

BC Leaders

in Education **Leading Student Success**



As part of our ongoing series
profiling BC's
education sector,
we meet the President of the
BC School Superintendents
Association (BCSSA)



Chris van der Mark is the President of the BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA). Since the appointment of the first provincial school superintendent – John Jessop in 1872 – these educational leaders have been managing school systems across BC. Although today's superintendents aren't navigating those earlier trials of travel by foot, horseback, stagecoach and canoe to inspect schools, the sheer complexity of public education has continued to increase and offers new and diverse challenges to school and system leaders.

Education has been Chris' focus from an early age. "It probably started for me when I was fairly young in high school, and then about the same time I started coaching. I think that had a really positive influence on me, it was a chance to spend time with and support younger people. As educators,

we help bring everything together for them: why *wouldn't* you want to do this work?"

Chris was elected as the President of the BCSSA in November 2018, but his decision to take on that role was preceded by significant experience in public education. "There was a long journey there: you're a teacher, a Vice-Principal, a Principal and then the next thing you know you're an Assistant Sup and so on. And these leadership roles, regardless of whether they're informal or formal roles, you've got to pay it forward. It's about continuing to put your efforts where you have opportunities to positively impact the direction of education in the province. At the end of the day, there's always a driven group of people who want things to be better."

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In regard to his decision to run for President, Chris adds, "An opportunity came along, and I've had the really good fortune to be around the Executive for awhile, around that table and around the province. The Executive is built up from from the Chapters around the province, and each Chapter has a representative that sits at the Board so we have that provincial scope."

That provincial representation is important to organizations who serve a diverse membership. "It's important because everyone's got their unique contexts. I'm sure that the BCPVPA has similar examples where so much of our membership – and so much of the population – is in Metro Vancouver. They've got their own unique context. But that can be very different from being in the Stikine, with its massive geography and some of the challenges that go along with that. We need to ensure that we have an equitable education system across our province, irrespective of where you live. We are so diverse, but we have a commonality of purpose."

Chris' priorities in the role are closely linked to Enhanced Student Learning, and enhancing the leadership capacity of the BCSSA membership. "I was very fortunate when I came into the Association 11 years ago, there were really good Mentorship structures that existed to support new people as they come into their various roles. We want to ensure that people who come into these roles are all working consistently with the rest of that broader team. I feel that there's good connectivity and cooperation across the sector, and I believe that there's a genuine sense in this diverse province that regardless of where you are – whether you're in Metro Vancouver, or whether you're in the Valley – that there's consistency to that support and development of experience. It was certainly there before I came in, and we continue to grow those opportunities for members."

With the diversity of rural and urban schools, and regional and geographic diversity, members can have differing needs. Chris notes that a huge priority for the BCSSA is for members to know that they are together in the work they do. "The role can be lonely, and we know that. It's so important

to our folks that we have support, that we have people to call and people to lean on. There is so much wisdom and experience out there: if I don't have the answer to a question, I know that somebody does, so having those people available to help, regardless of their role, that's important."

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"I think back to when I started: you could have a mentor for a year. And then people would ask if they could have a mentor again, because it was awesome, and now it's increased! Myself, I have people that I know are available if there's something that's beyond my normal experience, and I think that's very true of this Association as well. People need those networks when you're solo. I can't speak to what it's like everywhere – I'm fortunate

to work in a smaller district – but again it doesn't matter who you call, but get ahold of somebody.”

Like the BCPVPA, the BCSSA is just embarking on the redesign of their Strategic Plan, a process that will involve all of the Chapters across the province. While Chris doesn't want to influence the members' work that lies ahead, he can see a continuation of goals that relate to leadership capacity, ensuring a positive influence on public education and continued support for members in their roles.

With the many changes that are taking place in public education, Chris agrees that the partnerships formed in the sector are important. “I can only speak of my 11 years of involvement, but the partnerships have always been there. I think they were more informal before, and now they're more formalized. It's just part of a growing understanding that we're stronger together, we're better, and there is more collective wisdom. We're seeing increasingly a breaking down of silos, and that 'being better together' extends across all of the partner groups in our sector. It's become more of a common understanding that it will support us in being more effective in our core work.”

Chris continues, “At the end of the day, we are ultimately responsible through our Boards for making sure that our focus is around the development of the Educated Citizen. It's about how students are performing, and when we see people from across the world turning their attention to look at BC's public education jurisdiction, and we're being called an educational superpower, it reaffirms that all of the partner groups are connected. None of this happens unless everybody in the system is working together to move in a

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common direction. We have a reliance on our own members and our partners, whether it's support staff, teachers, Principals and Vice-Principals – they are the ones that are in the building that are charged with making sure that the vision of the Board is in place.”

Chris had the chance to be in Kenya in the summer, and it left him with a story that has resonated. “There are many challenges there – with water, medication, access to education – and there is a lot of work being done there. I have continued to reflect on this since I was there, and what strikes me is how generous the people were, how grateful the people were. I think that in all of our roles, we go back to our own ability to be generous, to be generous of spirit. We have 8,000 things that get thrown at us on a daily basis, and it's important to remember generosity and gratefulness. I just think it opens so many more opportunities for us to feel grateful for the people we work with, and the work that we do.”

The BCSSA recently launched a bi-annual educational journal: *InspirEd* is issued every April and November, and celebrates the great work happening every day in BC school districts.
April issue: bit.ly/Inspired



BCSSA

British Columbia
School Superintendents
Association

BCSSA is celebrating 100+ years of leadership in education,
as they "Inspire, Develop and Support" their members

*The BCSSA is currently engaged in a revision of their Strategic Plan,
scheduled for release August 2020*

BCSSA Governance

The BCSSA Board of Directors ranges in size from 9-15 members, all either elected or appointed by the active membership. The Board includes a President, Vice-President and six regional Chapter Directors, and may also have Directors who are Members at Large, and who are appointed or elected to specific positions which may include a Treasurer, Secretary, Professional Development Chair and Membership Services Chair.

The BCSSA has a current membership of approximately 320 district based senior leaders. Many of these leaders are new to their positions, and benefit from both a thriving Mentorship program and a New Members program that is tailored to the needs of the group and their roles.

BCSSA Chapters

Fraser Valley Chapter
Kootenay-Boundary Chapter
Metro Chapter

Vancouver Island Chapter
Northern Chapter
Thompson-Okanagan Chapter

Vision

The BCSSA inspires, develops and supports leadership in public education in British Columbia by:

- Providing a compelling leadership vision
- Serving as a strategic and principled voice on issues affecting public education
- Creating teaching and learning environments that effectively support the children and families we serve
- Working collaboratively with others to strengthen public education and leadership
- Creating dynamic learning opportunities for leadership development

Mission

A dynamic and successful public education system is fundamental to a democratic society and must provide our children and youth with an inspiring foundation for lifelong learning and citizenship.

As leaders in public education we work in collaboration, to create personalized learning for every student through our Organizational Purpose:

- Quality teaching and learning
- Flexibility and choice
- High standards
- Learning that is empowered by technology

Values

BCSSA identifies the following five values as fundamental guides to our work:

1. Students – at the centre of everything
2. Learning – for all of our lives
3. Ethics – guiding our decisions and actions
4. Caring – building effective relationships
5. Collaboration – working with our partners and the community

These five values are connected as we: Inspire, Develop and Support

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