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Leaders & Learners NEWSLETTER

The official newsletter of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators

Greetings from the President



Michael Helm
CASSA/ACGCS President

Équité et excellence en éducation
CASSA-ACGCS
Equity and Excellence in Education

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

Student-Focused Leadership

Spring has finally arrived! The warmer weather has brought with it green landscapes, renewed energy, and a positive sense of hope and possibility. This time of year, often gives us an opportunity to reflect on the work we have accomplished together and to look ahead with optimism toward the future.

As system leaders across Canada, we have a unique and important perspective on education. Every day, we work directly with students, staff, families, and communities to create the greatest opportunities for student success. We remain deeply committed to providing safe, caring, and inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive. Whether through innovative programming, student supports, or the creative use of both indoor and outdoor learning spaces, our teams continue to demonstrate dedication, resilience, and professionalism.

At the same time, we are increasingly being asked to do more with fewer resources. Across the provinces, education systems are facing reductions, restrictions, and significant changes in practice. While we continue to adapt and find solutions, these pressures create growing challenges for schools and school divisions.

I recognize that political decision-makers face difficult choices each day, and I appreciate the complexity of those responsibilities. However, the decisions made moving forward must keep students at the centre. We are seeing more students with diverse and increasingly complex needs than ever before. This is not the time for additional policies, directives, legislation, or changes that may hinder the important work being done in our schools. Our focus must remain on supporting teaching and learning while ensuring students receive the care, supports, and opportunities they deserve.

I hope those in positions of influence can work collaboratively to ensure we are all moving in the same direction with a shared commitment to student success. Over the next several years, teaching and learning must remain our primary focus.

In closing, a reminder that our CASSA Conference is just around the corner. I look forward to seeing you all in Saskatoon from July 2-4, 2026!

Take care,
Mike

Greetings
from the Executive Director

End of Year Reflections, Transitions, and New Beginnings



Reg Klassen
CASSA/ACGCS New Executive Director

As we welcome the month of June and approach the close of another school year, we find ourselves in a season filled with reflection, transition, and meaningful change. In these final weeks as every classroom and school ramps up to meet the many deadlines and finish the many projects it is challenging to pause and reflect. But I invite you to find those moments to pause and reflect on the growth you have witnessed – within our students, within your school community, and within yourself. For some, the work has opened the door to a new beginning as teachers and administrators across this country explore new roles, receive new assignments, or step into fresh opportunities for the year ahead.

In addition to the excitement of the year ending there is the exhilaration and anticipation of these changes next year. Whether someone is moving to a new grade level, joining a different team, or embracing a leadership role, these transitions bring renewed energy and fresh perspectives that often strengthen the school community. Change reminds us that learning is lifelong, and that each new assignment is a chance to grow, contribute, and discover new strengths.

June also calls us to honor those who are concluding their journey with us. We extend heartfelt appreciation to the staff members who are retiring after years of dedication, service, and impact. Their commitment has shaped countless students and colleagues, and their legacy will continue to echo through our halls. We also offer warm farewells to those moving on to new chapters beyond our school. Their contributions have left a lasting mark, and we wish them every success as they step forward.

As we close out the year, may we do so with gratitude for the work we've shared, pride in what we've accomplished, and optimism for the possibilities ahead. Here's to celebrating growth, embracing change, and welcoming the bright season that awaits us.

Have a wonderful summer break,
Reg

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Presenting the 2026 Nelson Award Nominees

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

For over 20 years, the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) has recognized the extraordinary efforts of Canadian school system leaders through the annual presentation of a national leadership award.

Since 2024, this award has been known as the Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award. CASSA recognizes and appreciates the support of this award by Nelson Canada, Canada's leading K to 12 educational publisher.

Prior to 2024, the award was known for two decades as the EXL Award.

It is with great pleasure that we announce the nominees for the 2026 Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award. CASSA will present the award in Saskatoon at this year's conference on Friday, July 3.

Congratulations to each of the nominees!



Dr. Clint Moroziuk

- College of Alberta School Superintendents
- Chief Superintendent, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools, St. Albert



Jody Weller

- Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association
- Superintendent, Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board, North Bay



Cindy Finn

- Association of Directors General of English School Boards of Québec
- Director General, Lester B. Pearson School Board, Dorval

Our American counterparts in the School Superintendent Association (AASA) will also recognize the 2026 Nelson Award recipient at its 2027 conference. The Canadian Superintendent of the Year will be announced along with the American Superintendent of the Year in Atlanta, Georgia, next February.

Since 2024, this award has been known as the Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award. CASSA recognizes and appreciates the support of this award by Nelson Canada, Canada's leading K to 12 educational publisher.

Previous Nelson Award recipients include Kevin Kardaal and Reg Klassen.

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 Award and the Distinguished Service Award.

The Honourary Life Membership recognizes excellence 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 Distinguished Service Award recognizes any present or recent CASSA member who has demonstrated outstanding ability and leadership. It is open to all leaders at any stage of a career in senior system administration. ○



About the 2026 CASSA Conference Keynote Speakers

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

We look forward welcoming you to Saskatoon from July 2 to 4 for the 2026 Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) Annual Leadership Conference!

Our host city of Saskatoon is located in an area of Saskatchewan that has been a gathering place for Indigenous Peoples for thousands of years. Saskatoon is on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis People. In the Saskatoon area, Treaty 6 encompasses the lands of the Plains Cree, Saulteaux or Plains Ojibwe, Dakota, and Nakoda or Assiniboine. Treaty 6 is also known as kistêsinaw-tipahamâtowin (the Elder Brother Treaty) in nēhiyawēwin, the Plains Cree language.

Our professional learning gathering offers many opportunities to engage with this year's theme, Leadership for Belonging: One Community, Many Voices. Whether in one of the breakout sessions or during our featured keynote addresses, conference participants will be able to explore how inclusive leadership practices create communities where everybody feels seen, valued, and empowered.

We are so pleased to announce this year's keynote address speakers: Charmaine Panko, Leona Prince, and Monique Gray Smith.



Charmaine Panko

Charmaine Panko, K.C., has dedicated the last 12 years of her career in collaborative law, mediation, and arbitration to helping couples and families in legal conflict go through the experience with clarity, dignity, and respect.

The founder of Panko Collaborative Law & Mediation, Charmaine and her multidisciplinary team prioritize alternative dispute resolution (ADR) and out-of-court methods to reduce financial and emotional stress for parties navigating divorce and other challenging legal processes in family law. The firm has offices in Saskatoon and Martensville, Saskatchewan.

Charmaine's expertise in law as settlement counsel and neutral professional includes employment and labour, insurance matters, estate disputes, separation and divorce, and physical injury claims. She also contracts her services to the Government of Saskatchewan.

Prior to launching her firm, Charmaine practised corporate law with Miller Thomson for a decade. She earned her Bachelor of Laws (L.L.B.) with Distinction from the University of Saskatoon in 2005.

Her commitment to ADR began right after graduation, leading her to earn designations as a Chartered Mediator and a Qualified Arbitrator. Since 2010, she has served as a sessional instructor at the University of Saskatchewan College of Law. She has also trained others in the collaborative law process, negotiation, and mediation for over a decade. Charmaine has led the CommonSense Mediation Academy since 2019, helping to train legal and helping professionals in family mediation and conflict resolution.

Among her professional accolades, Charmaine has received the 2008 Law Society of Saskatchewan Pro Bono Service Award, the 2011 L'Expert Zenith Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year Award, the 2013 Cam Partridge Memorial PLEA Volunteer of the Year Award, and the 2020 NSBA Pursuit of Excellence Award.

Charmaine has deep roots in rural Saskatchewan. She grew up in the small town of Maple Creek, where she was a rodeo queen in high school. Before she pursued a career in law, she studied acting at the University of Alberta. She and

her partner spent time in New York and then Toronto, where they ran an entertainment agency before returning to Saskatoon. Charmaine is the proud mother of 11 children and grandmother to six grandchildren.



Leona Prince

Leona Prince has devoted her life's work to children and their learning journeys. As an award-winning educator, best-selling author, and mother of three, her work is grounded in the belief that children have great potential for kindness, leadership, compassion, and connection to the natural world.

Leona is the director of instruction for School District No. 91 (Nechako Lakes) in Vanderhoof, BC. She has also held roles as vice principal at Nusdeh Yoh Elementary in Prince George, district principal of Indigenous Education for School District No. 91, and assistant superintendent with the BC Ministry of Education and Child Care. Her work in educational leadership was recognized with an Inspire Award in 2018.

She holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology and First Nations Studies, a Bachelor of Education in Senior Years, and a Master of Education in Multidisciplinary Leadership from the University of Northern British Columbia. In 2017, the university presented her with its Distinguished Alumni – Professional Excellence Award. She is now working toward her Doctor in Education from the University of British Columbia.

As a writer, Leona's work is inspired in part by childhood teachings, family stories, and ancestral Dakehl knowledge. Her first children's picture book, *A Dance Through the Seasons*, was also the first book to be published through Fireweed Canada, a venture started with her sister Gabrielle Prince.

The two sisters have since collaborated as co-authors on two more picture books: *Be a Good Ancestor* (2022) and *Remember Who You Are* (2025), published by Orca Book Publishers. *Be a Good Ancestor* spent weeks on the bestseller list and was shortlisted for the Ruth and Sylvia Schwartz Children's Book Award. Both books are available in English and French; *Remember Who You Are* is also published in Plains Cree.

Leona is Dakelh from Lake Babine Nation and Nak'azdli Whu'ten in BC's interior. She belongs to the Lhts'umusyoo (Beaver) Clan and is a descendent of Chief Kw'eh (c. 1755–1840), a great chief known as the dreamer of the salmon. Leona currently makes her home in Burns Lake, BC.



Monique Gray Smith

Monique Gray Smith is a bestselling author and storyteller. She has crafted stories and books for a wide range of ages, from babies to Elders. Her writing frequently centres on themes of wisdom, hope, kindness, reconciliation and Indigenous resilience, and the teaching that love is medicine.

Monique is of Cree, Lakota, and Scottish heritage and is a Two-Spirit person who identifies as a woman. Her mother, who was Cree but taken from her family during the Sixties Scoop, was raised first in an orphanage and then in a non-Indigenous home. Monique often shares her personal experiences during her public speaking engagements, including her years-long journey to reconnect with her mother's family. As with her writing, her talks frequently touch on hope, resilience, and love, as well as education and wellness.

She is the winner of the 2014 Burt Award for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Literature and the 2017 Christie Harris Illustrated Children's Literature Prize (with illustrator Julie Flett). Her middle grade novella *Lucy & Lola* was named an American Indians in Children's Literature Best Book in 2018. Monique has also been a finalist for the 2017 BC Book Prize, the 2018 TD Canadian Children's Literature Award, and the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award.

Besides her writing and public speaking career, Monique has worked as a psychiatric nurse in Indigenous communities for more than two decades. She was also an instructor for curriculum design at the Justice Institute of BC for five years.

Monique makes her home in Victoria, BC. ○

SELECT BOOKS BY MONIQUE GRAY SMITH

Children's Picture Books and Board Books

Kohkom's First Drum
Dreaming Alongside
Circle of Love
I Hope
When We Are Kind
You Hold Me Up
My Heart Fills With Happiness

Novels, Novellas, and Short Story Collections

Tilly and the Crazy Eights
Tilly: A Story of Hope and Resilience
Lucy & Lola: The Journey Forward, a Novella on Reconciliation
Sharing the Light: Stories and Reflections

Resources

Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults (adapted from Robin Wall Kimmerer's bestseller)
Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation
Every Child Matters: Reconciliation Through Education magazine
The Ripple Effect of Resiliency: Strategies for Fostering Resiliency With Indigenous Children

Faces in the Crowd: We Want to Put YOU in the Spotlight

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer



The countdown is on. In just a few weeks, members of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) will gather in Saskatoon for the 2026 annual general meeting and conference. It's an incredible opportunity for professional learning and networking.

Your *Leaders & Learners* newsletter also provides opportunities for members to further these collegial connections. Since 2004, we have profiled leaders from across the country in a section called Faces in the Crowd.

This long-running series features biographical portraits of CASSA members—superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of education, and other senior system administrators in public education—from coast to coast to coast.

In recent years, we have profiled leaders from:

- The British Columbia School Superintendents Association (BCSSA)
- The College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS)
- The Saskatchewan League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents (LEADS)
- The Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS)
- The Northwest Territories Superintendents' Association (NWTSA)
- The Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (OCSOA)
- Le Regroupement national des directions générales de l'éducation (RNDGEÉ)
- The Association of Administrators of English Schools of Quebec (AAESQ)
- The Association of Directors General of English School Boards of Quebec (ADGESBQ)
- The New Brunswick School Superintendents' Association (NBSSA)
- The Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia (PSAANS)
- The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of School System Administrators (NLASSA).

As well, our profiles occasionally include leaders and regional organizations not currently part of the CASSA membership, such as the relatively new Yukon First Nations School Board (FNSB).

Faces in the Crowd is a platform for CASSA members to share professional journeys in education and system administration, as well as personal achievements and interests. These profiles also offer space to highlight the latest initiatives, innovations, and milestones in your local school district or regional affiliate.

We profile members of CASSA and regional affiliates at any stage of their leadership career, from those in their first year of system administration to the near- or newly retired. In a country as geographically spread out as Canada and with multiple provincial and territorial governments responsible for K to 12 public education, it is sometimes challenging for our members to connect. Faces in the Crowd can help bridge distances and differences.

Do you know a CASSA member who deserves to have their story included in an upcoming issue? Is there a colleague making a difference in your district? Perhaps you would like to share your own story. We welcome all suggestions – reach out to *Leaders & Learners* contributing writer Tara Wittchen with your ideas at taraleewittchen@gmail.com. ○

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