot out of you. You need to understand as well that it's not a 'boss' job, or a 'manager' job. You are a facilitator and a communicator, you are a mentor and a community builder, and you see the strengths in everybody. If

you enjoy doing work like that, and you like the 'big picture' view, then this is the job for you."

Ultimately, for Iram, the work comes down to the students and what they experience in the school. She hearkens back to her own love of school as an elementary student, and her hopes for students are simple. "I hope our kids are happy. I hope they realize school is a safe place for them. I hope they realize that there are many adults beyond their families that care about them. I want school to be a safe community for them in the same way it was for me when I was going to school, and I want happiness to come from that. I hope kids go home feeling like they were heard, that they were taken care of, that they were valued, that they have people that they trust, that they have friends. I hope that they realize that the school is a community that they can enjoy and be part of."

A woman with dark curly hair, smiling, stands in a school hallway. She is wearing a teal and gold embroidered outfit consisting of a long-sleeved top with a wide gold border, a matching skirt, and teal trousers. She is also wearing black flat shoes. The background shows a hallway with a bulletin board on the left and bookshelves on the right. The bulletin board has a sign that says 'INFORMATION CENTRE' and several papers pinned to it. The bookshelves are filled with books.

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@ teachermrskhan

A Day in the Life of an Elementary School Principal: Iram Khan

I value my sleep. I love looking back on previous *Principled* profiles, as I have struggled with the 'typical day' because I am not an early riser. I am not going to do CrossFit in the morning. I am not going to do yoga or meditate. I am embarrassed to say that I wake up as late as I possibly can! I wake up at 6:30 am, and while I am eating breakfast, I check my emails and the 'failed-to-fills' to see what I need to anticipate. I respond to emails, I check Twitter to see what's going on in the world, and I connect with colleagues from all over about things that are going on in their schools. I leave at 7:30 am and my drive to school is about 40 minutes, depending upon traffic. As I'm driving, I'm thinking about the 'failed-to-fills', who is here, who's not here – that is my mindset every single morning. I am so grateful that I have a great Vice-Principal and secretary team that get to the school before I do. They are opening the gates, opening the doors, and turning on the lights.

We have a very busy school: that's part of the reason why I need to value my sleep, because I need to make decisions with a clear head and be well rested. We all put our time in where it's needed. The Vice-Principal and secretaries are working before I arrive, and I'm getting updates as we're trying to negotiate who to move, who will fill each of the roles. When students are not going to have their regular Education Assistant (EA) support, we need to address that and make sure there are fill-ins for those EAs. We also have an Intensive Intervention Support Program at our school, and that is a class of students – often with multiple disabilities and extremely complex medical/health and behaviour needs. It's a treatment

program that has a very skilled team of EAs, ABAs (Applied Behaviour Analysts), and a teacher, and I will often check in with them because they are our most sensitive learners in our school. They need that routine and structure.

When I arrive at school, I hit the ground running. Teachers are coming to ask me questions, and we're letting all the teachers know about the 'failed-to-fills', and preparing the morning announcements. We welcome *all* of our teachers, so sometimes that can be a list of 14 substitutes, from EAs to teachers. I'm touching base with teachers as I'm walking around, making sure that they had a good rest, asking how things are going in their classrooms. I then try my hardest to stand at an entrance. We have five entrances, and I greet the students who come in that way, and I change entrances every day. I welcome the kids to school, greet the staff, and make note of those kids who may be coming in a little sad and dysregulated so that we are prepared to support them if things go sideways. I then go to our Intensive Intervention Support wing to make sure that all those students are arriving happy and safe. I check in with the teacher there to make sure that she doesn't have any questions or any parents that I need to phone. After that, I rush upstairs and do the morning announcements and highlight the important things that are happening in the day.

After that, I have time to just sigh. I check with my secretary team, and we sit together as they are processing the 'lates'; it's quiet now, and I can give them an idea of what the day is going to hold. They raise questions about families who have phoned, and give me a list of people to call back. After that I'm on the phone with parents, and that may lead me to track down some students and try to solve problems. Then we are at recess! I try to go for at least one walk around before I come back in as this is an important time for teachers to touch base with me. I meet the kids coming back in to make sure that everybody's okay, and then deal with any playground issues that occurred at recess. Between recess and lunch, I continue dealing with playground issues and do some administrative tasks like responding to emails,

planning for events, and planning for future staff meetings. Before lunch, I meet with our five lunchtime supervisors, and make sure that there are no 'failed-to-fills' for them. I let them know about the kids who are high on my list, those kids who are grumpy or needing some extra support, and those kids who have had some consequences and may need some extra care at lunchtime. I also make sure to check in about their lives, and what's going on with them. We do a 'play first, eat later' lunch, so kids will be outside playing, and I get a lot of teachers coming in and asking questions. We also have meetings at lunch – lunch and learns, and committee meetings – and I try to attend all of those.

In the afternoon, I debrief with the lunchtime supervisors, deal with playground issues and problem-solving conversations, do more administrative tasks, and touch base with the secretaries. After school, I go out again, say hello to parents, make sure that the buses have arrived. We have multiple buses that come in for our special needs students; because we have the Intensive Intervention Program, we have students taking buses at all different times so it's important to stay on top of that. Then I can sigh again!

After the kids have gone, and I've touched base with my secretaries, it's a really good time for staff to come to talk to me. I have an open door policy: I love having discussions with staff. Staff often don't come to me during the day, they use that after school time, and we can have those deep conversations that they sometimes need when they're struggling with their work. It's also an opportunity to check in with them personally. That leads me to about 4:00 pm, and that's when I get really immersed in planning for staff meetings, writing the newsletter, and reading memos. I'm often at work until about 6:00 pm because I get so fully drawn in every day!

At the end of the day, I do my own self care. I watch Netflix, I chill out. I like to hang out with my family. We play video games together, and we try to eat dinner together every day. That is my important touch base with my family. I will usually check email right before I go to bed, 9:30 or 10:00 pm, to see if there are any 'failed-to-fills'. I need to pull myself away from that, my husband has asked me what difference it makes, as I can't do anything about it until the morning. I think a lot of us do that, though, because we're wired that way and we need to know.

