

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 this fourth installment of the series we meet Karen Fello, and find out about how Distributed Learning is helping BC students of all ages to connect and experience success.

When the global pandemic forced the transition of British Columbia's public schools to remote learning in March 2020, Karen Fello and her staff were already there. As Karen joined SIDES (the South Island Distance Education School) as the Vice-Principal in 2008, and became Principal in 2014, she understood the benefits, needs and challenges of online learning.

Karen has been in education for 30 years, and her career as a school leader has been entirely at SIDES. "I was a secondary school English and Social Studies teacher before I came into school leadership," says Karen. "My experience ran the gamut from learning assistance support to regular program teaching, and during the last part of my teaching career I was dividing my time between doing SIDES work online, and working in the Flexible Studies Program which was an inquiry-based and cross-curricular program at Reynolds Secondary School in School District #61 in Greater Victoria. That was a very cool experience, and we had that rare opportunity to follow a group of kids through a period of time. My husband is a band teacher, and the band teachers always get to see the same kids year after year, but as a classroom teacher you don't necessarily experience that in a big school."

Karen wasn't one of those kids who had their sights set on teaching from an early age. "It's funny when I look back. Education was something that kept touching

A Day in the Life

of an
Online
Learning
Principal

"I think what people don't – or at least didn't – understand was how connected you can be even when you're doing things online ..."

Karen Fello



me throughout my life. I played school as a little girl, but the times when I thought 'I would like to do that', were the times when I had an amazing and inspirational teacher. I loved school, and I loved to learn – the teachers were great but when they weren't really connecting with me, my mind explored other things, like being doctor or a lawyer. It was always something professional: I had this vision of dressing up and going to meetings – I have no idea why! When I had a fabulous teacher, that was a touchstone for me. Those were the times when I thought, 'yes – I'd like to be with young people'."

BC's history of distance learning goes back 100 years and began with a centralized approach through the Ministry of Education's Correspondence Branch. In the 1980's the Ministry contracted with nine school districts, two on Vancouver Island and seven on the mainland,

to create BC's original nine distance education schools, dubbed 'DE schools'. At that time, the curriculum was run entirely through the Ministry of Education, while operations were managed by the nine contracted school districts. "We were one of the first nine, and we were a paper warehouse," Karen holds one hand flat at chest level, the other well above her head, "with all of those modules of paper materials. We evolved in the early 2000s to more of an online program, and as one of the early schools we had the interesting option of being cross district. Our school provides service throughout British Columbia, and we can accept students from outside our district borders."

The impact of technology on the work of distance learning has been significant and has allowed for much more interaction with students. "Because we look after students from around the province, there were often people that we couldn't really reach in



Karen working with DL Systems Coordinator, Bev Bastness, on program development



Karen and Vice-Principal Sean Hayes

the same way when you're sending paper things back and forth... I think having children see their teachers through virtual classes, and having that opportunity to connect, to even do virtual field trips, that has changed a lot. We can have video so that the children can read something, and then they can read it with their teacher, and then they can connect with a parent around it – it offers more scope.”

The work is almost exclusively online for the 3,000+ students at SIDES. “We do have some paper, and manipulative resources for the little ones, but we do video and we do virtual classes through Zoom. We are K to 12, but we also have a significant adult population because we provide grade 11 and 12 content to students who've come back to upgrade or graduate. We have lot of people who were that solid C, C+ graduate who wasn't so invested in school, but later decide it's something they want to do. They come back, and they knock it out of the park, because now it matters to them. We graduate

about 150 students a year, and we have a small grad ceremony – about 10 to 20% attend. It's cool to have that connection, especially for the high school kids that choose to work with us. And for the adults too: we had a 50-year-old who needed to graduate for some aspect of his work, and his mom ran up on the stage and hugged him because she'd been waiting for 32 years.”

The connection to students may be different, but it is no less important. “I'm a people person, so I love it when students are on site. We have face-to-face opportunities for elementary and middle school kids: we have drop-in tutoring, and we have a learning services program called Transition to Adulthood for 19 to 21-year-olds who haven't completed their IEP goals. They're typically on the autism spectrum or have Downs.”

“I think what people don't – or at least didn't – understand was how connected you can be even when you're doing things online. When I was a

“We had a young woman come to SIDES, and she wanted to just do math with us. She was going to high school, and she loved school – loved everything about school – except for math. Her marks were good, but she eloquently described it as putting 70% of her psychic energy into math every year. And she said, ‘if I can just do this at home and not worry about asking dumb questions, and not worry that everybody else gets it and I don’t, if I could just take that little piece out and do it at home and not have to worry about that part, then I could just straight-up love school – I don’t feel like that about any other part of school’. So that’s what we did for her, and she had a great first year of high school because she removed that worry.”

teacher here, we established relationships with students and often the first time we laid eyes on one another was at graduation – it would be a big hug, and you felt like you had known them all along. Some of it is more distant than it would be if I bumped into kids in the hallway, but there are many ways to connect. In various classes I’ve done drop-ins. Our teacher-librarian does story time every Tuesday night, and I’ve joined as a story reader. We find ways to say that we have a Principal, and this is who I am.”

The adult learning component is an especially rewarding experience. “So many of them are people who come for a second chance. As a group, they tend to need a tremendous amount of support and encouragement – not support in the sense that they can’t do it, but support in helping them to believe in themselves. For example, they often thought they could never learn math, or they dropped out because of their circumstances at the time. They might have thought that they couldn’t do it, or that it was useless. Whatever it was, that became their protection in the decision they made, and they have to overcome that. It’s the social emotional piece. But they really do soar. We’ve had grandmothers who just wanted to prove to their grandchildren that they can do it, and moms and dads who just want to beat their 18-year-old to grad. Everybody has a different reason, there are as many reasons as there are students.”

With the COVID-19 global pandemic came a heightened awareness of remote learning. Karen was part of the BC Ministry of Education’s task force that addressed the continuity of learning when the suspension of in-class instruction occurred. “We had to do things quickly, and as you know we can be a bit glacial as a sector. But we did it. And what was amazing was the ways we found to share and connect. We tried to identify what it was that people were going to need. And we weren’t sure, because part of the problem is that people don’t

know what they don't know. We came at it from the perspective that, in a practical sense, they're going to need a learning management system, they need access to courses, they're going to need content – even if they don't use it, they can see how it's structured. We moved quickly to find three different learning management systems – Moodle, D2L and Canvas. Those companies stepped up to offer their services. And our schools can have proprietary concerns because we've put the time into course development, but SIDES, Navigate and the Western Canada Learning Network (WCLN) all said that's the right thing to do, to make the content available."

"At our school, we had teachers from 63 districts sign in to find content. In the end, we were all a little surprised that there wasn't as much uptake as we thought there was going to be. And from people I spoke with, I think part of that comes from individuals being so overwhelmed that they didn't know where to look. The idea of putting a couple of assignments online and planning to meet with students a couple of times a week was all they could manage."

"For us through this process, we certainly saw where holes exist in terms of equity of access, content for certain grades, and support for kids of a certain age. We were already in a process of reorganizing online learning in the province, so it became even clearer that the process was needed, but it also reinforced that district to district, we have unique needs that we have to address. With the idea of a more global Ministry approach to online learning, there is the concern that in, individual districts, we may lose the customization that really addresses the particular needs of that district. We have to figure out a way where we have equity of access, and fair and high-quality access for students all through the province, while not losing sight of unique needs."

SIDES has seen an uptick in interest as educators

"We have one little guy who is truly a genius – he's going into grade 6 this year, and he's finished Physics 12. He loves school. He's on the autism spectrum and he goes to a neighbourhood school, but he is a math and science genius. He has lectured first year students in astronomy at the University of Victoria (UVIC). He came to us when he was going into grade 4 and he told me in all seriousness, 'I've done all the math in my school: my school has no more math. So, I'd really like to come to your school now, and do your math'. That's the kind of thing we can make work. He comes in to write tests, and comes into my office for chocolate afterwards."

and parents recognize that remote learning will continue, and with the awareness that there could be a return to a different kind of learning if there is a significant increase in cases. Through her work with the task force, and her interactions with school leaders through the Spring and Summer, Karen could see the impact of the shift to remote instruction.

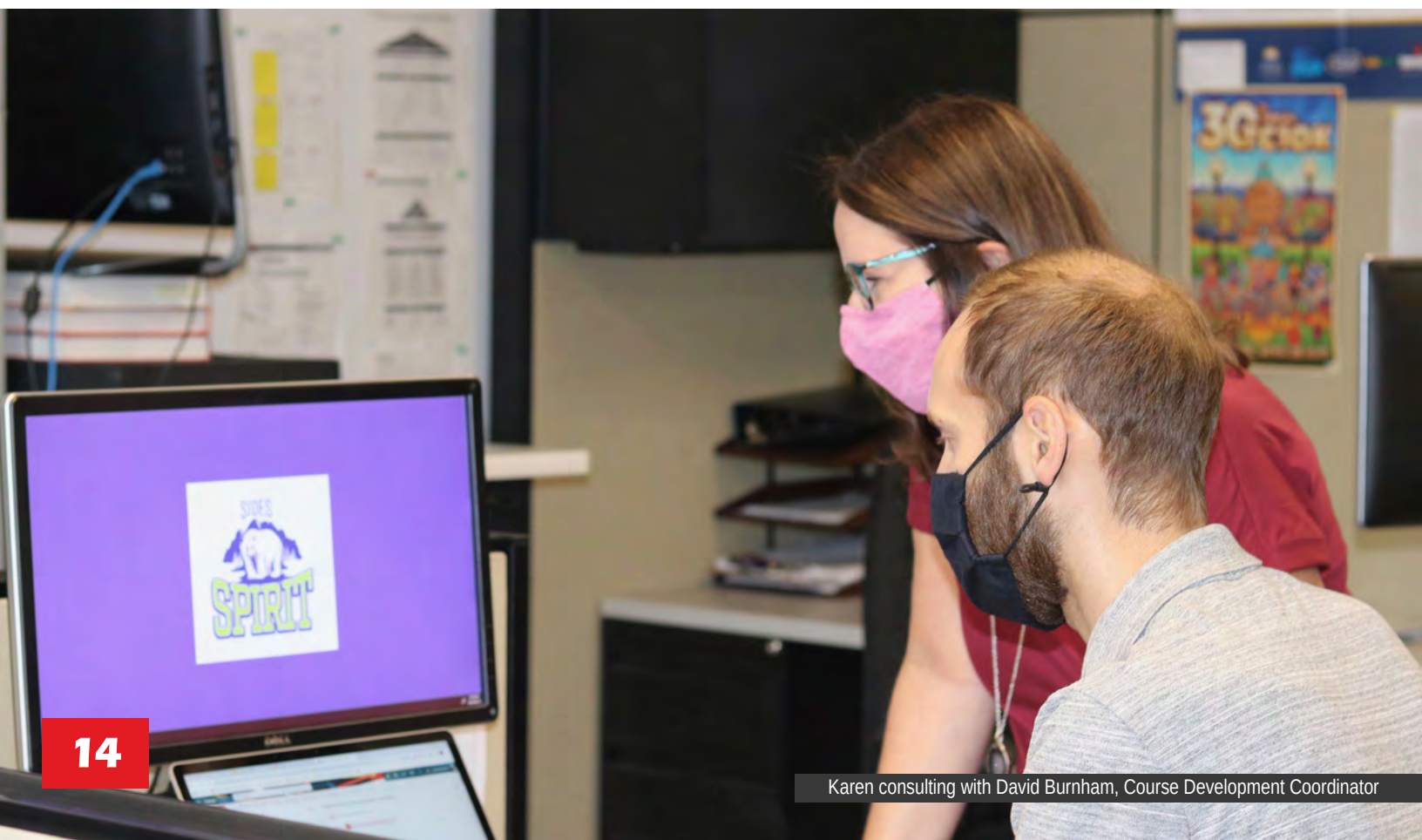
“In the Spring, I was seeing a lot of mourning: my teaching and administrative colleagues were mourning the loss of their classroom experiences. My own son was just finishing his final teaching practicum, and he was really gutted that he couldn't say goodbye to his kids.”

“I spent a lot of time talking to people about the notion of emergency remote learning, and the emotional overlay of that: we'd lost something very suddenly, and then on top of that you discover that now you have to learn how to teach differently. My Vice-Principal was talking to friends from the classroom who said they were going to put online everything they'd planned to do in the classroom –

they had all their notes, so they were going to do that in Google. And, three weeks in, they understood that was not realistic, that the kids won't spend the time reading what would have held them in thrall if they were hearing it from their teacher. It doesn't necessarily translate well onto paper.”

“The instinct was to move the in-person practice to an online environment, really quickly. And for SIDES and some of the other DL schools that have been around for a long time, we've been through that: we had tried that, and we knew it didn't work. Instead, we have found ways to create online classes and content that really gets to the heart of the course, and we enhance that with video content or conversations. I can talk for an hour – I may do that in the classroom – but I can't just put all that on paper and expect that anybody is going to be interested. Kids sure aren't going to be interested.”

“Over time, we've learned to distill content to the important bits, and we may get to inquiry more quickly for example, because we focus on the skills and let the kids go find the details. When I talked



earlier about those paper modules, they were written as though everything a teacher was going to say in the semester was written down. They were dry, thick and intimidating, and students didn't finish them. What we do now is designed to take the same number of hours that a neighbourhood school course would, and we design it thinking that an average student might take this long, and here's the instruction. The other important part is that they can go back and look at it again. Particularly for high school, we remove the limited time factor so that if a young person needs more time to review the concept – if they don't understand quadratic equations or the divine right of kings first time around – they can look at it again. The teacher doesn't just keep going because most of the class got the concept. We can focus more on mastery, because we don't have to get on with the next topic tomorrow."

There are similarities and differences between leading distributed learning and neighbourhood schools. While the baseline is working with people, and ensuring support for students, the frameworks for management can be quite different. Distributed learning in BC is smaller, with different rules and restrictions and a closer connection to the Ministry of Education. "My neighbourhood school colleagues don't need to attend to things like active requirements because that's something that is done at the central office level. In a regular year, they do have to make sure attendance is tight for September to generate funding for example, but I have to be concerned about other rules specific to a DL environment and make sure that everyone's in compliance. There are just a few DL Principals, and we are in frequent communication; our senior administrators rely on us to have the rules down. We're a bit more on our own that way."

Karen is reflective when thinking about the role of distributed learning, both pre- and post-pandemic. "A colleague of mine used to call schools like ours the school of first choice and last resort. We've

had testimonials from students and families to say we save kids. We offered them an opportunity when they didn't feel they had anything else left. Sometimes we worry, with the uptick of students who suffer from anxiety, and feel they can't go to school. We want to help them through that crisis and encourage them to get back into their world. We help them, we get them to a place where they can graduate or maybe go back to their neighbourhood school. It's energizing to hear the stories from those students."

"It always comes back to the people for me. From the perspective of our staff, I'm energized by our opportunities to be creative. I've witnessed how teachers have made things possible for students. We write a lot of our own course material: I'm inspired by the really thoughtful online pedagogy, the careful approaches to assessment, and the really rich conversations we have because we're publishing courses at the same time we're teaching. When the curriculum changed, our staff created 60 courses in two years; we would normally write and revise six to eight courses a year. It was a massive effort, and they were amazing."

Karen shares some thoughts for educators who may be interested in leadership in distributed learning. "I would say what I said to my Vice-Principal when he came on board: it's a lot more about people than we think. Our work is still about personal connection, but the kinds of things we talk about and the approaches we take are so different. We've all come from neighbourhood schools, so to come here a lot of learning has to happen, and there is a need to check our prejudices at the door. I was a neighbourhood school teacher and believed passionately in what I was doing. Then when I came here as a teacher, I had to unlearn a lot of my own beliefs about what doing things entirely online would look like. It really is still about relationship building. You don't have to be afraid that those connections are going to be gone, because they're not."

A Day in the Life of an Online Learning Principal

5:30 am

Mindfulness Practice

6:15 am

Check texts and emails for staff messages about the day

7:40 am

Arrive at school (Royal Oak Campus), and a second check for emails/text messages/phone messages specific to today's activities

7:45 am

Check in with arriving staff

8:00 am

Clerical department meeting

9:00 am

Staff meeting – usually in person, but more recently via Zoom

10:30 am

Head over to Beaver Lake Campus for Learning Services Screening Meeting – meeting with Screening team (ISTs, District Psychologist, School Counsellor, Administrative Team) to determine designations, placements and preliminary supports for students requiring extra services for their learning

12:00 pm

Phone call with parent wanting to know more about Online Learning options for three children (Grades 2, 5, and 8)

12:30 pm

Return to Royal Oak Campus - check emails and phone messages (eat lunch at my desk)

1:00 pm

District meeting with HR to discuss postings and staff accommodations (Health and Safety) as well as Remote Learning operations (providing the Online Learning perspective)

“Before I leave for school, my first thought is people: what's everyone doing today, what are the meetings I'm aware of, what's coming up? I'm thinking about students I need to follow up with, and thinking about the staff I need to work with or replace if they have to be away. Our school has two sites, so unless there is a district meeting I have to attend, I will be at one of the two sites.”

“I joke that someday I'm going to build a door right out of my office so I can come and go, because I need to walk from the back through the building to my desk, and by that time I've seen about eight people,” Karen smiles, “and there's not a lot of ‘leave it until your coat's off’. I'm usually working with clerical and support staff right at the beginning of the day, making sure the day is set up. And then it's into the email to find out what has emerged overnight. There's also a lot of long-term thinking. For example, how do we manage through the holidays when others aren't working, but we are? Arranging two months of TTOC (Teachers Teaching on Call) coverage for the Summer is a big task.”

“Throughout the day I connect with teachers, and my Vice-Principal and I are in contact all the time: he's here, I'm there, we're always texting. There are only the two of us, and my leadership style – and this works well for him – is that I like to bounce things off people. It's not that I don't make decisions on my own, but I believe it's important for him to understand the process. I know some leaders are very much ‘that's your job, this is my job’, and we do have a division of responsibilities, but I also believe it's important that we are able to answer for one another.”

“I've been really fortunate: I've had two absolutely fabulous Vice-Principals with skills that really complement my own skill-set. My current Vice-Principal came from a very large high school where there were three of them and there was quite a significant division of labour. In our K to 12 school, it's very different, and it's important that we're on the same page.”

“There are, of course, things that occur that can send the day off course. Sometimes we'll have a student who feels that they've not been heard, that they didn't

get the right kind of feedback, or that they've been mistreated. And where my neighbourhood school colleagues at a high school level would sometimes be involved in student behaviour issues, our student behaviour issues tend to run along the lines of academic integrity concerns. I am in contact with students and families about students cheating on assignments or – from the test scores – the concern that somebody else has been doing the homework. When we address the behaviour issues, it relates not only to where the learning isn't taking place when a student may just be looking for the credential, but also to protecting the school's reputation. DL schools sometimes have the reputation of being 'marks factories', and we work really hard to disabuse others of that narrative in respect to our school. We know that some people think 'I'm not going to do that well in school, so I'll do it online and they won't know that I paid my cousin to do it'. We're not foolish; we recognize that those things happen, but we've worked hard to put policies and practices in place to ensure that we are seen as a real educational option for people who need it, and so that the people who need it or want it aren't seen as having received a lesser education. That's the hardest part, because I'm so proud of what our teachers do, and what our students accomplish, that if anybody thinks that, it hurts my heart."

"The best thing about the work I do is the options that we give students. People often say to me – especially if they're trying to decide what avenue to take – that DL isn't for everybody and that's very true. But if neighbourhood schools were for everybody, DL wouldn't need to exist. We are the right thing for some people, and we're the right thing for some parts of some people. People have gone on to jobs because of us. We have a student – he's on the autism spectrum and was not doing well in middle school – who came to us when he was in the seventh grade. He graduated with us, went on to UVIC, did a BA in Psychology from studying autism spectrum disorders, and is now – as a person with autism – doing his PHD studying autism in California. He was never going back to school. He and his family are quite vocal about the fact that this opportunity, this place, these people gave him a second chance, and so it's about second chances."

A Day in the Life of an Online Learning Principal

1:30 pm

Check in with Secondary teachers on workload and current levels of student activities; includes impromptu discussion of new remote test proctoring technology

2:00 pm

Meet with Middle School teachers to discuss organization of the classes – core and exploratory structures; virtual class responsibility and schedules

2:45 pm

Online meeting with Learning Management System provider and our Administration and Tech teams to discuss continued partnership and providing course resources to BC teachers for remote learning support

3:15 pm

Meeting with VP to discuss class lists, building capacity, operations, and course development plans (Zoom, Teams or in person)

4:00 pm

Building closes; some staff are still here, so we take the opportunity to talk about what needs to be done tomorrow (or during the rest of the week)

4:30 pm

Connect with custodian, then back to checking emails, returning telephone calls, and writing tomorrow's "To Do" list

5:30 – 6:00 pm

Leave for home

*Throughout the day I receive many phone calls
and office drop-ins, usually prefaced by*

"This will only take a moment..."!

*And before COVID times, we would have students
in our buildings; now, our interactions are at a
distance, but I look forward to when our students
can come back again.*