



## Lynchpin (noun):

one that serves to hold together parts or elements that exist or function as a unit

– Merriam-Webster Dictionary

As I have mentioned before, I like metaphors. I've often thought of the principalship as the hub of a wheel, like a wagon wheel or bike wheel, the central part through which the spokes are supported to make the wheel turn. And if school leaders are the hub, then the spokes represent all the structures within the education system: the students, the parents, the teachers, the supporting staff, the community groups, the senior staff, the curriculum branch, the Ministry, policy, legislation ... I could go on. The roles of Principals and Vice-Principals are central and supportive, the 'go-between' for every interest in the K-12 system. We make the wheels of the machine turn.

So, if we're the hub, there must be a lynchpin – a strong support that keeps us locked in place and doing our jobs. This lynchpin is vital, and integrally related to the hub: without it, the wheels may endure one or two rotations before every component begins to fall away from the cart.

If Principals and Vice-Principals are the hub, then I believe that our own social and emotional well-being is the lynchpin. Without this piece of support, we may appear to be functioning and keeping the spokes connected, but are we still connected to the machine?



by  
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On September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020, I had the good fortune to participate in the first of a series of webinars offered by the BC Ministry of Education. The webinars were launched in recognition of '*a need to support teachers across the province through various capacity building initiatives*' due to the substantial changes brought upon the K-12 sector in response to COVID-19. The first of these webinars was titled *Teaching Tenaciously*.

In the ninety-minute session, participants heard from three presenters: Dr. Kimberley Schonert-Reichl, on the subject of Social Emotional Learning (SEL); Monique Gray Smith, speaking to resiliency and an Indigenous lens; and Dr. Linda O'Neill, who shared information regarding Trauma-informed Practice. I found the information timely and poignant, but did recognize at the time that many of my colleagues may not be joining the webinar live due to the crush of those first few days back with staff in our schools. Thankfully, the webinar was recorded and can be viewed with this link following registration with Open Course Resources:

[bit.ly/OS\\_992020](https://bit.ly/OS_992020)

All three speakers placed a powerful focus on self-care and SEL principles. One such principle is to '*design opportunities for adults to connect, heal, and cultivate their own SEL competencies and capacities.*' Other points at the forefront were the promotion of adult SEL & well-being and staff regulation. As the educators, we are expected to be co-regulators for our students; and for well students, we need well teachers.

While not explicit in the presentations, I believe the messages conveyed were intended for all who work in the K-12 system, including our Principals and Vice-Principals. We, too, are part of the adult community in a school. And for there to be *well* teachers, there must be *well* leaders. Yet, who will be our co-regulators?

This question evoked something that I first heard in October of 2018: Principals and Vice-Principals in BC are a 'population under duress'.

The speaker in 2018 was Ingrid Gailler of Morneau Shepell, the managers of our Long-Term Disability (LTD) plan at the time. Ingrid was making a presentation to the BCPVPA Board of Directors regarding the sharp increase in LTD claims by our members. She observed that we have been the same relative population over the years, working under the same plan. So, what changed to account for such a dramatic uptick in claims? Ingrid's conclusion? The job. Her phrase set off alarm bells for me, and a tremendous concern for our people. How would we, as Principals and Vice-Principals, continue to endure such pressure?

In July 2020, Dr. Fei Wang and Dr. Katina Pollock published their paper ***School Principals' Work and Well-Being in British Columbia: What They Say and Why It Matters***. The paper may be considered a follow-up to their 2014 paper ***The Changing Nature of Principals' Work***, commissioned by the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC). You may read the full document here [bit.ly/FWKP2020](https://bit.ly/FWKP2020).

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***School Principals' Work and Well-Being in British Columbia: What They Say and Why It Matters, 2020***

The current publication "aims to build on [the] previous work by developing a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary factors that influence Principals' work intensification." The introduction goes on to assert the "potential negative impacts of the changing nature of the principalship should not be overlooked, as *the health and well-being of Principals are essential to the current and future success of schools and school systems.*"

As part of their research, Drs. Wang and Pollock

conducted a survey which captured responses from nearly 500 BC Principals and Vice-Principals from 56 Districts. Their data surfaced some troubling information about our people and our profession.

- Less than one-third of Principals and Vice-Principals reported a work week between 40 and 50 hours, with the majority of our members working between 50-60 hours a week.
- A startling 21% of our members work more than 60 hours a week.
- More than half of the members participating in the survey reported their sleeping patterns, their fitness levels, and their physical activities were considerably or extremely affected by their work.
- Fully two-thirds of Principals and Vice-Principals reported their energy levels were considerably or extremely affected by draining situations at work.
- Just under half of our members reported that diet is considerably or extremely affected.

With no energy – likely due to diet and sleep issues – how can one maintain a healthy fitness regime? It doesn't take much imagination to see the outcomes.

Despite this disquieting personal health profile, 53% of Principals and Vice-Principals report they are 'good' at coping with work-related stress. We are ever the optimists, reporting that we manage emotions well at work (90%); feel self-efficacy at work (77%); feel resilient (74%); and turn adversity into achievement (66%).

Drs. Wang and Pollock offer several recommendations to address the well-being of school leaders and the intensification of the role:

- Increase school leadership allocations to address the volume of work with more Vice-Principal roles and the reduction of teaching duties.
- Boards could introduce an accumulated discretionary leave in recognition of the additional work of Principals and Vice-Principals (on average, school leaders work at least an additional 15 hours per week than those at similar levels of work in other sectors).
- Manage email volume by setting boundaries. On average, Principals reported spending nearly ten hours each week on emails alone. Managing emails does not simply translate to 'ignore them'. Our members must seek out strategies and establish boundaries around when and where they will process electronic mail, and these boundaries must be acknowledged and encouraged by employers.

We are a passionate group, and are passionate about our work with people. Fully 76% of our members surveyed reported they often or always feel this passion. However, in the same surveyed population, only 32% reported that they feel excited when thinking about going to work. This is a disconcerting disconnect, and is evidence that the lynchpin supporting the machine of public education is in jeopardy.

And, of course, there is one more thing to consider. The research that I have cited was compiled and considered prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the resulting global pandemic. Principals and Vice-Principals have been on the front lines in schools for months with little relief, and the intensification that we have witnessed over the past few years has increased even more substantially. As that machine labours along our current rocky track, we can feel that lynchpin continuing to loosen with every rock and rut.