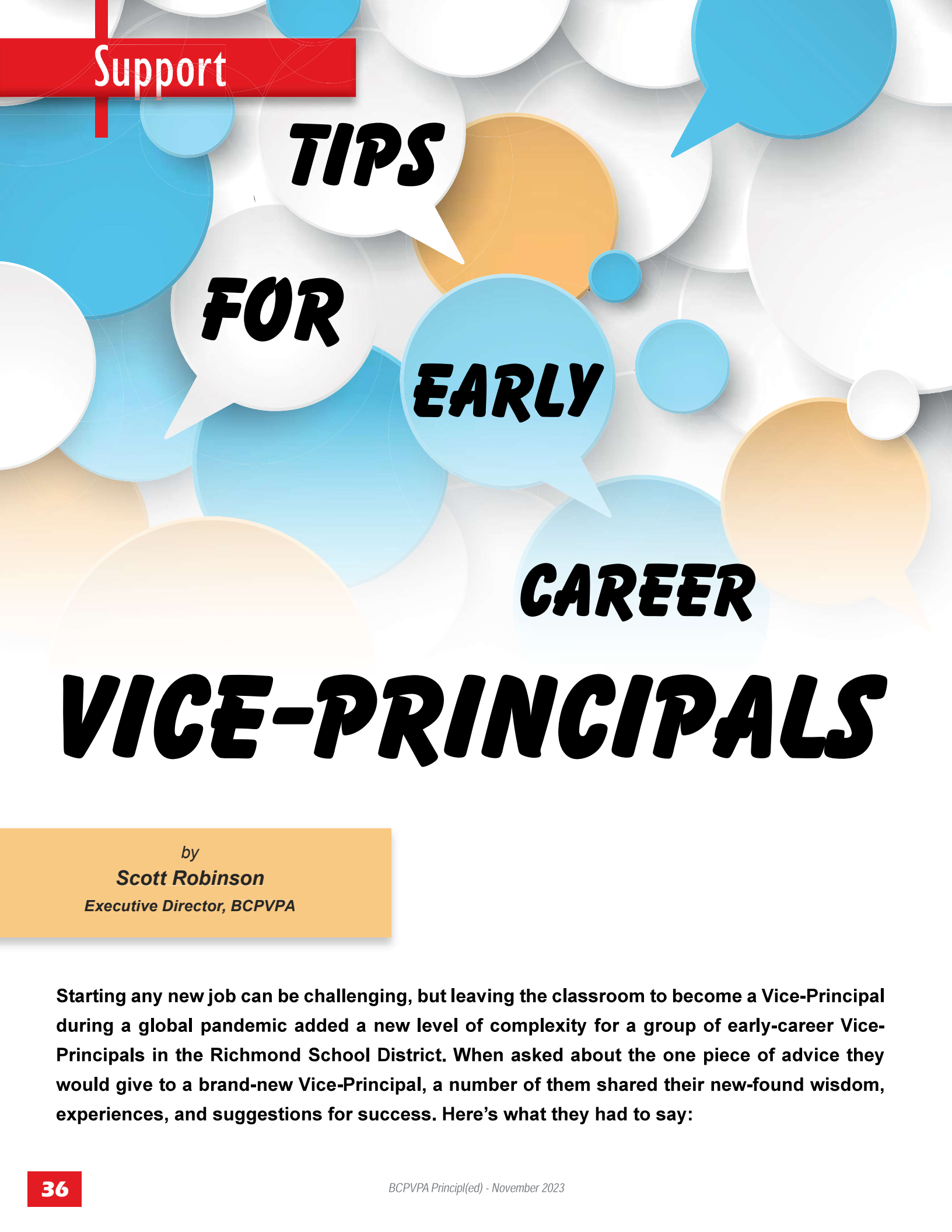




Support

TIPS

FOR

EARLY

CAREER

VICE-PRINCIPALS

by

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Starting any new job can be challenging, but leaving the classroom to become a Vice-Principal during a global pandemic added a new level of complexity for a group of early-career Vice-Principals in the Richmond School District. When asked about the one piece of advice they would give to a brand-new Vice-Principal, a number of them shared their new-found wisdom, experiences, and suggestions for success. Here's what they had to say:



PART 1

1. PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS

It's all about relationships: people first, tasks second! Take the time to invest in your people. Without question, the number one tip for incoming Vice-Principals is to build authentic, supportive relationships that are based in kindness. The advice was simple, yet powerful: take the time to get to know everyone in your school community, regardless of their role, and treat everyone with kindness and respect. The most worthwhile investment you can make as a beginning school leader is to invest time in your people, understand who they are as human beings, and demonstrate that you care. Is it easy? No. Does it take time away from tasks? Yes. Is it 100% worthwhile. *Absolutely.*

2. DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS AND SEEK HELP

Coming in at number two is the importance of asking questions and seeking help. The new Vice-Principals were unanimous in their agreement that, *"the learning curve is steep, you can't be expected to know everything on the first day – or even during the first year – and you will inevitably find yourself responsible for something about which you knew nothing a year ago."* There is a lot to learn, so do not be afraid to reach out to colleagues, talk to your admin partner(s), and 'grow your bench' of those people who are just a year or two ahead of you on their journey. They likely just lived your experience, and will be an invaluable resource.

It's okay not to know; it's *not* okay to pretend you know when you don't. Rely on others, and do not think of reaching out as 'taking their time'; think of it as an opportunity for both people to connect, share experiences, and build a connection. Who knows – one day the other person might need your help, too!

3. **DEVELOP A NETWORK OF TRUSTED COLLEAGUES**

Along the theme of connecting to others for help lies the strategy of developing a network of trusted colleagues. Grow, connect, communicate with, and tap into the wonderful network of people around you. As one administrator put it, *“it’s easy to fall into a pattern of working in a silo as things get busy but, as new administrators, it’s far more powerful to keep learning as we go, to ask questions, stay curious, admit when we don’t know how to do something, have fun, laugh at our mistakes and tap into the network of people around us.”* It’s likely that your district will have administrators who are just starting out, those who are retiring, and many in between. That range of experience is vast, and most people are more than willing to be a part of your network and answer any questions you may have. In turn, you will be able to share your own knowledge and experiences as you grow in your role.

4. **KEEP STUDENTS AT THE CENTRE OF EVERY DECISION**

From the moment we all became teachers, we have focused our time, energy, passion, and commitment on our students, keeping them at the centre of every decision. This becomes even more important when, as a Vice-Principal, we find the level of complexity around decision-making grows exponentially. School administrators encounter daily situations in which there are multiple perspectives and competing priorities from the adults in the room. Keeping the student at the centre of every decision is your compass that offers a strong and compelling direction within otherwise complex decision-making processes.

5. **BE OPEN & TRANSPARENT IN YOUR DECISION-MAKING**

In the busyness of the job, it’s easy to forget to keep people in the loop, and sometimes tempting to avoid conversations that involve hard decisions. Having open and transparent communication is critical if you want to build trust and strengthen relationships with those you lead. Being open and sharing the decision-making process helps people to understand your thinking. Others may not always agree with your decision, but if you’ve kept the interests of students at the centre and have communicated your rationale, most people will accept your decision even if it would not have been their first choice. Without that transparency, people start to write their own narratives to fill in the gaps, which often leads to misunderstandings, misperceptions, and eroded trust. As a school leader, investing the time in communication and transparency will go a long way.

6. **DEVELOP AN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR YOU**

New Vice-Principals often do not anticipate the magnitude and complexity of information they will need to track in their roles. A strong recommendation from early career colleagues is to create systems early on that will enable you to organize, track, and easily access the volume of electronic and paper information that will come across your desk. Some suggestions:

- Create a system for tracking notes from meetings, requests from staff members, and other notes you take in the course of your work. This might be in an electronic form, or in an old-school notebook. Do whatever works for you, but create something early on to avoid losing track of everything that will come your way.
- Set aside time each week to review and respond to district communications: expect a fairly large volume, especially at certain times of the year.
- Organize your email into folders, setting rules in your email program to direct emails into specific folders.
- Find and use a calendar system that will work for you, either electronically, on paper, or both.
- Create timelines for larger projects such as timetabling, or communicating student learning processes, and enter reminders in your calendar.
- Schedule weekly ‘organization’ time – even just for 15 minutes – where you look ahead and plan for upcoming projects and action items.
- Connect with more experienced colleagues, and ask them how they prioritize during busy days. One Vice-Principal pointed out that, *“the reality is that, on any given day, the office can feel like a bit of an emergency room triage centre on a busy day...we need to be able to reassure everyone demanding our attention that all their issues are important, and you want to make the time to have a conversation with them...”*. Having an effective system in place will help pre-empt tasks being missed, balls being dropped, and the potential for eroded trust from those who rely on you to follow through.

7. PAY ATTENTION TO SELF-CARE

Being a new Vice-Principal is a demanding job, and it’s critical that you set aside time to find ways to take care of yourself. Try your best to eat well, get some exercise, and get a reasonable amount of sleep. It’s not always easy, especially in those early days, but carving out scheduled time for yourself will pay off in the long run. As one Vice-Principal put it, *“the airplane emergency procedure always specifies to give yourself oxygen first before you help others. This philosophy also applies to you and your ability to effectively lead”*. It is easy to throw up your hands and say, ‘I don’t have the time for myself’, but, ultimately, those who can find even a few minutes here and there to look after themselves report a far higher ability to be effective in their roles. If it’s important, make it a priority and schedule it in your calendar. You’ll thank yourself later!

With many thanks to the early-career Vice-Principals of the Richmond School District for their willingness to share their experiences and new-found wisdom.

**Stay tuned for Part Two of our series
"Tips for Early Career Vice-Principals"
in the next issue of *Principl(ed)* magazine**