



FOUNDATIONS

for New School Leaders





for attendees and facilitators alike, the BCPVPA's Foundations for New School Leaders is a journey. It is a rare opportunity to spend a week in a reflective space, to meet new colleagues and reunite with valued friends. To learn, relearn, and explore. Here are impressions from three of those who experienced the 2024 Foundations event.

DEAN THORSELL, Principal, SD 47 (qathet) - Attendee

I began my journey as Vice-Principal at Westview Elementary in the qathet School District (SD47) in September 2023. Last year, I was unable to attend Foundations for New School Leaders due to my commitment to running summer camps, so I eagerly awaited the opportunity to learn and grow in my role. The 2024 Foundations coincided perfectly with my move to a new role as Principal at Henderson Elementary, promising essential tools for navigating the steep learning curve ahead.

Walking into Foundations, I felt nervous about meeting my table group, as we would be spending most of the week together. I am not the best at networking or putting myself out there, and consider myself more of an introvert. However, our circle sessions quickly dispelled those fears. Sharing our personal stories created a safe, non-judgmental space that fostered deep connections among us. Carolyn Roberts' guidance on relational accountability resonated deeply, as she described how we are "holding ourselves accountable for building strong relationships and allowing the relationships to guide the work we do as leaders".

One moment that really touched me was when members of my table group recalled parts of my story throughout the week, integrating personal narratives into our learning. This affirmed my belief in the power of shared experiences to strengthen bonds, a belief I further explored with Dr. Andrea McComb in a post-Foundations Cognitive Coaching session. Together, we delved into my leadership values, particularly

the importance of connection through shared experiences.

Reflecting on my previous year at a larger school, I realized I had maintained surface-level relationships with most of the community. As I embark on my first year as Principal at a smaller school, I am committed to deepening relational accountability. My goal is to ensure every student's voice is heard, and that our relationships guide our collective efforts to enhance student outcomes.

Foundations also reminded me of Michael Fullan's insights in *Drivers: Transforming Learning for Students, Schools and Systems*, and *Principal 2.0*. Fullan underscores the pivotal role of Principals in fostering community engagement and inclusivity, aligning with board visions while prioritizing the humanity paradigm. Fullan describes this paradigm as "a deep care and commitment to all living things including equity and equality in the service of helping all humans cope and thrive in the complex societies of the 21st century".

As I continue this journey, I am inspired by the potential of our school community. Together, through genuine connections and shared visions, we can achieve far more than any individual effort could accomplish alone. Foundations for New School Leaders was a catalyst in developing my leadership identity and will continue to guide the work that I do as a school leader for many years to come.



Dean and colleagues at the Foundations Celebration Dinner

PAUL GODFREY, Principal, SD 39 (Vancouver) - Facilitator

Breathing Life into Leadership

As the school year crept to an exhausting conclusion, I gathered my remaining energy, summed up for one last push, and embarked on a new experience as a facilitator at the Foundations for New School Leaders course (formerly known to many experienced leaders as the Short Course).

Back in 2017, I experienced the course as a participant and a relatively new leader, having just completed my first year as a high school Vice-Principal with the Vancouver School Board. I still remember the impact it had on me back then, how it helped to shape my vision of educational leadership in BC, and how I would never be alone on that journey.

Fast forward seven years, and I decided to step up and give back to the association that had given

so much to me. Although battle-scarred, tired, and running on fumes, I knew this was the right time for me to contribute. But why *now*?

As I was entering the school year in September 2023, I felt that I was stuck in a professional 'funk', and that I was going through the motions of being a high school administrator. It wasn't that the job didn't bring joy: it did and it does, nearly every day. Rather, I felt my professional growth as a leader had stagnated, and that I was consumed by the endless administrative tasks we process day after day. As those task lists got longer, the opportunities to enrich my own professional learning seemed to grow smaller.

While taking time to fill everyone else's bucket, my own bucket was running empty. So, I decided that the 2023 – 2024 school year would be the year of *ME!*

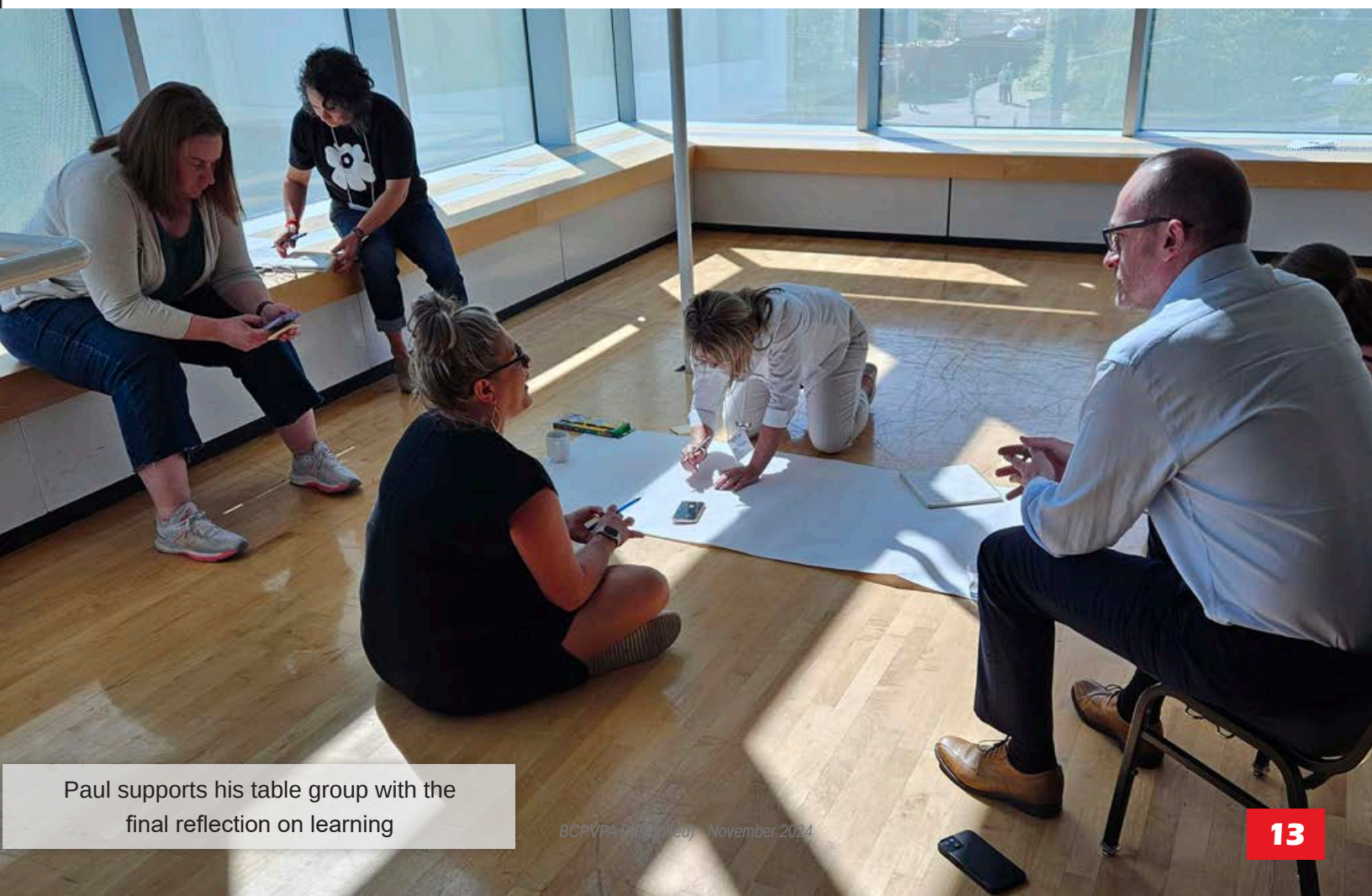
I stepped up to be a BCPVPA Professional Learning representative in my Chapter, and prioritized my own professional needs by registering for a number of professional learning opportunities both with the Vancouver Association of Secondary School Administrators and with the BCPVPA.

Within months of placing myself in new spaces with new people, I felt invigorated and upbeat and felt a new release of personal and professional energy. I was able to listen with intent, and to learn with a clear and open mind. I now understood that when I spent some time away from my building in pursuit of professional development, I was even better able to serve my school community effectively when I returned.

After a year of placing my professional growth front and centre, I experienced not only the personal lift that I needed and desired, but a new and unexpected breath of life in my day-to-day role as a high school administrator.

So why Foundations, and why now? When attending PLD meetings and opportunities throughout the year, I met with like-minded leaders from across the province, all with amazing stories and the capacity to share and learn from each other. I recognized that these are my people. That helped me to understand that when I allowed myself to step back from the day-to-day, and developed the ability to listen to and synthesize diverse perspectives, I no longer took for granted what I was doing day in and day out.

And now, it was my time to give back. I wanted to put my new renewed energy to good use, and what better way than to provide a safe space to support others as they explored their learning and embarked on the fantastic journey of being a BC Vice-Principal or Principal. It was everything I hoped it would be, and more. I had the privilege of supporting an amazing group of new-to-role leaders from all over BC, and got a glimpse of leadership life outside of Vancouver – and boy, is it different!



Paul supports his table group with the final reflection on learning

The experience exceeded my expectations, whether it was the learning from other facilitators, the learning from the course organizers, the learning from the sensational keynote speakers, or the learning from my table participants: Table 4 – you know who you are! I was continuously immersed in deep, rich, and transformative conversations. As we all built relationships over those five days, we let down our guard, we let others in, we shared, we listened, we cried, we hugged, and we demonstrated empathy, compassion, and true vulnerability.

All of the qualities of great leadership were exhibited day after day, by everyone in the room. With open hearts and open minds, more than 100 people soaked up the learning. If that doesn't fill your bucket, what will? I can say for certain, my bucket is now full. In addition to filling my own bucket, I hope that, in some small way, I was able to fill some other buckets in that room. New learning, new connections, and new friendships: not a bad way to spend the first week of July, if you ask me. And will I facilitate again? Absolutely!

I had the privilege of supporting an amazing group of new-to-role leaders from all over BC, and got a glimpse of leadership life outside of Vancouver – and boy, is it different! - Paul Godfrey

**REBECA RUBIO, Vice-Principal, SD 37 (Delta) - Attendee
and 2024 Foundations Class Speaker**

*“Stories create community – they make us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving”
— Madeleine L'Engle*

We are all made of stories. We are each a rich woven tapestry of personal stories of heartache, calm, triumph, and joy. Our tapestries have been shaped by connections, experiences and places, and they affect our every move: from how we treat others, to how we respond to challenges, to how we choose to face each day.

But people's stories are not always visible on the surface, and can require effort to uncover. Our stories have been referred to as the “invisible backpack” which we all carry, hidden in plain sight. Our stories have been referred to as the “painting behind the painting”, in reference to Vincent Van Gogh's hidden self-portrait behind his famous 1885 *Head of a Peasant Woman*. In all of this lies that simple fact that we are a product of our stories, and we carry them with us, somewhat obscured, wherever we go.

It is said that good leaders possess the “three Rs”: they are Rational, they are Reflective, and they are Relational. Although all three are important, being

relational is key. Relational leaders lean in with curiosity, seeking connection by understanding each person's story. They know that to be successful, they must ensure that those they encounter feel a sense of belonging and a belief in their own potential, knowing their stories matter and that their gifts are both seen and recognized. Relational leaders value individual differences and they create opportunities for all voices and perspectives to be embedded in school practice, because being relational is being equitable, and equity is not something we do occasionally, but is the lens through which we intentionally plan and carry out our vision for our schools.

The 2024 BCPVPA Foundations for New School Leaders course cemented the power of personal stories and relational leadership. The week was rich with presentations, case studies, deep learning and moments of insight, but, more importantly, it was about networking, hearing the stories of others, collaboratively grappling with difficult concepts, and honing our strengths as relational leaders.

"The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Dr. Dustin Louie began the week by telling us how the Musqueam, when approaching a new territory, would enter with their paddles up, to show they were coming in peace. He invited us to enter decolonization work with our "paddles up", challenging our own assumptions and being radically anti-oppressive, for reconciliation is not a synonym for "apology", but is instead about transformational and sustainable change. Decolonization, he argued,

is about rebuilding relationships, and that involves being aware of the danger of the single story, one that elevates some and silences others. He encouraged us to deconstruct old narratives and to rebuild new ones that include more voices and more perspectives. Dr Louie reminded us that attaining strong, transformational leadership requires listening to and elevating the stories of others.



Rebeca with BCPVPA President
Dr. Shannon Behan

“A child who does not feel embraced by their village will burn it down to feel its warmth”

– African proverb

Carolyn Roberts stressed the importance of connection, reminding us that colonization has severed our relationship to the land and to each other. She argued that decolonizing is about restoring those ties, urging us to create ethical spaces where we are intentional witnesses, courageous enough to reimagine a new system of care. She also spoke of the importance of challenging held beliefs in order to move forward with authenticity and courage. Who was

displaced in order for us to be here today? Knowing this land was never bought, sold, or traded, what are we responsible for? How do these realizations inform us as leaders? We must hold ourselves accountable for building strong relationships and allow the relationships to guide the work we do, all while connecting with and honouring the stories that each individual brings.

“You don’t inspire people by showing them your power. You inspire people by showing them their power.”

– Brian Aspinall

BCPVPA Director of Health and Well-being, Rochelle Morandini, also spoke of how we need to be relational leaders, nudging us to, “lead with humility and genuineness”, and create environments with high psychological safety. In order for all members of a team to flourish, they need to feel connected and valued, safe to speak their story and know it is held with respect by their team. At their core,

psychologically safe environments are grounded in story and relationships: there is respect and appreciation, input and learning are valued, mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth, and diversity is not just welcome, but celebrated and leveraged. When there is psychological safety, all members of the group are represented and can bring forth their stories and thrive.

“At the end of our lives/ There is an exchange between worlds/ Every storyteller becomes an ancestor/ Every ancestor lives on in our stories”

– Indigenous Peoples’ Exhibit

Dr. Kristi Blakeway invited us to share and receive stories together, because stories have the power to build community, create empathy, and strengthen understanding. Stories are windows into our lived experiences; they crumble bridges, give insight, and offer validation. She reminded us to lean in with curiosity, not judgement, seeking to understand challenging behaviours by unpacking hidden drivers and personal motivations. She spoke at length of the importance of relational discipline and restorative approaches, urging us to strive to understand rather than punish, and to move from being punitive to being relational. If we are truly hoping to be equitable

and connected in our practice, we must ensure we ask the right questions:

Who was harmed? What relationships need to be repaired? How can we fix this? How can we all return strengthened? What did we learn?

It is through these questions that we can enact relational discipline and work towards equitable care for all. It is through these questions that we will understand the stories that have shaped each and every behaviour.

“Stories constitute the single most powerful weapon in a leader's arsenal”

– Dr. Howard Gardner

The 2024 BCPVPA Foundations course clearly illustrated the fact that, as new leaders, we need to step forward with curiosity and optimism, and we need to be relentlessly relational. We must show up with humility, integrity, and courage, listening to all stories, and making space for all voices. We have a responsibility to understand where we hold privilege and recognize that we can leverage

our privilege to amplify voices that have not had an opportunity to be heard. To truly be equitable, inclusive, relational leaders, we need to challenge our own beliefs and unlearn and rewrite narratives, so that all of members of the school community can see themselves represented and valued, and have a sense of belonging within our schools.

STEVEN DALLA LANA, Principal SD 57 (Prince George) - Facilitator and 2024 Foundations Facilitator Representative

A Gift Of Time

When my wife, Silia, asked me why I chose to serve as a facilitator for the BCPVPA's Foundations for New School Leaders program after a demanding year of work, it gave me pause. It prompted me to reflect on the motivations behind this commitment, and to consider why my fellow facilitators and I dedicate a week at UBC to support new Vice-Principals and Principals.

In seeking answers, I turned to my co-facilitators, who shared their perspectives on this meaningful work. The responses were varied, but centered on a common theme: the genuine joy of giving back. Many of us, having experienced the program as participants, felt a strong desire to return and contribute to the growth of our new leaders. We recognize the importance of mentorship, understanding that in this journey, one should have a mentor ahead of them, mentors alongside them, and a mentee following behind.

Our facilitators consistently demonstrate a deep commitment to both their own learning and the success of participants. While participants engage in case study groups, facilitators form their own learning communities, relishing in the process of

decision-making and guiding conversations at our home tables. This collaborative spirit is the essence of Foundations, where facilitators and participants alike thrive in a metacognitive environment that fosters growth and connection.

Personally, my reasons for serving as a facilitator are twofold: first, to give back to the BCPVPA and the leaders who have enriched my own journey; and second, because I deeply value human connection and collaboration. As school leaders, it is imperative that we cultivate these social connections, as they are foundational to our roles.

At Foundations 2024, we emphasized the significance of stories, understanding that they shape our experiences and our leadership. Reflecting on my own journey, I attended Foundations as a participant 14 years ago, an experience that was pivotal in my development as a Vice-Principal, Principal, and individual. It was during this time that I realized the importance of connecting with the BCPVPA, an organization that would become a cornerstone of my professional life.



Steven speaks on behalf of the facilitators at the Foundations Celebration Dinner

The memories of Foundations events, locations, and the wisdom of our educational elders continue to resonate with me. I recall the inspiring presence of then-Minister of Education, Shirley Bond, who highlighted the necessity of knowing and engaging with our roles at both district and provincial levels. These experiences underscored the transition from classroom teacher to school leader, expanding my perspective on the broader responsibilities that come with these roles.

The relationships formed during my time at Foundations have endured, becoming invaluable sources of support and friendship. Whether cramming into a limo with colleagues or receiving mentorship from my facilitator, Brian Chappell, the connections made during that week have had a lasting impact on my leadership journey.

Being a Foundations facilitator fosters a mutually beneficial relationship with participants. We learn alongside them, sharing in moments of vulnerability, and engaging in deep, meaningful conversations about our work, our students, and ourselves. These experiences not only enhance our professional development, but also strengthen our networks and leadership skills. The continuous support from colleagues across the province reinforces the collaborative culture we strive to cultivate.

Now, it is our turn to give back. By participating in Foundations and becoming active within the BCPVPA, new leaders are welcomed into a supportive community of peers. This community is a space for sharing ideas, solving common challenges, and celebrating successes — an essential practice for all Principals and Vice-Principals. Too often, we

focus on the challenges without acknowledging the successes that we achieve daily.

To our new leaders and Foundations participants, my message is this: *Who you are matters*. Your character, values, and leadership style profoundly influence your school community. Be true to yourself each day, for there is no better person than you to lead your school. Remember, you are a role model,

and your vision, knowledge, and openness will shape your school's culture.

Foundations brings together practicing Principals and Vice-Principals as facilitators alongside the inspirational voices of new leaders. It is an exceptional opportunity for leadership development, networking, and learning for both facilitators and participants. It truly is a gift of time.

