

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 tenth installment of the series, we meet Dr. Shannon Behan, Principal of Westview Elementary School in Powell River, School District No. 47.

Dr. Shannon Behan hasn't always taken the predictable path. At 15 years old, Shannon had the opportunity as a Rotary exchange student to spend a year in Northern Lapland living on the edge of the Arctic Circle in Rovaniemi, Finland. It was there that she learned to speak Finnish, attended high school, and made lifelong friendships. Shannon recalls that, "I was 15 when I left and went to Finland. There were no cell phones in those days and I wrote a letter to my parents every two weeks. That was where I met one of my best friends who lives in Iceland, and where my world was broken wide open!"

Shannon has gone on to work in public, private, and international education in British Columbia for the past twenty-five years. She holds a teaching certificate from the University of Victoria, a Masters degree from the University of Calgary, and – most recently – a Doctorate in Education Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Kansas.

Shannon's inspiration to pursue a career in education was heightened by her experience teaching English in Taiwan, where she, "realized how brilliant the world in the classroom was," but her roots also influenced her direction. She was born into a large Irish Catholic family where there was, "a fundamental and core understanding that education and learning is a lifelong venture, that hard work matters, and that building community is a precious gift."

# A Day in the Life

of an  
Elementary  
School  
Principal



Photo courtesy Dr. Shannon

Reflecting on her time teaching in Taoyuan, Taiwan, Shannon says, “I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to work there, as I was able to teach preschool, kindergarten, and middle school, as well as adults who all wanted to improve their language skills. The most profound influence that led me to choose to go into education were the moments when I could see the joy in learning from students. Being in the classroom,

developing relationships with the kids, connecting with teacher colleagues and their families was just brilliant. I recall those days being filled with joy and fun. It isn’t easy work, but it is hugely rewarding!”

Shannon taught in the classroom for 15 years before becoming first a Counsellor, then a Vice-Principal and Principal, all in School District No.47 (SD47).

After a few years, adventure called once again. “Our district was in a state of flux, where many students were heading into our online and distance learning programs. At the high school, we were having difficulty offering all the courses that our senior students needed. As a result, one of the goals of the district was to expand our international program. We had created partnerships with different organizations abroad; one of them was the Sino Bright China, and I was asked if I would take on the role of Principal of our certified BC offshore school in Beijing. I was at a point in my career where I thought that this could be really interesting and exciting – I wasn’t really sure I could do it, but I wanted to try. My son was in grade 11 and I asked him if he wanted to move to Beijing, and he said, ‘okay, I’ll go’. This move was a bit of a leap but it resulted in being a phenomenal opportunity. Our superintendent, Dr. Jay Yule, in addition to being creative and innovative, has always been a tremendous supporter. I am appreciative of the work he has done to develop opportunities for both students and staff, both locally and worldwide. Over the years, our international department team has worked tirelessly together and increased the number of international students five-fold.

“We have more than 150 students from 18 different countries coming to learn in SD47. In addition, as a team, we opened a satellite campus in Vancouver’s historic Gastown neighbourhood, and opened satellite schools in Mainland China.”

While working in various cities in China, Shannon was a driving force behind expanding program offerings for international students in SD47, and the establishment of the Gastown campus was one of these projects. “Opening the satellite campus in Gastown with our partners was a response to what was happening with some international students that were coming to Powell River; some of them were from very large cities, such as Beijing, Seoul, and Hong Kong, and when they arrived in Powell River, they found it to be too quiet and peaceful, and would look to move to the Lower Mainland as soon as possible. The campus in Gastown is a BC school with BC teachers; most

*“Our demographic in this community is shifting, particularly after COVID. The new world order has many people leaving the larger centres and moving to smaller communities where they can enjoy a different quality of life while working remotely.”*

of the students are from mainland China, and they attend and finish their BC program, then head off to post-secondary.” Now that the infrastructure for the international department has been created, Shannon oversees and supports the international department, and is currently leading Westview Elementary School.

SD47 will also become a Provincial Online Learning (POL) School in 2023, and Shannon sees the importance of opening up the district offerings further into the province. “The reach is greater, and – again – the driving force behind the online learning has been the superintendent Dr. Jay Yule, as well as Don Fairbairn, former Director of Instruction. The development of these offerings speaks to the creativity and ingenuity of leadership that we have in this district. The POL broadens our offerings in that we can continue to be flexible in our educational offerings while maintaining our standards of excellence. POL schools allow for more equitable, and consistent access to the BC curriculum for students from all over the province. At present, we have schools on Vancouver Island and the Sunshine Coast as well as on Bowen Island, and campuses in the Lower Mainland. SD47 is proud to be chosen as one of the POL, and the team – Ms. Stephanie Hall, Mr. Don Fairbairn, and Mr. Allan Saugstad – are excited to expand the online learning program offerings.”

While welcoming learners to the online opportunities presented by POL, the district – and Shannon’s

# Finding Our 'Why'

It was a phenomenal experience to lead an international school, and be part of a system that is so highly regarded on the global stage. It was a peak learning experience, but not without its challenges.

I remember in my second year of this work, I was at a school in Kaifeng (a city about 3 hours by plane from Beijing), and there was some friction with the two co-owners of the school. International education in China is a high-stakes business, and some changes I was working on would have had an impact on tuition and student numbers.

I remember the day clearly: I was chatting with staff when I was asked by the office assistant to meet in the boardroom. I had never actually been to the boardroom, and my immediate instinct was that something was up. Before I knew it, I was sitting on one side of a large table and was being interrogated by a lawyer and two police officers. My time in China had been primarily in Beijing, so the Mandarin that I knew was a different dialect. The lawyer offered some translation, but I had very little input in the conversation. I often refer to this as 'the time I almost became The Third Michael'. I recall taking out my phone underneath the table and, with knees shaking, texting my superintendent to let him know I was being interrogated. I didn't know what else to do; I was hours away from a consulate, and in a city with very

few foreigners. Almost immediately, and with the wit I have always admired, he texted, "Why, what did you do?"

When the two-hour interrogation ended, the officers drove me to the police station where I was told I would need to surrender my passport. In my barely-passing Mandarin, I told them that my passport was in my apartment. They drove me there, and I entered, unescorted. In my room, I threw everything I could into my suitcase, tucked my passport firmly into my bra, ran down the back staircase, hailed a cab, and took the 90-minute ride to the airport.

Within hours – sick with terror and fear, knees still shaking – I landed in Seoul, Korea. I made my way back to BC, and I got on with my job.

Sometime after, I was asked to deliver an 'Ignite' speech, and I chose this experience as the focus. The message of that speech was that, collectively, as we're coming through the pandemic, now is the time to reflect and to make sure we're driven by our big 'why'. Because, here is what is important. It is in the stillness and the quiet moments that follow big life-altering events where we find or make meaning of experiences. It is in the trail time, the mountains climbed, the dark and uncomfortable moments, the seemingly endless duration of this dis-ease where the light comes in.

school in particular – has seen a rise in enrollment. Westview Elementary is located in the central area of the city of Powell River, and has the highest student population of any of the elementary schools in the community. "Our demographic in this community is shifting, particularly after COVID. The new world order has many people leaving the larger centres and moving to smaller communities where they can enjoy a different quality of life while working remotely. Our new families are looking for what we have

here: a small, inviting, welcoming, inclusive, and environmentally-focused community."

Shannon is a passionate advocate for improving literacy skills, embedding and making visible Indigenous learning, and building an inclusive culture in her schools. "At Westview Elementary, we have two reading intervention teachers as part of our Student Services Department. Guided by our current Director of Instruction, Mrs. Kristen Brach,

our reading intervention team has done significant research in approaches to literacy development; one of our reading intervention teachers focuses mostly on primary, and the other reading intervention teacher focuses primarily on upper intermediate. Students complete three standardized assessments throughout the year and, based on the data from the tests, we focus our work on learners who aren't yet reading at grade level.

"We use our results to improve our practice as we believe literacy is a key indicator for student success. In addition to the work that is specific to literacy, we have embedded the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL) into our daily work throughout the school. We believe in making the learning visible and having all languages represented around the school: in the welcome messages on our doors, in our morning greetings, in the project-based work the teachers undertake, and in the resources we purchase for our classrooms. We are pleased with the growth our students display, and we know we still have a lot of good work to do. We have a fantastic team of dynamic and talented staff at our school, and it is a privilege to work with them each and every day."

Shannon is energized by many things and believes that building a strong cohesive and collaborative culture is a core practice. "Being part of the team that works endlessly to improve literacy rates, to build an inclusive and welcoming school, and to celebrate the diversity of learners we have in our school and community has been fantastic."

Shannon has been energized as well through the pursuit of her Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy, led by Dr. Yong Zhao and Dr. Lisa Wolf-Wendel. "It has been so fantastic; originally, we were all meeting together in Vancouver as a cohort group, and I got to meet colleagues from all over the province. Then, when COVID hit, we went completely online. But we've all stayed connected, and our collegial connections have been so rich and rewarding. For example, the focus of my dissertation was on female superintendents who administer public schools in

*"We believe in making the learning visible and having all languages represented around the school: in the welcome messages on our doors, in our morning greetings, in the project-based work the teachers undertake, and in the resources we purchase for our classrooms."*

Western Canada. One of my good friends, Dr. Paula Gosal in Chilliwack, focused her research on the experiences of female Principals in this province. Our friendship as well as our research aligned, and we found similar patterns in the backgrounds, experiences, and pathways for women in leadership in public education in British Columbia.

"Originally, my intention was to focus my research on BC's world-class education system and the significant work that we do to maintain our excellence on a global stage. But I kept coming back to women in leadership, again and again. Yong could see my interest in exploring BC education on a global stage, but suggested I needed to focus on the topic of women in leadership and, as a result, I changed my focus. The process was rich with many learning opportunities, and the literature review was a very engaging part of the research phase. But as I delved into the writing phase, the struggle increased. I started to doubt that I could complete my Doctorate; I was really struggling, and unsure that I could reach this goal. And, as I was on a run one day, it came to me: it's difficult because I didn't realize that 'we're still here'. I think you'll see what I mean from the summary of my dissertation in this article, including details of the current representation of female superintendents, and findings and recommendations from the research.

"Across North America, research on gender and the superintendency continues to recognize the persistence of disproportionately low representation of women in the position of superintendent. In stark contrast to the number of male superintendents, teaching remains a feminized profession in Canada. According to Census Canada (2016), 2.9% of women who are employed in Canada are employed as elementary school teachers. Although this number could fail to awe, it represents a substantial percentage of the total number of people who work in public education. Elementary school teaching is the fifth most common female profession in the country (Statistics Canada, 2017). This trend is not new — the 2006 Canadian census reported that women made up 73.6% of all fulltime teachers in public elementary and secondary school systems (Statistics Canada, 2015). Despite this predominance of females in the teaching profession, those who serve in top leadership positions are far more likely to be male. In 2013, 21 of the 60 superintendents in British Columbia were female and this was considered an improvement over the thirteen female superintendents five years prior (Steffenhagen, 2013). The number of females serving in the role of superintendent of schools in Western Canada is disproportionately low as compared to the 73.6% female educators who serve as teachers.

The final chapter of the dissertation included recommendations for greater equity in the role of superintendent, and these recommendations include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Finding women currently working as teachers and school-based administrators, counsellors, and district roles that are not on the commonly travelled route to the superintendency who are excellent at relationships and team building, who are willing to take on additional school responsibilities, and show strength in leadership of schools. These individuals should be cultivated and supported through a leadership development program.

2. The role of the Board of Trustees is crucial now more than ever to recognize how their decisions affect policies procedures, and above all, people. The board must be aware of how its decisions impact females and other marginalized populations most severely and systematically disadvantaged by years of discrimination, racism, and prejudice. Board members can be difference-makers in addressing, pushing for, and assuring equity. We are in a time where Trustees are keenly aware that the manner in which they model and guide the equity conversations enriches the learning landscape.

One of the major gaps that was found in this research was that of intentionality on behalf of the individual to pursue the role of superintendent. The question remains as to why virtually none of the females studied intentionally sought the role, and felt they were simply 'in the right place at the right time' to take on the role. Perhaps work needs to be done on a provincial level identifying and outlining the female superintendent pipeline. The population of British Columbia is a rich and diverse population, and this can be reflected in all areas of the sector."

# Ground Pounders

"The Principal who was at this school before I arrived, Mr. Jamie Burt, started Ground Pounders. I love to run – that's one of the things I do for fun. When COVID hit, we collectively committed to some actions; we didn't know what this experience ahead would be like, but we were going to stay connected to one another. We were going to limit our news sources and do everything we could to stay healthy, including eating well, and drinking lots of water. And we were all going to move and be physically fit.

So, we kept Ground Pounders going, two days a week. During most of the pandemic, that was

something we were permitted to do as we followed all of the COVID protocols. It was outside, we could maintain distance, there are trail systems around the school, and it allowed us to stay connected to the students and to the parents who would come out. We've maintained that routine, and it has grown. We have about 65 regular attendees. When we finished up for the year in June, we'd run hundreds of kilometres – our group had run the equivalent from here to Winnipeg! It's a really fabulous way to get outside, we start the music, I warm everybody up, and then we all run together and there are different loops. It's a really nice way to start the day."



Photo courtesy Dr. Shannon Behan

"I interviewed a number of female superintendents, and I was in awe and inspired by the female superintendents in this province. They were tremendously kind, and gave generously of their time. They were always willing to speak with me when I needed to follow up with them. It really speaks volumes to who they are, and the very skilled professionals we have in our senior leaders. The challenges are big for any superintendent, because it's such a complex role, and the female superintendents who participated in my research are representative of the talent that we have in this province."

Shannon feels that professional development plays a key role in supporting leaders on their journey, and she recently participated in BCPVPA's Foundations for New School Leaders as a facilitator. "I'm always keen to be part of the organization that I belong to, and the BCPVPA has been a key part of my career development through courses over the years. I've also been the president of our Chapter, and I've been able to attend provincial meetings. All of the superintendents I spoke with had a similar response to my question about how professional development helped them on their pathway. All of them from BC said that their work in connection with BCPVPA and networking with colleagues strengthened them, and the superintendents from other provinces concurred that they were supported by working with the professional association in their province. I think it's really important to be engaged in our organization, because being an administrator can be isolating."

*"Being part of the team that works endlessly to improve literacy rates, to build an inclusive and welcoming school, and to celebrate the diversity of learners we have in our school and community has been fantastic."*

When Shannon considers her career as a school leader, she feels that it is, "more wonderful and rewarding than I ever could have imagined!" Shannon has shared her thoughts and many stories of her leadership journey on her blog, [shannonbehan.squarespace.com](http://shannonbehan.squarespace.com). There, she includes the following quote:

"Be around the light bringers, the magic makers, the world shifters, the game shakers. They challenge you, break you open, uplift and expand you. They don't let you play small with your life. These heartbeats are your people. These people are your tribe."

Danielle Doby  
Storyteller, Artist, Author

"When I saw that quote, I felt that it captured a bit about who I am, it spoke to my own lived experiences. There's another quotation that I love: 'if you are the smartest person in the room, you're in the wrong room'. I've been privileged to push myself into opportunities that are different, and often I'm not sure if I can do it. I may have a bit of hesitation, but it's in that lack of comfort – the state of being unsure – where you do a lot of growth and learning. I like being around people who challenge your thinking and push your thinking up."

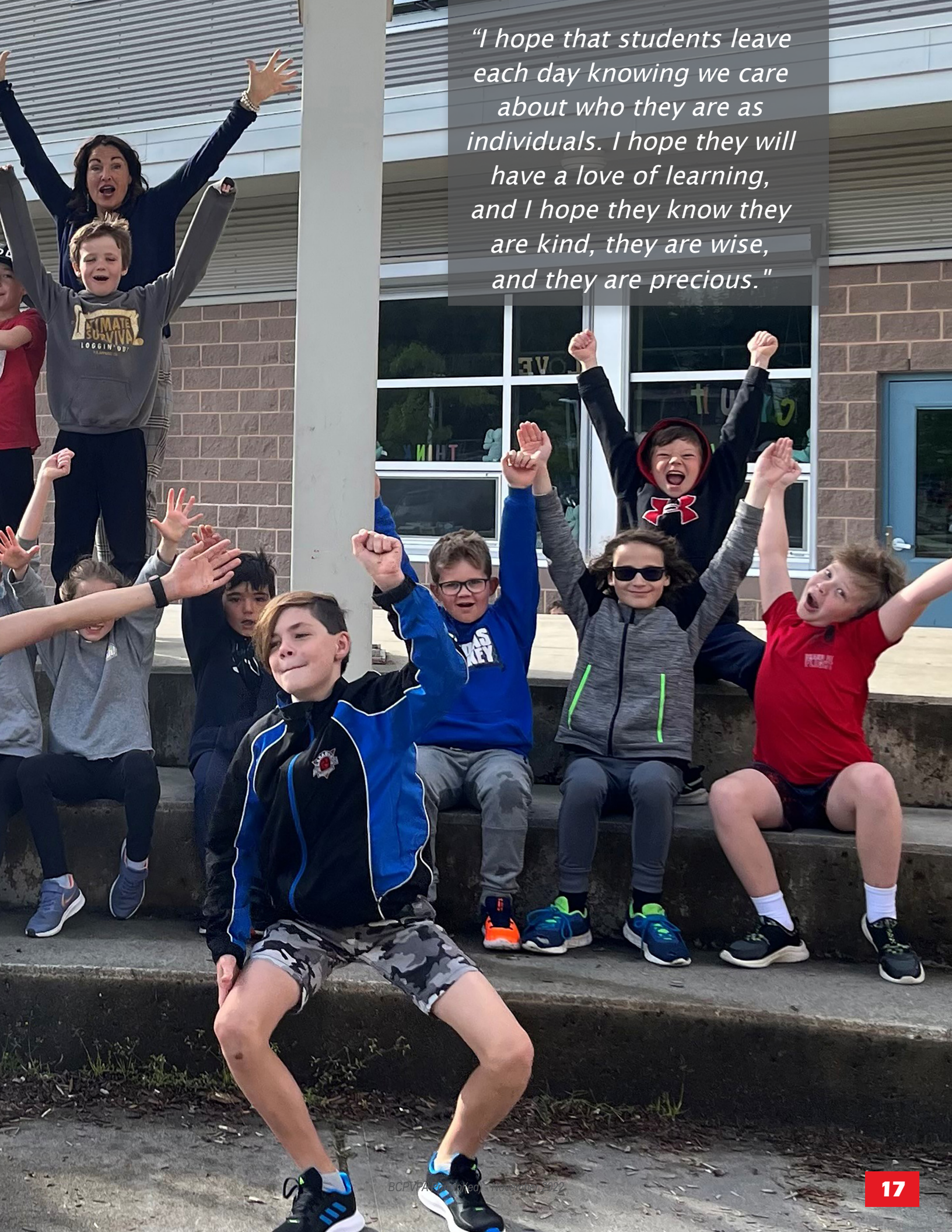
Shannon's wish for her students at the end of each day mirrors that gift of growth and learning. "I hope that students leave each day knowing we care about who they are as individuals. I hope they will have a love of learning, and I hope they know they are kind, they are wise, and they are precious. Each morning, as I get ready, I think to myself, 'whose life might I impact in a wonderful way today?' Isn't that a privilege?"



@svbehan



Photo courtesy Dr. Shannon Behan



*"I hope that students leave each day knowing we care about who they are as individuals. I hope they will have a love of learning, and I hope they know they are kind, they are wise, and they are precious."*

## A Day in the Life of an Elementary Principal

|          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5:00 am  | Briefly check morning emails                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 5:30 am  | Run or morning fitness class, depending on the schedule                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 7:00 am  | Arrive at school                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 7:15 am  | Answer emails, check for TTOC coverage and ensure busing is set up for any excursions; get prepared for the day                                                                                                                                        |
| 8:15 am  | Ground Pounders Run Club - 2 km run with students                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 8:30 am  | Welcome families for the day, greet students; be outside, accessible, and visible. Quick chat with Vice-Principal in preparation for the day/week                                                                                                      |
| 9:00 am  | Start the day: announcements ('sprinkle joy wherever you go' is our mantra!); visit each classroom, welcome TTOC and Student Support EAs that have been called in; problem-solve arising issues with student services department lead Michelle Shipley |
| 10:30 am | Recess supervision outside (play either hockey, soccer, baseball or dance with the kiddos!)                                                                                                                                                            |
| 10:45 am | Problem-solve playground issues with students, and support students who may be dysregulated, while trying to get some work done                                                                                                                        |

"I arrive each day at 7:00 am, unlock the doors, and tour the outside of the school to ensure that nighttime revellers – which can include both bears and bevvly drinkers – haven't left any evidence of their antics! I then get to work on communications and organizing the day. I typically split my day into four quadrants and work to meet an objective in each of the quadrants; professional development, relationships, improving student learning, and wellness. The activities within these quadrants can happen at different times throughout the day, but I work to make sure that when I reflect on the day, I have hit targets in each of those four key areas. My wellness goal usually starts just after 5:00 am as I love to run down the dark empty streets guided only by the streetlights. That is the time when I solve most of the problems of the world!

The colleagues and team that I work with are so important to me, and to our success as a school.

## A Day in the Life of an Elementary Principal

The Vice-Principal, Jennifer Kennedy, and I have a very close, genuine, excellent working relationship. We have been able to bounce ideas off each other and get creative, and we're always focused on what is best for the students and the school. Jen is super-talented as a teacher and administrator. I'm a little bit heartbroken because she's leaving us, to take on the role of Principal at Kelly Creek Elementary. But I'm also pleased that we have a new Vice-Principal, Mr. Raun Rainbow; he worked most recently for the Ministry in Victoria. Raun is originally from Sayward, BC, and he's taken a circuitous route to get to Powell River via Alberta. He will be part of what we're doing to grow the school and its offerings, and he's going to be a really dynamic and wonderful asset. We have a wonderful and dynamic group of professionals we get to work with, and the people I work with are what makes this role rewarding, rich and fulfilling. It is a privilege to work in public education in this district and in this Province."

|          |                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 12:00 pm | Lunch supervision outside                                                                                                                       |
| 12:40 pm | Depending on the day, it might be in-class support, student support, meeting with families and whatever is needed                               |
| 3:00 pm  | After-school meetings can include: School-Based Team (SBT), Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Admin team, family meetings, staff meetings    |
| 4:30 pm  | Check emails, tidy up issues, answer phone calls. Communicate home to parents via phone or email about any issues that occurred during the day  |
| 5:00 pm  | Head out for some fresh air... think and reflect on the day                                                                                     |
| 7:00 pm  | Answer emails, phone calls, work to navigate percolating issues, or attend evening PAC meeting                                                  |
| 9:30 pm  | Feel the exhaustion, and fall asleep trying to read my novel                                                                                    |
| 2:00 am  | Wake up enlightened with creative ideas on how to be part of improving our school community (while trying to force myself to go back to sleep!) |

*And onwards we grow...*