

The Last Word

Kevin Reimer is the Executive Director of the BCPVPA, a previous Director of the Board and served as President 2016-2018.



“We honour our past while we design our future” - Simon Breakspear

BCPVPA President David DeRosa often reminds me that our current work as an Association is to build BCPVPA 2.0.

This Fall brings with it some important initiatives that will assist our modernization efforts: we have released a new suite of tools in BetterEducate; adopted the MemberTech platform to better manage our databases and communication tools; a redesigned website with a member portal is on the horizon; and the growing use of Zoom as our platform of choice allows us to reach out to and connect with members more consistently.

All of these initiatives are within our circle of influence, and we believe they will all greatly benefit the Association and our members. This is a time of unprecedented change within our system, and that change can be challenging to navigate. Blending years of research and experience, Michael Fullan calls for school leaders to become agents as well as beneficiaries of school change. To make the position more rewarding, it is important to shift the role of school leader from one of a school-based superhero with superheroic expectations of their work, to a more nuanced model of leadership that embraces “simplicity” to break the cycle of surface-level change.

The ability for the BCPVPA to negotiate at a provincial level is the highest priority of the Association and its members. Critics of this approach have stated that the BCPVPA is looking like and sounding like a union. Their logic is flawed, as it is based on a superficial level of understanding of the system, and it lacks the nuanced approach encouraged by Michael Fullan. It is important to separate the facts from the fiction.

As of Fall 2019, we know the following:

- Last year, more Principal and Vice-Principals

voluntarily chose to return to the classroom than ever before

- More Principals and Vice-Principals are on Long-Term Disability than ever before
- Our BCPVPA Member Survey of 2019 told us:
 - 59% of Principals and Vice-Principals have seriously considered returning to the classroom
 - 77% of Principals and Vice-Principals have seriously considered changing their retirement plans for reasons of work intensification and stress
 - 30% of members have seriously considered changing their retirement plans because of a perceived lack of support for their role

These statistics are alarming, and they are telling the system that we should all be concerned about the working conditions of Principals and Vice-Principals. Organizations unionize for many different reasons, but one of the most significant reasons they do so is when their work negatively impacts their health. BC's public education system is one of the highest-performing education systems in the world, a fact that is frequently lauded by government leaders, parents and international experts: how is it that the school leaders and senior leaders who have been responsible for successfully delivering this education system have become so marginalized and undersupported?

Our members and the BCPVPA have been clear that we have no intention of unionizing. However, if our objective to positively address the working conditions of Principals and Vice-Principals through a provincial approach makes us sound like a union to some, then so be it. We are unlikely to sway the entrenched views of those who are unwilling to recognize that the leaders in our system are the canaries in the coal mine.

As a system, we have perhaps viewed this significant challenge through a binary lens, when it has been

recognized at all. We have perhaps believed that there is a scale where positive learning conditions for students have an inverse relationship to the working conditions of Principals and Vice-Principals, and that the harder school leaders work, make sacrifices, and go beyond the expectations of their duties, then the better students will do. You're either at the top of the see-saw, or you are at the bottom. If this truly is the attitude that is held by some, it's an unsound and unsustainable model. When learning conditions become the sole focus of the system to the detriment of working conditions, the system risks decay; the stress and intensification of the leaders' work will be unrelenting, and there is no clear path forward in that world.

Freedom of association is guaranteed under section 2(d) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This right provides individuals the right to establish, belong to and maintain any sort of organization. For a decade or more, courts across the country have upheld the notion that the right to associate must have meaning beyond the ability to belong to an organization – the right that they have upheld is the right to good faith negotiation and consultation as a collective. The BCPVPA's desire to negotiate on behalf of members is not just what is in the best interest of its members; we believe that it is a Charter Right of Principals and Vice-Principals in BC. Court rulings have been clear that the Charter upholds the right to a process, and not an outcome. It is time that provincial negotiations become the process that can address many of the challenges for school leaders in BC.

It is time for the system to look instead through Michael Fullan's nuanced lens, and to recognize that positive working conditions for Principals and Vice-Principals will result in consistently positive learning conditions for students, and positive work environments for teachers and support staff. And that is the educational setting where everyone will have an opportunity to learn, grow and succeed.