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2024-2026 President
BCPVPA



LEADING THE WAY

WOMEN RESHAPING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORK

My Familiar Landscape

Over the past two years as President of the BCPVPA, I have had the immense privilege of visiting districts and schools across this province — north to south, Island to Interior, rural, urban, and everything in between. Whether I was sitting in the school office in Quesnel, sharing a cafeteria table in Haida Gwaii, or walking school hallways in Vernon, one theme kept emerging for me:

Women are doing extraordinary things in leadership.

And yet, far too often, we are still navigating systems that were not designed with women in mind.

And, as I have travelled BC, colleagues continue to ask, “Why haven’t you written anything about female leaders in education? Why, if the BCPVPA has been existence since 1987, are you only the third female president? Is your experience different than that of your male counterparts?”

In my dissertation titled, *A Study of Female Superintendents Who Administer Public School Districts in British Columbia*, and in reading our colleague Dr. Paula Gosal’s study on female secondary school Principals in BC, the patterns were unmistakable: women continue to carry a disproportionate burden of gendered expectations, while simultaneously contributing to some of the most innovative, relational, and equity-driven leadership in the province.

*“The world needs different kinds of leaders.
Women bring a new perspective — be that.”*

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WHAT THE NUMBERS DON'T SHOW – BUT WOMEN DO

We all know the statistics: the teaching profession is overwhelmingly female. Senior leadership? Not so much.

But numbers don't capture the lived stories — the moments of doubt, the quiet resilience, the uncredited labour, the courage it takes to step into roles that have historically been modelled through a male lens.

Across my research, and through my conversations on district visits, I heard common themes:

- Women who didn't plan to become Principals or Superintendents, but said, “yes”, when purpose and opportunity intersected.
- Women who brought experience from counselling, international education, inclusion, Indigenous education, rural leadership, or ministry work — pathways sometimes dismissed as “nontraditional”, yet deeply aligned to what today's system actually needs.
- Women who learned to navigate scrutiny, politics, or gendered assumptions with grace and grit.

And what struck me most? **Not one leader I met got there alone.**

MENTORSHIP

The Through-Line in Every Woman's Story

If there is a single message I wish every emerging female leader could hear, it is this:

You will need mentors — plural. And you deserve them.

In my own journey, I can name the people who opened doors, who pulled chairs to the table for me, who said “you're ready for this” long before I believed it. Some of them were senior leaders, and some were colleagues; all encouraged me in important ways. Women interviewed in both of the aforementioned academic studies shared this, too. Many had male mentors simply because those were the leaders holding senior roles. But, increasingly, women are mentoring each other in powerful, intentional ways.

The truth is simple: mentorship changes trajectories.

And this kind of sponsorship — someone naming your strengths, speaking your name in rooms you're not yet in — can change outcomes.

GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

The Unspoken Curriculum of Leadership

One of the most candid components of both research studies came from stories that women shared about the “invisible” expectations and phenomena:



- the comments about age, appearance, or confidence
- the expectation to take notes or organize food — “the executive mom” role
- the pressure to avoid mistakes because there is “less room” for women to fail
- the weight of community politics and systemic pressure that can impact women more sharply or more personally

These are not theoretical suppositions. They are lived realities in BC and in educational communities around the world.

Yet what I see, time and again, is women establishing firm boundaries, leaning into their values, and building supportive networks that make the work both possible and purposeful.

“Establish your fence lines — and don’t give up on maintaining that fence.”

WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION

Say it Louder

In the interviews with women who are Principals, one message came through clearly:

None of them “balanced” everything. They designed and built infrastructure to make the work sustainable.

Childcare, household planning, shared calendars, morning runs, therapy, community, evening routines, career timing, and — importantly — permission to pause, restart, and shift roles as life evolves.

This is not weakness or vulnerability. It is leadership.

It is the honest acknowledgment that none of us works and leads in isolation from the rest of our lives.

INSIGHTS, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

The Leadership Gap — A BC Snapshot

Despite decades of progress, the leadership gap persists:

- Women represent 74% of BC teachers
- Women represent 32% of Superintendents
- Women remain underrepresented at the secondary Principal level

What gives me hope is that we are now learning more about why the gap exists, and we have the tools, research, and community commitment to close it.

FOR WOMEN LEADERS RISING IN BC

What I Want You to Know

1) Find mentors early — and keep them close.

Ask for the feedback you need, not the feedback that is easy to give.

2) Build a network wider than your district.

The leaders who thrive in BC are connected — to associations, colleagues, other districts, Indigenous partners, and ministry teams.

3) Your leadership style is not a liability. It is your superpower.

Relational, collaborative, equity-minded leadership is what our system needs most.

4) Learn how search processes work.

Women often underestimate their readiness. Understand governance, budgets, the politics, and the narrative of your district.

5) Plan for the reality — not the idealism — of work–life fit.

Give yourself permission to build the supports you need. Strength is not self-sacrifice.

6) Develop board and media literacy.

The political climate is continually shifting. Be ready before the storm arrives.

7) Lift others as you go.

Mentor other women, invite them to your networks, collaborate with them. BC rises when women do this for each other.

WHAT WOMEN TOLD ME THAT I WILL NEVER FORGET

“Mentorship changed everything for me.”

“Don’t let people take away your confidence.”

“Lead from the middle — culture moves when Principals move.”

“When the work gets hard, fall back on your ‘why’.”

These truths echo across communities, districts, and decades of women’s leadership.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR ALL OF US

If we want more women in senior leadership — and if we want them to thrive — we need systems that recognize and celebrate the strengths women bring, and remove the barriers that hold women back.

That means:

- District succession planning that is transparent and fair.

- Trustee education and orientation focused on equity and unconscious bias.
- Mentorship programs designed with intention, not by chance.
- Networks that welcome, honour, and amplify women’s voices.

And it means asking, every time a leadership role opens:

“Who is missing from this table — and why?”

CLOSING REFLECTION

In our school districts, I see women leading with courage, clarity, humour, humility, and deep compassion. I see leaders who shoulder immense responsibility while still creating spaces of belonging and joy for the people around them. I see emerging leaders who will redefine what leadership looks like for the next generation.

Women are not just stepping into leadership in BC.

They are reshaping it.

“This is a privileged role — and it’s incredibly rewarding. Make a difference, in a good way.”

