

# Adminfo

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**Sustaining leadership,  
supporting students**

# The many forms of leadership

BCPVPA President Jameel Aziz writes about the multi-faceted roles of principals and vice-principals.

Those of us who are principals and vice-principals often think about our role as educational leaders and ways that we can enhance that

aspect of our responsibilities. When we speak of leadership, what are we referring to? Are we talking about communicating new and innovative ideas? Are we talking about focusing on specific promising strategies to affect a change in an area the school community has deemed important? Are we talking about setting an example of best practice for others to follow? The answers to these questions and many others should be a resounding yes.

Depending on our training, level of experience, familiarity with technology and time allotment, educational leadership can take many forms. The key is to not think of it as being one thing or one type of activity. It cannot be mandated or prescribed and what works for one school community and school leader may not be the right fit for another.

The challenge is to keep 'leadership' in the forefront of our thinking and to share it from a place that is honest and natural. All parties in our system can easily



identify when someone is passionate about what they are doing and when they are going through the motions. An educational leader is an "ear" as much as a "voice." Engagement of the participating parties is key to the success of any initiative. Time becomes our best ally and our worst foe. We know that we have to put in the time to talk to our teachers, students and parents but where do we find it amongst the hundreds of other organizational items and mandates that we have on our plates?

Currently many school leaders are using Twitter, blogs, web pages and other forms of technology to communicate with our school communities. Many of us are looking to go paperless but we also recognize that many people like to have something tangible and "in hand" to read from and get their information. The decisions on communication forms can be as important as the type of communication that you send out. It requires a conversation with the community and stakeholder groups. It is not enough to say we are go-

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# Intense moral purpose

Having left the classroom to become a principal, an educator reflects on how to create positive, healthy learning environments for all students.

by Jill Jensen

“Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side ... These are the answers to what is most important in this world.”

Jon J. Muth, *The Three Questions* (2002)

As a principal, one of my greatest challenges is staying focused on what is most important and eliminating, or at least limiting, distracters. At any given moment there are a plethora of items on which I could focus my attention — a meager budget, a broken window, writing a message for the newsletter, figuring out what to do with 25 full sets of hockey gear that are sitting in the office, checking up on a report of vandalism in a bathroom, making sure all of our classrooms have working technolo-

gy, job action issues and responding to email. My to-do list is endless, but it is the least important part of my work.

The reason I agreed, ten years ago, to leave my classroom and “enter the office” was a belief that I could improve learning opportunities and life chances for more students than I could as a teacher. I believed that I could do more to create positive, healthy learning environments for all students, especially those who are disadvantaged. I still believe that I can make a difference, but my

perspective has changed. I know that the choices I make for our school are important. The choices I make for individual students are crucial.

I would like to tell you about Linda\*, a student who teaches me daily about the value of intense moral purpose, trust, and relationships (*\*details have been changed for privacy*). She also keeps me constantly reconsidering effective student discipline! Linda is not appreciated by many adults and is often the scapegoat when trouble occurs. She is being raised, with her siblings, by her grandparents. She is one of the most intelligent people I know,

I am passionate about my work as a principal because I know that teachers and schools make a difference. We change lives and give life chances to children who might otherwise be lost. At the heart of all we do are the learners in our care.

but neither Linda nor many adults believe this. Linda is often bored in school, does little work, and hands in nothing. She is intimidating to other students because of her dark, brooding demeanor. She has suffered abuse and generally feels that life is futile. She is quick-witted, artistic and fiercely loyal to her family and her culture.


Last year, Linda's mother, who hadn't been part of her life for several years, returned. Understandably, there were adjustments and uneasiness; Linda did not know if her mother would stay around for long. We had the opportunity to talk often as Linda was a regular (daily) visitor to the office for a variety of reasons. Sometimes she just needed a few minutes of quiet in her day. One morning after she had been sent in for throwing snowballs, we were talking and I asked her what her world would be like if she were

able to control everything, if she had that power. Her response was, "My mom would get up on her own." I suddenly realized how little I understood about her life. I thought I knew Linda because we had spent time together and talked daily.

I learned from this experience with Linda that there are many things I take for granted and that the "little" things are not little, but significant. I appreciate the time Linda and I spent together in the office talking, eating, playing chess, drawing, carving or just sitting. I am not her

family, but I can give her my time and my attention. She is a student we could easily lose, in many ways. She is the most important reason I am an educator.

I am passionate about my work as a principal because I know that teachers and schools make a difference. We change lives and give life chances to children who might otherwise be lost. At the heart of all we do are the learners in our care. We have a responsibility to each of them.

"Those in positions of responsibility – educational leaders – have to carry the burdens of being proactively responsible for changing those things which they have some control over in order to alleviate disadvantage and promote the deeply human fulfillment of young people." (Starratt, 2004, cited in Kaser and Halbert, 2009, p.22). 

Jill Jensen is principal of J. Alfred Laird Elementary in Invermere and has been a member of the BCPVPA since 2003. She can be reached at [jill.jensen@sd6.bc.ca](mailto:jill.jensen@sd6.bc.ca)

## Know More

Kaser, L. & Halbert, J. (2009). *Leadership Mindsets: Innovation and Learning in the Transformation of Schools*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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Editor

Richard Williams

# Farewell to the Lone Ranger

A retired principal from Coquitlam outlines a district program to support new principals and sustain school leadership.

by Greg McNally

We were often surprised how many principals operated like the Lone Ranger searching the landscape entirely on their own hoping to find the solution for the challenges that faced them. Only a few principals sought advice from colleagues, most felt confiding in colleagues was perceived as administrator weakness, admission of incompetency, risky and time consuming.

Recent literature confirms what those of us in the field have known for some time: the principal has a pivotal leadership role and influence on the culture, climate and ethos of a school in its work toward continuous improvement for students. Given the important role principals play in schools and the looming shortage of qualified candidates to fill these leadership roles vacated by increasing numbers of principals and vice-principals moving into retirement, what can be done to ensure that this leadership is sustained? Researchers point out that school districts can offer mentoring support to new

principals thus helping them avoid the typical sink or swim survival experience — and, at best, merely learning to ‘dogpaddle’ in their first administrative position. In this article I describe a form of mentoring that holds promise for supporting new principals, sustains leadership and is not a high cost item for school districts.

One month after retiring from rewarding careers as school administrators my colleague and I became involved in a pilot project initiated by the school district in consultation with the local principals’ and vice-principals’ association to support school administrators. The district

saw this initiative as an important feature in addressing the fact that 19 principals at the elementary level, representing 42% of all elementary principal positions, were either new to their schools or new to their positions. Additionally, the district profile of administrators revealed almost 70% of all elementary principals had five years or less experience in their roles. Clearly a significant knowledge and experience gap existed between new and seasoned principals. From the outset, there was an acknowledgment by everyone involved in the project that principals new to their position or new to their school assignment

need help as they start out. The district believed one way to bridge the gap and benefit principals in building capacity for leadership was ready access to a recently retired veteran administrator.

The district mutually agreed with us that the Pilot Project and our engagement with school administrators would only succeed built on the bedrock of trust and absolute confidentiality, anything less would be like setting a foundation on sinking sand. This agreement meant that there would be no identification of individuals or schools allowing principals to voice candid concerns knowing that whatever was said would remain confidential. In short, there was no expectation of 'reporting out' and no high stakes 'performance evaluation' process.

### Access to Support

Support was offered to all school administrators but elementary principals who were new to their positions or new to a school took priority. Access to support could be requested by individual principals without going through district central office. In other words, school administrators could choose to make direct contact with the mentor by phone, email or arrange a face-to-face meeting on site or off site with the understanding that confidentiality would be maintained between the mentor and the school administrator at all times.

### Differentiated Support

The assistance offered was differentiated and characterized as consultative, collaborative and coaching support.

Consultative support was frequently employed and focused on sharing of vital information about how the district and the school operate as a

system. It also included contextual advice about policy, procedure and practice for consideration or deliberation by the school administrator. The advice could include a suggested strategy for implementing change or explanations for gaining understanding of policy, procedure or practice. Our role was advisory and intended to guide, not monitor, administrator action. Similarly, we were cautious not to superimpose our own prescriptions or remedies for situations and decision-making to school administrators.

Collaborative support involved mutually generating possible reasons or causes for a particular circumstance or event, a variety of ideas or strategies aimed at problem solving and potential solutions or interventions holding promise for resolution. The discourse and dialogue arising in these discussions then became the stimulus in forming uniquely distinct ideas that were fitting for the situation and context of the school site. This kind of support was nearly as frequent as consultative support.

Coaching support with principals was almost always preceded by at least consultative support and usually included elements of collaborative support. Our coaching intent was to bolster, scaffold and probe a principal's thinking, problem-solving and goal clarification. It was less about information sharing and more about going deeper, reflecting on practice and decision-making through a process that

encouraged self-directed learning. We found this kind of support challenging and complex as mentors because it required us to stay sharp in using structured communication skills like paraphrasing, impression checking and clarifying. Coaching tended to evolve over time with a few individual principals; consumed more 'mentor' time and was more relationship-oriented.

### Entry and Awareness

Assisting individuals in gaining self-awareness about emerging or even existing issues or concerns that may be blocking efficacy of a school assumes that time and energy are devoted to exploring and discovering what is known and what is not known about organizational climate and culture. For that reason, as mentors, we discovered early on to initiate contact with school principals and not wait for the school to make contact with the mentor. The goal here was bringing awareness to the forefront through informal discussion and open-ended questions. In several instances it was apparent that new principals lack experience anticipating things that could quickly cause havoc and shipwreck as they encountered uncharted waters. Quite simply, 'they didn't know what they didn't know.' Our task



was helping principals 'sound' these waters and chart them before hitting rocks.

## Timing

In our work we saw demands on school administrators peak at certain times of the school year, namely, school startup in September, the spring staffing process and planning for next year's school organization and the close of the school year. From our experience we found timely contact by a mentor at these peak periods prudent, often averting potential calamities. We found most principals (even experienced ones) were, at these times, overwhelmed by rising system expectations and subsequent demands impacting principal time and energy. At the same time, we also found that these peak periods did not preclude assistance needed when 'episodic' challenges can and do arise unexpectedly for school administrators at any time of the school year.

## Nuts and Bolts

Nuts and bolts, or how things work in a school, are part of the mentor's mandate in providing assistance. The nuts and bolts of a principal's work are often centered upon managing a school. Management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning climate are primary responsibilities for principals. We found the following management topics were a helpful starting point in our discussions with novice principals that then led into a dialogue surrounding aspects of leadership:

- Policies and procedures arising from the *School Act*, District Administrative procedures and regulations.
- Collective Agreements: What do they say? What do they

mean?

- Forms, for example, 1701, 1601, Consultation forms, etc.
- Staffing & Personnel: What is the process for allocation of staffing to a school? What is the process for selecting staff?
- Finances: How much money does the school have? How do you access it? How is it tracked? How is it dispersed? Are budgets designated?
- Information: How is information shared and dispersed? What information is disseminated?
- Record Keeping: Where is vital information kept? How is it stored? How is it retrieved? Who looks after maintaining it?

Another important feature of the nuts and bolts of a principal's work is gaining understanding about the unique features of a school's culture. We used the term 'social dynamics' to identify parts of a school's culture by exploring with principals questions about the following topics:

- Exploration of organizational norms and how people are 'normed' into the culture?
- Are there facets of the norms that are positive? Negative?
- Do people have ownership in the goals of the school?
- Staff relations, what are they?
- Who are the formal leaders, informal leaders?
- Meeting protocols,

for example staff meetings, how are they conducted?

- Patterns of communication: What are they? What have you observed?
- Decision-making: Is there a process? What is it? Is it followed?
- What are the traditions of the school and who are the guardians?

These questions served as a starting point, not a prescription, in opening avenues of awareness, discussion and understanding, all with the intent of extending learning for practice and helping principals go beyond just dogpaddling in their craft.

Mentor feedback to district officials in concert with the local principals' and vice-principals' association was an important feature of the Pilot Project. The nature of our feedback was systemic, meaning that emerging patterns of system problems or concerns were identified along with



Rod Maclean is a former Surrey principal. For a weekly cartoon email Rod at [ramaclean@shaw.ca](mailto:ramaclean@shaw.ca)

recommendations for change in practice or policy. Feedback did not identify administrators or schools. This feedback included awareness about the challenges facing school administrators new to their position or new to their school. It also included suggestions for 'norms of practice' that we believe would benefit the district in the leadership growth and development of school administrators. Some feedback:

**Training:** Is varied and different from site to site for vice-principals. Most receive opportunity to grow and get exposure to all aspects of administration. A few do not.

**Norm:** Consistent training across levels can only be beneficial – selection and training of 'principals' who mentor vice-principals should be given high priority.

**Culture Shock:** Administrators coming from a secondary or middle school experience into a single administrator elementary school can be overwhelmed by the broadness of responsibilities coupled with a teaching assignment and feeling all alone.

**Norm:** Selection of principals 'match-to-fit' at the level they were trained for would seem to make sense.

**Transitions:** Transferring from one assignment or school to another should include an embedded process of information exchange between incoming principals and exiting principals.

**Norm:** District procedure established to ensure a process of information sharing occurs during transition stage. A topical list is a helpful tool for accomplishing this.

**Financial Knowledge:** This necessary and vital part of school operation requires sound stewardship on the part of the principal. Don't assume that administrators enter with a common understanding about finances.

**Norm:** Provide specific training about managing budgets and school finances.

**Staffing Organization:** Fitting the many pieces of a school organization together can seem like an insurmountable jigsaw puzzle even for the experienced administrator. How much more daunting for a novice.

**Norm:** Sessions using sample organizations would help. Like levels sharing 'how to' in organizing a school is of benefit.

**Networking:** Each school site is different in its context and culture – no one can possibly know everything or even anticipate what may unfold in the day and life of a principal.

**Norm:** Since the nature of work is episodic and unpredictable principals need to build a network of trusted colleagues they can access for advice whenever needed.

We were often surprised how many principals operated like the Lone Ranger searching the landscape entirely on their own hoping to find the solution for the challenges that faced them. Only a few principals sought advice from colleagues, most felt confiding in colleagues was perceived as administrator weakness, admission of incompetency, risky and time consuming.

In our work we also found some common recurring concerns voiced by principals during our visits with them. These concerns were almost endemic and predictable across schools in our discussions with principals.

- Leading employees from mediocre and less to competent and more.
- Dealing with interpersonal conflict between staff members.
- The chronic and intrusive malcontent parent.
- Roadblocks to accessing services for students.
- The isolation feeling of elementary principals with no vice-principal.
- Loss of flexibility, constraints of contract language, rule bound by statutes and regulations.
- Staff intransigence to change.

## Know More

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Lipton, Laura & Wellman, Bruce, *Mentoring Matters, A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Sherman, Connecticut, Mira Via, 2003.

Stone, Douglas; Patton, Bruce; Heen, Sheila, *Difficult Conversations, How to Discuss What Matters Most*, New York, N.Y., Viking Penguin, 1999.

School stuck, not moving, teachers remain at same school for years, have seen principals come and go – will wait out the principal.


- Increased frequency of added layers of responsibility and expectation.

Although these concerns were common across schools what surprised us was the reluctance of school administrators to disclose issues to a superordinate because it seemed too trivial to bother them with and also the fear that disclosing issues might reflect poorly on performance and be career limiting. We encouraged school administrators to bring substantive issues to the attention of a superordinate sooner rather than later.

In contrast, we found school administrators candid about work related challenges and expressed feel-

ings of inadequacy, personal issues affecting performance and wondering about their own efficacy in their roles. We also found many school administrators enthusiastic and celebratory about student success, teacher acceptance of improved instructional practice and other positive change efforts they had been involved in. In several ways our presence in schools gave principals a voice to hear their own thoughts, perceptions, hopes and dreams about the work they were doing as we provided feedback and encouragement to them.

In casual conversations with family, friends and acquaintances about our 'mentoring' of school adminis-

trators we often hear 'what a great idea, it makes a lot sense.' While we find our involvement as mentors highly satisfying and equally rewarding we readily admit we have much yet to learn. We believe that assisting school administrators through mentoring efforts early on directly benefits districts in the long run and holds much promise developing and sustaining leadership in schools. For those riding the saddle of the Lone Ranger, remember, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. We agree with Andy Hargreaves: "If change is to matter, spread and last, sustainable leadership must also be a fundamental priority of the systems in which leaders do their work." 

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Greg McNally was an elementary school administrator for 19 years and is now retired from the Coquitlam School District. He served as Vice-President and a BCPVPA Chapter Council representative for the Coquitlam PVPA. He can be reached at [mcnallygw@gmail.com](mailto:mcnallygw@gmail.com) Greg and retired colleague, Brad Aitchison have been working periodically as consultants for Coquitlam School District.



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# Integrating and celebrating culture

Students and staff at a school in Haida Gwaii integrate and celebrate the Haida language and culture into the curriculum to create a sense of place and pride — a thriving community to call home.

by Leslie Dyson

The staff and students of Sk'aadga Naay Elementary School in Skidegate on Haida Gwaii have a clear sense of place. "As much as possible, the Haida language and culture are integrated into the regular curriculum," said Principal Vicki Ives. Actually, the school has a trilingual focus. French immersion is also offered.

The school building won an architectural award and, although it's built in a rain-forest, it has few gutters so that children can enjoy the sense of standing behind a waterfall when it rains. Teachers take their classes outdoors regularly for exercise and learning on the land.

Classroom topics revolve around what's happening in the environment with the change in seasons. Students get excited about the arrival of the salmon berry season in June. The fall brings salmon and tsiljii (jerky), one



of the favourite treats of students.

Field trips to the ocean side are arranged so that students can gather and dry seaweed to be used as salty flavouring in their halibut jum (stew). One class has built a trail with wooden bridges to a large old growth cedar that is home to eaglets living in two nests.

In June, the school celebrated Aboriginal Day by having staff, students and parents congregate at the beach to play Haida games, create rock art, sing, drum and dance. Parents made Haida vests with the school crest for all the graduating students. The school song has been written in Haida.

Ives, a teacher at the school for 18 years, vice-principal for three and now the principal, said the school has always been culturally responsive. However, as the principal, she wanted to encourage more integration and parental involvement.

The past year also saw family activities like a pancake breakfast, Friday evening barbecue and potluck turkey dinner.

Sk'aadga Naay is a public school located on the Skidegate reserve. About 70 percent of students are Aboriginal. Ives, other school principals,

education coordinators and members of the village attend the Haida Education Council meetings every two months to share ideas and plan Haida language and cultural initiatives on the island.

Monday morning staff meetings include learning how to say phrases like “dream big,” “never give up” and “walk, don’t run in the hall” in Haida. Teachers join their classes twice a week to learn the Haida language from Joan Moody, the Haida language teacher. Then they look for ways to bring what they’ve learned into the classroom.

Moody, a member of the Haida, has been teaching for 20 years. “That was my language, but when I started, I knew none of it.” Moody’s mother didn’t know the language because her parents didn’t speak it, nor did her father use it very often. That reflects the students’ experiences as well.

The school has taken on a significant challenge. Haida is an isolate language with no genetic relationship to any other. The number of fluent Haida speakers is dropping significantly.

Diane Brown, an elder and fluent speaker, said, the school’s language emphasis is “a start.” She is concerned that it won’t be enough to preserve the language. There are just 24 fluent speakers in Skidegate, she said, and even fewer in Masset.

Moody said all of the Haida language speakers are in their 80s. Many of them are working hard to develop curriculum and record all the songs and stories that they can. She is working with these elders and, even though she’s not a fluent speaker, she is pleased that she understands what they are saying.

Grade 4/5 teacher Vanessa Wahl said she is concerned that the Haida language could be dying. She weaves Haida words into her science, lan-

guage arts, math and art classes. “But there needs to be more money put into it. We have just one teacher who’s teaching Kindergarten to Grade 7 and she’s part time. It’s pretty challenging for one teacher. She needs a lot more support.”

Shyanna, Grade 7, said, “When it’s spoken it’s really pretty. It’s rhythmic and song-like.”

Cassandra, also in Grade 7, said the language sounds “so interesting.” She’s picked up the phrase *gum gee slee* and uses it in her conversations with her friends because “it’s a fun thing to say.” It means “not likely.”

The language includes glotal sounds and ticks and the younger children pick it up quickly. It’s a challenge for others. “Some of the words are a bit difficult,” Cassandra admitted, “but I’m getting better at it.”

Moody has taught the students the traditional greeting offered on special occasions and the students take delight in repeating it. Translated, it means “Chiefs, ladies held in high esteem, my precious friends, I thank you all. Today Skidegate is proud, today Haidas are proud and I am proud.” It takes several seconds longer to say in Haida.

Shyanna and Cassandra were keen to recite it together.

Shyanna, a Haida member, said she wishes she could carry on a conversation with the elders but is confident she could understand them. Her father uses the language occasionally at home, but she’s also teaching him what she’s learned at school.

She said she also appreciates learning the history of her culture. “You

feel more connected to nature. The first people started with just nature. They didn’t have TV and electronics.”

Kostan, Grade 7, is Haida and said he likes learning about Haida art and the language. “It’s a really cool thing. It goes back hundreds of years ... It’s pretty important to me.”



His mother is from Masset and some of the words are pronounced differently in Skidegate. Even so, he said, “I say things to my mom and she’s saying more to me. The population of Haida speakers is going down,” he added. “It would be cool to be one of them.”

The high value that the school




in such a project and then made 18-inch models. After painting on designs, they led a pole raising ceremony for the school in which they gave a speech in Haida, handed out gifts and shared traditional food.

Wahl's class did a unit on traditional food gathering and taught the students the English and the Haida words for each item. The students then made little booklets and passed along what they'd learned to the younger children.

It's important for students to understand the Haida culture, Wahl said. "This is where we live." She also talks to her students about the similarities of the cultures that call Haida Gwaii home. "There are a lot of commonalities even though some people weren't born here. All cultures are reliant on the ocean.

The students are reminded of this as they look out the windows at the unimpeded view of the water.

"We are an island," she said. "BC Ferries' costs are going up and only come once a week. We talk about things that we can grow to be more self-sufficient." Wahl said her students come to school already very knowledgeable. They know about a local company that is harvesting chanterelle mushrooms and selling them at Granville Island in Vancouver. They've also discussed community concerns like fish farms and oil pipelines and tankers going down the coast. "It's all part of being socially responsible," Wahl said.

"The school is hopeful that helping to instill this sense of place and pride in Haida culture will ensure that the students always have a healthy and thriving community to call home," said Ives. 

places on Haida language, culture and history is good for the students' self-esteem, said Grade 1/2 teacher Marcie Watkins. All but one of the students in her class are Haida.

"It's really incumbent on us to use the language because it's so tied to the land and the culture," Watkins said. "Otherwise, you're only looking at things with 'English' eyes.

"I've lived here for a long time [23 years] and I'm in the same community that the kids live in." Like all the school staff, she said, "I know what's going on seasonally, what people are fishing for and the traditional food gathering cycle."

It may be difficult for people living in large urban settings outside of Haida Gwaii to understand the importance of this. Mandarin oranges, strawberries and tomatoes lose their element of delight when they're available year round.

However, in May, the Skidegate

community prepares for the harvest of k'aaw (herring roe on kelp), a highly prized food item globally. It is never taken for granted.

Brown, also a grandmother at the school, explained that everything has to be in place. The last two years have seen only small harvests and arriving weeks later than usual. In the years before that, over fishing of the spawning herring prevented any harvest at all. Herring fishing in the inlet is now sharply curtailed.

This year, the temperature of the water was just right, the kelp had not yet rotted and the herring showed up in time. The k'aaw was collected and dried. It will be eaten like salty chips over the winter.

Last spring, Watkins' class did a unit on totem poles. The students learned the protocol, went out to the forest to see what trees would have been used

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Leslie Dyson is a regular contributor to Adminfo. She can be reached at [Leslie@F2Fcommunications.ca](mailto:Leslie@F2Fcommunications.ca)

The Principal  
Connection



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Help to spread the word about the passion of  
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The BCPVPA has launched a timely Facebook campaign to inform partners and the public about the important role of principals and vice-principals in BC's public education system.

You can help to share the passion of BC's principals and vice-principals by logging in, listening, posting comments and sharing the news about the campaign with your school communities.



**Faizel Rawji, Surrey:** Kids, when then have really appropriate, positive adult mentors in their lives build resiliency and become good adults.



**Maeve Buckley, Central Okanagan:** I would hope that when students reflect back on their time spent in our school they will remember that we thought they were special.



**Darlene Shandola, Richmond:** We are paying a great deal of attention to the development of social responsibility elements as well as the academics.

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# From To to With

Working with students to design learning for progress.

by Eileen Phillips

I have recently had time to think about some of the educational initiatives of the past 40 years that I have seen

and I have started to write about ones that I believe have really made a difference. One of these initiatives has been the development of the Network of Performance-Based Schools (NPBS).

As the principal of a large, urban, dual-track elementary school, I was often in and out of classrooms and engaged in discussions both with and about students, parents and staff concerning progress, challenges, accom-

Not until we stopped trying to think of what we might present to the students to help them, and started working with the students to design personal learning frameworks, did legitimate progress occur.

plishments, curriculum, facilities, etc. However, aside from those occasions when I was invited as a guest to a special celebration/event, was involved in teacher evaluation or covering for an absent teacher (due to no 'subs' being available), I found it difficult to spend extended time in classrooms. The key understanding here is that extended, meaningful time with students in classroom settings, can be very tricky to schedule. Committing

For both of the two years I was a member of an NPBS inquiry, involved with mathematical learning, I worked in a principal/vice-principal/teacher team. The first year, the inquiry worked with the grade 3 students in a combination traditional grades 2 and 3 classroom; in the second year, the classroom was Montessori grades 1, 2, and 3 and the inquiry involved all the students. The members of the research team were

to being part of a teacher-principal team undertaking an inquiry over the course of a year was, therefore, a major task.

different each year: I remained the principal, but the vice-principal and teacher changed. However, there was more continuity that initially meets the eye — the teacher from the first year was appointed vice-principal, so for the second year our only truly new member was the teacher.

Each year, the team met and started by discussing which particular area of mathematical problem solving we felt needed more attention and then tried to focus ourselves by formulating and explicitly writing the question that would guide our inquiry. By talking about the teacher's perceptions of what her students needed, we found an entry point into our search. But, it was not until we understood what each student felt would be helpful that a real starting point was reached and our true research could begin. Not until we stopped trying to think of what we might present *to* the students to help them, and started working *with* the students to design personal learning frameworks, did legitimate progress occur.

### Getting More Specific

I believe that attending to specific language use is one of the most helpful skills educators can learn. It has been claimed that the mastery of prepositions is one of the most difficult skills when learning English and that prepositions, in some sense, comprise/constitute the essence of English. My experience supports this claim. Listening for preposition usage can provide insights into some of the more human aspects of schools. For example, we have:

- assessment *of* learning;
- assessment *for* learning;
- assessment *as* learning.

Each one of the above different types of assessments is useful. In this piece, though, I want to talk about assessment *for* learning and I want

## My growth as an educational leader

Learning to work with our students, by inviting them to participate in their own assessment, enriched our practice and our understanding of the nature of student engagement in learning. And, of course, as principal, the act of working with these staff members and their students, rather than just simply (though not insignificantly) encouraging them to conduct an inquiry, was of ultimate importance to our outcomes and our discussions, and contributed greatly to my appreciation of true educational leadership and my growth as an educational leader. — EP

to discuss the movement along the continuum from working to provide educational experiences to students towards working with students to provide meaningful and purposeful educational experiences.

### Going Deeper

As a member of an NPBS inquiry team, I spent many hours working with the other team members and listening to their goals and strategies. At the start of one inquiry, I heard that the students:

- need to learn how to read for understanding;
- have no idea how to translate words into number sentences;
- cannot visualize the story of the problem;
- are unaware of how and when to use manipulative tools.

A discussion followed about how

to teach these skills and we looked at providing opportunities where such skills could be practised. We thought that we could use a *Provincial Performance Standard for Numeracy* to guide our teaching. But, when the team looked at the *Numeracy Performance Standards*, we found that they were not specific enough to meet the needs of our inquiry — one concerned with the role of feedback and coaching to improve mathematical problem solving. We decided that we needed also to look at the *Performance Standards for Reading and Writing* and to design a rubric that would be specific to comprehending and then representing solutions to math story problems.

Designing a new rubric was exciting and we were pleased with our work. We took it to the students. They tried to use it, but found that they sometimes needed us to tell them what a

point meant and/or they often felt they fell somewhere between two descriptors. So, we had the students work with us on the language of the descriptors. At this point, we changed the rubric entirely. We produced a standard, class-based assessment rubric, with space for comments below, that was both student-centred and student-friendly. But we also used a blank form, so the students could design their own personal rubric, defining the area(s) where they wanted to grow and writing their own descriptors to demonstrate learning. Some students occasionally abandoned the rubric in favour of writing a statement of purpose and result. We found that once the students owned their assessment tools, they were keen to define what they needed and how they would judge their own success. Students would make statements such as:

- Today I want to work on reading the problem aloud;
- Today I want to use drawing to represent the problem;
- I am going to ask (*name*) to help me by acting out this problem;
- I think I will use the number line to help me answer this;
- I'm writing my comment to show that I used more

than one strategy to test my answer;

- My rubric shows that I am reading and understanding, but I still need to work on getting the arithmetic correct – I think I need to work on my adding facts

### Significance of Going Deeper

Where does this leave us? What has been learned? These questions always point us to the next level of understanding and the next level of questioning. Meaningful educational research, I believe, comprises an organic cycle where the overall learning provides a gestalt that synthesizes the whole into something larger than the parts. That being said, we can still look closely at the parts. In this research, at the student level, we learned that:


- first, it is important to engage not only the adults but also the students in the inquiry;
- second, students—even primary students – can define their own areas of focus/challenge once they have the language and tools to do so;
- third, working on an area of challenge is fun and rewarding

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Eileen Phillips is a recently retired Vancouver elementary school principal. She has a PhD in Mathematics Education and has been a member of the NPBS (Network of Performance-Based Schools) for the past three years. Eileen is also the Area Representative for PDK (Phi Delta Kappa). She can be reached at [ephilips555@gmail.com](mailto:ephilips555@gmail.com).

for all concerned;

- fourth, assessment for learning can be individualized;
- fifth, assessment for learning is closely linked to assessment of learning once fear of failure is removed. That, however, is a topic for another short paper.

At a personal level, I learned that listening to the language that the team members used to describe our inquiry was pivotally important. A seemingly simple shift in our use of prepositions – using *with* rather than *to* when discussing learning intentions – moved us a long way along the path of our inquiry. Learning to work *with* our students, by inviting them to participate in their own assessment, enriched our practice and our understanding of the nature of student engagement in learning. And, of course, as principal, the act of working *with* these staff members and their students, rather than just simply (*though not insignificantly*) encouraging them to conduct an inquiry, was of ultimate importance to our outcomes and our discussions, and contributed greatly to my appreciation of true educational leadership and my growth as an educational leader. 

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*Aziz, continued from page 2*

ing paperless and force everyone else to adapt to the change.

There are regular meetings springing up led by current principals and vice-principals, whether Edcamps, video viewings, online community chats or face-to-face meetings, and the sense of a wider education leadership community has never been stronger. You have to look for some of these opportunities and we, as an organization, would be happy to connect you to some if you are having challenges.

Your leadership role has never been more needed or

vital. You have to find the role that fits and works for you and then embrace and run with it. Trying to emulate or copy others will not have the desired effect unless it is a “natural” fit. No matter what medium we use, the core of our leadership is still going to fall to genuine dialogue and communication and a respect for all ideas brought to the table.

I hope that you will all continue to embrace the leadership aspect of your role and find a way to pursue it that is genuine and brings your natural abilities to the forefront. Enjoy the journey! 

# Already on our way

A principal uses the BC Performance Standards to engage students, address individual needs and move the learning forward.

by Deborah Koehn

Under the guidance of Dr. Linda Kaser and Dr. Judy Halbert, members of the Network of Performance Based Schools understand that they already have a tool that is moving them into 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning. They have been accessing provincially developed tools that will enable students to engage in personalized learning, the *BC Performance Standards*. Educators in British Columbia already are well on their way to personalized learning because British Columbia's *Performance Standards* are being used in their classrooms.

Read the conversation (*opposite*), typical between learning partners at Glenview Elementary School. Students are in grade one and two and are using a *Grade Two Quick Scale* for informational writing.

## A typical conversation between learning partners

**Sarah**

What are you working on?

**Josh**

The form aspect.

**Sarah**

Oh! You have a title. *The Marmot*. You wrote about the marmot. What is a marmot?

**Josh**

It's a Canadian animal.

My learning intention was I can tell about a Canadian animal.

**Sarah**

I don't know about marmots. Where did you meet the criteria?

**Josh**

I used a topic sentence. I told that the marmot was not only an Olympic mascot, but lived in the mountains where the Olympics were held. Then look (*using a highlighter*) I told four or five facts about the marmot in the following sentences. My ending sentence kind of tells why the marmot was chosen for an Olympic mascot.

**Sarah**

(*highlighting on the form strand*) You have a title, a topic sentence and sentences that tell about the marmot. And you have a good ending sentence. And now I know some ideas about the marmot. What will you work on next?

**Josh**

I need to add a diagram and some labels telling more about the marmot. Sarah, what did you do?

**Sarah**

I don't think I have a topic sentence. I'm going to add that before we look at my stuff.

article continues 

The students are using the Form strand (it is printed across the top of their writing sheet). Josh and Sarah have worked independently to address the learning intention, “I will write a paragraph describing a Canadian animal” and are now working as peer coaches to move each other forward. Using the performance standard they co-constructed criteria with the teacher. The teacher then clearly displayed the learning intention and criteria in the classroom, easily seen by each member of this learning community. The students can refer to the strand as they are completing the task, referring to each component, ensuring that they are meeting the requirements. When they self and peer assess the task, the strand is equally easy to refer to. The teacher has given them the tools to discuss the work as well; they refer to the printed strand at the top of the page.

In a blog entry, Dr. Judy Halbert stated, “For years, we have been saying that the BC *Performance Standards* are an invaluable resource for teachers, parents and students.” The performance standards are a reliable assessment tool that gives teachers information that informs their practise. When teachers use the *Standards*, they create a snapshot of each student’s learning. The students can answer the three key questions for student engagement and ownership:

- Where are you going with your learning?
- How is it going?
- Where to next?

Josh clearly knew he was missing the visual component when he referred to the performance standard. Sarah was able to affirm that Josh had met the learning intention and criteria. Her examination of Josh’s work will help move her own learning forward.


After the peer and self assessment takes place, and students move their

learning forward, it is the teacher’s turn to assess the students task, referring to the performance standard aspect of form, looking beyond what has been accomplished, to what comes next for this learner?

Student engagement depends on the educators’ understanding of individual needs, addressing those needs and continuously moving the learning forward.

Dr. Kaser and Dr. Halbert work to remind us that our students must be at the center of the learning. Using the *Performance Standards* ensures that everyone is learning, the student is learning, the teacher is learning about the students’ learning and parents are given access to the learning taking place in language understood by all parties. All parties can identify goals – it is as simple as looking at the aspect – and identifying the evidence of what has been learned and what needs to be learned next. Together, teachers and students can then develop a set of strategies that will enable the students to reach individual goals. Students have information about the progress they are making, how to

make the progress and they are aware of when goals are successfully met. Using the *Performance Standards* provides a practical means of meeting individual and group learning challenges and ensuring that learners have the means to move their work forward. Students are engaged, have a purpose for achieving and the means to access the knowledge and skills they need to achieve. Students and parents have access to the source of evidence of the learning and can understand how to move the learner forward. An inquiry cycle is established, always asking the three questions: “Where are you going with your learning? How is it going? and Where to next?”

Using BC’s *Performance Standards* has proven an effective tool for addressing the individual learning needs of students. As well the standards provide an opportunity for teachers to examine their own effectiveness as teachers by reflecting on what is being learned and what needs to be revisited. The standards are moving BC teachers into personalized learning for both themselves and their students. 

Deborah Koehn was a teacher at Glenview and is now principal of Thornhill Elementary in the Coast Mountain School District. This is Deborah’s third article for Adminfo, most recently an article or working as learning partners in June 2008. Deborah can be reached at [debbie.koehn@cmsd.bc.ca](mailto:debbie.koehn@cmsd.bc.ca)



## Cover Art

Our cover art this month is by Daniel Hoffman, a grade 11 student at Edward Milne Community School in Sooke. Daniel’s piece was exhibited at the Sooke Fine Arts show. We thank Daniel, his teacher Sue Garat, who has been teaching AP Art at EMCS since 2003, and Principal Roberta Kubik for sharing this work.

## Meaning of Home

writing contest for students  
in grades four to six

From now through November 11, students in grades 4, 5 and 6 can enter the annual *Meaning of Home* writing contest in support of Habitat for Humanity Canada (HFHC). The contest is an opportunity for students to put their creative writing skills to work for a good cause.

The winner of the contest will be responsible for a \$60,000 contribution towards the building of a Habitat home in or near the winner's community. The winner also receives a laptop, while each runner-up will be given an iPod Touch. The winner will also receive a pizza party for his or her entire school.

Teachers can incorporate the writing contest into their classroom activities and assignments because:

- The writing contest provides students with the opportunity to produce an original piece of creative work that reflects their capacity for independent critical thought;
- The contest is an activity that students will see as meaningful; one that challenges them to think creatively about a topic that directly impacts their lives — the meaning of home — and will ultimately improve their writing skills.

A complete Education Module including a lesson plan, activity ideas, writing tips and a Habitat for Humanity Canada fact sheet, as well as full contest details, can be downloaded at:

<http://www.meaningofhome.ca>

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**Sharon Cutcliffe**  
Legal & Contract Services,  
Student Voice  
[sharon@bcpvpa.bc.ca](mailto:sharon@bcpvpa.bc.ca)

**Gaila Erickson**  
Professional Learning  
[gaila@bcpvpa.bc.ca](mailto:gaila@bcpvpa.bc.ca)

**Harold Krische**  
Legal and Contract Services  
[harold@bcpvpa.bc.ca](mailto:harold@bcpvpa.bc.ca)

**Carol Powell**  
Finance  
[carol@bcpvpa.bc.ca](mailto:carol@bcpvpa.bc.ca)

**Richard Williams**  
Communications  
[rwilliams@bcpvpa.bc.ca](mailto:rwilliams@bcpvpa.bc.ca)

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– Isabel, Education Volunteer, Ethiopia

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