

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 contemplations, their focus on their practice, and why they love what they do.**

In this third installment, we meet Beth Applewhite, Vice-Principal at Pinetree Secondary School in SD43 (Coquitlam).

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Beth Applewhite's journey to leadership took a sideroad that gave her a different perspective on the work and the sector. She began teaching English and some Home Economics in 1995 in the Burnaby School District. After six years, Beth took a break from teaching to open her own business – a tutoring centre – that she ran as the sole proprietor for two years and helped run for one more year after she sold the business. "I came back to teaching because I really missed public education, and I missed the collaboration of a larger staff and having a team," said Beth. "I had made that change around 2001, when teachers didn't have a great reputation in the public: I decided to be a tree outside of the forest for a while, and to get a different perspective. That's where I got the leadership bug, because when I came back to teaching from being a business owner I could see that bigger picture."

Beth became a department head before joining the Vice-Principalship pool in both Burnaby and Surrey. She started her first Vice-Principal appointment in Surrey in January 2011.

A Day in the Life of a Secondary Vice-Principal

Beth worked at her first school for three-and-a-half years, and her second school for four years, before jumping back to Coquitlam where her mother had taught for nearly 30 years. "I was one of those kids who played school as a child, all the time. I was always the teacher, and never the pupil." Beth adds, "I think it was seeing my mom in the classroom, and seeing her creating units and writing report cards: that was a big part of my family life. My father taught in Trinidad-Tobago before he immigrated to Canada to earn his engineering degree, so education was very important in our family."

Being a staff rep in the union also helped Beth, as she learned about things that she wasn't able to see from the classroom, like stakeholder interactions and board meetings. "It opened up my perspective, and then moving into the world of small business – the combination of those things – made me thirstier for leadership. And a big part of my path towards administration has been that I can make a difference. I've always been interested in anti-racism education,

that is my passion, and I realized I could have more of an influence as an administrator, and better networking opportunities that will ultimately support kids."

Beth learned early on that she connected well with adolescents and received positive feedback from those interactions. That genuine rapport led her naturally to secondary education. "I chose secondary because I love how, with teenagers, it's black and white. I try to help them see the gray areas. They're at an age where they're maturing, so they are able to sit and be attentive, and you can encourage them to see things from a different perspective. When I see them do that, it excites, energizes and motivates me." Beth smiles. "I love the energy of adolescents; they have their whole lives in front of them and they're so excited. And still, for the most part, hopeful. They're right there on the cusp of the next steps in their lives. It's fun to be a part of that, and it can be quite moving too. I meet teenagers who at their young age have been through more than I have been in my lifetime, so the resiliency that I see in high school students is inspiring."

Beth considers the meaning of graduation for grade 12 students in 2020. "Some people downplay the graduation piece, but you have to remember that for a teen, they've been looking forward to that moment their whole school life. It's an important milestone that is not going to be anything like what they expected it to be, or want it to be. But they're staying strong."

While Beth is now a Vice-Principal, she still has a passion for teaching. "In most high schools in the province, Vice-Principals have teaching responsibilities, but in the Lower Mainland most Vice-Principals don't teach. Whenever I'm asked to do a presentation or to teach, I jump on that. I just love those opportunities. I do miss the different type of relationship you have with students. I still feel so rewarded in my job, but there is a special connection when you have a group 25 or 30 students working with you, and you're having great discussions."

That opportunity to connect with students and their families is a critical component of Beth's work. One of her portfolios is Indigenous students and learning, and she supports students and their families, and



works with both the District and care workers. And connecting with staff is equally important. “Something that I started doing is lunch and learns. You think about the needs, have conversations with teachers and identify the subjects that people may be yearning for more information. You tap that expertise in your own building, you don't need to go out and find a guest, but you order some lunch and create community by breaking bread together every couple of months.”

Those connections in the school extend to what's happening within each department. “I love collaboration, and I'm working closely with the English and ELL departments and helping them to collaborate. ELL students end up in English classes, so it was a huge triumph in the Fall when the departments came together and did a cross-grade summative assessment and a marking calibration session. They now share common language and are on the same page.”

One of the initiatives closest to Beth's heart is anti-racism work. At her current school, she has established a student committee of about 30 students, and for the past two years they have mounted an anti-racism youth conference involving students from all over the District. “I was really surprised I could pull it off my very first year in the school — that's a real testament to my team, and how amazing my Principal and Vice-Principals are”, said Beth. “Back in 2007, there were a few serious racial incidents at my school, and that was when I created the first Black Student Committee in Western Canada. The group eventually morphed into an inclusive Anti-Racism committee. This is something I've established at every school I've been in ever since.”

“For the past four years, the Anti-Racism Youth Symposium has become an annual Metro Vancouver event hosted by the Surrey Aboriginal Education Department. We have had incredible guest speakers including Indigenous leaders, artists and RCMP officers; Black judges, writers and music artists; an ex-Neo Nazi member who now works in anti-terrorism; and activists advocating for LGBTQ rights. This year, we were able to host a powerfully moving Maori speaker from New Zealand. It's all about diversity and seeing the beauty and the strength in

diversity, and that we all need to be allies. There's an amazing feeling in the room, and great feedback from students and from educators who can't believe the positive vibe in the space. They learn so much from what the kids have to say about their experiences with racism and prejudice and discrimination.”

“I'm very much a believer in the core competencies, especially personal identity and social responsibility combined with the First Peoples Principles which support this work. Students feel validated at these events. They can see themselves in the room, and feel like they belong. I'm biracial and I've learned the importance of embracing one's personal identity. I know firsthand the challenges of not seeing yourself in the curriculum or in the staff or on the walls of your school. I lived through that and so I can relate, and I know that those challenges are real for kids. It's the same for the family, if they don't see themselves represented. It is my hope that all students learn to respect diverse identities, not just tolerate each other but respect each other and become allies.”

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In such an unprecedented and challenging year, Beth has hopes for what students will have gained. “Normally I hope they feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of a school year, and I've been worried it'll be tougher for some of them to feel this way in this unexpected remote learning environment. I hope that they have learned, that they've been reflective and are aware of their strengths. I hope they've started to discover what their passion might be, and I think this may be even stronger now because of COVID-19. I hope they have a stronger understanding of who they are, and that they have a sense of gratitude for some aspect of their lives. I know they're seeing, hearing and learning about so much tragedy and struggle, so I hope they have developed some resiliency. I hope they still have a sense of excitement about what lies ahead and hope for their next stage.”

Beth has been acknowledged for her significant accomplishments in education. This year, she was nominated for a YWCA Women of Distinction Award, and she was nationally recognized as a 2020 Honouree for 100ABCWOMEN. Last year, she was the recipient of a BC Achievement Community Award. Beth appreciates the recognition. “I never feel comfortable celebrating my own awards, but I acknowledge that recognition does bring me joy and I'm very grateful. It's not the accolades so much, but knowing that my peers, my colleagues and my mentors put in the time and effort to honour me. It lets me know that the work I'm doing is making a difference, and it encourages me to continue. It may mean some late hours, but it's worth it.

And the long hours can be one of the most challenging aspects of the role. “There are not enough hours in the day, said Beth. “You are always being pulled in different directions. I did expect it to be demanding, with so many meetings and planning sessions. But I didn't realize how unbelievably ridiculous some days are, where you look at each other and shake your head in disbelief: you can't believe that you just did that many things in that short amount of time. You feel like a health professional, a psychiatrist, a counsellor, a teacher and more, all in one day. I thought I would get to be a decision-maker and have some influence, but now I realize the impact of my decisions on staff and families, even for seemingly small decisions, can have a huge impact on the people I work with and the people in the community. It shows you really have to think about your decisions, and think about all the different stakeholders.”

“Often teenagers feel that people don't understand them: when they are truly heard and seen, that's a great reward.”

Beth is grateful for the support that she receives in the role, and knowing that she is supporting others. “I think that for me the best thing is when students are feeling supported and are feeling heard. Often

“I love bringing diverse members of the community into the school or to the youth conferences because it forces students — and adults — to re-examine their biases.”

I bring in community members who I know will challenge the stereotypes, speakers of colour, Indigenous speakers, speakers who have survived unbelievable challenges and speakers who have thrived, not just survived.

These people inspire you, and students learn not to use their own colour, or their circumstances, or their race, or their culture as an excuse.

Kids actually love the opportunity. It's worth the risk to see the ‘A-ha!’ moments, and then I can tell it's going to change their lives for the better.

I know it's become a bit of a cliché to say this, but they are our future, they're the next generation of leaders.”

teenagers feel that people don't understand them: when they are truly heard and seen, that's a great reward. I know as well that we are doing a great job of supporting vulnerable families, and that's something that I couldn't do as much as a teacher. In an administrator role, I have more influence and opportunities to support families and to connect them with resources. I am also grateful for a strong Principal who allows you to build capacity in yourself, who recognizes and acknowledges your strengths but challenges you to grow."

Beth has some words of advice for teachers who may be interested in transitioning to a leadership role. "I love it when a teacher seeks support thinking, 'where can I grow in this role?' It's actually one of my favourite things to do, to help someone figure out how to develop their leadership, and help prepare them for their first Department Head or Vice-Principal interview."

"I want them to know that what some teachers are worried about, that the student relationship will be different: that's true. I often don't get to know the students as well; I won't have that same relationship with the students. But I do have pretty amazing

relationships with kids, and it's even more powerful because it's not just with the child but with the family, the parents."

"I want them to know that yes: it will be different, but you won't completely lose that connection with students. You still believe in the work, and that doesn't have to end when you become a Vice-Principal. Just don't take no for an answer, and you can still find ways to be in the classroom, you can still coach, sponsor a team. or a student club."

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"I'm going to say one last thing especially to female administrators. You may walk into a room especially at secondary, and you might be the only woman. Know that you are enough, and that you have every right to be there. You have as much right to be there as anyone else."

Beth emceeing the Anti-Racism Youth Symposium



A Day in the Life

"The first thing I think about on a working day is: what kind of day will it be, what meetings do I have set, when and where am I supposed to be. I don't usually answer my email first thing, I look at the subject to see if there something pressing: if there is I will address it, but usually it's okay. I know who I need to see, or an email I need to answer as soon as I get to work. But I do check my texts – if it's an emergency, they will probably text me. There's nothing worse than that feeling when you get to school and someone says, 'didn't you see the text?'

And the day will drive what you select to wear: is there an earthquake evacuation drill, or is it the Terry Fox Run, or am I making deliveries to at-risk families? Am I covering someone's PE class, or do I have an important meeting at the board office? I have a supportive husband, and we make sure our son is on track for the day by doing our check in: who has what planned, who is at the late night band performance or who has a parent-teacher evening. We are able to empathize with each other and understand where each other is coming from.

I usually get to work around 7:45, but it's been different during COVID-19. I've been making sure my son is on track with his schoolwork, and we have breakfast together. The first thing at work is email and making sure that we have coverage for teachers who are away. I'm part of a team of four, so it's not just me doing that. I'm checking voice messages and making phone calls. Often we have a parent meeting or a counselling or administrators' meeting in the morning, and every two weeks we have a District All-Administrators' meeting where we can connect with other leaders and learn together.

Over the course of the day, typically in secondary, there's some discipline that needs to be handled whether that's someone being sent to the office, or students vaping in the bathroom, or not being where they're supposed to be at the time, so that can be something very minor but some days it can be something more serious and can take up a lot of your time. My school is great, we don't have too

A Day in the Life of a Secondary Vice-Principal (should the day not be derailed by an unexpected fire alarm or incident in the community)

- 6:30 am** Coffee – check texts and look over email
- 6:45 am** Check Work and Family Calendars
- 7:45 am** Get to School – check voice mail, start answering email
- 7:55 am** Greet students at the door and supervise the foyer (quick check-in with the team)
- 8:10 am** Check, if needed, for TOC coverage
- 8:15 am** Typically 2 or 3 students waiting to meet unexpectedly during their off block (no appointment) re: courses, lockers, fees, student initiatives, reference requests, etc.
- 8:30 am** School Based Team Meeting – collaborative dialogue addressing referrals and complex student needs
- 9:15 am** Check email and prepare for Meeting with English Department Head (Rubric/Assessment Examples for cross-grade write)
- 9:30 am** In-school Suspension Resolution Meeting with Parent(s) and Student
- 9:50 am** More email and inform teachers, Counsellor and Receptionist about student returning to classes
- 10:00 am** Meeting with Parent, Student, Case Manager and Counsellor to update student's IEP and discuss adaptations and supports
- 10:43 am** Hallway/foyer class change supervision – connect and check-in with vulnerable students
- 10:50 am** Teacher pops in to ask if I can meet to discuss a student concern – advocate for the student while supporting the teacher
- 11:00 am** Youth Care Worker drops in to discuss a student/family's food security issues – create a plan for support
- 11:15 am** Counselling/Admin. Meeting
- 12:00 pm** Check more email, grab a snack and jacket for Lunch Supervision

many serious discipline issues but, you know, they're good kids who can make bad choices. We need to teach them how to make better choices, give some appropriate consequences, inform the parents — who most often see that it's coming from a place of support — and try to get them to learn a different choice.

I spend time connecting with the team, so my partners are my go-to, my Principal is my go-to, and sometimes I'll reach out for support to other administrators in the District. I'm lucky, because I can get perspectives from colleagues in many different Districts.

I sit on the Executive for the Principals' Association, and did this as well in Surrey, so sometimes there are executive meetings and events outside of school hours.

During the day, we try to get out to the halls in between classes and we are definitely out and about during the lunch hour. We have a large campus, so it's great to be out and to walk, and there is a forest in the back that we often have to check. Sometimes lunchtime makes for more work, because you discover things – more opportunities to help students make better choices. Sometimes we have meetings with support care workers, and we do check-ins to make sure vulnerable students are being supported. On any given day, an RCMP officer could drop by with an issue or just to drop in to connect about what someone is doing or to let us know something is happening in the community – sometimes someone in our neighbouring community rec centre accidentally sets off the first alarm, and that can put a wrench in our day. Sometimes there's a medical emergency, a bad asthma attack or a sport injury. And sometimes there is good news, that one of our sports teams has been recognized, or that someone in the school has gone to their citizenship ceremony.

Each of the Vice-Principals and the Principal take on different portfolios, including three or four subject areas. Under these new COVID-19 circumstances there has been more placed on our plate. I have been managing the support staff and their changing duties, while organizing a plan for the return of school resources, as one of my partners works tirelessly on tracking our most vulnerable learners while building next year's timetable. And my other partner, who is

brand new to the role, has the Health and Safety portfolio which has been an extensive undertaking during the pandemic. We help and support each other. Having three VPs makes a big difference, as more can get done. I feel for schools where there is only one VP. At our school we have more time for culture-building and for team-building, and I love that.



Beth speaking at the 2020 Anti-Racism Youth Symposium

- 12:05 pm** Students start arriving to see if I have a moment – book time with two at the end of lunch, and walk and talk with the third
- 12:50 pm** Arrive back at office – two students waiting to see me (meet with each student and then try to eat lunch off the side of my desk while answering more email)
- 1:05 pm** Take a call from BC Children's Hospital – Psychologist requests a confidential student inquiry survey; receive the Doctor's request and fill out the document (collaborate with the student's Counsellor)
- 1:40 pm** Meet with Counsellor to discuss updates for three vulnerable students who are not connecting well, have attendance issues and are at academic risk
- 2:06 pm** Try to get out to the hallways to supervise class change, but do not quite make it in time as a small crowd of students have come to confirm their scheduled time for the Provincial Numeracy Assessment
- 2:10 pm** Walk the halls and encourage stragglers to get to class; walk one student to class and explain her locker troubles to the teacher so she won't be marked late
- 2:15 pm** Visit English 9 class for a Formal First-Year Teacher Evaluation
- 3:30 pm** Meet with the teacher for a short debrief and confirm a date to meet after having read my notes/feedback
- 3:45 pm** Back to the office to meet with SOGI Student Committee members who want to propose initiatives for Anti-Bullying Day and Pride Month, while finishing my lunch.
- 4:00 pm** Interview two teachers for a temporary position (teacher off on sick leave)
- 5:30 pm** Debrief the interviews with VP team member and Principal
- 5:45 pm** Check voice mail, more email and start packing up for home
- Homework To Do List** Read/answer email, including contacting the successful candidate for the temp. position, and sending the rationale to HR; complete reference letter for a teacher's MEd application; chapter readings for District Leadership Training Session