

Greetings from the President



Michael Helm
CASSA/ACGCS President

I encourage you to seek out opportunities within your own communities – to go, to listen, and to engage meaningfully with members of Indigenous communities. There is so much to be learned through these connections.

Hello all! I hope the weather in your part of Canada has moved away from winter and into warmer times for you. Winter to Spring has certainly proven to be a challenge for many of us with many difficult weather patterns.

Earlier in May, I was fortunate to attend the C21 Canada – CEO Academy Atlantic Leader Summit. The summit provided for two full days of sharing and learning by many leaders and partners from across Canada. The focus was on the AI Use Case Projects that have been completed by school boards and districts throughout Canada. We engaged in thoughtful presentations and open, honest discussions that created a safe space for reflection and exploration. The format encouraged both roundtable sharing and full-group exchanges, allowing for diverse perspectives to emerge on the promise and complexity of integrating AI in education.

Among the many impactful moments, one experience stood out for many of us – the Medicine Walk led by Grandmother Buffalo. We were welcomed into the

Mi'kmaq (Meeg-mah) community and taken on a two and a half to three hour walk through the forest and across the land. Along the way, Grandmother Buffalo shared stories – about the land, the people, and the history – that were deeply moving and filled with wisdom.

As we listened and learned from her, it became clear that she holds a profound understanding of the world around us. The experience reminded us of the importance of outdoor learning spaces, the power of storytelling, and the deep knowledge carried by Indigenous communities. It was a powerful call to reconnect with the land, to listen more deeply, and to recognize the richness that surrounds us.

I encourage you to seek out opportunities within your own communities – to go, to listen, and to engage meaningfully with members of Indigenous communities. There is so much to be learned through these connections. By doing so, we take important steps on the path toward truth and reconciliation, both personally and professionally.

I wish you all the best.

Mike Helm
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



Reg Klassen

CASSA/ACGCS New Executive Director

Late last fall, I picked up Dr. Sanjay Gupta's book *Keep Sharp - Build a Better Brain at Any Age*. Knowing that the new year would bring a shift in my life – one without the daily demands of school division leadership – I wanted to make sure I was taking steps to keep my brain engaged and active. Naturally, Dr. Gupta covers the familiar pillars of brain health – movement, sleep, nutrition, and continuous learning – but what really caught my attention was his emphasis on relationships, something he calls the “Connection for Protection.”

His perspective on human connection as a fundamental part of brain health stuck with me. Relationships aren't just emotionally rewarding – they're biologically necessary. And when I think about this in the context of schools, it becomes clear that prioritizing connection isn't just beneficial; it's essential.

We all know for students, strong, positive relationships contribute to emotional well-being, cognitive development, and resilience. When they feel a true sense of belonging – whether through friendships, supportive teachers, or mentorship – they are more engaged, more confident, and more successful. Schools that create opportunities for collaboration, foster inclusive environments, and emphasize social-emotional learning help students feel valued, supported, and motivated.

But the same is true for staff, we can't overlook the importance of connection among all staff. Teaching is a demanding profession, and we all know how crucial it is to have supportive colleagues we can lean on. Strong professional relationships reduce burnout, enhance job satisfaction, and strengthen teamwork. When we encourage open communication, peer support, and staff wellness initiatives, schools become places where educators feel appreciated and empowered to do their best work.

Beyond the classroom, connected schools have a lasting impact on their communities.

Parents, administrators, and local organizations all play a role in shaping an environment that fosters meaningful collaboration. When we build these bridges, they support student success and deepen trust among stakeholders.

Dr. Gupta confirms something we acknowledge as vital in schools, now more than ever before, relationships are an integral part of well-being. We all recognize we need to create connection among students, staff, and the broader school community, spaces where learning thrives and people flourish. And as I step into this next chapter, I'm reminded that staying sharp isn't just about challenging our minds – it's about nurturing the relationships that enrich our lives.

Reg Klassen

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

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Faces in the Crowd: Kirk Smith



*Kirk Smith and his family
on vacation in Western
Newfoundland. Photos
courtesy of Kirk Smith.*

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

Kirk Smith couldn't be happier that this year's Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) Leadership Conference will be held in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

"I want people to enjoy Newfoundland and Labrador's famous hospitality and culture, and at the same time have a professional learning experience like no other," he says. The deep love for home is evident in his voice over the phone line. "I want them to enjoy every minute of their time in Newfoundland – it is a truly unique place."

Kirk is the new president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of School System Administrators (NLASSA) and a director of schools with NLSchools.

The timing of the Leadership Conference taking place in Newfoundland a year after the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD) integrated into the Department of Education to become NLSchools is ideal. (See "About NLSchools and NLASSA" to learn more.)

"Now that we are part of the Department of Education, there are opportunities to grow NLASSA as an organization. Our vision is to inform potential new members from the department of the professional learning



Above: Kirk and his family at Disneyland Resort.

Right: Kirk and his son Grayson.



opportunities available to them through NLISSA and CASSA,” he explains. “Our goal is to grow NLISSA and we are using this ideal opportunity of having the CASSA conference in our backyard to invite all other non-member executives and directors in the Department of Education to join us at the conference.”

Kirk also sits on CASSA’s board of directors as the president for NLISSA, and quickly signed up to be part of the conference planning committee as soon as he learned it was coming to Newfoundland.

“I wanted to be a member of the committee because I knew I could promote Newfoundland and Labrador in the right way,” he says. “I had already attended a number of CASSA conferences and had experienced

their excellent reputation for providing professional learning to its participants. So I said to the committee there is no way the conference can happen in Newfoundland and Labrador without learning about our culture, our music, and our traditional ways so that all participants would have that experiential engagement when they come to St. John’s.”

A key experience Kirk hopes conference visitors will enjoy is the music. Friday night will feature an authentic Newfoundland kitchen party, he says, with the folk and traditional band Tarahan.

Another experience not to be missed, Kirk says, is the guided walking tour of St. John’s. The tour will include stops at Cabot Tower and Signal Hill (where Marconi successfully sent

the first transatlantic wireless signal in 1901). It will also include a visit to Cape Spear, the most easterly point in North America where there is an old American gun battery from the Second World War, and the oldest surviving lighthouse in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Kirk grew up and was educated in St. John’s, including earning his Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education, and Master of Education from the Memorial University of Newfoundland (“affectionately known in Newfoundland as MUN,” he adds). His career in public education, from teaching to senior administration, has also been based in St. John’s.

His mother, however, is from the tiny community of Conche on the Northern Peninsula and she instilled in him a true appreciation of outport and rural living. As much as he loves St. John’s, he also hopes guests take the opportunity to explore beyond the city.

“St. John’s is like any typical metropolitan city to a certain degree, but if you want to really see how people talk and interact in Newfoundland and Labrador, you have to get outside of the city,” he advises. “We want you to see some of our beautiful scenery, so we booked a boat tour with Gatherall’s for July 2. I went to school with Mike Gatherall, and they put on the best kind of show.” Expect to be fully immersed in the culture and history of the community and environment, he says, while watching for puffins and humpback whales.

“At the end of the day, what I really want is for visitors to experience that cultural piece. I don’t want them to just stay in the hotel downtown.” He also hopes conference participants will take the time to connect with others – not just in terms of the larger CASSA group but with Newfoundlanders and Labradorians they encounter. “That new perspective can really change your life.”

Kirk is pleased with the conference’s lineup of session presenters and keynote address speakers, particularly Dr. Chief Misi’l Joe. “I am inspired by Dr. Chief Misi’l Joe and how his story constantly reminds me to maintain that moral compass piece, to gain knowledge to make the right decisions, and make sure we’re not forgetting about everything we need to have as a foundation for learning.”

In addition to his deep roots in public education, Kirk has also served as a reservist with the Canadian Armed Forces for 28 years. He earned his Master of Defence Studies from the Royal Military College in Kingston in 2012. In 2018, after five years as the Commanding Officer for the 37 Signal Regiment with the 37 Canadian

Brigade Group, he took on the role of Chief Instructor for 5th Canadian Division (Atlantic Canada) at the Canadian Army Command and Staff College (CACSC) in Kingston.

His reservist responsibilities include travel to Halifax and Kingston as well as online teaching and prep work.

"I try my best to balance it all – I've got my civilian work as a director of schools, I've got my military work as the chief instructor, and then I've got my family. I'm consciously balancing those roles," he says. "It's busy. I love it, and I think my family is used to it now. It's become part of who we are. There are still challenging times, but we put everything on our family calendar on the fridge to keep track."

For him, the challenges are more than balanced out with the rewards of constantly learning and experiencing new opportunities.

"In the military, once you become the commanding officer of your regiment, there are only a couple of jobs to move into. So, they said to me, 'We'd like to send you to the college to become an instructor.' I said that I couldn't have thought of a better job."

He's come full circle, he observes. "I've held all kinds of different positions from a lineman as a private right up to being the commanding officer of a Signals Regiment. From my educational perspective, I was a teacher, then an assistant principal for five years, then a principal for 10, and this is my fifth year as a director of schools, but in the military, I've come right back to teaching."

A common requirement in his parallel careers is leadership. He sees his leadership style as one embracing empathy and approachability.

"And I love to talk! I love to talk to people – when I go to a school, I don't want to sit in the office and talk to the administrator the whole time. Let's go, take me around the school. I want to meet your teachers. I want to meet the students. Can I sit in on a class, do you mind if I read them a book? And then I'll do whatever it is I need to do but I want to do that first."

He also genuinely enjoys solving problems. "Especially in my new job now as a director, I'd say 90 per cent of my time is trying to solve problems. Issues happen at a school, and I am often having conversations with administrators to try to figure it out."

Rather than seeing himself as the person with all the answers, though, he prefers to listen to what other people are thinking. It is in this interaction, he says, that collaborative solutions are found. ○



About NLSchools

The way English-language public schools are organized in Newfoundland and Labrador has changed since the last time CASSA held its annual conference in the province.

Responsibility for the education of English-speaking students and for K to 12 public schools now belongs to NLSchools. This entity of the provincial government was created in January 2024 following the integration of the former Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD).

The change came about after years of work by the provincial Department of Education, the NLESD, the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers Association, the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE), and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

By aligning program and curriculum development and enhancing service delivery, staff from the former NLESD and from the provincial government can work together more closely to improve student experiences and outcomes.

Headquartered in St. John's at the Avalon Regional Office, NLSchools also has offices in Happy Valley-Goose Bay (Labrador Regional Office), Corner Brook (Western Regional Office), and Gander (Central Regional Office). It oversees more than 250 schools organized into 10 families of schools (FOS) and currently serves over 63,000 students.

A superintendent of schools, in a role equivalent to that of an assistant deputy minister, manages NLSchools. They are supported by the senior management official of human resources and the senior management official of school systems. Each FOS is led by a director of schools overseeing between 20 and 30 schools.

This is the second major transformation for English-speaking public schools in the province in just over a decade. In 2013, the NLESD was created through the amalgamation of the Labrador School Board, the Western School Board, the Nova Central School Board, and the Eastern School Board. Under that organization, corporate services were set up in the St. John's office and regional offices were located in Gander, Corner Brook, and Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

To learn more about NLSchools, visit nlschools.ca.

About NLASSA

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of School System Administrators (NLASSA) is the host regional affiliate for this summer's Leadership Conference.

NLASSA's members include directors of schools, senior management officials, and executive members. They represent NLSchools, the Conseil scolaire francophone provincial (CSFP), the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, and Se't A'newey Kina'matino'kuom (the Miawpukek Mi'kmaw Mawi'omi of Conne River Department of Education).

Its current executive consists of President Kirk Smith (NLSchools), Vice-President Susan Perry (NLSchools), Vice-President Alicia Sainsbury (NLSchools), Member at Large Marcella Cormier (CSFP), Member at Large Don Perry (NLSchools), and Executive Director John Way.

The organization holds its own general meetings in June and December each year. These and other events are part of NLASSA's efforts to support and enhance the professional growth, professional and personal welfare, and professional development of system leaders in Newfoundland.

To learn more about NLASSA, including its belief statements, its code of ethics, and the services and resources available to members, visit nlassa.ca.

2025 Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award Nominations

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 is grateful for the support of this award by Nelson Canada, Canada's leading K to 12 educational publisher. (For its first two decades, the award was known as the EXL Award.)

We are pleased to announce the nominees for the 2025 Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award. CASSA will announce the recipient in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, at this year's conference on July 4.

Congratulations to each of the nominees!



Kevin Kaardal

- British Columbia School Superintendents Association
- Superintendent/CEO, Central Okanagan Public Schools, Kelowna
- CASSA member since 2018



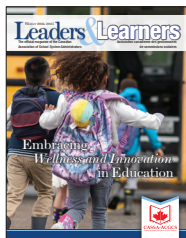
Michael McMann

- College of Alberta School Superintendents
- CEO/Superintendent of Schools, Fort Vermilion School Division, Fort Vermilion
- CASSA member since 2009



Sohail Soujah

- Northwest Territories Superintendents Association
- Superintendent, South Slave Divisional Education Council, Fort Smith
- CASSA member from 2017 to 2019 and since 2022



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The CASSA Board is looking for authors interested in writing for the upcoming issues of *Leaders & Learners* magazine. If you have an article idea that you're itching to tell, please send an abstract to Jenna Collignon, editor of the magazine, at jcollignon@matrixgroupinc.net, and copy 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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1123 Glenashton Drive
Oakville, ON L6H 5M1
Tel: 905-845-4254
ken_bain@cassa-acgcs.ca
www.cassa-acgcs.ca

Articles written by Tara Wittchen

Published by Matrix Group Publishing Inc.

309 Youville Street
Winnipeg, MB R2H 2S9
Tel: 866-999-1299
editor@matrixgroupinc.net
www.matrixgroupinc.net