

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 seventh installment of the series, we meet Aaron Akune, Principal of North Delta Secondary School.

Principal Aaron Akune had a clear plan. “If I was to rewind the movie of my life in my head, I had already formulated the idea of landing a teaching position in Richmond. That was my vision: I was a Richmond kid, I’d be a Richmond teacher and, if all things went well, I would spend my career in Richmond.”

Apart from one year of his life in Williams Lake, Aaron grew up and lived in Richmond while attending UBC and through eleven years as a science teacher. While the idea of going into leadership and administration at the school level was always in the back of his mind, a number of other leadership opportunities would lay the groundwork for his later decisions.

Aaron grew up in an extended family of educators. “My dad was a teacher, Principal, and Superintendent and my mom was a teacher,” said Aaron. “At the time I didn’t really think about it, but so many of my aunts and uncles were in education, and later my cousins as well. So there’s something in the genes – or in the water! I think where it started for me was the summer after grade 10 with my best friend at the time. We started coaching soccer for girls who were just turning five. We worked along with this same group of kids with soccer, and later with softball. At the time, if asked, I would have said I was there because I like the sport; I liked the coaching side of it. If you’d asked me about going into teaching I would have said, heck no! My parents are teachers, my extended family is composed of teachers. I can still remember being at the dinner table and saying, I don’t know what I’m going to do when I grow up, but I

A Day in the Life of a Secondary School Principal



"The best moment in this profession is knowing that as a school, you were part of a game-changing and life-changing experience over the course of five or six years for a student."

- Aaron Akune

Photo courtesy Aaron Akune

can tell you: I'm never going to work in a school. So that worked out really well, as you can tell!"

In university, Aaron was convinced that he would pursue a career related to athletics and health, in sports medicine or physiotherapy. In his final year, he came to a realization. "You're at that time in your undergrad where you've got final exams the next morning, and your friends and classmates are focussed on studying", Aaron recalls feeling torn between coaching a practice and preparing for exams. It was definitely a sign that he enjoyed working with and teaching kids.

After his bachelor of science, Aaron applied straight to the education program at UBC. "And after that was completed, I remember it was a July 1 call on my cell

phone while I was on the ball diamond. I was called to come in the next day for an interview, and that took me into the role of a science teacher. I never looked back."

After eight years teaching at the same school, another opportunity further defined Aaron's leadership goals. "We were a shrinking school at the time, and similar to the experience of other teachers, I was going to end up being short a block. The Principal said, I've got a role for you. Our athletic director was stepping back, and the Principal said, well: guess who's in the gym all day? Guess who the best person is to take this on? He talked me into the role – honestly, it didn't take me very long. I realized pretty quickly that spending time in the gym – supporting the

athletes and coaches – brought me joy. The other piece was the leadership component, bringing on new coaches, mentoring coaches, and feeling like you're overseeing something bigger. For a couple of years, I split the athletic director's role with another teacher, and we also co-taught a science class. That was interesting: you bring together two people with a very similar interest, but sometimes with different approaches and different perspectives. There were some times where we'd disagree, talk things through, and arrive at a collaborative plan. It really helped that we got along well and had very similar values. I think this was a good precursor to many situations I find myself in now. It's important to take the time and not feel pressured to make a rushed decision. You sleep on it, let it sink in, and then a couple of days later you have the answer. Other times it might mean an informal walk and talk conversation, and then over time you find that you understand one another better and you've worked out a creative plan."

"That was some of the best preparation. The other piece that I really enjoyed, and that has stuck with me, is what it was like building trust and relationships with families in the role of athletic director. I would get comments from parents like, "Do you ever go home?" And I would say that I don't coach this particular team, and I may not know this particular sport well, but I'm here as the athletic director, to support your kids and the coach. If parents are going to give up the time, it's important that we are there as well."

A masters degree was Aaron's next step, along with thoughts about a path to more formal leadership. And the Richmond boy was sticking to his plan. "I was following my dream and applying to Richmond for a Vice-Principalship. Although the opportunity never presented itself in Richmond, the secretary at my school knew that I was interested and she suggested that I apply to Delta. She suggested that I update my application and offered to drop it off at lunch, as she lived just behind the Board Office in Delta. And I thought to myself, Delta? I didn't even know there was a posting there, or considered applying. Not long after, I received a phone call from an unknown number on a Friday afternoon when I was out with

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colleagues. Sure enough, it was a call from Delta inviting me to interview for a Vice-Principalship."

Aaron started with a halftime Vice-Principalship at Delta Secondary in 2007 – teaching in the morning, supervising at lunchtime, and taking care of Vice-Principal responsibilities in the afternoon – and was able to work with two different Principals during his time there. "It was neat to see the changes in the school led by two leaders who were quite different. They had very similar values but two very different styles and approaches. It was remarkable to see how certain kids and certain staff thrived under one Principal or the other; it really shows the influence of leadership. The other great thing for me at that school was the opportunity to grow and learn with a cohort of students from grade eight to graduation as their Vice-Principal. For some kids, you are the constant: you know them, they know you, and what you're about."

After more than six years at Delta Secondary, Aaron moved to Seaquam Secondary as Vice-Principal in December 2013, and then to a Principalship at Sands Secondary in September 2014 where he remained until moving to his current role with North Delta Secondary in January 2019.

"With all of those transitions, I learned to be flexible and adaptable. But it's still really about the people and the building of relationships. Leaving Delta Secondary in the middle of school year was difficult because I felt very connected to the students and staff. A memory for me – and something that is still in my house! – is a

On Student Leadership

“One of the initiatives I love the most is student leadership. In Delta, we have a Youth Advisory Council composed of students in Grade 8-12. Each school team ranges in numbers anywhere from just a half dozen to more than 30. School teams meet regularly to plan initiatives. Each month, school teams meet as a larger group to share their initiatives and offer their perspective to school and district leaders. Typically, the Vice-Principal at the school heads up the group. One year, when I began the year without a Vice-Principal, it happened to be our school’s turn to host the district meeting of 70 to 80 kids. Jumping into that situation and truly relying on the leadership of students, I realized the potential of leveraging a group like that: these are leadership kids, in different grades, and with a lot of different perspectives. These are kids who have earned quite a bit of trust with adults in the school and are well-respected amongst their peers. When you can get students like this on board with a direction and can generate some momentum, it’s powerful because they can engage staff in some disrupting conversations that can trigger change.

Connectedness, transitions, and mental health have been our focus. We have collaboration time built into our schedule for staff, and one thing that we have started to do is bring kids into the conversation. I’ve said to the kids, you have to know that when you join these meetings, you might be a small number compared to the staff, but your voices matter a lot to the teachers. You have the chance to really influence the direction that we take.

We started to survey the kids around connectedness, and around the transition to grade eight. I don’t think anyone can disagree that for kids, the transition from the grade seven to grade eight – in a new building – with new people, is a really pivotal time. If you can get that right, if you can meaningfully connect them with adults and positive peer influences in the school, you have a much greater chance of them being successful. Something we initiated at my previous school, and continued pre-COVID at North Delta, is to visit each grade 8 student’s home and hand-deliver letters to the families instead of emailing an introduction. We mapped it out on Google and went door to door, ringing doorbells and knocking on doors. Truthfully, it was an excuse to go and just say hello, meet the student, and in many cases, the student’s family. It proved to be a little more challenging here at North Delta, where in some instances we have the challenge of a language barrier. A large percentage of our parent population speak Punjabi as the first language in their home. Sometimes, we would arrive at the door and be greeted by a grandparent. They appreciated the visit but often weren’t quite sure who you were. So, we decided to invite some of our leadership kids to come with us, and they were able to assist with translation. It proved to be an excellent opportunity for our students to be ambassadors of the school and help families feel more comfortable. When we get beyond COVID, I look forward to doing the same thing in the future. It spoke volumes that not only were we there as adults to support their kids, but there are other kids that are willing to do that during their summer break.”

signed farewell banner that the kids rolled out. I didn't expect that, because I didn't have a 'classroom'. I didn't realize the impact that I could have on kids could be that strong. And of course I didn't realize that I would only be at Seaquam for seven months, but I think it was the same: you go in the best you can mid-year and just get to know people. My time at Seaquam was way too short, but I was able to begin building some positive relationships with people. In terms of digging into the deeper work at the school, I don't feel that I ever had the chance to sink my teeth in. If I had stayed, the following September would have been the time to start that work."

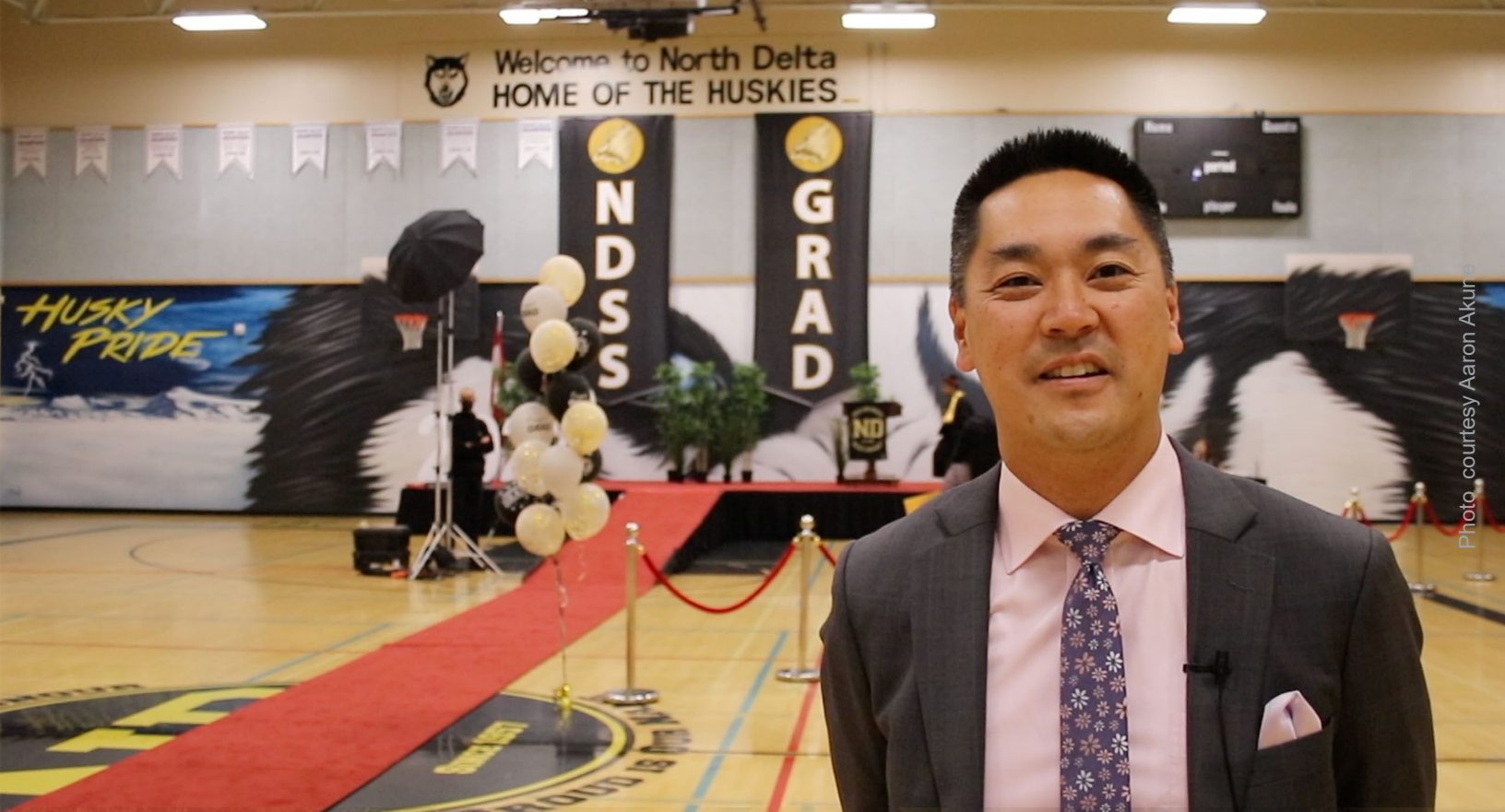
"When I started as a Vice-Principal and was teaching halftime, I really noticed how challenging it was to build relationships with kids. I was used to having classes of students in front of me daily, and knowing many students in the school from previous years. Coming in brand new to a bigger population, and not having as much direct facetime with kids was hard. In the halls, sometimes they just walked right by, sometimes they might have waved – and it was really just a courteous wave. Probably around Christmas that year, I really started to understand that my classroom had changed. During the half of the day when I wasn't actually teaching, my classroom had to be that seven or eight minute class change. I realized I had to be intentional about talking to as many kids as I could in those short bursts of time, remembering the running conversation I had with a student, who they are, and genuinely having fun with them in those brief moments. I would often run back to the office after a class change and quickly open up the picture book so I could identify the kids. During the first couple of

months of the year it wouldn't be uncommon for me to take the book home and try to study it – look at faces, look at names, and try to put faces and names together. Because I know that if I saw them today, and can call them by their first name tomorrow, it will have a tremendous impact. It signals to them that they matter."

"Working with staff, the first step is getting to know them. There are those you have hired and there is often an inherent sense of trust with them. It's particularly meaningful for them to know they have your confidence, especially when they're brand new in their career. And then there is the group of staff that's already there at the school when you arrive. Many are a little cautious at first as they try to get to know you. Some feel they know you already based on your reputation, what they have heard from others. And there is a very small group who may say, I've gone through 'X' number of Principals: when you leave, I'm still going to be here. It's your job to build relationships and win them over. Part of that is just making the time, it's the informal conversations and being able to laugh and talk about something that may have nothing to do with work. Or, it may be supporting them in other ways, coming to a student theater event, a sporting event or something extracurricular. It's important to honour the people who have been there, and to say, how has this been done in the past? I'm not saying that I'm committing to doing it that way in the future, but I want to understand *why* we have done it that way."

"When you start to make changes in a school, some of them will be procedural and organizational. These are often highly visible to others. The deeper changes, especially those involving a shift in philosophical approach may not be as noticeable at first. Over time, the decisions you make and the rationales you offer communicate your values and beliefs, and lay the groundwork for foundational change. What is most important is that collectively, we continue to learn and evolve. We're going to make some mistakes, and we need to err on the side of being flexible, adaptable and generous with kids and with ourselves."

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“As educators, we have learned so much during the pandemic. Even if it appears we are returning to ‘normal’ in the future, we have grown so much that I believe we will approach matters differently, and better.”

If there is something that Aaron is most proud of, it's knowing the stories of students, and championing the underdog. “It's having a strong relationship with a kid, but also knowing their family. You don't necessarily get all that feedback until they graduate, but we had one graduate this year, a great boy. I knew the two older sisters, and I received a long email from the mother to say that it's been a real treat to see all three of her kids go through two different schools with me. Even this morning, there was a kid who graduated this year from my previous school who swung by just to say hello and thanks. So, those are the experiences that are really memorable for me. When you are able to build a safe, caring culture in a school community, these kinds of powerful connections are not only possible but grow to become expected. It's very challenging to truly develop the feeling of ‘family’

across a larger school, but if collectively you're able to create ‘micro families’ – your Athletics teams, theatre group and clubs – kids will be able to find their safe space, a sense of belonging and ultimately thrive.”

“I remember working closely with a kid who was really creating challenges for herself during her grade 10 and 11 years. Her mom was part of our PAC and she would say, I don't know how you do it, I don't know why you'd want to work with my kid all day. But then one day she asked me to have a chat with her daughter because we both noticed, she hadn't been at school nearly as often as she should have been. I had known that student for three and a half years, and one day I called her in and had a heart-to-heart chat with her. I said, “Your mom drives you to school every day – which I don't agree with, because you're an athlete and could be walking here on your own. When your mom drops you off, she signs you over to us, and so as long as you're at school, I'm like your dad at school. And that's how this is going to work. If I'm pleased with you about something or if I'm disappointed in you about something, I'm going to

On Connections

"I appreciate the connections that I've made through the BCPVPA. I have been part of our local Chapter as Professional Development Chair, Vice-President and President, and that's given me a closer connection to folks within our local Chapter and at the Association. Acting as a facilitator at Short Course I for a few years is what truly brought me into the Association. Despite the long and tiring Short Course days, and the challenge of transitioning into Short Course right after school ended, I found the conversations to be some of the most engaging and best professional learning for me. Four of us from the table group of my first year as a facilitator have formed a small network. We exchange messages periodically and try to get together once a year.

Last year Short Course was virtual, which was different. While I didn't feel quite the same satisfaction on my part, given the circumstances I think the program was still really effective. And now, being part of more frequent President's meetings on Zoom, that's been a great connection.

At first, the BCPVPA President was always just a name and a picture, but then you get to know who these people are. I remember being at an event in Vancouver and I had never met (former President) David DeRosa in person. We ended up in the same workshop session, and David greeted me by name – I realized then who he was as I recognized his voice from talking to him on the phone. And after that, even if it was just for a few minutes at an event, we would chat. It's been the same with (current President) Darren Danyluk, I met him two years ago at Short Course I. It really makes you feel connected and part of the Association."

tell you about it." And it was funny, because a couple of days later I was at the front door in the morning as I usually am, greeting kids as they came into the school. As usual, the girl arrived five minutes late, and she was probably expecting me to confront her about that. But before I could say anything, she says, "Hi, Dad. Sorry I'm late." And this is where it began. For her final year or so, that was how she and some of her friends greeted me. Although it was all playful in nature, the fact that they referred to me as 'school dad' was indicative of the mutual trust that had been established. It was all about the human connection."

"The best moment in this profession is knowing that as a school, you were part of a game-changing and life-changing experience over the course of five or six years for a student. Like helping them find a safe living arrangement when they had no place to go home to. Or providing them with food when we know they are coming to school without having had a square meal. Or supporting them through challenging or traumatic situations outside of school, or sometimes just being willing to listen. I'm proud of these kinds of things, and they bring me joy knowing we may have altered a young person's life significantly."

"The most challenging thing for a Principal can be those heart-breaking situations, the ones that keep you up at night. You find things out suddenly and often unexpectedly: there you have been as a school supporting a kid for four years and you didn't know about something that was going on for them outside of school. You worry about the damage that may have taken place, and how the child has internalized it. You wonder what you could have done if you had known. It all comes back to getting to know people and making people feel safe enough to share."

"Another gratifying moment is seeing a teacher experience success. Teachers come to us for advice about how to approach a student who has not been succeeding, or for permission to try something unique with their students. To engage in dialogue with them, offer suggestions, see them try some of these strategies, and experience success is a very

positive moment. In those moments, you realize that something you said or offered may just have made a remarkable difference for the teacher and student. Even more importantly, it becomes part of the teacher's repertoire and they have it available to themselves as a tool when working with other students in the future."

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"A piece that I find challenging is some of the difficult conversations you need to have with adults, where you might philosophically disagree, or you might philosophically agree but have a different approach to implementation. Sometimes you land in a tough place where no matter what you decide, someone is sure to be unhappy. Over time, you become more comfortable holding true to your values and making these challenging decisions. You listen to and consider the many perspectives and do your best to communicate your rationale. You have to have the trust, confidence, and belief in yourself that you are making the best decision given the information you have. If new information comes forward, you have to consider adjusting. If you make a mistake or something doesn't turn out as you had envisioned, you own it. You may take some heat for things, but you never make decisions in order to show anyone up or to feed your own ego."

What would Aaron say to someone considering the move? "I have enjoyed the Principalship far more than being a Vice-Principal, or being a teacher. I find much greater satisfaction being able to influence a larger number of people. As a Vice-Principal there

was a different sense of pressure about decision-making: at the end of the day, it's not your final call. And now as a Principal, the good – and the bad! – is that *you* get to make the call. I'm really fortunate with the team I work with. We listen to each other's perspectives, offer constructive feedback, and are comfortable enough with each other to be able to disagree. Even when we may not have started 100% in agreement privately, when we emerge publicly, we always support one another. Truthfully, there are times when you know that you might be the only one that believes in your decision 100%, but again you must have confidence in yourself and your decision-making to occasionally go against the grain. The other great thing about this role is that there is still the opportunity to be very hands on and connected with kids, and to have a real direct influence. You have an ability to impact student learning by influencing teacher practice. It's less about formal meetings and more often when a situation arises with a kid. Being able to talk through a situation with a staff member, asking what they've tried, making suggestions, and coming up with a plan, or connecting them with someone in the district or their department who can shed more light. As a Principal, compared to being a Vice-Principal, you're in greater contact with district leaders like the assistant superintendent, directors and district principals. Folks at the district level do some heavy, heavy lifting behind the scenes that helps to make your work at the school level a little bit easier."

"As Principals, we're in the middle of so many conversations: district leaders, staff, parents, alumni, and community associations or organizations: you get the full picture. You might only be one of many different stakeholders but you're usually the one who has the best idea of how things will go within your school. You can see how it all fits together and you are critical to the roll out and implementation of so many initiatives and directions."



@aakune



Photo courtesy Aaron Akune

A Day in the Life

"My alarm is usually set for quarter to six. I'm clearing the cobwebs, getting ready, and that's when I try to do a quick check on my phone over breakfast: junk, junk, junk, whoa – what's this? I've talked to many colleagues who wonder why I do that, and why I don't wait to get to work instead of stewing over something for an hour before arriving? But having that space gives me a chance to think. When I get to the school, I'd rather be able to say to someone that I saw their email and give them an answer, or let them know that I haven't got an answer for them right away.

I enjoy listening to sports radio on the way in – that's my chance to do a little bit of catch up – and then I'm generally at school by 7:30 am. The first half hour is a chance to quickly hit 'send' on some emails, lay out the day, have some conversations with office staff and tackle Teachers Teaching on Call (TTOC) and Education Assistant (EA) shortages. It's quieter at that time, and there are fewer distractions. Once we hit 8:00 am, it gets pretty busy because questions start coming in as more staff arrive. The kids start to come in at 8:15am, and there's more and more questions. I usually try to go to the front door 15 minutes before the first bell, and hold the door open to say good morning. It's an important 15 minutes for connecting with kids, and one of the most enjoyable parts of the day. This past year with our COVID-19 procedures, we've had three entrances with myself monitoring one door and two Vice-Principals monitoring the other doors. I've always felt greeting students at the door is important and we agree that when we are no longer following COVID protocols, we will still maintain three entry locations so that we can see every kid enter the building at the start of the day. We have eyes on every kid that comes through, and sometimes that means that a kid is starting their day better because someone remembered who they are; someone said good morning. You may be the first adult that they saw today because their parents had already gone to work. Greeting kids at the door gives you a chance to observe: if something isn't going right, you can read it and you know to talk to that kid either in that moment or later in the day.

A Day in the Life of a Secondary School Principal

5:45 am	Wake up
6:30 am	Check email over breakfast
7:00 am	Leave for school
7:30 am	At School. Check absences, send emails, connect with office staff about messages that came in overnight, connect with staff as they arrive
8:00 am	Talk with admin team about 'must-do's' for the day, go over our appointments
8:15 am	Greet students at door
8:40 am	Walk hallways to ensure students are in classrooms and classes are underway Pop into classes
9:00 am	District-wide Virtual Principal & Vice-Principals Meeting Snack during meeting
9:50 am	Hallway supervision during class change
9:50 am	Announcements
10:00 am	Walk hallways to ensure students are in classrooms and classes are underway. Pop into classes. Pop into Learning Commons, check in with students on study block and Teacher Librarian
10:30 am	Phone call to District Leaders
11:00 am	Set up seating in cafeteria for lunchtime
11:20 am	Lunchtime supervision

While the kids are in class, my work can range from small meetings with staff, speaking with the office team, meeting with parents, working with teachers while they are on their prep, calling someone from the board office or joining a Zoom meeting with Principal/Vice-Principal colleagues from another school I enjoy getting out there for class changes, and being visible in the hallways with students and staff. I try to position myself in the highest traffic areas. I can't get out there for every single change but it's a priority when I'm in the building.

Some people view supervision as putting out fires. I see lunchtime as a chance to be proactive, putting out fires before they happen. It's a chance to engage in conversations and friendly banter with students. It also offers an opportunity to observe who is friends with who, and who is eating alone that day. Occasionally, there are incidents that happen during lunch that can occupy us for the rest of the afternoon, but sometimes it's quick: I'll tell someone to see me at the end of lunch. We have 'the chat' and then they are on their way, hopefully with the problem averted. People might call them disciplinary conversations – they might start on the surface for disciplinary reasons, or because a student needs some redirection – but it's also a time when you can learn about things that are going on for those kids. You might unearth something much more significant just by making the time to have the dialogue with the student. It could lead to more work, but it's better to know and be able to help, than to not know at all.

As a teacher, I probably didn't realize how frequent and in depth those conversations could be. Sometimes it could result in needing to prepare a Ministry report, contacting a social worker, talking to the police, referring the student to their counsellor, or calling a parent. There is a range of interventions that might be necessary in order to support a kid. In North Delta, there are five high schools in a fairly small geographical area. We often find that a situation at one school has a connection to one or more of the neighboring schools, so the five Principals talk a lot. Sometimes the Principal or Vice-Principal from one of the other schools has the piece of information that helps everything make sense.

We hold staff meetings on the first Monday of each month, meet with department heads once a month after school, and meet with the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) one evening each month. And there are, of course, always the unexpected

things that will take your day in a completely different direction! We usually participate in Principal and Vice-Principal meetings in the district every two weeks. I have missed meeting face-to-face with my Principal and Vice-Principal colleagues during COVID-19 because you can have a different depth of conversation and it gives you a chance to catch up with others who you don't speak with as regularly. It's nice not driving 25 minutes to and from meetings, and it allows us to remain in our schools, but Zoom meetings just aren't the same.

At the end of the school day, it's time to head outside for parking lot duty. A large number of our students are picked up from school and as a result our parking lots and neighbouring streets are very busy. I usually walk out to the sidewalk and monitor traffic. I tell parents I'm making sure students remain safe and I tell staff I'm directing parent drivers. Since I'm out there pretty much rain or shine, I try to use it to my advantage. I wave at and greet parents, say goodbye to students who are walking home, and chat with the occasional staff member who joins me outside. It's just another way to be visible and for parents to recognize me.

If there isn't a scheduled meeting after school, I'll poke my head into the gym or the theatre to see what's going on. In some instances, if you walk into a class, a teacher will wonder why you're there. Others are completely comfortable with you coming in. But if it's after hours and its kids in a club, staff are proud and they want the kids to show you what they're doing. You can have a different kind of conversation that can go a long way towards relationship and trust building.

By 4:00pm, the building quietens down, so you have a chance to get some paperwork and emails done. I usually wrap up around 5:30 or 6:00 pm unless there's a meeting, game or event in the evening. I remember when I was a Vice-Principal one of the parents commenting, are you here for everything? He saw me at his son's basketball game at 5:00 pm, and then at his other son's band concert at 7:00 pm. Secondary schools can be very busy places well into the evening. Often, they are like the hub of a community. You can't be present for everything, and you have to be ready for an early start the next morning but often your absence is noticeable. Your presence communicates to families and kids that the activity is important, and they are important. It's an opportunity to meet parents and say hello."

A Day in the Life of a Secondary School Principal

12:00 pm	Stand in Main Foyer, welcome students who are returning from lunch outside. Supervise students moving to classes
12:10 pm	Walk of hallways to ensure students are in classrooms and classes are underway
12:30 pm	Eat lunch while checking emails
12:45 pm	Interview of candidate for TTOC List
1:20 pm	Return phone call to parents
1:30 pm	Hallway supervision during class change
1:40 pm	Return phone call to Principal or Vice-Principal colleague at neighbouring school. Respond to emails. Prepare for afternoon or evening meeting (Staff Meeting, Department Heads Meeting, PAC Meeting, Student Leadership Meeting)
2:50 pm	Parking Lot Supervision
3:10 pm	Afternoon meeting
4:30 pm	Finish up unsent emails, return phone calls, district paperwork
5:45 pm	If no evening event or evening meeting, pickup for the day and head home for dinner
7:00 pm	Some evenings, attend school/ district event (theatre production, athletics event, PAC Meeting, board meeting, etc)
8:30 pm	Finish up documents, emails, prepare 'to-do' list for next day Check absences to get a sense of who will be away the following day