

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 eighth installment of the series, we meet Lucinda Wolters, Principal of Arden Elementary School.

Lucinda Wolters has been an educator since 1997, and a school administrator since 2010. She taught for five years in Coquitlam at Mountain View Elementary and Minnekhada Middle School, and moved back to Vancouver Island shortly before the birth of her second daughter. With two daughters now in university, Lucinda and her husband are adjusting, and enjoying the transition to empty-nesters. But as much as education has been at the centre of Lucinda's life, teaching and school leadership was not in her early plans.

"It's quite a story," says Lucinda. "When I graduated from high school, I vowed to my parents that I was never going to be a teacher. They still encouraged it a bit, they thought teaching would be a fitting career for me and they were very passionate about education. My mom was also a kindergarten teacher who loved it. But I needed to forge my own path. To this day, my mom laughs and reminds me about it; but, she's proud of me. My dad passed away in 1999, just after I became a teacher, but I know he would have been proud of how my path has unfolded."

As Lucinda began to think about her future, there were three careers that she was considering. "I was interested in being a naturopathic doctor, or an actress because I was very involved in theater arts in high school. The third area was psychology: I was interested in child development, and that was the path most related to education. I have three brothers, and that interest in child development was prompted by the experiences of my oldest brother. When I was six, and he was eleven, he was on a

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Lucinda with husband Michael and daughters Emiko and Elska

class trip to a farm; the kids were playing in the barn loft, and he suffered a head injury when he fell. This event completely changed the trajectory of his life. He was in a coma for three weeks, and when he eventually returned to school, it was as a very different learner. At that time, of course, more traditional approaches prevailed: it was very difficult for him to be part of the regular classroom, and he had to come to terms with his new limitations. It still pains me to this day, thinking about how he was treated due to misunderstanding his needs. But that has become fuel for me and my leadership.”

That tragic experience ignited Lucinda’s lifelong interest in child development, and how to support kids with special needs. At the time, she wasn’t thinking about being

an educator, and instead completed a psychology degree before traveling with a friend through Europe for five months. “I ended up in Japan teaching English: while it was about being able to get a job while I was there, it became more about experiencing a culture that I was fascinated by, and didn’t know much about. It was eye-opening, as my parents were Dutch immigrants and I’d had somewhat of an insular upbringing. My second brother kept telling me about his friend in Victoria, who was Japanese-Canadian. And when I came back, I met my brother’s friend and – as it turns out – I married him!”

When Lucinda was getting to know her future husband, she learned about his family, and how his

parents met in the internment camps in the Interior. “I knew nothing about that; I was so shocked. It was at a time in my life where I was really reflecting on my values and my experiences in Japan, and then I returned to Canada and met Mike, and learned about what his family and so many other families had endured. As I continue to reflect upon this over the years, the understanding I have gained surrounding their story has helped me to begin to understand aspects of Truth and Reconciliation.

“There is a piece of personal family history that has also influenced my thinking, where my father and his first family hid a Jewish family of four in their tiny attic room during the Second World War. I grew up hearing about his past, and it had a huge impact on me. My dad was a role model in many ways. He stuck with his principles, even when it meant risking his life.”

“For me, it’s been how critical the ‘*Truth*’ part is, when you look squarely at what has happened in our country, the way cultural communities have been treated. Although absolutely terrible, I see the internment of Japanese citizens being different from the magnitude of the loss experienced by Indigenous Peoples, because of the intent to eradicate Indigenous Peoples and their cultures. Yet learning about the Japanese Internment camps contributed to my personal understanding and awareness of what it meant to be Canadian and further has helped me reflect on the significance of what has happened to Indigenous Peoples. I’m finishing my doctorate through the University of Kansas, and I’m focusing on leadership identity. In digging into the research, I’m thinking about my own leadership identity, and what that means to me such as my values and beliefs about diversity and remaining courageous and true to what I believe.”

Lucinda was a supervisor for a group home, and then became an alternate program worker for Vancouver schools, doing urgent intervention contracts all over the district. She was constantly in different schools, seeing what was happening in classrooms and supporting kids to ensure they were included. “And that was when it finally struck me: I really want to

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do this. I was feeling increasingly restless about the limitations of my role and wanted to get in there. So that’s when I did the Professional Development Program (PDP).”

“When I reflect on my development to considering myself as a more ‘formal’ leader, I initially had more of a traditional view of leadership which has unraveled as I focused on being a learner. The more I wanted to learn and to develop my skills in the classroom, the more opportunities would come up. Gradually, I was more involved in leadership with other teachers in schools. The Network was a significant influence on my developing leadership, at the time the Network of Performance Based Schools, and now The Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIIE). At the time the focus was on understanding assessment for learning practices. I started to hone my skill set and noticed the influence on students and their level of engagement.”

Lucinda found that students responded when she could clarify the assessment for learning strategies, communicate clear learning intentions, outline criteria for success, and provide specific descriptive feedback for kids that reflected both where they were, and where they would go next. “When student voice is part of the learning, there is a much more personalized lens. And kids really responded to it. I was able to use those assessment strategies and differentiate successfully. It was very motivating.” Lucinda then chose to pursue her masters, with research focused on the impact of the Network on classroom practice. “It was awesome, just hearing other educators talk about the influence and understanding of assessment for learning

Small Fires

strategies and being part of the teams and a larger network. There was a clear collaborative cycle to guide teacher practice which was rich and meaningful.”

Lucinda’s first Vice-Principalship was as a solo leader in a small rural school. Lucinda recalls that with her own relative inexperience, and the complexities of the community, it was a very difficult point in her career. “I was two years in, and I thought, I don’t think this is for me. Pretty devastating to get to a point where I was so full of self-doubt, and wondering, what am I doing here? What am I going to do? At the time, (BCPVPA Executive Director) Kevin Reimer was a Principal and the chair for our local association. I remember feeling so distraught and asking him, can I really do this? And he said, yes. Such a lifeline when he was so supportive. I also connected with Harold Krische, at the time at BCPVPA’s Member Support Services, and I was so impressed with his listening skills; I didn’t feel judged. Each time I spoke with him, he would listen and reframe the conversation from a leadership lens. I’m so glad now for that experience, and that I was able to recommit to the work. But it did lead me to Adaptive Schools. I was really soul searching and wondering, what is the missing piece? What is it that I need to help me in my leadership, and how do I enact it?”

When attending a formative assessment professional development session one summer, Lucinda was impressed by the skill of the facilitator in creating community and a depth of conversation in a room full of strangers. In a later conversation, the facilitator recommended Adaptive Schools: Lucinda looked it up. “It was through this organization called Thinking Collaborative. There are different branches: there’s Adaptive Schools, which is about developing groups, Habits of Mind, which is developing thinking in classrooms, and Cognitive Coaching, which is a one-to-one

“I definitely see that the Adaptive Schools work, altering those patterns of communication, informs and influences the educational transformation at a school level: I’m pretty energized about that.

A couple of years ago, I started a podcast, Small Fires, around the work of Adaptive Schools, and how that can influence educational transformation.

I’ve been a bit busy with my doctorate, so I don’t have many episodes yet. But I love exploring conversations with other educational leaders through it.”

smallfires.ca

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coaching piece. The learning has dramatically influenced my lenses around how I see my role, who I am as a leader, and has given me many strategies and approaches to facilitate learning in schools with the teachers."

The shift of thinking significantly changed Lucinda's approach to her practice. "A book that has had an impact on me is Michael Fullan's *The Principal: Three Keys for Maximizing Impact*. He talks about Principals creating a culture of collective efficacy and labels them as being leaders for learning. What struck me was how he saw the Principal role as facilitating teacher learning, and "using the group to change the group." To expand on that, if I would notice staff always sitting with the same people, talking with the same people during staff meetings, and the same people being more vocal, or being quiet, I see this as lost energy, lost leverage points. Adaptive Schools has increased my awareness around complex systems and what that means in the way I facilitate meetings to maximize the energy and expertise in the room."

"I think, in the past, we've looked at education systems as complicated, where we have relied on step-by-step expertise: you follow the way things have been done, and you'll be okay. Well, those are not the kind of systems we work in. Our schools are increasingly complex compared to the schools of the past. The ways that we engage with each other and maximize networks within a school, is paramount to actually moving things forward to meet the demands of student needs today.

Understanding complexity informs how I facilitate staff meetings. My intentions are to elevate patterns of communication to be healthy and balanced, so everyone's voice is heard. With all those voices, there's a lot of expertise in the room and we can then more effectively "use the group to change the group." Creating psychological safety and using structures to facilitate those conversations can have a huge impact on the decisions that are made as a result. A key takeaway for me from the Adaptive Schools training was truly understanding how the quality of the adult conversations directly influences the quality of the work that gets done for kids as well as influences the collective commitment to the decisions made."

Lucinda is in her second year as Principal of Arden Elementary for Comox Valley Schools and is gratified by the staff's ongoing commitment to students and to collaboration. The school uses the Response to Instruction (RTI) model to support students' learning needs. "One of my early-career experiences was attending BCPVPA's Short Course, and listening to Dr. Janet Mort facilitating a session on the vulnerability of early learners – the data was so compelling. When I returned to school, and shared the data with the kindergarten teachers, they agreed, based on their observations of kids beginning school. This led to engaging in some work around implementing RTI; which has continued. We're also in the process of acquiring a different lens on self-regulation through a course through the Mehrit Centre, and the teachers are open to learning. The Self-Reg course for Leaders is helping me see kids with challenging behaviours differently, and how to reframe behaviors so that we can give them supports to minimize their stressors. The Self-Reg course has aided my recognition of adult stress responses as well. Each of us have different stressors and, given our pandemic reality, our collective consciousness about how we are managing has become a school priority as we strive to support ourselves and each other. We are developing our understanding that when we are regulated, we are better able to influence student regulation."

"I'm proud of the shared ownership and the collective



Photo: courtesy Lucinda Wolters

leadership that I've helped support at our school, around everyone having a voice and contributing, and having those collective decisions. It's something I really value, and when it starts to have an impact on how people engage in the school to specifically address what kids need, it's very satisfying. People are willing to say what they think and how they feel. Things happen here: people constantly step up to do things. It's a definite team approach. I cannot say enough about this school. They are all in."

While Lucinda would love to spend more time in the classroom, she is now a solo leader at Arden and misses the support and collaboration that a Vice-Principal can offer. "Last year, we had a Vice-Principal, Debra Fullerton, and I cannot speak more highly of her, we were a dynamic team and shared such a trust. But with declining enrollments, and another school that needed her, Debra has moved

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on. It is a different experience this year, not having a Vice-Principal. At the beginning of the year, I told the teachers I'd like to come in and teach a lesson, so they could just sign up. Some teachers did, but some later came to me and said, "Lucinda, what are you thinking? You don't have time for that!" And while it was a goal to be in classrooms more, with the complexity of the school, it has been difficult. I try to get in as much as I can to connect with kids and staff, but I don't formally teach. I hope I can get there at some point, because I do really miss it."

The Arden Way

“We have something called the ‘Arden Way’, which was initiated by Kevin Reimer when he was Principal here – it’s a wonderful thing that our community has embraced, and we have built so much of our culture around it.

It’s a code of conduct, and it’s about being a learner and celebrating each learner. We refer to ‘successful learner traits’ that we emphasize in all areas: being creative, industrious, compassionate, risk-taking, confident, strategic, thoughtful and enthusiastic.

These traits originate from Susan Bannister’s work to support the core competencies.”

bit.ly/SLTraits

Being a solo leader in a school has been a change for Lucinda in a number of ways. “You have trust to be able to bounce ideas off each other, you get together and make a game plan around what needs to be done – that’s helpful. The number of meetings here is significant, with collaboration meetings, school-based team meetings, parent meetings, health and safety: having a Vice-Principal to support those is really helpful. They could attend a meeting, or we could both be there and have our own perspective on what was happening if a situation was a little contentious.”

The diverse needs of a school and the intensity of the work can create challenges for school leaders. For Lucinda, it has been finding the balance between the managerial aspects of the work and the instructional leadership that she loves. “There is limited time, and there’s always so much to do. I have to make sure that I am doing those management pieces, because the school won’t run without those.”

“For our school community, there are definitely unique needs, and there’s a real love for Arden. Sometimes it comes back through the grapevine, people on Facebook are wondering where to live in the Comox Valley; they’re thinking about schools, and Arden gets mentioned. There is a sense of commitment that people have here, and the fact that kids love to come to school is influential.”

Is the role of Principal what Lucinda expected? “In a sense, I knew what it would be like. But to actually experiencing it is intense; I have definitely increased my awareness around my own self-care. I would suggest that someone considering a school leader role connect with others – connect with Principals – to really get a sense. Talk to a few people, because everyone has a different style and approach, and have different areas they focus on. Really consider who you are, your leadership identity and your beliefs and values. Consider if you are able to invest the energy and the commitment: it’s a demanding job, it’s not for everybody. And even though it can be really hard at the beginning – because I *know*! – having the support can make a difference. When I moved to the second



Lucinda meets with Katie Arsenault

school as VP, where I worked with Geoff Manning as the Principal, it was a completely different experience for me.”

Despite the demands of the role, Lucinda has continued her quest for learning. “For me, curiosity is key. When I was considering pursuing a doctorate, I chose to go into it with a focus on Adaptive Schools, and seeing what the research says about complex systems and leadership identity, in connection to the changing role of the principalship. But when you’re passionate about the topic, and living it, the energy is there for pursuing it.”

“It’s empowering learning at multiple levels. It’s the professional empowerment, it’s the individual student’s empowerment, and creating this collective

unified approach to learning as educators as well. I really see my purpose as unifying communities in meaningful learning. And that unity piece is so critical. There are all these individual pieces, and different ages engaging, but that collective piece – where we’re going in the same direction and seeing that fulfillment and joy in learning – that’s very satisfying.”

“And for the students, I really hope that they know how cherished they are, and how they belong here: that this is their school. I want them to feel at home here, and hope that they feel a joy in learning, that they can really show who they are and that they’re thriving physically, cognitively, and emotionally, in all areas.”



@LucindaWolters

A Day in the Life of a Elementary School Principal

5:45 am	Wake up and greet the day.
6:15 am	Check email for any urgent matters.
7:00 am	Arrive at the school, get organized, and plan priorities.
7:30 am	Open up the school and make my rounds. Connect with teachers as they arrive. Set up the parking lot.
8:20 am	Greet students outside arriving on the buses.
8:45 am	Do announcements and the school mindfulness program.
9:00 am	Make a loop around the school and connect with students and staff in classrooms.
9:30 am	Respond to emails and address any issues that have come up.
10:00 am	Support recess supervision.
10:30 am	Meet with students to help problem-solve an issue.

"I arrive at about 7:00 am, and it's pretty quiet. I take the first half hour of the day to organize myself and prioritize what's essential. After that, I open the school and make my rounds. Some teachers are starting to show up, and I'll connect with them – there is a *lot* of connection, it's a great time of the day to have conversations with staff, and to follow up on something that happened the day before, or something that is coming up. Then I set up the parking lot, with cones and signs since it can get quite crowded. Before the day starts, I'll continue connecting with teachers, and then I get outside before the first bell, usually near the parking lot or the bus loop, just to make sure everybody's safe and we can greet students as they arrive.

I do the announcements once the bell has gone, beginning with the Arden Way prompts and then Inner Explorer, which is a mindfulness program. After the announcements, I'll continue responding to emails, and then I do a loop around the school and connect into classrooms as much as I can. Then it might be more meetings or emails with parents. I check in regularly with our support staff; we have some significant student needs, so that can take a lot of my time when things come up.

There are certain people in the school that I am regularly in contact with, and one is our Learning Support Teacher, Debora Krueger. We're always connecting about what our next step will be around needs. I also connect every day with our Indigenous Support Worker, Sandi Phye. Approximately one-third of our population is Indigenous, and Sandi does so much. We're in constant contact about the projects she's working on, students she is working with, and

A Day in the Life of a Elementary School Principal

how I can support them. Then I'm on supervision at recess and lunchtime, which are great times to connect with kids.

Regarding the things that can take my day 'off course', I've had to reframe the way I see that. I always have my plan. But the plan isn't necessarily the work. Whatever shows up is the work. Reframing that helps me to say, okay: I'm putting this to the side. So much of what I'm doing is being a careful and thoughtful listener. If staff need to talk something through, I'm there; if I'm helping kids solve a problem, it's about listening and reframing. Things arise that are related to staff or students, and I need to be present, to help problem solve and to support. And that's the work.

There are often team meetings, or I'll be following up with teachers about something that has happened or connecting with parents, especially after school. But towards the end of the day, when it's quieter and most staff have left for the day, I'm getting as much done as I can in connection to the managerial parts of my role.

I'm usually home between 5:00 pm and 5:30 pm: I try to have some good boundaries, and to work when I'm most productive. It's a long day, but the day does zip by!

Recently I have incorporated a short meditation that I do as soon as I get home. It's a guided Wim Hof Method breathing meditation. It is the quickest, most impactful meditation I have come across that helps me to de-stress: bit.ly/GdWimHof."

11:00 am	Visit grade one class to hear about their project.
11:30 am	Respond to emails or update school blog.
11:45 am	Support lunchtime supervision.
12:30 pm	Meet with groups of students as needed.
1:00 pm	Eat my lunch.
1:20 pm	Work on school project promoting active school travel.
2:00 pm	Meet with Indigenous Support Worker.
2:30 pm	Say goodbye to students as they leave for the day.
2:45 pm	Facilitate team or staff meeting.
4:00 pm	Return to emails and respond to phone messages.
4:30 pm	Prepare for tomorrow morning's Health & Safety meeting.
5:00 pm	Head home for the day.