

## Greetings from the President



**Kevin Kaardal**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

The Canadian Association for School System Administrators (CASSA) serves as a national voice and professional network for system leaders in Pre-K to Grade 12 public education in Canada. CASSA's National Conference (Theme: *Reimagining Education*), held at St. Andrews By-the-Sea, had over two hundred system leaders discussing some of the critical competencies system leaders utilize in their work leading districts. This conversation occurred at an important time for system leaders. We recognize that during the pandemic, our leadership was crucial though we were asked to lead in unfamiliar circumstances. The conversations centered on how we might leverage competencies to move forward to reimagine education and improve the experiences and the outcomes for each student across Canada.

The pandemic highlighted inequities in the system that profoundly impacted students and their learning. Public schooling provides so many services to the communities and the families they serve beyond delivering the prescribed provincial curricula. Schools provide food services, mental health services, and locations where students can socialize and participate in caring learning communities. School communities support students and staff to pursue deep learning through passion projects, to express themselves through fine arts and to compete with good sportsmanship through intra-school athletics. Schools also provide opportunities for students to show their generosity by performing organized acts of social justice.

Some of these services and opportunities were interrupted over the past few years. Depending on which wave of the pandemic we were in, the protocols from governments changed, often with short notice. The changing protocols required adaptive expertise from everyone in the system. Each school, district, and community experienced the pressures of the pandemic differently. Some had the resources to adapt, and some did not.

System leaders persevered and did heroic work under incredibly stressful times. It wasn't perfect, but it was the best that we could do within the knowledge and parameters that we faced.

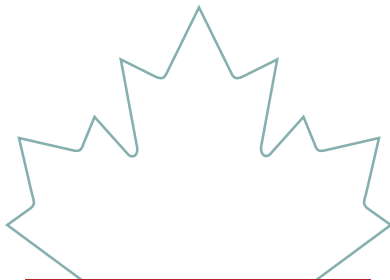
As we begin another school year, we have an opportunity to reflect on what we learned and renew our commitment to improve the life chances of those in our care. Some questions we might ask ourselves include: *What competencies and skills do our students need to thrive in a global society? What does our journey towards Truth and Reconciliation look like in our local communities? How do we ensure we are respecting the Indigenous rights holders on their traditional territories? How do we end racism, or ableism to create more inclusive, safer school communities and districts? How do we work towards equity for those who experience poverty, homelessness, and food scarcity? How do we support people's mental health? What should education look like going forward? Where is the agency of the learner promoted in our systems? Are we doing enough to steward environmental sustainability? What competencies do we need to learn to help us answer these incredibly complex questions?*

I am certain there are many more important questions that I have not asked.

The answers will require adaptive expertise. They will require the collaboration of thoughtful people. The good news is that we have a network of system leaders in CASSA with whom we can connect when we are contemplating and wondering about what we might do to reimagine and reshape education across Canada.

I am honoured to serve as CASSA President and look forward to the conversations we will have.

**Kevin Kaardal**  
CASSA/ACGCS President



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Equity and Excellence in Education

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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

**W**elcome back! I hope you all had a safe and enjoyable summer break with family and friends.

## A tribute to Reg Klassen, Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS)

It is with regret but with heartfelt thanks that the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) Board of Directors says “farewell” to Reg Klassen, Chief Superintendent of Frontier School Division in Manitoba. Reg has concluded his two-year commitment as the CASSA Past-President, having served two years as President-Elect and an additional two years as CASSA President.

Reg has been an active and supportive CASSA board member for many years having served as an executive member as well a MASS representative. Reg’s commitment to the importance of a national association and his vocal advocacy in Manitoba and beyond has allowed CASSA to grow over the years to where it is today: a national association representing school system leaders from all

ten provinces and three territories including directors-general from French-language districts outside of Quebec.

Over the years, Reg and I have developed a great friendship, even though he cheers for the Winnipeg Jets and Saskatchewan Roughriders. We will miss his wisdom and sense of humour around our table. I wish Reg well as he continues to serve the communities in the Frontier School Division which is one of the largest geographic districts in the country. His commitment to supporting the needs of Indigenous learners came through at every meeting in which we engaged those discussions.

## CASSA board changes

Every year, the CASSA Board experiences turnover in the board of directors. It is up to each association to determine who sits at the CASSA table and 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 Pauline Clarke (MASS), Scott Morrison (CASS), and Morris Hucal (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. Welcome to our newest board members: Krista Curry (MASS), Clint Moroziuk (CASS), and John Klein (OCSOA). Congratulations and many thanks for his future contributions to Mike Helm (ADGESBQ) on his election as CASSA President-Elect!

## Save the date for CASSA 2023!

Get out your calendars and save the date for next year’s CASSA Leadership Conference in beautiful Victoria, British Columbia. The dates are July 5-7, 2023. Lots more to come of course. Get the dates locked into your calendars!

Thank you all, and I hope the beginning of a new school year greets you all kindly.

**Ken Bain**

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

## CASSA Board of Directors

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# Scaling Conversations with Dave MacLeod of ThoughtExchange



By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

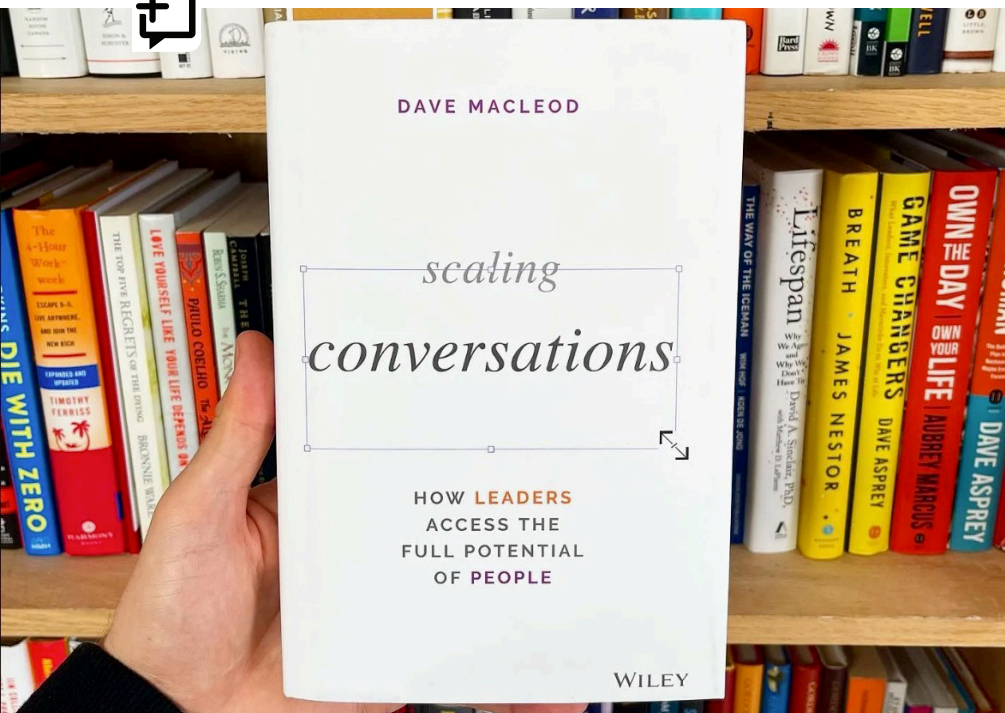
Dave MacLeod, CEO and Founder of ThoughtExchange.

**F**or 13 years, ThoughtExchange’s patented anti-bias software has helped leaders in many sectors, including thousands of public education leaders, scale conversations to quickly gain critical insights and improve decision-making while building trust with

the students and communities they serve. In his new book *Scaling Conversations: How Leaders Access the Full Potential of People*, ThoughtExchange CEO and co-founder Dave MacLeod addresses the challenges that leaders face in scaling conversations and the proven strategies for making communications more inclusive. He also explores how leaders can help to raise the voices of people who rarely feel empowered to speak up.

Before his current role with ThoughtExchange, Dave was a self-described “old-school” facilitator and consultant. He worked closely with people of all different backgrounds and industries: business executives, Indigenous leaders, not-for-profit managers, community members, students, and more. His job was to bring them together through fair, inclusive, and productive group discussions.





When Dave met ThoughtExchange’s co-founder Jim Firstbrook to discuss the idea of accessing collective intelligence through technology, he was skeptical. At the time, he felt keeping group dialogue simple and in person was the best approach. He now knows that when leaders are elevated by great technology, they can reduce bias, raise all voices across organizations, and make better real-time decisions.

In *Scaling Conversations*, Dave draws his top lessons learned from working with hundreds of superintendents and leaders in the biggest companies in the world at ThoughtExchange to share the critical whys, whens, and hows of scaling conversations.

The book came out in the second year of a global pandemic, at a time when many in-person gatherings for professional and community organizations were restricted. Online platforms and digital tools continue to play a significant role in supporting leaders and organizations as they facilitate communication both internally and externally. It is not always easy to scale conversations online, even for leaders and organizations with pre-pandemic digital engagement experience. Several challenges stand in the way of successful online group conversations, including social awkwardness, loud online voices, unheard voices, and crowd madness.

“If you think of the last time you were in a room filled with many people and a leader asked the group for questions or comments,

it’s easy to remember the tension,” Dave says. “You know everyone has at least one or two thoughts or questions, but very few people say anything. Then one or two people speak and you wonder if they represent their own views or the views of many. It’s impossible to tell.”

This phenomenon also takes place online, he adds. In a large online group, for example, there can be a socially awkward silence followed by a loud voice that silences.

“This tension actually silences the majority of people,” Dave says. “And in the odd case where everyone does share their thoughts, they are based on the bias of what they read and crowd madness can occur. People say things they regret. The type of person who is loud online may differ from the person loud in the room but the effect is the same, the silent majority is not represented, and their wisdom stays locked in their own minds.”

Even with the best of intentions, group conversations—whether online or in person—can easily slide into negativity and even harmful interactions. It takes skill, experience, and the right tools to scale conversations successfully. It isn’t uncommon for some leaders to consider the risks involved in scaling important conversations about difficult topics, and then simply avoid these conversations or rely on ineffective or disingenuous methods of engagement.

The first half of *Scaling Conversations* concludes with Dave’s observations of common mistakes leaders make when attempting to scale conversations. He notes errors made when using surveys, open-ended forms, and focus groups. He also explores the risks inherent to these methods when leaders try to engage large groups, particularly when those groups are made up of people with diverse perspectives such as the community served by a school district.

“The first risk is that ‘research’ via survey relies on putting people in distinct groups,” he explains. “The act of asking if you are A, B, or C is inherently polarizing. Without conversing, leaders study people by forcing them to select from a preconceived list of acceptable answers and this process can lead to the erosion of trust and even substantial backlash.”

This can easily be observed in the behaviour of children, he explains. “When you ask a group of kids to vote between two alternatives you have basically started a small war. Where a moment ago they didn’t have a strong opinion about an activity or a thing to eat, now they are completely dedicated to however they voted on a whim. And good luck trying to get them to change their mind later.”

Adults are like children in these situations, he says, but worse as they back up their new position with all sorts of evidence. “The very method of dividing people as a way to understand how they think erodes community. It’s a huge problem. Challenges are very rarely binary and therefore dialogue is required, not a five-point scale or multiple choice.”

While the first half of the book notes the potential challenges and mistakes that can be made in scaling conversations, the second half examines how leaders can successfully scale conversations safely and fairly. In it, Dave explores the connection between safety and equity:

- A safe place to share thoughts independently is the starting point, not the end.
- The best way to achieve safety is to remove identity from thoughts and reactions.
- Removing bias lets people’s thoughts be fairly considered one at a time.

If a leader wants to access wisdom and the truth from the people in their organization, he explains, then it is imperative to bake in safety and equity from the start when scaling conversations. Bias and the

powerful forces of systemic racism, sexism, ageism, and other prejudices make it extremely difficult for people to not be overcome by their conscious and unconscious biases when it comes to conversing with others.

“If you don’t think you have a bias, that’s your bias talking,” Dave adds. “We all do. We all value certain kinds of ideas from certain kinds of people over other ideas from other people, and this is a huge problem.”

By ensuring safety, you access the truth, he explains. By eliminating bias, you access group wisdom. “Truth plus group wisdom is extremely powerful. Absent safety, however, and you are back to hearing from only a small group of people with a narrow lens.”

The strategies explored in *Scaling Conversations* can be applied to the kinds of conversations that school system superintendents, directors-general, and other education leaders are involved in on a frequent basis, whether with peers and colleagues, school staff, students, or community members served by their district.

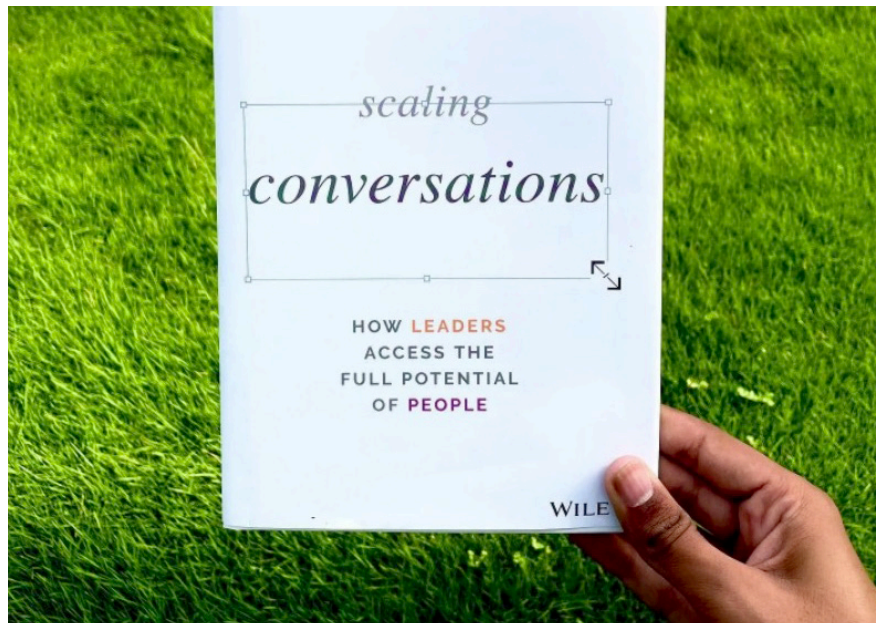
Dave says he hopes senior leaders in education who read his book come away with the understanding that conversations are powerful and possible, and in very polarizing and challenging times, especially so.

“Many leaders are exhausted and overwhelmed, and the notion of conversing at scale feels like a burden, not a solution,” he says. “The opposite is true. Discovering the truth is energizing and liberating. You can do something about it.”

The loud voices are often the ones creating much of the stress in systems. By accessing the voice of the silent majority, leaders have the material and buy-in to drive important change to benefit students.

“Being a leader is harder and harder, and I hope this book will help them attain some tools, questions, and approaches to get them unstuck and back to feeling energized to engage with their school communities. Our kids need leaders willing to have hard conversations and increase organizational empathy. I really hope this book serves as an energy source to get that important work done.”

He reflects on why it is the right time to share the insights he’s written about in *Scaling Conversations*. Digital technology has jolted human communication into overdrive, he says. “Never have so many of us been able to connect with so many others at once, online. However, this also gives unfair



## Win a Copy of Dave’s Book!

The first 10 people to contact [media.inquires@thoughtexchange.com](mailto:media.inquires@thoughtexchange.com) with the subject line “Scaling Conversations” will receive a free copy of Dave MacLeod’s book, *Scaling Conversations*. It will be shipped directly to you, anywhere in Canada!

Simply email ThoughtExchange and say “Entering the *Leaders & Learners* Newsletter Giveaway” and you could win!

voice to small groups, dividing us into silos and creating echo chambers within threads and channels of similarly minded people.”

Issues such as anti-racism, pandemics, climate action, LGBTQ+ rights, gun violence, and remote worker mental health urgently require us to focus on what’s always given us an advantage as a species, he says, and that’s our ability to converse.

“I felt it was the right time to do what I could to illustrate the time we still have to leverage the good parts of technology and human nature to scale safe, bias-free conversations with one another, before it’s too late.”

In addition to ongoing pandemic concerns, he notes, we’re also facing a looming recession and economic downturn. This environment increases the level of accountability leaders face across industries.

“This is a time they need to really show how they are making prudent and sound decisions, bringing their entire community and stakeholders along in that process and building trust. I think as they navigate these ongoing and current challenges, leaders will continue to find the tips and insights in *Scaling Conversations* useful to them.” ○

To learn more about ThoughtExchange’s work with digital equity, see the *Leaders & Learners* two-part series featuring Dr. Dennis Carpenter, ThoughtExchange Director, Education Operations, in 2021 Issues 3 and 4. To learn more about collaborative models of decision-making and leadership, check out an interview with ThoughtExchange’s Education Partnerships Manager Kai Kafritsen in *Leaders & Learners* 2022 Issue 3.



To read an excerpt from *Scaling Conversations: How Leaders Access the Full Potential of People*, continue to page 6



# “Equity in Education”

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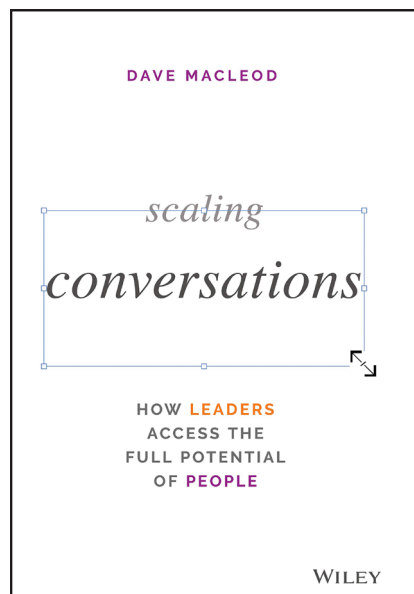
**T**he process of creating equity in education is a multi-generational journey that will likely not be completed inside the span of our lifetime. The systems that created the inequity were intentional and thorough. The dismantling of systems that don't provide equitable access to learning takes grit.

[...] When people make a claim that an educational system is not equitable, and is instead systemically racist, the reaction of the leaders, mostly white men, is often a survival brain-based response that systemic racism is simply not possible in such a caring and established community organization.

Only stark examples help illuminate the situation.

In one school system several members of the administration and board were adamant that systemic racism was not occurring. Yet a simple example existed that helped provide a pathway to discovering the many others.

Job placement programs were a tenet of the district as high school seniors were placed into internships at local organizations to help prepare them for college and career life. The only caveat? The student needed to own a car to be a part of the program. In that city, only one generation ago home ownership was next to impossible for a Black person as the banks had regulations prohibiting lending to Black clients, regardless of their income. This resulted in a wealth gap that meant in the next generation, very few Black families in the district



had accumulated the wealth required for their kids to own cars. But a policy is a policy. And the result of that policy was that Black students couldn't participate in job placement. Until that policy is dismantled, progress won't happen.

Black students are also in most studies found to be more than twice as likely to be expelled from school after exhibiting similar bad behavior to their white peers. That coincides with the dramatically higher number of unarmed Black people shot by police officers compared to white citizens.

[...] I believe systemic change will come out of a belief of optimizing a system based on understanding the raw power of equity in decision-making, not because white men the world over will suddenly agree

this is a great idea. The experience of the results of equitable decision-making, like increased test scores, graduation rates and college graduations will then help create more equity champions. The unconscious bias and survival brain of many or most well-intentioned white leaders gets in the way of them learning about their own role in the problem.

The best questions about equity in education [...] are not questions about equity and are instead questions about the education system asked in an equitable way:

- What are your thoughts about this change?
- What is working well and what resources do you need?
- What are your thoughts and questions about this funding scenario?
- What are the most important skills and attributes of a graduate of our system?
- What are some things we need to do to address teacher workload? What is working well and what changes could be made to improve remote learning?

As a student, what are your thoughts on what teachers and administrators need to do more of to make more students successful?

These questions asked in an equitable manner have the power to change the world. A district ThoughtExchange worked with asked a student voice question similar to the last one and found the answers mapped extremely well to some of the most recent and sought-after research on learning put out by major universities. Teacher as facilitator, education on finding and discerning sources of truth, soft skill enhancement for STEM tracks. Simply by



asking the students they uncovered actionable best practice learning methodologies in the language of their students.

In another more painful scenario, a New York State superintendent had reacted very quickly after the mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Parents and teachers were terrified the world over and to react to the moment the school board in this New York district hired armed foot patrols to provide protection on campus. After this was done, the superintendent scaled a conversation to ask everyone in the community for their thoughts and questions about the initiative. Many answers were what he expected. But some were not. Though only a small percentage of the school population identified as Black, a few parents shared powerful thoughts about their new fear of their students now potentially being shot in school for getting in a fistfight. History and stats proved their fears to be founded. These thoughts were not shared frequently but they resonated with the community and were elevated to the top of the conversation.

The superintendent took a humble approach to his response. He publicly apolo-

## The unconscious bias and survival brain of many or most well-intentioned white leaders gets in the way of them learning about their own role in the problem.

gized for this rash decision and admitted his own inherited biases kept him from considering how this decision would affect so many of his parents who are impacted by systemic racism. The conversation results were shared with many local officials and the decision to hire the armed officers was immediately reversed. Other safety precautions that didn't threaten young people of color were implemented.

In that same district, several months later a question was asked of parents to share what was on their mind for their school leadership to respond to. Right near the

top was a thought about the frustrations of a Black mother who articulated that the burden of educating students about the historical and current impacts of racism should not fall on the shoulders of her children and should instead be the responsibility of the other parents and the system itself.

Notice in both of these cases, a normal operational question was asked in an equitable manner that protected and elevated the voice of people who needed to be heard. The conversation wasn't about equity. The conversation was about education and the platform was equitable. ○



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# EXL Award Recipient Announcement

It is with great pleasure that *Leaders & Learners* announces the 2022 Canadian Superintendent of the Year! The 2022 recipient of this year's Xerox Excellence in Educational Leadership Award, also known as the EXL Award, is Bevan Daverne.

Congratulations to each of the three system leaders who were nominated for the 2022 award:

- Philippe Brulot, Superintendent for the Dehcho Divisional Education Council (NWTSA)
- Rob Buttars, Director General for the New Frontiers School Board (ADGESBQ)
- Bevan Daverne, Superintendent for the Golden Hills School Division (CASS)

All three EXL nominees were profiled in *Leaders & Learners* 2022, Issue 3.

The award was presented during CASSA's 2022 conference in St. Andrews By-the-Sea on July 7, 2022. As well, 2021 EXL Award recipient Denise Andre was presented with her award at this time. (The 2021 conference was a virtual event due to COVID-19 restrictions.) Denise is the former Director of Education and Secretary Treasurer for the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSOA). CASSA remains grateful to Xerox Canada for its ongoing support of this prestigious national award.

The EXL Award is presented at each national conference, barring extraordinary circumstances, to the CASSA member who has exhibited exemplary leadership ability and who has enhanced the profession of school administration throughout their career.

The Canadian Superintendent of the Year is also recognized at the annual American Association of School Administrators (AASA) conference, where the American Superintendent of the Year is selected. The



*The award winners for 2022 Canadian Superintendent of the Year and the 2021 EXL Award, alongside CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director and Past President. From left to right: Ken Bain, Bevan Daverne, Denise Andre, and Curtis Brown. Photo courtesy of Denise Andre.*

2023 AASA conference is scheduled to take place from February 16 to 18 in San Antonio, Texas. Each EXL national recipient is traditionally invited to attend this important leadership gathering.

The EXL award has been presented since 2002. Recipients also receive honorary life memberships to CASSA. Previous EXL Award recipients include Denise Andre, 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.

CASSA extends its congratulations to all EXL Award nominees and recipients. ○

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**If you know of an outstanding school system administrator who is deserving of one of CASSA's awards, consider putting forth a nomination package. Watch for details on the CASSA website and in early 2023 issues of *Leaders & Learners*!**

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