

Greetings from the President



Michael Helm
CASSA/ACGCS President

Excellent Opportunities and Conversations Across the Country

Spring does not seem to want to get going this year for us in Quebec, as winter just won't leave. In talking to many of you from other provinces, it appears to be the same in most areas. I am hopeful that the month of April will bring warmer weather and that we will start to see flowers emerging and buds forming on the trees. There is always something refreshing about this time of year, as it brings a sense of renewal and optimism that many of us are ready to embrace after a long winter.

Last month, I attended the Canadian AI Collective session, and it was both enlightening and thought-provoking. Mark Pearmain from the Surrey School District in BC shared his opinion article from the Vancouver Sun. The article highlights the importance of ensuring that all partners are part of the conversation when it comes to creating national policies and protocols for privacy and the responsible use of AI.¹ It is well written and delivers a key message: as educators, we need to have a strong and active voice in these discussions.

We were also provided with additional resources that supported meaningful breakout discussions in small groups. These conversations allowed participants to reflect, share perspectives, and consider how AI is impacting our work across different regions. I have listed the resources below that were shared at the session for those who may wish to explore them further.^{2,3}

Overall, the session provided valuable insight and an excellent opportunity to engage in conversations with leaders from across the country. It reinforced the importance of collaboration and collective thinking as we navigate these emerging topics. I hope that at the next session on May 5th, even more of us will be able to participate and contribute to this important dialogue.

Take care!

REFERENCES:

1. Mark Pearmain OpED. <https://vancouver-sun.com/opinion/op-ed/canada-schools-need-voice-in-ai-strategy>.
2. Andy Hargraeves, Carol Campbell and Louis Volante OpEd. https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/we-were-involved-in-the-last-study-on-eqao-testing-but-the-ford-government-buried/article_b7487cc8-7852-420c-bb82-8d10bfe41d46.html.
3. Jessica Rizk, Conference Board of Canada OpEd. <https://thefutureeconomy.ca/op-eds/canadas-ai-strategy-is-missing-kids/?4-> Brookings Report and Summaries <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-new-direction-for-students-in-an-ai-world-prosper-prepare-protect/>.



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**All websites and email addresses are
active. Click them to connect
immediately with various resources.*

Greetings from the Executive Director

Leadership for Belonging: One Community, Many Voices



Reg Klassen

CASSA/ACGCS New Executive Director

As the title suggests, the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) is again gearing up for an inspiring national conference this July in Saskatoon, and the momentum is already building. This year's gathering brings together educational leaders from across the country for three days of learning, collaboration, and reflection – set against the backdrop of one of Canada's most vibrant prairie cities, all of which will leave a lasting impression on conference participants.

This year our conference features three powerful keynote speakers whose work resonates deeply with themes of leadership, reconciliation, and human connection. Charmaine Panko, a collaborative lawyer and arbitrator based in Saskatoon, brings a wealth of experience in conflict resolution, consensus-building,

and restorative approaches. Her perspective invites system leaders to consider how collaboration, rather than contention, can shape healthier school communities and governance.

Leona Prince, a Dakelh woman from Lake Babine Nation and Nak'azdli is a best-selling author and offers a compelling voice on Indigenous education, identity, and story. Her work encourages educators to honour Indigenous knowledge systems and to create spaces where students see their cultures reflected and respected.

Joining them is Monique Gray Smith, an award-winning, best-selling author whose writing and speaking focus on resilience, healing through trauma informed training, and the power of relationships. Her messages often remind audiences of the profound impact that caring adults and inclusive systems can have on the lives of children and youth.

Conference delegates will also have opportunity to register for a tour of Wanuskewin

Heritage Park, a nationally significant gathering place that offers deep insight into Northern Plains Indigenous cultures. The visit provides powerful land-based learning and a chance to reflect on history, stewardship, and reconciliation in action.

Of course, Saskatoon itself is part of the draw. With its walkable riverfront, thriving food scene, and famously friendly residents, the city offers a perfect blend of prairie charm and urban energy. Whether strolling the Meewasin Trail or exploring local galleries and cafés, visitors quickly understand why Saskatoon makes it an ideal setting for meaningful professional learning and memorable conversations that continue long after the conference ends.

Registration for the conference can be found at <https://www.cassa-acgcs.ca/>.

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It's (*Almost*) Always Sunny in Saskatoon:

See You at the 2026 CASSA Conference!



By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

Senior system leaders from across Canada are invited to gather in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, this July 2 to 4 for the 2026 Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) conference.

“Pack your sunscreen and prepare for some beautiful prairie sunshine along with excellent professional development,” says Ben Grebinski, a member of CASSA’s planning committee and board of directors.

With more sunshine per year than any other city in Canada and its welcoming spirit, Saskatoon promises to be a memorable destination for the conference. “Not very many places get to see the sky like we do,” says Ben, who was born, raised, and educated in Saskatchewan. “In July, you’ll get close to 16 or 17 hours of sunlight each day. The sunsets

are absolutely gorgeous, and the night sky is brilliant too. It’s unbelievable the number of stars you can see.”

CASSA members can expect the same high-quality conference experience as in previous years and locations, with an excellent lineup of keynote speakers and breakout sessions. This year’s theme, *Leadership for Belonging: One Community, Many Voices*, will provide multiple opportunities to examine how inclusive leadership practices create communities where everybody feels seen, valued, and empowered.

“It’s such a rich experience to have an educator from the prairies talk about inclusion with someone from the Maritimes, each with their own perspectives,” Ben says. The national conference is an ideal setting to have system leaders from all regions share best practices and experiences.

“And for those who have never been to the prairie provinces, this is your opportunity to see what Saskatchewan and Saskatoon have to offer.”

In addition to professional learning and networking, the CASSA conference offers many moments for fun, celebration, and shared purpose. The conference’s host hotel is in downtown Saskatoon, allowing attendees and their guests opportunities to explore the best of what some have called the Paris of the Prairies.

“You’ll be in the heart of the city and right on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River,” Ben notes. Saskatoon is distinguished by the river and the series of artful bridges crossing the waterway. The Meewasin Trail, located along both sides of the river, is popular with locals and visitors alike for hiking, biking, paddling, and more. (Meewasin means “it is beautiful” in *nēhiyawē*, or Plains Cree.)



“Within walking distances of the hotel is the Remai Modern, a contemporary art museum displaying many local, national, and international artists,” says Ben.

The museum’s architecture alone makes it worth a visit, with dramatic windows overlooking the South Saskatchewan River. Opened in 2017, the Remai Modern notably includes hundreds of linocuts and 23 ceramic pieces by Pablo Picasso, the most comprehensive collection of its kind in the world.

The Remai is situated at River Landing, a stunning 36-acre riverfront park just south of the Victoria Bridge. Park visitors can enjoy patio dining, a farmers’ market, and live cultural events. Don’t miss *Prairie Wind*, a 15-metre-high sculpture representing prairie grasses, especially when it is lit up at night. Fans of Joni Mitchell will also want to take a stroll on the nearby Joni Mitchell Promenade.

Also nearby is the Ukrainian Museum of Canada, the largest and oldest Ukrainian museum on the continent. Experience the rich heritage, culture, and histories of Ukrainians in Canada, Ukraine, and throughout the greater diaspora through its exhibits.

Other nearby cultural attractions include the Saskatchewan Craft Council Gallery, Handmade House, the Bassment live jazz and blues venue, and the Western Development Museum’s Saskatoon branch. Saskatoon also has a great public and street art scene – watch

for colourful murals and impressive large-scale sculptures. For those staying beyond the conference dates, the city’s annual jazz festival gets underway July 5.

Despite a modest population of just over 300,000, Saskatoon has a food scene that is innovative, diverse, and proudly local. Be sure to sample a dish featuring the berry that gives the city its name. Saskatoons look like blueberries but have their own unique sweet but slightly nutty flavour.

Details about the conference’s breakout sessions, award nominations, meals, and special activities will appear in the June 2026 issue of *Leaders & Learners* as well as on the conference website. Biographies of keynote speakers Charmaine Panko, Leona Prince, and Monique Gray Smith have already been posted online.

One special activity that deserves early attention is optional but highly recommended pre-conference Thursday morning trip to Wanuskewin Heritage Park. Space is limited so be sure to book early. Tickets are \$40 plus tax per person and include transportation to the park and back. The tour also includes bannock and jam served with Bison Blend coffee, a unique brew created to celebrate the return of the Plains bison herd at Wanuskewin in 2019.

Wanuskewin, which means “seeking peace of mind” in nēhiyawē, is home to the longest

running archeological dig in Canada. The park is located where the Opimihāw Creek meets the South Saskatchewan River a short drive northeast of Saskatoon, a site that has been visited by nearly every pre-contact cultural group on the Great Plains. Wanuskewin Heritage Park includes a state-of-the-art interpretive centre that presents the nomadic practices of the Northern Plains Indigenous Peoples, the remains of a 1,700-year-old medicine wheel, bison jumps, archeological finds, and prairie trails to explore.

Registration fees and related details are available on the conference website. Note that refunds, less a \$150 cancellation fee, are available until June 2. While refunds are no longer possible after that date, your organization may choose a substitute delegate at any time before the conference at no charge. ○

Once again, CASSA is pleased to offer accommodation and travel discounts for conference attendees and their guests!

- Sheraton Cavalier Saskatoon room rates start at \$179 per night for single or double occupancy in a traditional room. A group rate is available until 5pm (Central Standard Time) on June 1, based on availability. Room rates do not include applicable service charges or taxes.

Planning to fly to Saskatoon? CASSA has arranged discounts with both major national carriers:

- WestJet is offering 5 per cent off Econo and 10 per cent off Econo-Flex and Premium base fares for travel within Canada and between Canada and the US. Discounts are not available for Ultra Basic or Business fares. Bookings must be made for Saskatoon during the travel period from June 24 to July 12. Use coupon code 6I1B4KK online or provide code YBW58 to your travel agent.
- Air Canada is offering discounts of 5 per cent for standard fares and 10 per cent for flex fares and higher. International travellers are offered 10 per cent off standard fares and higher. Business fares are offered 12 per cent discounts, except 5 per cent on the lowest Business fare. Discounts apply to travel to Saskatoon between June 24 and July 12. Use promotion code CUJY9FH1.

Recognizing Excellence: Nominate a Colleague for a CASSA Award!

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

Each year, the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) recognizes the extraordinary efforts of Canadian school system leaders through the presentation of a national leadership award.

The Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award has been presented since 2024. CASSA recognizes and is grateful for the support of this award by Nelson Canada, the country's leading K to 12 educational publisher.

Prior to 2024, the award was known for two decades as the EXL Award. CASSA presents these awards each year at our annual conference. We will present the 2026 Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award this July in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Our American counterparts in the School Superintendents Association (AASA) also recognize the recipient as the Canadian Superintendent of the Year at the following year's AASA conference, where it announces the American Superintendent of the Year. CASSA's 2026 Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award recipient will be recognized in Atlanta, Georgia, in February 2027.

Is there a superintendent, director of education, or other school system leader in your provincial or territorial organization or school district deserving of this national recognition? Consider putting forward their name and accomplishments. Nomination forms for the Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award are on the CASSA website under the Awards tab.

Be sure to submit nomination packages by May 16, 2026. Nominees are announced in the *Leaders & Learners* newsletter, and recipients are profiled following the annual CASSA conference.

The 2025 Canadian Superintendent of the Year and recipient of the 2025 Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award was Kevin Kardaal, the former Central Okanagan School District superintendent and a former CASSA president. Kevin received this



award at the 2025 conference in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

The recipient of the inaugural Nelson Award was Reg Klassen, CASSA's current executive director. Previous EXL Award recipients include Tony Stack, Bevan Daverne, Darrel Robertson, Dr. Renee Closs, Shannon Barnett-Aikman, David Keohane, Dr. John Malloy, Joan Carr, John Crocco, Brent Kaulback, Kim Jenkins, Robert Mills, Linda Fabi, Curtis Brown, John Mackle, Johanne Messner, Geoff Williams, Carol Gray, Ron Canuel, Edie Wilde, Ed Wittchen, Roy Seidler, and John Darroch. The recipient list is updated each year in the Awards section of the CASSA website.

CASSA also presents two other special awards from time to time: the Honourary Life Membership and the Distinguished Service Award. The nomination process and deadlines are the same as those for the Nelson Excellent In Leadership Award.

About the Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award

CASSA members who have exhibited exemplary leadership ability and who have enhanced school administration are eligible to receive this award. The award includes an honorary life membership in CASSA.

A Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award nominee will have brought honour to themselves, their colleagues, and their profession. They will have given exemplary service to their provincial, territorial, or national professional association. They will have made significant contributions to the field of edu-

cation through their service, writings, or other activities. They serve as role models and teachers to others, and they will have had at least five years of membership in CASSA.

About the Honourary Life Membership

This award recognizes excellence in education at the national level. It is intended to honour individuals who have contributed significantly to CASSA but may also be presented to those who have made a difference at the provincial affiliate level. The latter will only happen when those provincial affiliate contributions relate to and support CASSA and its national mandate.

In 2025, CASSA recognized Ken Bain with the Honourary Life Membership Award. Ken is CASSA's former executive director, serving in this role from 2012 until his retirement in 2024.

About the Distinguished Service Award

This award recognizes any present or recent CASSA member who has demonstrated outstanding ability and leadership. Please note this award is open to leaders at all stages of a career in senior system administration. It is not restricted to only those who are retired or nearing retirement; the CASSA Honourary Life Membership would normally be more appropriate for those individuals. These guidelines do not exclude those who are approaching retirement from receiving the Distinguished Service Award. In 2025, Dr. Souhail Soujah received the Distinguished Service Award. He is the superintendent of the South Slave Divisional Educational Council. ○