

Each September, BC K-12 public schools open their doors to throngs of students who are buzzing from the events of their summer, and who are keen to reconnect with their peers, teachers, and school leaders. But before those doors even open, each school and district is already a hive of activity. Principals have barely let go of the reins in July before picking them up again in August, coordinating supplies, confirming schedules, assigning spaces, reviewing school and district plans, connecting with school communities and families, and welcoming staff.

Many Principals and Vice-Principals are seasoned in their roles, and experienced in fielding a daily barrage of requests and expectations. But others are stepping into a leadership role for the first time, and are having that “first day of school” sensation in earnest.

The BCPVPA recognizes that our newest members can require different elements of support to help them find success in their roles. The transition from teacher to Vice-Principal – and from Vice-Principal to Principal – can take place as part of a more moderated progression, or it can be a rapid run up the slope when that unanticipated shoulder-tap for leadership has been delivered.

Education systems are continually changing and evolving, and it is important for professional associations like the BCPVPA to keep pace and ensure that our resources are bolstered where they are most needed by our members.

We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic became a powerful driver in shifting people’s thinking and upending established routines. In considering the journey for the next cohort of leaders during that time of immense change in schools, we could

see that teachers with an interest in leadership would benefit from a program that allowed a peek behind the curtain of the Vice-Principal role, and an opportunity – beyond their classroom and local school environment – for attendees to meet current leaders and find out more about their work. Since its inception in 2021, the program “Explorations for Aspiring School Leaders” (formerly “Essentials for Aspiring School Leaders”) has engaged and inspired hundreds of BC teachers, many of whom went on to pursue and accept leadership roles in the province.

The BCPVPA has also traditionally offered new leaders a deeply immersive experience through a week-long learning and leadership program that originated in partnership with the University of British Columbia’s Faculty of Education. “Short Course” was launched more than 45 years ago, and over that time thousands of BC educational leaders have come together in the first week of July to learn and connect. The program was reborn as “Foundations for New School Leaders” in 2022 when we were once again able to gather in person following the pandemic, and it has continued to introduce new leaders to the key responsibilities of their roles, and the nuances of successful leadership.

And, here again, we find ourselves in the midst of change. As the public education system and school operations have grown more complex through societal and technological influences, the roles of educational leaders have continued to rapidly evolve. Principals and Vice-Principals acknowledge that they are wearing more and more hats over time; the requirements of their expanded expertise have been both enriching and taxing, and the specter of burnout has been real. More of the professional learning and support that we have offered to our members in recent years has been focused around the increases in job responsibility and complexity, and how to both build resiliency and develop mechanisms to manage the intensity and demands of the role while providing steady and effective leadership.

There is a recognition in British Columbia that recruitment and retention of both educators and



Paddling Together

A Two-Year BCPVPA Pilot Program Helps New Educational Leaders to Navigate their Roles

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educational leaders is critical, particularly in some of the more rural and remote areas. With the increased pressures that surround the educational leadership role, a trend has emerged where some Vice-Principals, and even Principals, are returning to classroom teaching for a number of reasons. This has disrupted the cycle of advancement in some districts, as teachers aspiring to leadership are moving into a Vice-Principal or Principal role at an earlier point in their careers. These leaders bring significant skills, knowledge, enthusiasm, and engagement to the work, but often don't have the depth of experience in navigating the diverse requirements of their school and the system.

There is no practicum for school leadership, and Principals and Vice-Principals hit the ground running in support of their students, staff, and school communities. What we hear often from new educational leaders is how little they truly understood about the depth and breadth of the role, despite observing their own supervisors during their teaching years. This is often stated alongside the popular comparison of "drinking from a firehose" as they begin their roles.

BC school districts are focused and intentional in their support of new leaders, ensuring that district direction is clear and that mentorship opportunities are established. To complement the important work of districts in supporting school leaders, the BCPVPA has launched the **Compass Leadership Academy**, a two-year pilot program that will serve as a backstop to local district programming to help support new-to-role Principals and Vice-Principals, with a particular focus on those members serving in rural and remote districts.

This two-year virtual leadership development series brings together BC's new-to-role educational leaders, and opens avenues for personal and professional growth. Compass will introduce practical learning opportunities in many areas of leadership including inclusive education, health and well-being, and human rights and equity. The modules will support members' daily practice in areas such

as understanding fiduciary duty, managing budgets, leading in a unionized environment, time management and prioritization, navigating difficult conversations, and developing decision-making frameworks.

Through Compass, we are placing a special emphasis on our members who lead in rural and remote schools and districts. We recognize that these leaders are often geographically isolated, which can make contact with both the district supervisor and a supportive network of colleagues a distinct challenge. The intent of Compass is to both empower these rural and remote leaders with resources and tools that can support them in their practice, and to introduce them to other Principals and Vice-Principals leading in similar circumstances. The development of a community of practice for rural and remote leaders is a critical component of Compass, with the objective of helping these educational leaders to thrive in their environments, to have access to the assets that they need to be successful, and to develop supportive networks with other leaders.

The Compass learning experience weaves the BCPVPA's Leadership Competencies into each session, offering a competency-based approach that is grounded in core values, beliefs, and system goals. The Competencies use the metaphor and philosophy of school leaders "being in the canoe" alongside teachers, staff, and students. This is extended to our new-to-role leaders who had a different responsibility in the canoe before their move to leadership, yet the need to paddle together, to synchronize and navigate the journey collaboratively through all weather and conditions, remains the same. Ultimately, educators need the support of others in order to travel a route that is at times uncertain, and where the destination may change over time.

We look forward to the participation of our new-to-role members in the Compass program, and to sharing our learning with our education sector partners as we embark on this journey alongside BC's newest educational leaders.

For more information about the Compass program, please contact Executive Director Scott Robinson at scott@bcpvpa.bc.ca