

## Greetings from the President



Michael Helm  
CASSA/ACGCS President

## *More Than Just a System*

One of the growing concerns in the education environment is the value of it in society. In many of my recent discussions with system leaders from across Canada, this is a recurring topic. How is education viewed? Is it seen as a fundamental pillar of personal and societal growth, or has its role become diluted in the eyes of both the public and policymakers, the governance?

In today's fast-evolving world, education is more than just a system to impart knowledge; it cultivates critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability – life skills that are essential in the 21st Century. However, the perception of education is increasingly focused on outcomes that can be easily measured, such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, and employability. While these factors are undeniably important, they don't always capture the full scope of what education offers.

Across Canada, there is a growing trend of questioning whether the current education system is preparing students for the real-world challenges they will face. With technology advancing rapidly (AI) and the job market becoming increasingly dynamic, it is difficult to see a clear path.

System leaders from various provinces have highlighted the need for a more holistic approach to education, one that places equal importance on personal development, social-emotional learning, and fostering resilience. For instance, a shift towards project-based learning, interdisciplinary studies, and experiential learning programs can help students develop their competencies that are applicable beyond the classroom.

With more integration of mental health support, career guidance, and financial literacy into school curricula, we can ensure that students are better equipped to thrive in both their personal and later, professional lives.

The discussion around the value of education is not just about what is taught but how it is taught. Our school and centre teams are working hard each and every day to demonstrate all the dynamics that now go into learning. Valorizing education in Canada in the eyes of all stakeholders needs to be a focus in Canada's future.

**Mike Helm**  
President  
CASSA/ACGCS



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

# Greetings from the Executive Director

## Reflecting on My First Weeks as Executive Director of CASSA



**Reg Klassen**

CASSA/ACGCS New Executive Director

**A**s I wrap up my third week as the Executive Director of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA), I find myself reflecting on the journey so far. The role is still new, but the work has already been both exciting and rewarding.

My first full week on the job was a significant one. I had the privilege of joining the CASSA Board in Toronto for our annual winter planning meeting. This gathering provided a valuable opportunity to review our Strategic Plan, celebrate the accomplishments of 2024, and assess our progress toward key objectives.

A central focus of our discussions was reaffirming our identity and purpose. CASSA serves as the national network for senior school system leaders, guided by the vision of ensuring equity and excellence in education for

every learner. Our mission is to strengthen the capacity of school system leaders through national dialogue and professional learning.

During the meeting, we worked collaboratively to set goals for 2025 and identified how each Board member would contribute to achieving them. The work was structured around three core strategic priorities:

- **Professional development:** Expanding learning opportunities for school leaders nationwide.
- **Communication and engagement:** Strengthening connections with our members.
- **Governance and operations:** Aligning governance structures to enhance organizational effectiveness.

While these priorities seem straightforward, the reality is more complex. Education systems across the country face similar challenges, yet they arise at different times and in varying contexts. Despite this, the Board remains com-

mitted to navigating these complexities and pushing forward with our shared vision.

I am grateful to our Board members for their dedication and willingness to take time from their busy schedules to advance this important work. Their leadership and commitment will be instrumental in driving CASSA's mission forward in the year ahead.

Looking ahead, I am excited to connect with many of you at our annual conference in St. John's, Newfoundland, from July 3-5, 2025. This event promises an engaging program in a fantastic setting, and I look forward to the conversations and collaborations that will shape our path ahead.

**Reg Klassen**

Executive Director  
CASSA/ACGCS

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Dr. Souhail  
Soujah.

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

An email signature can provide a large amount of information in a small digital space. It offers a place for contact and pronoun information, a favourite quote, an organizational mission statement, a land acknowledgement, and more. For staff at the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) in the Northwest Territories, an email signature also provides the opportunity to give thanks. At the end of SSDEC messages are expressions of gratitude in five languages:

- Mársı (Chipewyan),
- kinanāskomitin (Cree),
- Máhsı (Slavey),
- Merci (French), and
- Thank You (English).

“In the South Slave, we have communities that speak every one of these languages,” says Dr. Souhail Soujah, superintendent for the SSDEC. “Language is a



window into what a culture values. Wade Davis said language is not just words and rules but a flash of the human spirit. We see the two as connected and work toward reconciliation through small gestures such as the signature.”

The email signature is just one of many ways the SSDEC supports Indigenous language programming and shows respect for the Indigenous cultures in the North. “We cannot call ourselves educators and teachers if we don’t immerse ourselves in our communities’ culture and the language,” he says.

These words of thanks also reflect Dr. Soujah’s personal feelings about his having the opportunity to live and work in northern Canada.

“Living in the North prioritizes what’s important and gives you a genuine perspective of what matters,” he says. “It allows you to escape, somewhat, the trappings of politics and the distractions that plague education in the south. There is no equal to the natural beauty, the generosity





***Clockwise from left to right:***

*Souhail enjoying the snow.*

*Olivia, posing for the camera.*

*Luna Mae, the Frenchie.*

*Souhail's three dogs, from left to right: Olivia, Jethro, and Luna Mae.*



of the people, and the opportunities in the North.”

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Dr. Soujah spent the first part of his childhood in Venezuela. “Venezuela was a stopover for an immigrant family fleeing the war in Lebanon. It was a great experience – such a beautiful country and people that have fallen into hard times through no fault of their own.” His family then came to Toronto. “One could not ask for more diametrically opposed cultures,” he recalls.

He earned his Bachelor of Science at the University of Toronto, his Bachelor of Education After Degree at the University of Regina, his Master of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, and his Doctor of Education at the University of Nebraska.

Dr. Soujah’s career in education began with a position as an educational assistant in British Columbia. In addition to his teaching work, he has served as principal at Morden Collegiate Institute in Morden, Manitoba; Porter Creek Secondary School in Whitehorse, Yukon; and Liverpool Regional High School in Liverpool, Nova Scotia.

“I have always been attracted to small town living,” he says. “It is personally and professionally exponentially more rewarding than big cities. We are often warned that we could end up in a small town fresh out of teachers’ college. I don’t get that. It should not be a warning but something to aspire to.”

From 2017 to 2019, he served as superintendent with the Department of Education in Whitehorse. During this time, he also briefly stepped in as assistant deputy minister.

“Acting as the assistant deputy minister while in the Yukon was a reminder of why I went into the profession in the first place and gave me clarity as far as what role I wanted to play in the system – politics was not it. Although our jobs are political in many ways, my orientation is always toward the school, something not always possible in upper politics.”

Dr. Soujah has been the superintendent for the SSDEC, based in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, since 2022. He

is also the current Northwest Territories Superintendents Association (NWTSA) representative and a former Yukon representative on the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) board of directors.

In addition to his teaching and senior leadership work, Dr. Soujah’s journey in education has included coaching girls’ soccer and volleyball and mentoring student leaders. He has an impressive array of publishing and conference presenting credits to his name on topics such as Indigenizing education, Indigenous representation in schools, Indigenous educational practices, technology integration in schools, gender differences in student achievement, the role of schools and community in preventing online harassment, online education, and film studies. His debut novel, *The Associates*, was released in January 2024.

Here, Dr. Soujah kindly responds to a series of questions about his work and life in education and in the North.





*Olivia, the English bulldog.*



*Dr. Soubail Soujah.*

### What inspired you to work in public education?

Education is a unique field in many ways. It's a humanistic endeavour that is natural to our species. We have an inherent need to teach, to pass on our knowledge, so to speak. The Dalai Lama is quoted as saying that to achieve immortality, we must pass on our knowledge.

Having said that, I gravitated to teaching after spending time at a summer camp in Ontario. The energy, enthusiasm, and possibilities of the kids I worked with galvanized my interest in teaching.

### What inspired you to pursue leadership positions?

It just so happens that administration is also a natural progression in the profession. Our desire to do more, reach more people, make more connections, and significantly influence the process for good nudges you in that direction. Your classroom expands and becomes the school. Pretty soon it grows to become many schools, and so on. Your students become your teachers. It's very empowering and humbling at the same time.

### How would you define leadership? How would you describe your personal style or styles of leadership?

My definition of leadership has evolved by design and circumstance. It has evolved from servant to transformational to constructivist. It has retained many aspects

from its initial genesis but lately I am reverting to what I learned as a teacher and applying it to a much larger arena.

As a leader, I focus not on providing answers but on encouraging the discovery and exploration of possibilities in growing and learning together. My leadership role is to support the spiral process of solution-oriented and data-driven systems while building sustainable leadership capacity. This can be messy and unorthodox, but the result is organic, sustainable, strength-based, custom-made leadership.

**Can you reflect on how your experiences as an immigrant, particularly as a young person moving to several continents before adulthood and as a child fleeing war and as a newcomer to northern Canada – as in someone who was not born and raised in the North but who has chosen to make a career and life there – have informed your leadership?**

I think my preference for this model is because of my immigrant history. As

### About The South Slave Divisional Education Council

The South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) serves five communities across a large geographic area in the Northwest Territories. Approximately 1,300 students attend schools in Fort Smith, Kátł'odeech First Nation, Fort Resolution, Lutsel K'e, and Hay River. Each of the communities is governed by a locally elected district education authority (DEA), and each DEA has one representative on the divisional education council.

Programming at SSDEC schools is grounded in the Indigenous cultures and languages of local communities. Second language classes are offered in Cree, Slavey, and Chipewyan. The SSDEC has published over 300 books in these and other Indigenous languages. As a result of this dedicated programming, Indigenous language fluency rates at SSDEC schools have risen by 20 per cent in the last couple of years.

SSDEC boasts a number of territorial and national awards. Recent distinctions include the

Indspire Indigenous Educator Award, Canadian Innovators in Education Award, Public Sector Leadership Award, Premier's Award for Collaboration, NWT Ministerial Literacy Award, Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, Premier's Award of Excellence, and Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. As well, two SSDEC superintendents have received the CASSA EXL Award.

To learn more about the SSDEC, visit its website at [www.ssdec.net](http://www.ssdec.net).

newcomers to a new land where the social manual is in a foreign language, you adapt, create, and find a way that fits your worldview. It gives birth to a unique solution to you and your experience.

As far as my love of the North, I give Coleen McDonald a lot of credit for it. Coleen was my principal when I worked in Yellowknife, and her leadership and dedication to the community were very influential in my formative development. Similarly, Pennie Prysruk, my superintendent in the Yukon, allowed me to build those connections with the North. Both these fantastic northern leaders validated my decision to move up North, and the work that I have been able to do is because of their informal and formal mentorship. I have nothing but gratitude for their leadership.

### **What drew you to become more deeply involved with CASSA, particularly in terms of your role with the NWTSA and the CASSA board of directors?**

CASSA is a significant aspect of our professional identity. It is the flag bearer for our profession. The space it occupies in advo-

cating for education systems at the highest political and educational levels is critical to maintaining the high standards that Canadian education is world renowned for.

The strength of CASSA rests on its national participation and membership. Without a united voice as senior leaders, the dangers of a fractioned national view threaten the integrity of a system built on the commonality of purpose and altruistic values.

Involvement in CASSA is necessary to preserve that voice and provide a northern perspective to help inform our decisions at the national level. The North is the canary in the mine. The social and educational issues we struggle with are a glimpse into the future of every regional authority. Indigenous students are the fastest growing demographic in Canadian schools. Understanding Indigenous cultural needs and values will help school boards better meet the challenges of this reality. Lending our voice to CASSA is critical in helping bring awareness and knowledge to this important future of education.

### **What can we share with our readers about you in your non-work time?**

Like most teachers, we spend time away from work seeking peace and quiet. The hectic pace of education makes us appreciate the calm and serenity of simple things. My wife Kylie and I have two dogs who are the centre of our world. They are equal parts adorable and mischievous. Caring for pets is a measure of our humanity. There is a quote referencing how we treat the sick, the young, and the elderly as a barometer of morality. Pets are equally deserving of that measure.

Of course, being a pseudo-nomad as a youngster, I love seeing the world. We take every opportunity to explore different cultures and lose ourselves in foreign places, within and outside Canada. We live in a beautiful country, and our time on this planet is short. We try to appreciate it and not waste time on hesitation, regrets, or what-ifs.

**Thank you, Dr. Soujah, for sharing parts of your story with us.** ○

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## **Call for Research Participants: System Leadership, Equity, and the Experiences of Gender and Sexually Minoritized Leaders**

A research project out of the University of Calgary is exploring how gender and sexually minoritized (GSM) system education leaders experience the team-based development of equity-related policies. This study will extend knowledge about how GSM-identifying system educational leaders in Canada: (a) experience team-based development of equity policies, (b) perceive their contributions to equity policy development in a team-based setting, (c) navigate systemic structures of oppression within the field of educational leadership, and (d) interact with dominantly-located perspec-



tives when engaging in team-based equity policy development.

There is a recent rise in legislation and policies that impact GSM individuals across Canada and abroad. Due to the lack of research on GSM issues in educational leadership contexts and the limited priority placed on developing equity solutions

that improve outcomes for GSM students relative to other equity-seeking groups, this project will generate relevant and timely knowledge that can inform the work of system leaders and policymakers in these complex and uncertain times.

If you are a system educational leader who identifies as a GSM individual, and might be interested in participating in the study, contact Dr. Stephen MacGregor, the Principle Investigator/Doctoral Supervisor, at 613-770-5557 or Stephen.macgregor@ucalgary.ca, or Mat Campbell, Doctoral Candidate, at 780-880-1982 or mvcampbe@ucalgary.ca. ○

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*The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB24-1467).*



# We're Looking for a Few Faces in the Crowd

**D**o you know a Canadian superintendent, director of education, or other senior system administrator who should have their story shared with their peers across the country?

Would you like to share the story of your own journey in education and leadership?

Faces in the Crowd is the space to do that.

Faces in the Crowd is a long-running series in *Leaders & Learners*, the national newsletter for the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA). The series has featured profiles of dozens of leaders from across Canada since the newsletter first began in 2004.

## We profile members of CASSA and regional affiliates, including

- 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 Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association (OCSOA),
- The Northwest Territories Superintendents' Association (NWTSA),



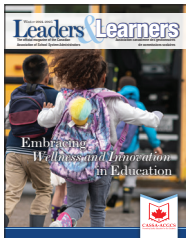
- The Association of Directors General of English School Boards of Québec (ADGESBQ),
- The Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia (PSAANS),
- Le Regroupement national des directions générales de l'éducation (RNDGE),
- The New Brunswick School Superintendents' Association (NBSSA), and
- The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of School System Administrators (NLASSA).

Faces in the Crowd, as with CASSA's annual national conference, helps CASSA members and their colleagues in senior system administration get to know one another better despite distances and jurisdictional differences.

The series also gives members the chance to highlight initiatives and milestones in their local school district or regional affiliate in addition to their own personal achievements and interests.

Consider suggesting a colleague or yourself for a Faces in the Crowd feature in an upcoming issue.

Reach out to *Leaders & Learners* contributing writer Tara Wittchen at [taraleewittchen@gmail.com](mailto:taraleewittchen@gmail.com) to share your ideas.



## WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO WRITE FOR US!

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](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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