

Listening, enabling & building student achievement

Lesley Dyson interviews participants in the BCPVPA's Supervision for Learning program and discovers the great learning conversations between principals, vice-principals and teachers.

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here are many valuable outcomes to the BCPVPA's Supervision for Learning (S4L) program and, as a result, each participant finds his or her own special benefit from the program. Rather than the numerous single-time professional development offerings, S4L carries on for eight months (but could continue longer), taps into the experiences and expertise of BC peers, and provides effective supervisory strategies on an as-needed basis.

The program was offered for the first time last year to 171 administrators. This year, more than 185 principals and vice-principals from 36 districts are taking part. It begins with two-day sessions in the fall with cohorts in four centres (Penticton, Prince Rupert, Prince George, and Richmond) and is led by Jessica Antosz and Woody Bradford from the BCPVPA's Professional Learning Department. A dedicated group of principals and vice-principals helped design the S4L sessions.

Participants hone their listening skills and learn strategies for building trust and enabling open conversations about the best ways to assist students. Triads of principals and vice-principals from different parts of the province are formed and continue to support each other on a twice-a-month basis through Skype, phone, email, or face-to-face meetings.

The cohorts meet again on five separate occasions during the school year, focussing on four keys: structures and support; learner-focused dialogue; clarifying purpose; and professional relationships.

The program is based on the *Leadership Standards* and supports a peer coaching model, "where professional learning is a continuous, pervasive process that builds knowledge rather than an occasional activity that is sharply distinguished in time and space." (David Hargreaves)

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curious questions

learning walks

building trust

“When you engage in a conversation with a teacher about their practice, it’s important not to be judgemental. You formulate questions that will help them reflect so they can work through it themselves.”

Don Bold, in his second year at Kwilicum Secondary School (Qualicum Beach) but with 10 years experience as a vice-principal, signed up for S4L last year. “It’s a great program,” he said. “Its biggest strength is the supportive teams. There are many one-off offerings, but it’s rare that there’s an opportunity for ongoing conversations with administrators across the province and with different ideas. That’s what makes it work.”

Many of the conversations centred on how to increase supervision in the classroom. “How do you talk about kids in the classes where everyone is comfortable with it? How do you set a climate where teachers are constantly challenging themselves? If you see a child who’s not engaged, how do you support him? It’s easy to turn a blind eye,” Bold said, “but it’s fantastic to have a structure to do that.”

Bold said his triad helped him frame the difficult questions and work through the challenges when conversations didn’t go well. “They would always ask: ‘What are you going to do next?’”

When an administrator visits a classroom and sees something that he or she doesn’t like, it can be tempting to be overly direct and demand immediate change, but this can damage a sensitive professional relationship, he said. The better approach is to observe and then develop non-judgemental statements and curious questions such as: “*Tell*

me more about this,” and “*How can I support you to try something different?*”

Mike Skinner, the principal of Lakes District Secondary School (Nechako Lakes) for the past six years, was a participant last year. He has recommended S4L to others including Phil Johnson, the school’s vice-principal, who is taking part this year. The district of Nechako Lakes is supportive of the program. It provided some financial assistance for the eight administrators who attended last year and the six who will be involved this year. The cost of the program is \$800 per person.

Skinner said, “I didn’t know what to expect. A lot of our training is formal and academic but this was about specific needs in our schools. We talked on a weekly basis. That networking with others around the province and about real-life stuff – there is real value in that.”

Skinner attended meetings in

Richmond and Prince George. “The first thing we did was to try to listen for one minute with no interruptions. It’s hard to do.” Participants practiced listening with an open mind, putting aside their pre-judgements, and not asking leading questions.

His triad included Kirk Czechmeister, vice-principal at Prince George Secondary School, and Kathy Weninger, principal at Rutland Middle School (Central Okanagan). Over the summer, Skinner talked to his colleagues about how they were preparing for the fall, various staffing challenges, and how the labour dispute was affecting their communities.

“Each year has its unique challenges,” he said. For administrators, “It’s about self-awareness and body language. We know these things but we may not be consciously aware.” When a teacher comes to his office now and interrupts his work to ask a question, he takes a moment to reflect on the consequences of leaving an email unfinished. “Would it be a loss?” he asks himself. “If not, I get off the computer to have the conversation. We’re in a people profession. Relationships are so important.”

The S4L program reminded people not to think they already have

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the answers and to understand their own biases. Skinner now asks curious questions such as, “I noticed the kids were doing this and then you did that? Why?” And he listens openly to the answer and reflects on the conversation later. “Some teachers are already on edge and this is a tough skill. I wouldn’t say I’m proficient at it yet.” But he pays closer attention to the students. “Look at the kids,” he suggested. “Are they learning and was the teaching effective for this group of students?”

Lisa Bartlett, principal of École Spring Creek Community School (Sea to Sky) and a participant in last year’s program, found value in it but her team found it challenging to try to find a common time during the week to talk to one another. “S4L got me into the classrooms more often, engaging in common professional dialogue around practice,” she said.

“It was well organized and the presenters were knowledgeable. The best part [of the program] was the networking outside your school. We tried for after school, but there would be emergency meetings with a social worker or police officer or an upset parent. That is when the ‘other’ work gets done.” In a school with just one administrator, that often left late evenings, early mornings, and weekends. Then the provincial government and teachers’ labour dispute at the end of the 2013 school year made it even more difficult.

“It’s always good to connect with other administrators in the province. It would be valuable to do this even in our own district, but we’re always so busy.”


On the other hand, she said the program helped her to become a better listener. “When you engage in a conversation with a teacher

about their practice, it’s important not to be judgemental. You formulate questions that will help them reflect so they can work through it themselves.”

Bartlett gave an example: In older grades where there is perceived pressure from provincial exams, heavy content, and students working at many different levels, there are teachers who fall back on traditional methods. “But kids need to get out of desks. They need to be engaged. So you would have a conversation about what you observe and try to ask questions that don’t result in just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and have them reflect on their practice.”

Skinner also commented on the lack of time during the monthly administrator meetings. “We’re spread out in this district and we are the only high school in Burns Lake.” He said the weekly conversations were particularly fruitful. While being a small school of 400 has its draw-

backs, Skinner said conversations with his secondary school colleagues gave him a fresh appreciation of the fact that he knows many of the parents and all of the volunteers and there is value in having all staff living in the community.”

Last year was Bold’s first year in a new high school. “I looked at my schedule and saw that second period was the best time for me to visit classrooms. I told teachers I wanted to get to know them and the kids better. The staff were really welcoming. They want you in their classrooms so they can show you what the kids are doing. For the beginning teachers, it allowed me to have some really wonderful conversations.” But the “big bonus” came from the students. “I wanted the kids to know what kind of person I am and what I can do for them. We have a really good relationship and I look forward to being part of this school community for a long time.” 

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Rod Maclean is a former Surrey principal. Visit Rod’s website at www.justkiddingcartoons.com