



# CHOOSING TO LEAD

by  
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*A Surrey Vice-Principal Reflects on Year One in the Role*

**Not long ago, my husband told me I should think about earning a master's degree so that one day I could become an administrator.**

Being in formal leadership himself, he seemed to have recognized some leadership qualities in me, and had confidence that this was to be my ultimate path. I remember laughing at him, acknowledging that I saw the value in upgrading my degree but that there was no envisaged universe that would include me as an administrator. Why? "Because I love working with kids," I said.

As tends to be the case, he ended up being right in predicting my career trajectory. But what changed for me? I still stand by my original sentiment. Kids are the reason we all do this work. It has to be, otherwise the glitter of summer break wears off very quickly. Now, having completed my first year as a secondary Vice-Principal, I can share with you some of the ways I have kept it all about the kids, and how I've rediscovered the joy in my work through this new role.

When I started at Lord Tweedsmuir, I was reminded in the kindest way possible that for the duration of my tenure, I would be a *guest* in 'their' building ('their' being 'staff and students'). A harsh truth, but a truth nonetheless. As an administrator, you are there for a relatively short time and – as a new-to-role leader – your first years are spent figuring out who's who and how things are done. You then have even less time remaining to make an impact. Your job is to bring out the best in others, but you can't do this until you really get to know who the others are, and what they're about.

As you're navigating the complexities of relationship-building, you simultaneously go from de facto the most competent you have ever been in your professional career to a place where every little thing is a learning exercise. At this point, it can be hard to feel like you're competent at anything. These are the growing pains of transitioning into formal leadership. There are moments where you question it all. It is critical in those moments that you keep a firm foothold in your values. If you don't yet know what those are, figure

them out, because you will be tested in this work. All other things being equal, your values will remain your compass through murky waters. I love summer break for this reason because it allows me uninterrupted time to reflect on my practice with a fresh energy, and a chance to clarify my values and set myself up for success in the year ahead. While you reflect, make a habit of reminding yourself of what you've accomplished. Leaders, especially new-to-role leaders, are particularly good at being self-critical. It's easy to pick apart our own mistakes, even ruminate on them. Cut yourself some slack, and if you notice a colleague doing something great, tell them about it.

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Nascent leadership isn't all doom and gloom, so let's get to the good stuff: the best part about this role is being able to connect deeply with kids as whole learners and as human beings. You get to observe their growth during some of their most formative years. Yes, you can absolutely do this as a classroom teacher, but as an administrator you are lucky enough to follow a student as they transition across multiple grade levels.

You do, however, need to be intentional about creating opportunities for connection with both students and staff. Your busy schedule doesn't often allow for



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spontaneous moments to fall into your lap (though there are rare, joyful occasions when they do). Don't wait around for these unicorns – it can be easy to spend your day holed up in your office if you aren't careful. I colour-code my day-planner to help me identify how I spend my time each day, and the visual cues are helpful in determining if I am being swallowed up by paperwork. Establish a routine of connection. A big difference between classroom teaching and administration is the unpredictable nature of our work, so if you want something to be done, be explicit about integrating it into your schedule. And that is the beauty

of building your own schedule: you can change the narrative to suit your leadership. For example, you can flip the script on the notion that a student only sees the Vice-Principal when they're in trouble. You can instead invite students in for a congratulatory conversation about their recent successful project, or volunteer to participate in staff-versus-student intramurals at lunch time. Kids notice these types of things and it makes any hard conversations easier down the road. And, most importantly, it brings joy to our work.



"Tweedy" Admin: Harjot Ghuman, Robin Smalley, Danielle Garbe, Dana Miller

With staff, the story is similar. Sometimes I connect with staff over the most mundane stuff. It's tough being a new administrator in a large school, especially when we started the year under a mask mandate. Good luck trying to learn everyone's faces and names! But frame every interaction as an opportunity to connect, and you will learn more. Stay curious, and others will feel comfortable about opening up. Even if you're just filling out an injury report or helping a staff member navigate MyEdBC, you'd be surprised at how these moments can provide glimpses into the practices and passions of your staff.

There is no guidebook for how to do this job. Yes, you have a fiduciary duty to act in the best interest of your stakeholders, including your employer and especially your students. You are also obligated to conduct yourself professionally in accordance with Board policies and within the parameters of the BCPVPA (or similar) Code of Ethics. But exactly how you define your role within this framework – how you articulate your values, and your purpose, through your work – is up to you. And this is where you can make the magic happen, and say, "I chose to be an administrator *because* I love working with kids".