

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



As a new teacher in the late 1980s, I was hired to a secondary staff along with a number of other new teachers. At an August meeting, the admittedly-anxious new teachers were invited to a lunch with the Principal before our first school year started. At the lunch, we were matched with an experienced teacher who would act as our mentor for the first few years. I was paired with a counsellor at the school named Tom Fuchko who had been a teacher at the junior high school that I attended. Tom had known me since I was 14 years old, and I was relieved to be matched with someone familiar. Until I left the school three years later, Tom had a guiding influence on my development as a teacher through his mentorship and coaching – and the occasional straight talk that I needed in those early years.

One Conversation at a Time...

As a new Vice-Principal in the late 1990s, I felt that everything that I needed to know about managing and leading a school community could be learned from the Principals that I worked with. As a single VP, the administrative team was a natural mentoring opportunity for me, and I was eager to learn as much as I could from my more experienced Principal partners. *Sidenote:* in one of my first VP positions, the Principal – who became a very close friend – stated at the outset that he wanted our administrative relationship to be a 50/50 partnership. To this day, I still tease him about the four straight years I spent doing bus duty as part of our ‘50/50’ partnership.

In the fall of 2017, the BCPVPA launched its pilot Mentorship Program. When we asked our members if their district had a mentoring program, about 60% of our members said yes. However, when we asked about the quality of those mentoring programs, the responses were very mixed. I have come to believe that the mixed responses are a result of districts attempting to provide mentoring support as an in-house offering, and relying on pairing mentors with mentees in the same school district. The survey responses from the mentees following the first year of our pilot program were clear – the mentees were very hesitant to pair with mentors who worked in the same school district. Anecdotally, the mentees expressed a reluctance to share their vulnerabilities with a mentor who was also a work colleague. This may be the reason why some school district mentoring programs struggle to develop a model where mentees can be fully engaged and committed to the process.

When we first contemplated the need for a mentoring program at the BCPVPA, we knew that we should

look outside of the organization for a facilitator and coach. At the time, Alison Davies had been heading up the New Teacher Mentoring Program for the province. That program was ending, and we approached Alison to lead our pilot mentoring initiative. Alison had been a lifelong teacher, and when we first approached her there was some initial reluctance, as she wondered about how to best guide our mentors when she had not herself worked as a Principal or Vice-Principal. Once she agreed to bring her skills and experience to our program, I sat in on the first training session with our mentors so I could offer my ‘translation services’ if anything she was sharing could use some additional school leadership context. As I suspected, there were very few areas where Alison required support, and as I sat in the room as a witness to the process I was impressed with her skillful facilitation and depth of knowledge.

Alison’s approach was to create a mentoring-coaching model as a means to strengthen the relationship between the mentor and mentee, and lead to engagement in conversations that matter deeply. This process of capacity building through conversation has served to nurture the capacities of both the mentor and the mentee as they learn and grow together. Our survey results are clear that our mentors gain as much from the experience as our mentees.

Initially, the program was tailored to target new Vice-Principals to support them on their leadership pathway. As word of the program spread, we added another layer to the mentee cohort and began accepting members who were new to their role,



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such as an experienced VP who had taken on the role of a Principal. Over time, the makeup of the cohort changed again, and we found that even experienced Principals were looking to be a part of the program. I think the evolution of our cohort group says a great deal about the pressure that even experienced leaders are feeling today.

Alison's time as the facilitator and coach of our program is ending as she moves on to a new opportunity. I know that the influence of Alison's leadership will leave a lasting imprint on the BCPVPA and our mentoring program participants for many years to come. With transitions come new opportunities, and I am very pleased to share with you that Magdalena Kassis, BCPVPA Director of Member Support Services, will be leading the program going forward. Magdalena led the school leader mentoring program

for the Vancouver School Board, and I know that her passion for supporting and nurturing school leaders will continue as she takes on this role.

As I reflect on my own VP experience in the 1990s, I still believe that I could have learned everything I needed to know from my Principal during that era. Fast forward to my last Principalship with a new Vice-Principal: we were both so run off our feet that there was little time to catch our collective breath, let alone engage in a meaningful mentoring relationship. That is a refrain we hear from our members in the program or considering the program. They have a keen desire to fully participate in a mentoring relationship, but the current demands on their time due to the intensification and scrutiny of their work leave them with little cognitive energy to participate to a meaningful degree. There is more work for the

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BCPVPA to do to help our members understand that mentoring is not, 'one more box car on the train', as a former superintendent of mine used to state, but rather the train that moves all those boxcars along the track. The program is intended to assist members so that they are better able to manage the demands of their work, and realize the full potential of their leadership.

Along my leadership pathway, I have greatly benefitted from the wisdom and guidance of several mentors. I can say with absolute confidence that I would not be

in the position I am today without the mentorship of Tom Fuchko when I was a beginning teacher. Sadly, Tom passed away a few years ago and I never took the opportunity to truly thank him for the influence that he had on my career. Some of the most impactful professional learning that I ever experienced took place while sharing a drink with Tom after school on a Friday, with deep conversations about teaching and learning. In the many years since my time sipping a drink with Tom on a sunny patio, I have come to believe that impactful leadership development takes place one conversation at a time.

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