

## Greetings from the President



**Kevin Kaardal**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

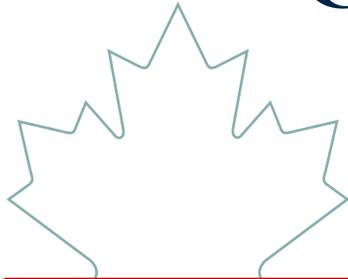
**O**n September 11, 2023, the Board of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) met on ZOOM. Part of the agenda was a cross-country check-in, where a number of themes were discussed. These themes included: the centralization and politicization of public education, the elimination of school boards, staff shortages due to the labour market, managing through climate emergencies, and the mental health of staff and students with increasing instability and complexity of society. Another theme that I have already written about in our June issue that continues to be concerning is the polarization and incivility of groups across Canada focusing on their views on identity, cloaked in a concern around parental rights, which contradict the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the dignity of the person.

Senior leaders in districts face increasing complexity in navigating their statutory responsibilities as they deliver public education to millions of students coast to coast. Directives from government that seem to contravene the law on minority language rights, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and Provincial Human Rights Codes, are impacting the work of system leaders. Each situation requires leaders to use their own contextual literacy skills to navigate how they lead their respective systems. I certainly won't pretend that there are easy answers to these issues. I simply wish to encourage system leaders facing particular contexts to connect with their colleagues and share strategy and wisdom that will assist them in navigating this increasing complexity.

I also suggest CASSA can help support networks if that would be of value to you and your team. The collective wisdom of many experienced leaders is a powerful opportunity that could be facilitated. If you are new to dealing with a climate emergency, connect with leaders that have experience and can share frameworks of response that may be helpful. If you simply need a confidential ear to listen and not provide solutions, then connect with a colleague in a different province you can trust. When dealing with a complex issue during the pandemic, I was able to connect with another leader from a different province who had already managed through the same issues successfully. Connecting was very helpful and helped me strategize and develop an effective plan and response to a problem before me.

Senior leadership can be a lonely job at times. It can seem even lonelier if you are facing significant complex societal and political issues. If you are in a larger district, you can lean on the collective wisdom of your team. You can also seek advice from your provincial associations that support Superintendents and Directors. They are a fantastic resource. National organizations like CASSA can also connect colleagues. Our organization's values include supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. We hope to support the well-being of students and leaders in public education. We appreciate the many complexities that face school system leaders and are willing to lend our support to promoting success for each student you serve.

**Kevin Kaardal**  
CASSA/ACGCS President



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

# Greetings from the Executive Director



**Ken Bain**

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

## CASSA board changes

Every year, the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) Board experiences turnover in the Board of Directors. It is up to each association to determine who sits at the CASSA table; the role varies from province to province to territory. Usually, the constant member is the association executive director with respective table officers rotating through the CASSA board depending on local by-laws. At this time, I want to express my appreciation to Claire Guy (BCSSA) who is retiring; and Krista Curry (MASS) and John Klein (OCSOA) who have served their terms and will be leaving the board. We look forward to their continued involvement as CASSA members in committee work. And, welcome to our newest board members: Gino Bondi (BCSSA), Christian Michalik (MASS), and Laura Callaghan (OCSOA).

We must also express our profound appreciation to Mike Borgfjord. Mike has been an outstanding member of the CASSA board for seven years. He began

as one of the members from Manitoba and then went on to serve as the CASSA Western Rep on the AASA Governing Board. Mike has served on the executive for six years and has been a member of the Professional Learning Committee. We will miss his many contributions to the association. We welcome Kevin Garinger (Saskatchewan) who will be our new CASSA Western Rep on the AASA Governing Board. Kevin began with CASSA as one of the board reps from Saskatchewan and now will transition to a new role as an executive.

## Copyright awareness

The Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) Copyright Consortium is again encouraging principals and teachers to discuss copyright during their staff meetings. CASSA supports the work of the consortium as the issue is very important to districts/divisions and boards throughout Canada.

CMEC is emphasising to teachers the importance of copyright compliance.

Our members across the country will be circulating a copyright information package to schools in the coming weeks.

## Save the date for CASSA 2024!

Get out your calendars and save the date for next year's CASSA Leadership Conference in beautiful and historic Montréal, Québec! **The dates are July 3 to 5, 2024.** More information to come, of course. Always happy to hear from our members. Please email me [ken\\_bain@cassa-acgcs.ca](mailto:ken_bain@cassa-acgcs.ca) if you have any suggestions for our 2024 conference theme.

Get these dates locked into your calendars!

**Ken Bain**

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

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# The Journey Toward Reconciliation in the Valley of the Birdtail

## *(Part Two)*

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

*This is the concluding part of a two-part feature. The first was published in the September 2023 issue of Leaders & Learners. Profiles of the authors of Valley of the Birdtail: An Indian Reserve, A White Town, and the Road to Reconciliation appeared in the June 2023 issue.*

One of the key questions explored in the book *Valley of the Birdtail* (HarperCollins Canada, 2022) by Andrew Stobo Sniderman and Douglas Sanderson was why Canada would underfund education on reserves for so long.

Sniderman and Sanderson, whose Cree name is *Amo Binashii*, note the pre-2010 funding gap between what students from Waywayseecappo First Nation were receiving and what students from the neighbouring town of Rosburn, both in Manitoba, were receiving was not a unique error but part of a larger pattern of what has happened to the hundreds of schools on reserves across the country. The funding discrepancies were also not exclusive to education. They applied to many aspects of life on reserves.

Journalist and writer Gillian Steward wrote in a June 2023 *Toronto Star* column that there are a great number of similar examples of struggling Indigenous communities next door to well-off white communities. There are, however, few detailed

comparisons of the history of these parallel but separated and unequal communities. “And yet,” she noted, “it is the story of Canada, especially western Canada.”

In recent years, former politicians have acknowledged the harm done, and some have expressed regret for policies that led to decades of funding discrepancies. Scott Serson, who was the Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs from 1995 to 1999, has said, “It is only reasonable to conclude that the deliberate, but unstated, policy of the Canadian government is to maintain the vast majority of First Nations in poverty.”

Former Prime Minister Paul Martin, referring to a long-standing two per cent funding cap on reserve services including education, said in 2012, “The cap was a mistake and there’s no excuse for it.”

# A key step needed to successfully develop a partnership between Waywayseecappo and Park West was bringing in the crucial third party—the federal government.

Rosburn and Waywayseecappo are on Treaty 4 territory. Part of that treaty states that the government of Canada promises to maintain a school on each reserve. Canada's consistent underfunding for these schools, however, has resulted in them never having the same level of support as nearby provincially funded public schools. Sniderman and Sanderson point out how despite knowing their schools would remain separate and unequal under this arrangement, Waywayseecappo First Nation and many other reserve communities still chose to retain their own schools, in part due to the deep wounds Indigenous Peoples have endured from the residential and integrated school systems.

When a province like Manitoba increased funding for its public education system, it benefitted about 90 per cent of the students in the province. The schools on reserves, however, did not see these benefits and children in provincial public schools are not affected by the

federal underfunding of reserve schools.

But just because it had always been this way, did it have to stay that way? For years, Waywayseecappo's Director of Education Colleen Clearsky wondered how to change this system of unequal funding. She wanted to know why students from her community couldn't simply receive the same funding as the kids in Rosburn, overseen by Park West School Division, were getting. What needed to be done to reduce and eliminate the funding gap once and for all?

Population patterns have always been a part of the story of these two communities. The more sinister side from early chapters of Canadian multiculturalism apply here as they do elsewhere in the country. From 1895 to 1914, Canada welcomed 180,000 Ukrainians; at the end of those two decades, Ukrainian settlers outnumbered Indigenous Peoples. On the one hand, the federal government warmly welcomed newcomers to

settle in places like Rosburn. On the other hand, that same government enacted and enforced policies meant to "civilize" and isolate Indigenous Peoples to clear the path for settlers.

By the 2000s, however, rural communities like Rosburn were experiencing steady population decline. The changing nature of farming meant fewer young people were staying in places like Rosburn to raise families. The depopulation became alarmingly evident to Park West School Division administrators as student enrollment numbers continued to drop year after year. The decrease in enrollment threatened a decrease in funding for division programs, staff cuts, and possibly even school closures.

Meanwhile, Waywayseecappo had a growing and much younger population, particularly of school-aged children. This was a key factor in bringing Waywayseecappo and Park West School Division together toward developing a mutually beneficial education funding deal. If Park West could include Waywayseecappo's student population with its division numbers, it could address its enrollment issues and related challenges.

A key step needed to successfully develop a partnership between Waywayseecappo and Park West was bringing in the crucial third party—the federal government. The question of why the federal government allowed this unequal funding to continue for decades



*Valley of the Birdtail: An Indian Reserve, a White Town, and the Road to Reconciliation* by Andrew Stobo Sniderman and Douglas Sanderson.

has yet to be thoroughly addressed, Sniderman and Sanderson observe in the book. Even after a non-binding resolution passed in 2012 in the House of Commons for the federal government to provide funding that would put all reserve schools on par with non-reserve provincial schools, very few immediate changes were made across the country. The Government of Canada continued to systematically underfund students on reserves, regardless of if Liberals or Conservatives were in power.

On November 29, 2010, however, the inequality was acknowledged enough to allow for a small but significant change to take place. That day, the federal government began matching provincial per student education funding levels for federally funded students from Waywayseecappo. This was a historic first, not just for the community but for all of Canada. (In fact, this kind of funding parity would not take place for students in many other First Nations until 2021.)

Sniderman and Sanderson detail the federal political climate at the time the partnership came into being and the various factors that eventually led to support from the federal government. That the partnership was a locally driven initiative without a large price tag (in the context of a federal budget) had an immensely positive effect on moving things forward and quickly.

Securing that federal support meant that every student from Waywayseecappo would immediately be funded for the exact same number of dollars as a student in Rossburn or from anywhere else served by the public school system in Manitoba. This almost overnight increase to Waywayseecappo's education budget resulted in many positive changes, often right away:

- Six more teachers were hired for the school in Waywayseecappo, resulting in smaller class sizes.
- Pay rates for teachers increased, resulting in better teacher retention rates (by 2016–17, Waywayseecappo had the best retention rate in the entire division).
- The school in Waywayseecappo kept its autonomy while benefitting from the economies of scale that come with



*Stephen David, Park West Superintendent.*

being part of a larger school division, such as access to teacher training, speech pathologist services, and student counselling services.

Within a few years after the agreement was signed, half of students in Grades 1 to 4 in Waywayseecappo were reading at grade level. This was a vast improvement over testing results from 2010 that saw only one student from all four of those grades reading at grade level. Student attendance rose. Incident reports decreased. By 2015, the majority of Waywayseecappo students in Grade 8 stated they hoped to go to university. Meaningful and improved investments were resulting in meaningful and improved outcomes – including hope.

The partnership also offered a way forward to reconciliation. In 2017, Park West School Division hired its first Community Connector/Indigenous Education Facilitator to help bring an Indigenous perspective into all its schools, including those in Rossburn.

“The Community Connector plays a critical role in advancing truth and reconciliation by fostering understanding, respect, and recognition for Indigenous culture, history, language, worldviews, and perspectives,” Park West Superintendent Stephen David explains. “This promotes cultural sensitivity and competency, reducing stereotypes, biases, and misunderstandings.”

A key role for the Community Connector is strengthening and supporting schools, families, and communities

with a specific focus on the division's Indigenous students. They also help to promote a welcoming school environment and to connect and build relationships with parents and families. The Community Connector works to develop partnerships and connections to the community, supports before- and after-school programming, and identifies and coordinates resources used to support students and schools.

The personal stories of Park West's Community Connector Maureen Twovoice (*Binesi Ikwe*) and Troy Luhowy, one of its school principals, and their respective families are presented throughout *Valley of the Birdtail*. These stories provide deeply personal perspectives to the histories of the two communities and the details of how funding gaps and discriminatory and racist government policies have resulted in generations of vastly different outcomes for the children of Waywayseecappo and Rossburn. The Community Connector is from Waywayseecappo and is the child of a residential school survivor. The principal is white and grew up in Rossburn not knowing much about the nearby reserve or Indigenous Peoples.

Despite a divided and at times divisive 150-year history, Rossburn and Waywayseecappo have become symbols of what meaningful cooperation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities can look like. Neither community agreed to the partnership out of pure generosity, the authors note. Each party understands the arrangement in terms of its own self-interest. Yet at the same time, they understand the importance of creating a shared and mutually beneficial future. Sniderman and Sanderson observe that this relationship is no different from the broader one between settler and Indigenous Peoples across Canada. It's an important example of how policies that maintain poverty in Indigenous communities are ultimately costly ones for everyone.

One of Park West School Division's four divisional priorities is to focus on improving equity and inclusion while advancing truth and reconciliation. It has identified several action areas to support the priority:

- To implement Mamàhtawisiwin: The Wonder We Are Born With—An Indigenous Education Policy Framework;
- To enhance age-appropriate curriculum by integrating content on residential schools, Treaties, land-based education, Indigenous languages, and Indigenous Peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions;
- To develop high school programming and learning experiences to address Indigenous history, language development, and cultural awareness; and
- To work in partnership with the local community to develop land-based learning opportunities for students.

Several recent initiatives have supported the division’s focus on reconciliation, notes David. For example, the division has provided professional development for staff that also focuses on residential schools, Treaties, land-based education, Indigenous languages, and Indigenous Peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions.

“Our divisional in-service in September 2022 was on the land at Waywayseecappo, and one of the

authors of *Valley of the Birdtail* was our keynote speaker,” says David. “The main theme of the day was truth and reconciliation. The secondary theme was making connections with Waywayseecappo community for the purpose of shared learning and relationship building.”

The in-service last fall also included sessions on historic and contemporary issues surrounding the Treaties, the history of Waywayseecappo, and the Indian Act. Several Elders attended the sessions as facilitators. Another of the division’s initiatives is supporting conversations between its Indigenous Student Council and Indigenous Education Committee about improving student outcomes.

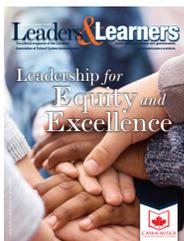
Reconciliation includes exploring the past and choosing to build a better future. Park West supports Elders spending time in all its schools to share their experiences and stories to help build trust and understanding as part of the provincial Elder and Knowledge Keeper in Schools program.

There are many system administrators across Canada who, like David, work in divisions that serve students

from communities like Rossburn and Waywayseecappo First Nation, communities with parallel but separate and unequal histories. What does David hope these leaders take from *Valley of the Birdtail*?

“While the book focuses on two communities in Manitoba, its message of cultural preservation is transferable to other communities and provinces in Canada, as many Indigenous communities have faced similar challenges and have engaged in efforts to assert their cultural identities and seek equality and justice. The book’s themes of cultural identity, resilience, and justice are relevant across our country, connecting historical events to current discussions about Indigenous rights and reconciliation.”

It may take a generation or more to see real changes in response to all the calls to action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report, but vital first steps have been taken. As the authors state in their concluding chapters, there are lessons to be learned from the example of these two communities in the Birdtail River valley. There are teachings to be heard. ○



### WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO WRITE FOR US!

The CASSA Board is looking for authors interested in writing for the upcoming Winter 2023-2024 issue of *Leaders & Learners* magazine. If you have an article idea that fits into a theme about leadership, please send an abstract to Jenna Collignon, editor of the magazine, at [jcollignon@matrixgroupinc.net](mailto:jcollignon@matrixgroupinc.net), and copy [ken\\_bain@cassa-acgcs.ca](mailto:ken_bain@cassa-acgcs.ca). We are looking for features and success stories from each region of Canada: Eastern Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Western Canada, and Northern Canada.

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