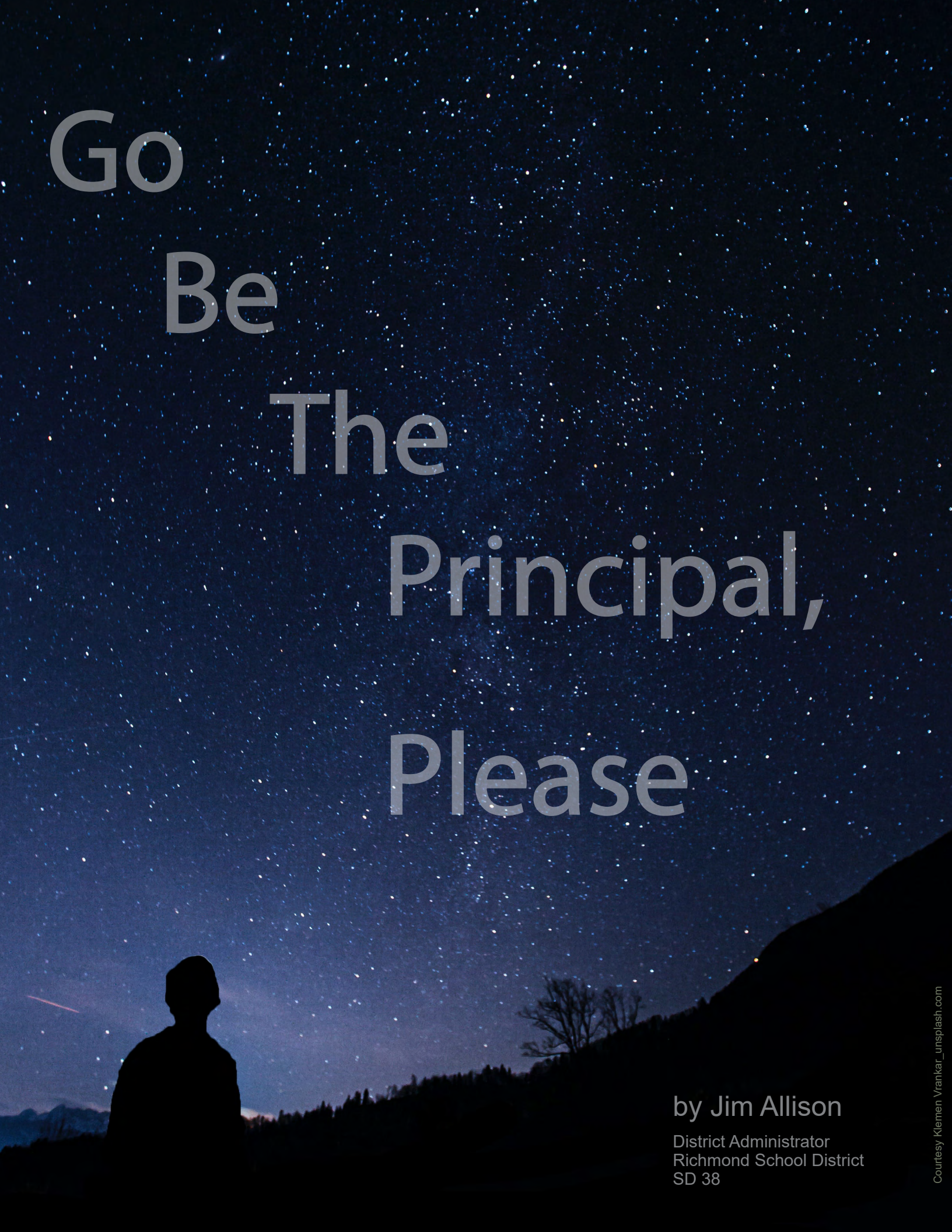


A silhouette of a person is shown in the lower-left foreground, looking up at a vast, starry night sky. The sky is filled with numerous stars and a few streaks of light. The person's silhouette is dark against the lighter, starry background. The overall mood is contemplative and inspiring.

Go Be The Principal, Please

by Jim Allison

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After serving seven years as a Vice-Principal and 19 more as a Principal in six secondary schools, I recently transitioned to a role as a 'District Administrator'. I have been reflecting on my experiences and have captured some thoughts on the complex role of school administrator. For what it is worth, I have never liked the title 'Administrator' or worse, 'Administrative Officer' or 'AO'. Good Principals and Vice-Principals are so much more than efficient administrators, managers and organizers; they must also be influential models, mentors and leaders. If any of what I have written resonates and you are currently a Vice-Principal or Principal, thank you for all you do. If you are a teacher, consider applying to become a Vice-Principal: our schools will always need thoughtful, innovative and courageous leaders who are not afraid to take responsibility for positive change.

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It is not a coincidence that excellent public schools have exemplary Principals and Vice-Principals. After initially struggling in the role, and even considering resigning during my first year as a VP, I grew to love being on school admin teams. I also had a lot of fun as I embraced the joyful energy of interacting with over a thousand teenagers and the people who care deeply about them. If you are considering school administration as respite from working with students every day, you will not be effective. Indeed, our core purpose is to always be grounded in what is in the best interest of students, and you can only know this by knowing them.

Serving as a Vice-Principal or Principal of a large public secondary school is important, complex and challenging work. As a formal leader of the school, you are ultimately responsible for the learning and working experiences of every student and staff member, and your effectiveness can impact the confidence that thousands of parents have in the school and in public education in general. I believe that most school leaders never imagined they would become Vice-Principals or Principals when they first entered the profession as teachers. Indeed, they laugh knowingly when the role is lampooned in television and movies, where the Principal is often portrayed as

an inflexible taskmaster or a buffoon that kids mock and teachers do not respect.

Good Principals were involved, dedicated and reflective teachers who were committed to refining their practice while also busy coaching and sponsoring kids, serving on committees and working collaboratively to build the professional learning community in their schools. They merely evolved from informal to formal leaders.

Good school Vice-Principals and Principals do not define themselves by their title, take themselves too seriously, nor believe that they are the boss. They understand, value and respect the work of all the educators in the school, yet also take responsibility for asking difficult questions to help the school continuously grow and improve. They also accept that if they are doing the job well, not everyone is always going to like them, so it really helps to have a clear vision, grounded self-awareness and a healthy sense of humour.

It is important to understand the limitations of the 'system' we work in. In many districts, Principals are moved from school to school every five years or so, despite evidence that it takes longer for a leader to build trust and create positive change. Various stakeholders – students, teachers, support staff, parents, district staff, trustees and the Ministry of Education – have different and, at times, conflicting expectations of the school Principal, and this can pull you in many directions.

Secondary schools are very busy places. There are many long, eventful days filled with complex student and family crises, incidents requiring thorough investigation, as well as evening meetings and events, and these require energy and enthusiasm. Public education often faces funding challenges and schools are scrutinized and 'ranked' using incomplete and invalid criteria. Decades-long tensions exist between the provincial government and the teachers' union and every few years this discord can leave lingering distrust that can detract from creating ideal learning and working environments. Prescriptive – and at times inflexible – language entrenched in different collective agreements provides the Principal with little latitude in staffing and hiring decisions.

The mandate of schools continues to grow. Curriculum learning standards focused on 'knowing' have shifted to an emphasis on 'understanding' and 'doing', while developing cross-curricular competencies in our students. Schools are responsible for teaching digital literacy,

personal finance, physical and emotional well-being, and both social and personal responsibility. Societal trends such as increases in adolescent anxiety, depression, substance use and cyberbullying are added to the list of things we want our schools to solve.

I believe in the critical role that public schools play in sustaining a healthy, pluralistic democracy, and I embrace the challenge of our expanding mandate; nonetheless, it would be easy to become overwhelmed. While remaining current on best practices and new initiatives, the Principal must be clear on the school's vision and core purpose, be able to differentiate between what is urgent and what is really important and – above all – maintain a positive perspective.

Despite the complexity and challenges of the role, going to a modern, well equipped school every day with 1,200 or more capable adolescents and scores of dedicated educators is exciting, engaging and rewarding work. To persistently lament roadblocks to improvement is not leadership. Instead of focusing on what we cannot change, an effective leader looks for ways to build community, improve structures, processes and capacities with the people and capital the school has. The key to being an influential leader is to view all challenges through an appreciative lens by wondering, 'what are we doing now, why are we doing it, and how can we make this better for students?' Together, we are the system, and any positive change we hope to see is in our hands.

The Principal is responsible for understanding the professional work of all teaching and support staff. Influential staff will have worked at the school for many years before you arrived – and most know that they will be there long after you have departed – and this can be an obstacle to change. With very little formal or line authority, the currency of influence for Principals is effective communication and relationship building. To support meaningful growth, the Principal needs to understand the context of the school and constantly look to develop the capacity of others. Before they can influence innovation, Principals must earn trust and credibility by managing the school effectively, and the myriad and mushrooming list of organizational tasks can take enormous amounts of time and energy to do well. However, our role is not merely to manage an efficient school and keep everyone happy, but to gently yet persistently move the organization forward by asking good questions and, when necessary, have crucial conversations about our practices. This can be

challenging in a well-established place with a reputation for being a 'good school' and some will actively or passively resist.

“To support meaningful growth, the Principal needs to understand the context of the school and constantly look to develop the capacity of others.”

The Principal needs to be cognizant of the level of professional engagement and quality of work of each staff member, yet also have realistic expectations. It may be true that the further removed Principals are from the classroom, the more innovative we think we were when we were teaching every day. We must be mindful of the incredible challenges involved in preparing for and teaching seven classes and 200 increasingly diverse learners, day after day, for ten months. All educators are on a continuum of growth and the Principal must be aware of what is going on in individual teachers' lives. Some staff may need support to make it through each week while others need authentic opportunities to flourish as leading innovators in the school. All staff need to know they will be cared for and supported through personal or family crises or illness and that their Principal has integrity, is trustworthy and reliable. At the same time, the Principal must be willing to confront unacceptable practices and address those who are not meeting professional standards. Finding the right balance between kindness and directness, between caring and pushing, can create tension, but this is the very heart of the role and the art of effective leadership.

Serving as a school leader can seem lonely at times. Your relationships with some staff will change, and the complexity and volume of student and staff issues can seem overwhelming. In smaller elementary schools, Principals may not have Vice-Principals and this makes leading even more isolating. I have been fortunate to work with many very thoughtful admin team partners and together we shared ideas, strategies and the workload. Honest, daily conversations helped clarify our thinking and supported all three of us in our development as school leaders. Just the same, to gain new insights and perspectives, school-based administrators need to look beyond their immediate context for opportunities to connect with other educational leaders.

In our district, the secondary Principals and the Vice-Principals meet regularly, and these diverse and wise groups are a great resource and collective sounding board. Similarly, our district hosts monthly meetings that are open to all school-based and district administrators from all schools and sites. The agenda at these monthly meetings balances professional conversations with management topics and the gatherings foster a sense of connected community, shared purpose and vision across the school district. We have a local school administrators' association that includes elementary and secondary leaders together. The association represents the interests of all of us with the Board, and hosts regular study groups, professional development dinner meetings and a biennial retreat.

Finally, technology has opened up an expanding source of professional learning for school leaders. Every educator should consider connecting and engaging with a professional learning network on digital platforms in order to reflect on their practice with others around the province and the world. Our current global context has clearly shown that continuous improvement and integrating technology into our schools are important and, as leaders, we must model this in our own professional practice.

As school leaders, our role is to collaborate with others towards a common purpose and to build capacity – of individuals and of the professional culture of the organization – so that we plan for our own obsolescence. I have always believed that the mark of a truly effective Principal and leader is not that the school or organization struggled after their departure, but that it flourished. The work is important, challenging and complex and the conditions are rarely ideal, but this is the norm in every profession, and we are never alone. Ongoing dialogue and reflective work with our staff, our admin team partners, as well as other Principals and district leaders, are keys to developing our capacity to lead. I work in a community that places a high value on education, and with remarkably capable students who are interested in learning and engaging in their own success. Overwhelmingly, the colleagues I work with are dedicated, professional educators who care about students and are genuinely interested in being the best they can be. When viewed through this appreciative lens, serving as Vice-Principal or Principal and one of the school leaders is an honour and a privilege, every day.

***P.S.** The most important and influential people in education are those who spend their days interacting directly with our students. In my new role, I will strive to remember this and support their work, every day.*

Read more from Jim Allison at
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