

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 this second installment of *A Day in the Life*, we meet District Principal Selma Smith of the Surrey School District.

In January 2020, Selma joined the Surrey School District as District Principal, Student Support (Universal Design for Learning) following two years as District Vice-Principal, and two and a half years as District Principal for Social Emotional Learning & Prevention in Vancouver.

When Selma Smith was 13 years old, she would cycle with her father down 10th Avenue from Cambie Street in Vancouver. On that route, she saw a building being constructed with sleek glass and modern lines, a standout on the block. She stopped and told her father that – someday – she would work there. As a carpenter, her father was perplexed and asked why she would choose to work in a building with so much glass? The temperature would just never be right. But Selma was resolute.

While Selma didn't completely fulfill her dream of working in our BCPVPA building, she came close.

Selma's professional journey as a school leader has been influenced by her own early-learning experiences, and her compassionate approach to supporting others. She fulfilled a long-time goal when she graduated from the UBC Faculty

A Day in the Life of a District Principal



of Education in 2000, and immediately joined the West Vancouver School District as a full-time high school social studies and geography teacher. “When I was in elementary school, I had teachers who inspired me to love learning; but you know, when you’re young you get involved in lots of different things,” says Selma. “It wasn’t until grade 12 that my geography teacher Ms. Kelly Hawbolt had such a positive influence on me: her style, and her approach to learning really resonated with me and inspired me to pursue a four-year geography degree at Simon Fraser University.”

It was during that time that Selma decided to apply to teacher education. “Again, it was really Kelly Hawbolt who influenced me, she connected so well with young people and really made time. I had my own struggles in school: I was an English-language learner with non-English-speaking parents, and I needed to work that extra mile, with writing especially.” Selma returned to Kelly Hawbolt when she got her first position in West Vancouver as a geography teacher. “I thought it was so ironic that I had done a middle school practicum in Coquitlam, and my first teaching job happened to be five

teaching blocks of geography 12. Kelly Hawbolt was still teaching in the Vancouver School District: she really helped me to get going for my first term and I still keep in touch with her.”

In the Spring of 2002, Selma took the opportunity to teach at an American International School in Guadalajara, Mexico. As a first-generation Canadian, she had a real-world understanding of the challenges students and families can experience, of settling in a new country and operating in different languages at school and at home.

“My dad was a refugee from Germany in the early 1950s, and my mom is from Mexico, so both my parents didn’t really speak English. My Dad hired a tutor so that he could learn Spanish to communicate with my mom, and my mother learned German with the help of other Germans in Vancouver. When I grew up, I learned Spanish, German and English: my parents learned a bit of English but I was often translating for them. I have two siblings, a younger brother and an older brother, and somehow as the middle child I became the school spokesperson



connecting between my parents and the school for my younger brother.”

“I think having lived experience as a first-generation Canadian, and in thinking about teaching a lot of our newcomer families or ELL families, I know how fortunate we are to have multicultural workers and settlement workers who can help families. When I was growing up in the early eighties, I don't think that was accessible, so I can now appreciate the importance of having those enhanced services in a District.”

Through working with many families from many different countries at her school in Guadalajara, Selma recognized how the support for life-changes can have an impact. “It's how someone copes with those changes, especially if they don't have any support. When I came back to Canada, I worked on my master's degree in Counselling Psychology: I wanted to have more of those skills and found that counselling work and therapeutic relationship work was so interesting.”

"I had an opportunity to really see what it means to wrap around a student and work as a team."

Selma completed her degree in three years and after two years of teaching on call she was hired for a counselling position in a Vancouver elementary school, beginning 12 years of counselling at about 20 different Vancouver schools. “Elementary school counsellors are typically split between different schools and it was a pivotal part of my career to learn how to work with so many different students, colleagues, parents and community partners. I had an opportunity to really see what it means to wrap around a student and work as a team.”

Selma's decision in 2013 to apply for a role as a Vice-Principal offered the opportunity to plant roots in one school, leading to two years as VP of Renfrew Elementary. “It opened my eyes to a different role of administration. Working approximately 80% teaching and 20% as a Vice-Principal, I got to



"Shop talk does not end at work for me, I feel very fortunate to have a very supportive husband, who is an elementary school teacher. Discussions around inclusive learning practices as well as the purpose of schooling and learning are regular topics of discussion for us. From this I feel my compassion and humility are derived.

We are both competitive athletes who train and compete in our respective sports. (*Tennis is my sport and my husband Sean, is a Slo-Pitch player*). From the beginning of Spring until Labour Day, many of our weekends involve travel throughout BC and the USA for tournaments.

Mind and body health are two important aspects to well-being. As a young athlete I was drawn to sports psychology as I learned the power the mind can have during a high performance activity.

I feel it is crucial to give all of our youth a foundational understanding of mental health literacy. This way, mental health/ mind health is normalized and youth have the tools they need to manage their emotions or to seek help for themselves or others.

work with all of the students but predominantly the primary students which was new for me. They had also just launched a brand-new Montessori program in the school, so I was involved in building out that program at Renfrew which is a dual-track school. It was a very exciting time to be a Vice-Principal: one minute you're doing something at the micro-level and then you turn around and you're planning a school-wide winter concert event. I was constantly on-the-go and loved every moment!"

Selma's recent role as a District Principal in Vancouver involved supporting student learning in the areas of social emotional learning and prevention, and inclusive learning. That District has both school-based administrators and District Principals who have assigned portfolios that include Indigenous Education, Alternate & Alternative Learning, International Education, Student Information Systems and Inclusive Learning.

The staff teams provide either direct support to students through added staffing or support through collaboration with teachers and other staff departments, and provide professional development training opportunities for staff along with parent education and engagement.

"I brought people together and focussed on how we could improve outcomes for students: that drives all of my work."

Student learning is the priority in the Vancouver School District, with 100 elementary schools, 18 high schools, alternate programs and adult education programs. In her role as District Principal, Selma was accessible to all of those sites and provided support as needed. "I could be contacted by school parents – often they would reach out to me for support in navigating our system. I worked with community partners who may have questions around student safety and mental health initiatives. In that District Principal role, I was a leader but very

much a collaborator with community partners, with staff and with families. I brought people together and focussed on how we could improve outcomes for students: that drives all of my work."

Selma adds, "With Vancouver being a large urban area, there are so many different services in the city, but what I heard over and over were questions about how to navigate these services. Where do I start? Where do I go? I worked to help staff, families and students to understand where they can go to get support for student well-being, mental health and student safety."

Selma reflects on her years with the Vancouver

What advice would you offer to other Principals or Vice-Principals who may be considering a District role?

"I think it's important to have a growth mindset, to be your own person, to challenge yourself and take risks and be authentic.

Authenticity is really important in a District Principal role because you are one person in that role and you want to build on those positive relationships and find ways to support professional learning networks.

I would encourage someone to speak to the people who are currently doing that role, and to ask them what their day is like, what they do each day. It's a practical question, because I think a lot of perceptions may exist."

School District and what she's learned. "I think in the work that I'm doing and will continue to do, having student voice has been incredibly important to me. As a District leader it's been critical to have committees with student voice: those are real opportunities for youth to share their experiences and thoughts, where I can also connect directly with them. Students know their voices are being heard, and that's really important to me in my role."

The integration of social emotional learning (SEL) into the system has made a difference in deepening the understanding of school leaders and staff. "Site-based Principals are utilizing a lot of these tools in their school growth plans, and looking at the adult SEL competencies, there's more of a common language and it's understood. I think people are seeing the value of the foundation when you're implementing an SEL approach to your classroom or to your school; research has shown that there's a positive impact on academic achievement, so I would say it's something that many schools want to be part of."

Selma continues, "For parents and families, there is an increasing demand for opportunities to learn about SEL and we are sending home materials and resources for parents so that they understand what their child is learning at school, and what SEL is. We understand that parent education is important."

A core component of Selma's journey has been reflective practice. "It's vital to take the time to reflect on your own practice and how you connect with others. People feel heard, they feel understood and feel valued, and we can look for ways to improve our service delivery. It's important to me that the staff teams I work with feel that they're continuing to learn, and can find joy and pride in their work with each other. We are working together to improve outcomes for our little ones."

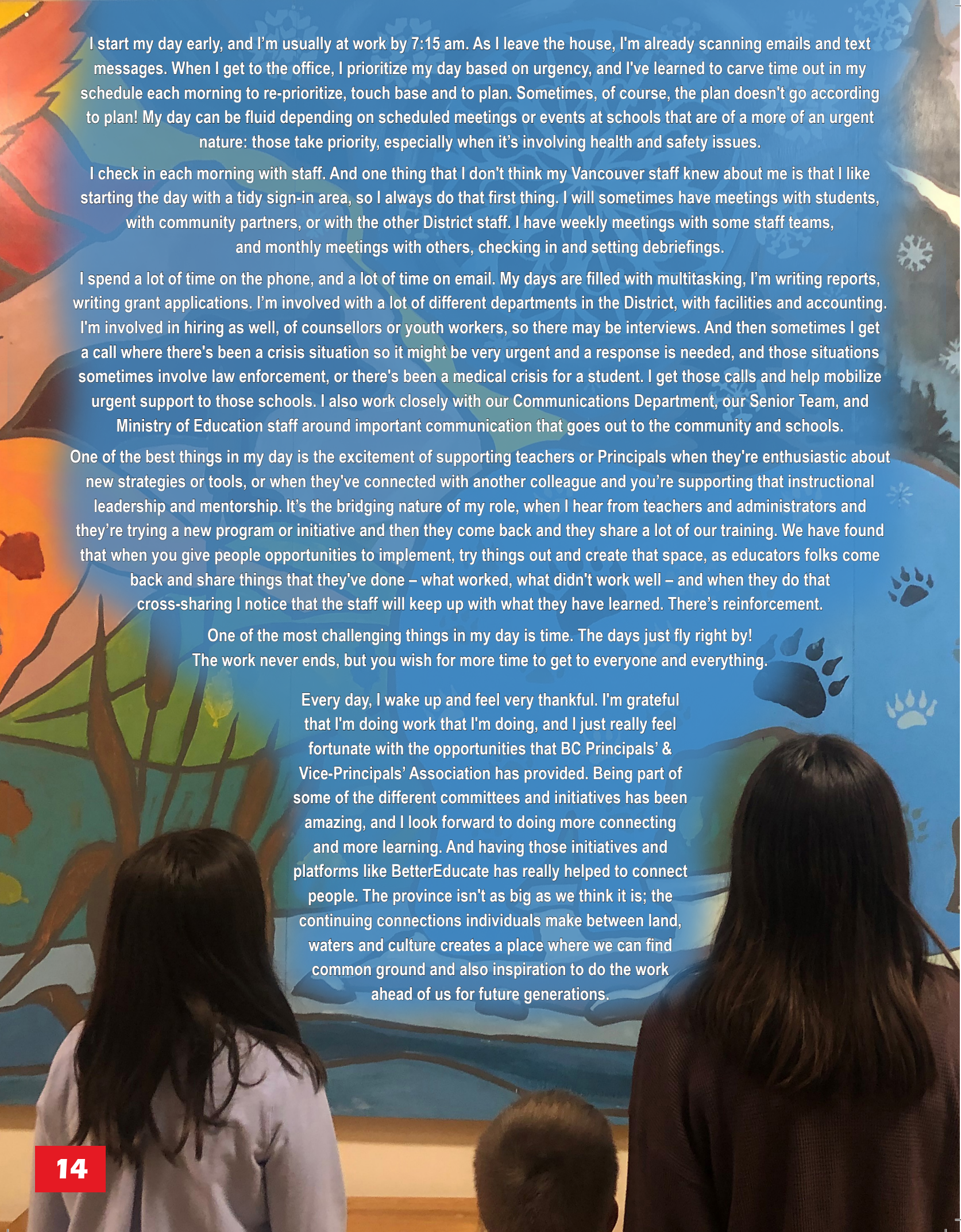
With Selma's January 2020 move to her new role in the Surrey School District, she is excited to bring her experience and strategies to Surrey schools.

"There's a balance that I help find in terms of reactive vs. proactive strategies. I provide a lot of proactive strategies and supports to schools so that if there is the need for a reactive strategy for a crisis or emerging situation, we have hopefully connected previously in fostering proactive supports with the school."

"I hope to continue to liaise with neighbouring School Districts: in Vancouver, we did a lot of sharing of training opportunities, a lot of wonderful support for student safety and well-being initiatives and we collaborated with other districts to co-develop learning tools such as Competency Based IEPs."

"My hope for the work that I'm involved with is that students feel a sense of identity, belonging and connection to their school community."

"My hope for the work that I'm involved with is that students feel a sense of identity, belonging, and connection to their school community. If we're looking at engagement, and we have students that are not attending, how could we better support or meet them where they're at? I meet with parents and students, sometimes under circumstances where there's been a safety issue or a school climate issue, and my role is to support re-engagement or transition so that student has support. I often meet students and their families at challenging times and so I've been the person to help walk with them through that journey. Over the years, I've had families and students that keep in touch with me as they've moved forward in the system. It feels good, and you know they're reaching out because they want to and not because they have to. Sometimes I haven't seen a student and their family for years, and then I hear from them down the road; when they leave that support, they know I'm just a call or an email away."



I start my day early, and I'm usually at work by 7:15 am. As I leave the house, I'm already scanning emails and text messages. When I get to the office, I prioritize my day based on urgency, and I've learned to carve time out in my schedule each morning to re-prioritize, touch base and to plan. Sometimes, of course, the plan doesn't go according to plan! My day can be fluid depending on scheduled meetings or events at schools that are of a more of an urgent nature: those take priority, especially when it's involving health and safety issues.

I check in each morning with staff. And one thing that I don't think my Vancouver staff knew about me is that I like starting the day with a tidy sign-in area, so I always do that first thing. I will sometimes have meetings with students, with community partners, or with the other District staff. I have weekly meetings with some staff teams, and monthly meetings with others, checking in and setting debriefings.

I spend a lot of time on the phone, and a lot of time on email. My days are filled with multitasking, I'm writing reports, writing grant applications. I'm involved with a lot of different departments in the District, with facilities and accounting. I'm involved in hiring as well, of counsellors or youth workers, so there may be interviews. And then sometimes I get a call where there's been a crisis situation so it might be very urgent and a response is needed, and those situations sometimes involve law enforcement, or there's been a medical crisis for a student. I get those calls and help mobilize urgent support to those schools. I also work closely with our Communications Department, our Senior Team, and Ministry of Education staff around important communication that goes out to the community and schools.

One of the best things in my day is the excitement of supporting teachers or Principals when they're enthusiastic about new strategies or tools, or when they've connected with another colleague and you're supporting that instructional leadership and mentorship. It's the bridging nature of my role, when I hear from teachers and administrators and they're trying a new program or initiative and then they come back and they share a lot of our training. We have found that when you give people opportunities to implement, try things out and create that space, as educators folks come back and share things that they've done – what worked, what didn't work well – and when they do that cross-sharing I notice that the staff will keep up with what they have learned. There's reinforcement.

One of the most challenging things in my day is time. The days just fly right by!
The work never ends, but you wish for more time to get to everyone and everything.

Every day, I wake up and feel very thankful. I'm grateful that I'm doing work that I'm doing, and I just really feel fortunate with the opportunities that BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association has provided. Being part of some of the different committees and initiatives has been amazing, and I look forward to doing more connecting and more learning. And having those initiatives and platforms like BetterEducate has really helped to connect people. The province isn't as big as we think it is; the continuing connections individuals make between land, waters and culture creates a place where we can find common ground and also inspiration to do the work ahead of us for future generations.



A Day in the Life of a District Principal

- 6:45 am** Check texts, review specific emails for student support needs
- 7:30 am** Arrive at the District office, check emails, check voice messages, re-prioritize day if needed
- 7:45 am** Review and re-assign support staff to schools where support is waitlisted
- 8:00 am** Staff arrive, staff check-ins, greet and welcome on-call staff
- 8:15 am** Prepare for meetings/ school visits or presentations/ workshops for the day
- 9:00 am** District Autism Team meeting
- 10:00 am** Weekly meeting of incoming collaboration requests for student support
- 11:00 am** District Principals of Student Support Huddle meeting — updates on collaborative work together, planning for District Pro-D events or upcoming training sessions for schools
- 11:30 am** Weekly progress meeting regarding student in hospital – conference call/ phone-in meeting
(School, family and medical staff discuss progress and planning for re-entry to school)
- 12:45 pm** Secondary school visit with student/ parent as part of intake meeting
- 1:45 pm** Head back to the District office for next meeting
- 2:00 pm** Team meeting with District Helping Teachers — focus articulation plans for Grade 7 to 8 students with complex learning needs
- 2:45 pm** School Principal phone call — student in crisis, review and discuss supports and plans for intervention.
- 3:00 pm** Emails to school Principals/ Vice Principals — graduation plans for specific students with Ministry Designations
- 3:15 pm** Make a cup of tea and have a check-in with clerical assistant *(review budget, upcoming Pro-D, requests for resources/ supplies)*
- 4:00 pm** District Healthy & Safety Committee Meeting
- 5:30 pm** Check messages, emails, make to-do list of who to call back tomorrow
- 6:15 pm** Go home