

Working with your PAC



by

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in collaboration with Lee Riemer

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**How a
collaborative
approach
and a culture
of gratitude
creates positive
engagement**



The potential leaders among us are sometimes too humble to step into a leadership opportunity unless invited to do so. In June 2020, I was on a virtual call with our Parent Advisory Council (PAC) executive and the PAC president was resolute that she did not wish to continue in that role. Despite several pleas to the parent community, no successor stepped forward. The executive was discouraged by the complacency of their fellow parents. My experience with non-profit boards had taught me that individuals rarely take on volunteer positions of responsibility when we put out generic calls, and are much more likely to respond when the request is personalized. With that in mind, I suggested that perhaps the next president was on the screen in front of us, and directly asked our PAC treasurer and secretary to consider the role. To everyone's surprise and relief, Lee Riemer – our treasurer at the time – said he would take on the task. What followed was a year of exceptional, authentic leadership and collaboration with a PAC that impressed me beyond what I had previously experienced. After months of sharing enthusiastic stories about our amazing PAC with colleagues, family members, and friends, I realized that – after

more than fifteen years of being a BCPVPA member – I had a story to share with a broader audience.

Upon reflection and in preparing for this article, Lee and I identified three approaches to his PAC presidency which had a key impact on the PAC's ability to increase parent engagement by creating a positive climate. To begin, Lee set a goal for himself to carry out his role with intention, and in keeping with the ideas articulated in the PAC mission statement. Second, he determined to create a culture of gratitude where parent and staff efforts received recognition throughout the school year. And third, he chose to delegate roles to others as a way of sharing the many responsibilities that can easily overwhelm a PAC president. With a focus on intentionality, gratitude, and delegation, Lee created an inviting community where parents were motivated to participate. As he built trust within the parent community, he similarly connected with the school's administration and staff with the same degree of optimistic engagement. He energized our PAC to develop a strong sense of community based on caring relationships.

It was a warm Victoria evening when our Vice-

Frances Krusekopf and Lee Riemer



Principal Tammy DeLeenheer and I first experienced Lee's energy. We arrived at his house for a meet-and-greet to get to know the PAC executive members in an informal setting. The impression I was left with that evening, that Lee was friendly and positive while also organized and purposeful, proved to be the norm for all the initiatives he led as PAC president. Lee welcomed us with two ice-breaker questions: "What is one thing you're looking forward to in the fall? And one thing you are dreading?" He then nonchalantly pulled a whiteboard out from behind his deck chair and presented us with a proposed PAC mission statement. Politely, he solicited our input, incorporated some minor feedback, and then announced the PAC statement that would guide the new school year. *"Create a 'World Class' educational community for our students. Support Staff ~ Encourage Parents ~ Love Kids"*. Tammy and I left Lee's home that night in awe of his enthusiasm to shape a PAC with intention. Not surprisingly, his eagerness was contagious, and the first on-line PAC meeting had an impressive turnout of about fifty participant families.

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The move to online PAC meetings will likely become one of the silver linings of our pandemic experience, and something that will carry on. I imagine our PAC was not alone in enjoying a significant increase in participation with a move to virtual meetings. The pandemic also reminded us that it takes an engaging chair and agenda to keep an on-line meeting format viable. Lee's positive energy and innovative spirit ensured that the PAC 'events', as he renamed the monthly meetings, stayed dynamic, allowing him to sustain unprecedented participation numbers – from 30 to 50 parents – for the entire school year. With a backdrop of the family piano, guitar, and globe, Lee's PAC online events began with an acknowledgement

of our local First Nations territory, a quick reference to the PAC mission statement, and a review of the event agenda, all aided by accompanying PowerPoint slides. His cheery nature made you want to be there, and his creative agenda ensured that you would stay, even if the event went over time... which it often did! He brought in monthly speakers or guests to 'encourage parents' as articulated in the mission statement. The presenters ranged from our new counselor, to a parent who is a professional musician, to a consultant addressing the topic of creating balance with media use. Lee would seek input about potential speakers from PAC VP Kim Guiry, but often he would also follow his intuition, exploring topics that were timely or of interest to him. Lee often arranged for a fellow PAC member to interview the guest, talk-show style, while staying engaged himself by asking his own questions and ending with positive feedback for the presenters.

Beyond speakers, Lee introduced door prizes such as gift cards or children's socks as a perk to entice participants to the online events. Recognizing the importance of delegating roles to others, Lee solicited the help of parent Sarah Doerksen who collected donations from local businesses to distribute as door prizes. The door prizes were a hit. With the enthusiasm of a game show host, Sarah awarded them to randomly selected event participants. Shout outs, where Lee thanked parents or staff for their efforts, became another agenda highlight. He wanted parents to feel that the energy and time they put into raising \$500 was more than a line item in a financial report and worthy of celebration. In Lee's year-end report, he noted that more than 55 gift cards and thank you cards were given out to key PAC volunteers throughout the school year. This gratitude was also extended to staff who received a personal gift bag in May. By creating a culture of gratitude, he wanted to acknowledge that people's efforts meant a lot.

Lee took on difficult issues with equal finesse. Early on in his tenure as president, both of us learned of proposed catchment changes that would relocate our school's French Immersion program. Together with a parent advocacy committee, Lee acted quickly, handling this concern with diplomacy and an appropriate sense of urgency. PAC provided a

safe space for parents to ask questions, share their opinions, and communicate their perspectives to the school district. Lee understood, and embraced, the potential to expand PAC's impact beyond the usual focus on fundraising initiatives, and to advocate for the 'world class' educational community that was identified in the mission statement.

Lee and I met in my office each Wednesday morning for most of the year. Regular meetings with the school's PAC president were a practice I had initiated in the past with those who had the time and interest. These meetings would unfold informally, each of us bringing forward issues or upcoming events that would benefit from discussion and advance planning. I recognized that dedicating time and space, outside of scheduled PAC meetings, helps develop a positive working relationship with the school's PAC president. It was also a way to demonstrate to the school community that my door truly is open to parents, a particularly important message during the pandemic. As it turns out, meeting with me regularly to establish a strong working relationship was quite intentional on Lee's part. He wanted to affirm my leadership and our teamwork to the parent community, which he often did during the online PAC events.

Lee and I soon discovered that we had common interests that related to assuming a leadership role. Of note was the morning when Lee asked me about my favourite books on my bookshelf. Professional literature, whether specifically related to education or more broadly to leadership, has directly influenced my practice as a school leader. I was heartened that Lee took notice of my collection of books and even more excited to pull out several books such as Margaret Wheatley's *Turning to One Another* and share their significance. In exchange, Lee offered up a few suggestions of his own, including *Deep Work* by Cal Newport, and it became clear to me that reading had influenced his leadership style as well.

As the year ended, Lee informed me that his family would be changing schools to attend their new neighbourhood catchment school. Knowing that he was leaving our community did not change Lee's commitment: the positive PAC spirit he had helped to create stayed strong. Together with the PAC, plans

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were made for an end-of-school year ice cream day, a Grade 5 celebration, and grant initiatives with the Capital Regional District and ArtStarts in Schools. Without any difficulty, Lee was able to find a successor to take on the PAC president role. Interestingly, next year's executive will be comprised of two mothers and two fathers. I am certain that our community will benefit from their diverse perspectives.

In an unprecedented school year, where elementary school parents were rarely seen inside of the school building because of pandemic restrictions, our PAC flourished. I attribute that largely to Lee's positive and purposeful leadership style, his focus on gratitude, and his ability to delegate responsibilities to others while still providing support. "Way to go, team!" Lee said at the end of one of his PAC online events. It was true: despite all the COVID-19 challenges, our PAC functioned as a successful team this past year. Perhaps because parents were unable to help in typical ways inside the building, they were more motivated to take on different PAC roles to show support. How grateful I am that Lee provided a welcoming forum to encourage them to do so.

At the end of his online events, Lee would sign off with fellow parents by saying "I will see you on the playground." While I will be disappointed not to see Lee on our playground this fall, I know his year of leadership made a difference to our school community. As Principals, we understand that working successfully with your PAC is critical. Collaborating with a PAC as keen, effective, and innovative as the one I experienced this past year was a real treat and has become my new standard.