

THE GIFT OF INVITATION

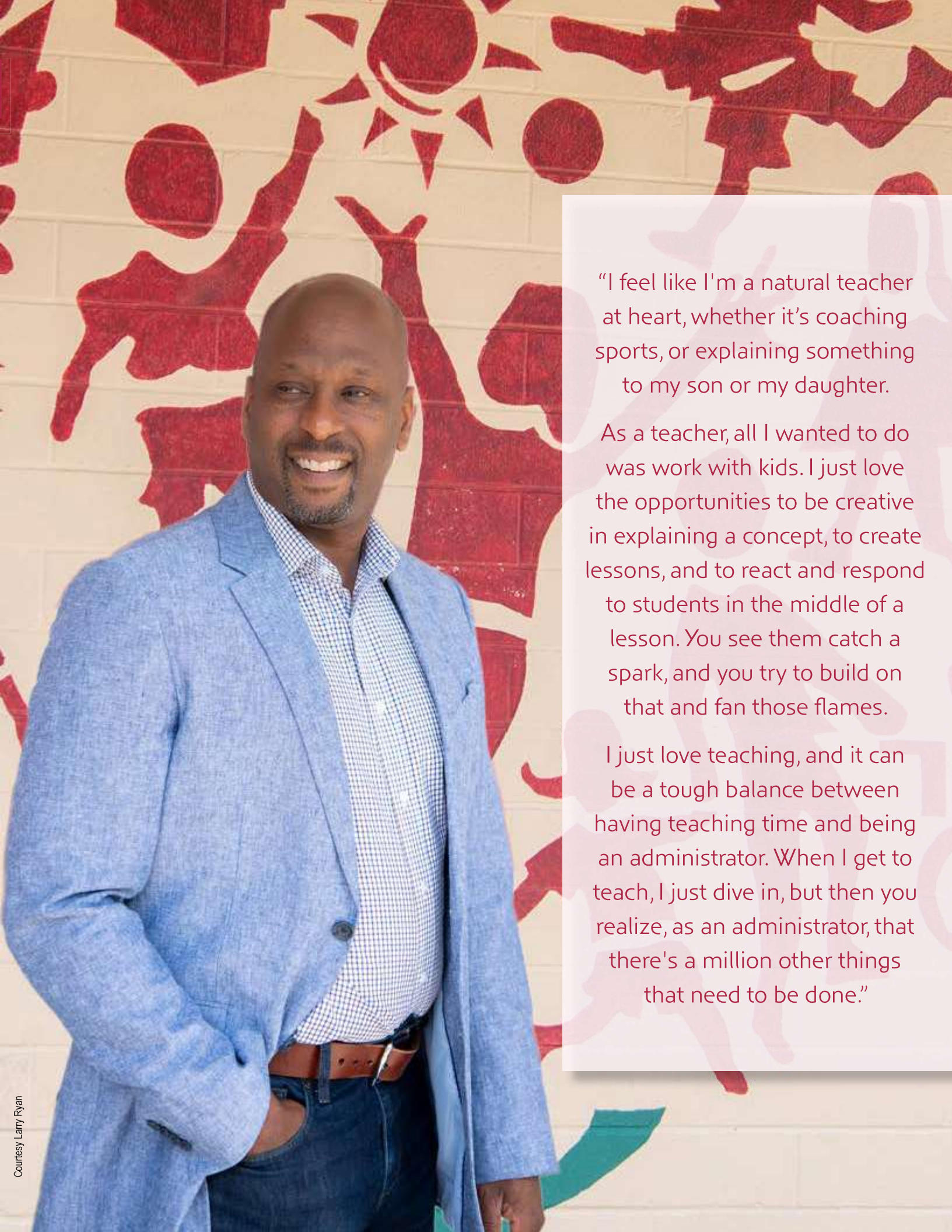
A 'RELUCTANT LEADER' SHARES HIS LEADERSHIP LEARNING

Larry Ryan always thought that he would be a psychologist. After completing his undergrad in psychology at SFU, he did not feel ready to take on his master's – and, beyond that, look ahead to a PhD – so he decided to work for a while. “I was already working with youth at risk during the summer,” Larry recalls, “doing summer camps and then working with some more challenging students, and I really loved that. I went on to do that full time, working for the YMCA and doing after school programs in partnership with the school district to identify kids that needed extra support and extra activities. Within a year, someone from the school district suggested that I come to work for them. So, I went on to be a youth worker.”

Larry was a youth worker for four years, and his direct supervisors were counselors from the different schools. “It really made me think, I want to do *that* job. A lot of my friends were teachers, and I had never felt cut out to be a teacher. I was told that if I wanted to be a counselor in a school, I had to get my teaching certificate. I decided to do that, solely as a

means to an end.” Larry went into PDP (Professional Development Program, Teacher Education) and was inspired; he had already been working in schools for four years, and had encountered many different teachers with many different styles. As he began teaching, he felt ready to pursue his purpose, working with youth at risk. He decided to work as a TTOC (Teacher Teaching on Call) first, in order to experience ‘normal’ classrooms, and gain some perspective.

Larry's journey as an educator has been supported by many people who recognized his potential, and reached out with opportunities. “I received a call after I finished PDP, asking me if I had ever considered working in a district behaviour program. I said that I *had*, but that I was trying to do something different, and that I had already worked in that area. They convinced me to take the position. I was responsible for both a youth worker and an EA (Education Assistant) and – without really knowing it – we were an integration type model. We were in a school with kids from all over the district, and our job was to get



“I feel like I'm a natural teacher at heart, whether it's coaching sports, or explaining something to my son or my daughter.

As a teacher, all I wanted to do was work with kids. I just love the opportunities to be creative in explaining a concept, to create lessons, and to react and respond to students in the middle of a lesson. You see them catch a spark, and you try to build on that and fan those flames.

I just love teaching, and it can be a tough balance between having teaching time and being an administrator. When I get to teach, I just dive in, but then you realize, as an administrator, that there's a million other things that need to be done.”

them used to being in the classroom. We would work with all the different age groups and teachers on those programs. Through that leadership – having my own staff with no budget – I engaged in a lot of leadership without recognizing that I was leading; at the time, it felt like surviving.”

After four years, Larry moved to a regular grade six/seven teaching position. “I loved it, and really poured myself into it. I was all about the kids, and I didn’t get involved in things like staff committees. At the time, there was an unfortunate situation at the school with staff infighting, to the point where mediators were brought in. Myself and my teaching partner remained neutral. The mediators met with each staff member, and they asked me if I knew that myself and my teaching partner were the only two staff members that everyone had trust in at that time. Of course, I didn’t know that.” Larry was asked to chair a committee, and that was yet another step towards leadership. “The school had a reputation over the next couple of years that discouraged good staff from joining the school, and that affected the kids. That’s when I said to myself that I would never again stand on the sidelines. Our school had imploded and, in the end, it hurt the kids.”

Larry was on the brink of continuing his education with his master’s in counselling when he received a call about a special teaching position in Burnaby. “It was called Community School Coordinator, and I had forgotten that, when I was a youth worker, most of the schools I worked at were community schools where I worked alongside those coordinators. There was a maternity leave, and someone brought up my name for the role. I said that it wasn’t the right time, because I was applying for my master’s.” The invitation caused Larry to reflect on the work he had been doing since university, how people had recommended him for those situations, and that he had been able to walk into those rich and meaningful experiences. He had always wanted to work with tougher kids; should he apply? “I applied, and I got the job. I remember distinctly at the end of the first week, I said this is the *best* job. I spent the rest of the year worried that I’d have to leave it, because it was a maternity role.

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Luckily, I was able to stay, and I worked in that role for eight years.”

The Community School Coordinator job led Larry to leadership in many different ways. He worked with the PAC, and worked very closely both with parents, and as the go-between for parents and teachers. He did community work with mayors and city councillors, and was the chairperson for grassroots community committees and professional committees. “For me, that was the shift. I never thought I could be an administrator, because I didn’t think I was a leader of adults until I started doing that job. I was working with Principals, and with school board trustees. People seemed to like that I was a different kind of leader.”

With the idea of working towards a role at the school board as the supervisor of Community School Coordinators, Larry decided to get a master’s in educational leadership. “This master’s really changed things for me. It helped dispel the idea that you have to be the expert, and focused on how you support people, come alongside of them, and work with them to build a team. Early on in my master’s, I made it clear that I wasn’t going to be a school Principal, I was going to do a different job. In the middle of my master’s, I said out loud to my classmates that I think I might apply to be a Principal, or go into school admin. They all laughed, and said, of course you are. Once I finished, I was on that track.”

Larry was successful in applying for a head teaching job in Burnaby. “In August, my first Principal said that he knew a lot of people who have worked with

me, that he saw his job as getting me into a Vice-Principal role and, in September, he mentioned that Coquitlam was hiring for a middle school VP. I was torn, because I had literally just started at the school; again, I almost didn't apply but at the last minute I did. I thought, I'm just going to do the interview. And less than four weeks later, they asked when I could start. So, I became an administrator, and I've been in SD 43 since 2017."

After five years at the middle school, Larry was looking for a change and was moved to his first secondary school. While he loved the challenge, he still had a clock in his head that was ticking to a principalship. Similar to his previous experience, he applied in October, interviewed in November, and got the call. In his interview, Larry had spent time talking about the leadership he learned as a Community School Coordinator; the district had someone leaving a community school, and Larry started at Seaview Community School in February 2022. "I've loved stepping back into a community school again, it's full circle for me. The philosophy of community school coordinators is that we're not trying to do it *for* people.

We're not trying to run everything. Instead, we're trying to bring more people into the conversation, and into shared leadership, especially when we're talking with parents. We want them to know that we are not going to run all the programs for them; we are helping them learn how to lead, and we are supporting them."

Larry feels humbled by the support that he has received through his career. "I've presented to groups a few times, and one of the things I talk about in my leadership learning is the gift of invitation. It's the idea of inviting people into a possibility – people did that for me. I was sometimes reluctant to hear it or accept it. But the more I heard it, the more I thought that maybe I *can* do that. Maybe there *is* something to it. So that's how I conduct my own leadership, by inviting people into the possibilities."

"I think it's because they saw it in me so early in my career. I'm the type of person who has to think about something for a long time, and play out the scenarios. In some ways, I wish I had started the journey towards school administrator a little bit earlier, but I have loved the experiences that I've had, so I wouldn't change



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that. It feels good when people see something, and encourage you. It is such a positive impact. Ten years ago, I would never be an administrator. Things can change when people set the table for you, and you feel you might be able to do it. You step into it, and you see they were right all along."

Larry has been mindful about offering support to others, and helping them to find the path that is right for them. "I never saw myself as a leader, and I'm now in this formal role, but all of my other roles and opportunities on the way were leadership. For me, it was almost like trying on the uniform, the clothing, of leadership. Other people may just jump right in, but I needed to take smaller steps and believe in my skills and abilities. When I talk to potential leaders, I first tell them that they already are leaders. They're leading in their way, and don't necessarily have the formal position or title to lead. You can lead from where you are. I talk about Benjamin Zander from the book, *The Art of Possibility*. He uses the example of the flutist in the orchestra who can lead from where she is just by doing her best and impacting the people around her; with her own positive energy, she has an effect. When you do certain things that aren't in your official role, people start looking towards you because you're the person who is positive, or the person who can organize, or the person who has passion around the work. All of a sudden, you're leading people.

"I want to encourage people to at least try it on; they can start small, and have impact. For people who really are thinking about going into admin, like those attending BCPVPA's Explorations for Aspiring School Leaders, I want to show them that there are different types of leadership. Early on, I had only a single vision of what a school leader was, but there is more than one type. I want people to see my

journey, because maybe they can see something of themselves, and know that it's okay to be different. We need diversity in all aspects of education – and in leadership in particular, because that's the way of the world. Supporting our students to achieve success requires all different types of leaders. One of the leadership groups that I now work with is the recently formed B.C. Black Educational Leaders Association (BCBELA). One of our goals is to be mentors and models for other educators of colour. We want them to consider taking leadership positions in education. I am proud to be an founding member of the executive and the Association.

"Staff need different types of leaders, too. And staff can lead in so many ways where I don't have the expertise. I used to think that because I wasn't an expert in everything, I wasn't going to be a good leader. Now I know that it's all about helping people, and bringing them alongside, or walking behind them."

Much of the joy in Larry's day comes from his interaction with kids. "At lunchtime, at recess, before and after school, once I've finished meeting with teachers, I'll walk through and talk to the kids. In my short time at the secondary school, I got an email from a parent saying that they didn't know what I did at lunchtime, but that their son and his friends in grade 11 and 12 were telling them that they love it when I come to hang out and talk. While there were some problems with some of the students in that group, I turned that into an opportunity to have, hopefully, a fun conversation. I try to treat everyone, including each child, as someone who wants to do their best. With high schoolers and middle schoolers, they're smart; they already know they are doing something wrong, so instead of scolding them, I can communicate it in a different way. The kids realize that I'm not there just to nail them on things, and that I expect them to behave in a way that we can have fun. It brings us together to talk, and I can find out about them and what they like to do. One of the guidance counsellors I worked with described it as my 'positive smiley attitude', and that's how I am with everyone. Sometimes, as leaders, we think we have to act a certain way to be respected and to get credibility. I understand that, but I think

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being yourself is important. I'm not saying that what I do is the only way to lead, but it works for me."

Like many educators, Larry cites his relationships with colleagues as a driving force in his growth and happiness as a leader. "During the pandemic, I had been a Vice-Principal for about three years, and I still felt new to the district. When things shut down, I didn't have any connection with colleagues and other administrators and that felt really, really lonely. When things opened up over that first summer, I purposely called all the people I thought I could connect with to see if we could get together. That has led to some good ongoing relationships." Larry also took the opportunity to expand his experience as a BCPVPA program facilitator for Explorations for Aspiring School Leaders. "When I was asked the first time, three years ago, to be a facilitator in the breakout groups, that was such great learning for me. It was hearing the guest speakers, but then hearing from the participants with their deep thoughts and questions. I enjoy participating in things where I can be challenged, where I can learn more and share my knowledge, and be part of a community. It's so important for any leader, especially as a Principal of an elementary school where you're the lone administrator."

Family has also been critical to Larry's joy in his work. "I have been very fortunate to have a wife and kids who have given me the opportunity to dive into leadership. The stability at home has helped me to spend the time needed to focus on schools and leadership. I also want to pay tribute to my father,

Alex, who passed away in June 2022. He was the leader of our extended family. He was the first one to come to Canada, to British Columbia, and he brought so many family members over here. Even in his work as a social worker, when he retired, they created a workplace award based on his character, his integrity in leadership and his ability to support others. I really modeled myself after that; to think that you could have a long career and they would create an award in your name – you were their boss, but they loved you so much."

"I am happy that my father got to see me become a Principal. It was in February 2022, the month he was diagnosed with cancer. He was very, very proud. So I continue to dedicate my thoughts to him, considering always, what would my dad do in this situation?"

Larry contemplates his own school experience, and how that is reflected in his leadership today. "When I was in elementary school, and in junior high school, I loved going to school because of everything that was happening. I wasn't a particularly great student, but I went every day because I loved hanging out with friends, and doing sports. So, I've tried to create those type of opportunities to build community. Something that I have introduced is monthly assemblies, and they can be a great opportunity to build leadership, and allow students to shine in different ways than they perhaps have in the past. We have students performing, making music. We have teachers coming up to give the land acknowledgement. We want it to be mostly student-led, but I believe that not everyone gets to see adults in these roles. I also take pictures and we produce a video montage – the kids love seeing themselves. I can put titles and subtitles in there that represent our growth mindset, the vision about being kind and working problems out peacefully. It allows us to hold up a mirror to see that we are doing great, and to project forward, to think ahead about what we want to be. That hour is so impactful, because everyone's together and getting the same message. Monthly assemblies are the epitome of everything that we do – they are a ton of work, but the impact is huge."

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Whether in the school or in the neighbourhood, Larry finds meaning in working with others. Part of the pathway towards building a community is fostering growth. "I think my purpose in life is to support people to be the best versions of themselves. That's the meaning of everything. Part of that is helping kids learn from the mistakes they've made. When that occurs, I try to put a spin on it and say, today you made a very big mistake, and the unfortunate part is that you can't take it back. It's still there, and it's caused harm. But there are opportunities to at least repair some of it, and maybe time will take care of the rest, but let's discuss what you can do that's within your control. When you can reinforce that you intend to support them, then they may make their apology, share their feelings, and hear from the other person. That's not easy, but it's necessary."

"It's meaningful to me to pass on the power of leadership. I can give that to staff, and even give a little bit to the kids, from kindergarten students all the way up to grade 12. And if they are not able to make a choice we think is appropriate, then we'll step in, but we'll talk about that. My purpose is to help kids grow into educated citizens. When students feel they have agency, power, and control, then they're more likely to take risks in their academic learning. Emotionally, if they don't feel like they have control and a level of say in their lives, and support behind them, they are not going to take those risks."

"At the end of the day, I want kids to know they were part of something special, and that they have the ability to then – in turn – lead in their own spaces."

I believe that every kid knows what's right or wrong, but it's how they make their choices. In our daily announcements, we started doing reminders about what it means to do the right thing, and why that is important. That was contagious: once we started that messaging, we saw a big improvement in some of the behaviours we had been seeing. I want kids to walk away knowing that they have the power to be a positive influence, wherever they go. They can do it by themselves, but sometimes you're not strong enough, and then you find the right people. That comes back to community."

Larry has some advice for educators who are considering a move to school leadership. "Find out if it's truly what you want to do. There are people who definitely know this is their path, and they should pursue leadership in a way that allows them to tap into their skill set and their authentic selves, and to find their fit: that could be at a different school, or even at the district level. If you are not embodying your authentic self, or you feel like you're being asked to be someone you are not, I don't think you will find the joy in the work. I think many teachers like the control that they have within their classroom, and the idea of losing some of that control may not be a fit. But when you find the right environment, and you know who you are as a person and as a leader, you can feel like you're not being controlled by outside forces all the time."

For those who aren't really sure, who aren't ready, or don't feel they are cut out to be in the role, I would say to try on as many leadership hats as you can. Try different things that your district may have, like teacher consultant jobs or teacher leader jobs; it may be a stretch for you, but you can try it rather than going right to the administrator role. I would say don't stay in a rut, or in the same vein. If you're a reluctant leader like I was, you can try a series of smaller steps down that path. Ask for leadership opportunities, seek them out: you will recognize it once you find the joy, and realize that you actually like leading people."



@laryan70