

Greetings from the President



Michael Helm
CASSA/ACGCS President

Coast to Coast to Coast

More than ever, we are being invited to share insights that reflect the perspectives of leaders from coast to coast to coast. Our commitment to offering timely, high-quality professional learning remains steadfast.

Welcome back! I hope each of you had the chance to enjoy some well-deserved time with family and friends over the summer. As we begin the 2025-2026 school year, I'm excited for the opportunities ahead.

The summer began on a high note with an incredible Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) Conference in Newfoundland and Labrador. Those who attended will agree – it was an outstanding event. Our keynote speakers and workshop presenters delivered rich, relevant content, exploring topics such as AI, Indigenous perspectives, and more. Equally memorable was the hospitality of our hosts, Kirk Smith and John Way, who went above and beyond to showcase the beauty and culture of St. John's.

From whale watching to local music, the experiences were unforgettable. My sincere thanks to the Professional Learning Committee led by Barb Isaac for their hard work in bringing it all together, and to

our Executive Director, Reg Klassen, for his invaluable support.

This year, there is minimal transition within the CASSA Executive Committee, with only one change to announce: we warmly welcome Kirk Smith as the AASA Eastern Representative. I would also like to express my gratitude to last year's representative, Anna Villalto, for her dedication and service on behalf of us all.

Looking ahead, CASSA will continue to provide a strong national and international voice on key issues in education. More than ever, we are being invited to share insights that reflect the perspectives of leaders from coast to coast to coast. Our commitment to offering timely, high-quality professional learning remains steadfast. I look forward to connecting with many of you at our next conference in Saskatoon – it promises to be another inspiring gathering.

Wishing you all a great start to the year!

Take care,

Mike Helm
President, CASSA



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

Greetings from the Executive Director

Waves of Innovation: Making a Splash in St. John's



Reg Klassen

CASSA/ACGCS New Executive Director

The 2025 Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) Annual Leadership Conference in St. John's, Newfoundland, was nothing short of extraordinary. Set against the backdrop of rugged coastlines and rich cultural heritage, our theme – “*Waves of Innovation: Riding the Tide of Educational Leadership*” – came to life in powerful and inspiring ways.

We were honoured to open the conference with Dr. Chief Mise'l Joe, whose recent investiture into the Order of Newfoundland and Labrador speaks volumes about his enduring leadership and commitment to fostering understanding of the Mi'kmaq people and culture. His keynote, “*Leadership from the Heart*,” reminded us that authentic leadership begins with empathy, humility, and connection.

Throughout the conference, we explored the evolving landscape of education with cour-

age and curiosity. Dr. Lesley Eblie Trudel and Dr. Laura Sokal delivered compelling, research-based insights into educator well-being – an issue that continues to demand our attention. Their message was clear: supporting the mental health of our educators is not optional; it is foundational to sustainable leadership.

We also leaned into the future with sessions on artificial intelligence. Dean Shereski challenged us to embrace AI as a permanent fixture in education, while Dr. Tom D'Amico closed the conference with practical strategies for harnessing its potential to drive meaningful change in classrooms and schools.

Our workshops tackled complex and urgent topics – from equity and colonial legacies to conflict agility and anti-racism. These sessions were not only informative but transformative, equipping leaders with tools to foster inclusive, responsive learning environments.

Beyond the sessions, the conference offered space for reflection, collaboration, and connection. Whether in breakout rooms or along

the Atlantic shoreline, the energy was palpable. Delegates left feeling renewed, empowered, and ready to lead with purpose.

As we look ahead, I'm thrilled to announce that the 2026 CASSA Annual Leadership Conference will be held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. With its vibrant educational community and rich cultural tapestry, Saskatoon promises to be an inspiring host city for our next gathering.

Keep your eyes on our website for more information! If this year's momentum is any indication, the next wave of leadership will be even more powerful.

Warm regards,

Reg Klassen

Executive Director, CASSA

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Hopeful Leadership:



Exploring System Leadership Through the Lens of *Ted Lasso*

By Tara Wittchen, Contributing Writer

In this two-part series, we meet Steve Perchard and Ryan Kelley, two directors of schools from Newfoundland and Labrador. Steve and Ryan have been using the Apple TV series *Ted Lasso* as a learning opportunity to help school administrators enhance their leadership capacity while also developing a sense of hope and optimism in their work.

The critically acclaimed comedy centres on Ted, a folksy and eternally optimistic

American college football coach from Kansas who is hired to lead AFC Richmond, a struggling professional English soccer team. Ted is completely unfamiliar with the sport but is hopeful he can help bring out the best in the Richmond players. Key themes explored include empathy, vulnerability, resilience, developing an organizational culture of trust and support, and the importance of believing in oneself and others on the team.

In April 2024, Steve and Ryan flew across the country to attend uLead, a school leadership conference held each year in Banff. To pass the time on the long flight, Steve decided

to check out a few episodes of *Ted Lasso* (the hit series that first ran from 2020 to 2023).

By coincidence, once at the conference the pair attended a session on the leadership lessons found in *Ted Lasso*. It was presented by Brandon Isert and Andrea Farrell, administrators from Northern Lights Public Schools in Alberta.

“We thought what a great idea that is,” recalls Steve. “That was the seed where Ryan and I realized that’s something we can take back to Newfoundland. We were so excited on the plane ride back. I think I had 12 pages of notes just from that conversation of where we were going to take it.”



Ryan had seen a few episodes of the show a few months before the trip to Banff but hadn't yet made the connection to leadership themes. After their conversation with Brandon, and with Brandon's full support, the two delved into the series and began to craft a custom 10-week program on a systems approach to hopeful leadership using the themes explored in *Ted Lasso*. They've since presented the program to two cohorts of NLSchools administrators and to leadership from within their own families of schools.

This July, Steve and Ryan presented a condensed version of that program at the CASSA annual conference in St. John's. As they noted in their presentation, education leaders need hope now more than ever. The statistics paint a dire situation:

- 70 per cent of Canadian teachers report high stress, mainly due to workload
- nearly 30 per cent of new teachers leave within five years, often due to burnout
- Canadian teachers work an average of 52 hours per week, with over 30 per cent of that time spent on non-teaching tasks

In Hopeful Leadership, Steve and Ryan ask participants to imagine reframing obstacles as opportunities. During their CASSA conference session, they led participants through three-minute table talks and other breakout exercises, and shared clips from the show to examine themes such as genuine optimism versus toxic positivity, belief

and team culture, and the impact of small, meaningful actions. Using *Ted Lasso* as the foundation, they explain, gives them a relatable, engaging framework for these sessions.

A few weeks after their CASSA conference presentation, Steve and Ryan shared their story with *Leaders & Learners*. Here we present the first part of that uplifting and informative conversation. It has been edited for length and clarity.

As you note in your presentation and as the character Ted Lasso shows us early on, connection begins with a name. Let's start there. Who are you and what is your current role with NLSchools? Please share the highlights reel of your school and system leadership roles.

Ryan Kelley: I'm a director of schools for Family of Schools 4, which takes in quite a large geographical region in the centre of the island. I was an administrator for a little over a decade. I've had a pretty vast experience in terms of what I've taught in my career, everything from kindergarten phys. ed. to design and fabrication and skilled trades in the high school system. I was very fortunate to make it back to my hometown where I grew up for my first teaching position. I spent a good long time there and then ended up as a principal in that same

school before moving on to a leadership role with NLSchools a little over two years ago. I grew up on a wharf in King's Point, which is a very small town of roughly 650 people. When I left, I assumed that there was no way I was ever going to come back here. There weren't a whole lot of jobs when I started. My cooperative teacher ended up retiring the same year that I was coming out of university, and after my internship I lucked into a job. I had a great principal at the time, who was a wonderful mentor, and the rest is history.

Steve Perchard: I grew up in St. John's, and I graduated with my education degree in 2000. Like Ryan said, jobs weren't overly plentiful at that time. I applied all over the island and the first offer I received was for a term contract in Corner Brook. I bought a car, packed it up and drove to Corner Brook, and I've been living in Corner Brook now for 25 years. I've worked as a classroom teacher, then I got my first permanent job three years later as a department head. It took me a while to get into administration, but about 15 years in, I took my first vice principal role and really loved school leadership. Eventually that led to a principalship and some time working as a program specialist as well. When the director of schools job opened up two years ago, I applied for it and was lucky to get it. The two of us work with a team of 10 provincial directors

across the island. I'm with Family of Schools 3, which means western Newfoundland, Stephenville, Port Aux Basques, Southwest Coast, and I serve 25 schools.

"We can't really be good partners unless we get to know each other, right? We're gonna start simple, real easy one. We're gonna do 'First Concert, Best Concert.'" – Ted Lasso

Please share a little about your non-work lives. Who are you when you're not in your office overlooking the school system? What do you like to do?

Steve: I'm married with two kids, so family is certainly a very important part of my life outside of school. I do a lot of community theatre in Corner Brook and try to exercise as much as I can. I try to do something to stay somewhat mentally and physically well, and I'm an avid reader. I love reading in my spare time, a mixture of fiction and non-fiction.

Ryan: I have a daughter who is going to senior high, which is grade 10 in Newfoundland and Labrador. My wife is a principal, one of the principals that I supervise. Certainly, my priority is my family but it's hard to really find where home life starts and our work life ends because the two are distinctly linked. I'm a basketball coach for girls' basketball, and I still play. I'm very active in the athletics side of things, especially within the school system.

"You say impossible, but all I hear is 'I'm possible.'" – Ted Lasso

Describe your leadership style or philosophy.

Ryan: I don't want to speak for both of us, but we do believe in hope and optimism. Through the Hopeful Leadership series that we've completed, that has been a theme and something that we truly believe in. For me personally as an administrator and as a director, I believe in innovation. I love tech – that has been my background and where my passion lies. As part of that, I've always been pretty good at empowering students to find what their passion is and chase that. I'm still trying to figure out where that exists in the role I'm in now. I haven't quite perfected it but I'm trying.

Steve: From a purely leadership style, I really try to take a servant leadership approach. I really do see myself as being there to assist my principals and my assistant principals so they can do their job. Part of that is trying to empower them through a distributed leadership lens as well. If I can empower them to take on challenges and run with them in their own buildings, I think that's really important. Both of us are really trying to be forward thinking in terms of what education currently is and where it's going. I think both of us like to push our schools to be places that are preparing students for their future. I know it sounds a little corny but consider that schools are changing, society is changing, and if we're leading schools that are stuck in the 1990s or early 2000s, I don't think we're really doing our job as leaders. We try to embrace that and push the envelope as far as we can with our schools.

Would you say you feel more of an affinity to Ted Lasso or Coach Beard, two of the main characters in the Ted Lasso series? Which of you is a Ted, and who is Coach Beard?

Ryan: I'm Ted – no, I'm joking. We feel an affinity for both characters. One of the great things about being in the position I am is the fact that I get to work with Steve Perchard. We work really well together. Our Family of Schools joke is that we work together so often, Family of Schools 3 and Family of Schools 4, that they just call us "Family of Schools Three Quarters." We have a good ebb and flow.

Steve: What I love about both of those

characters is they support each other, and they need each other. Ted is charisma and ideals and optimism, but what's great about Coach Beard is although he's a little more understated, he's always got his nose in a book, always doing the research and doing the work behind the scenes. That's why their partnership in that show really works. And to go back to Ryan and myself, there are times when I'll call Ryan up because I know he's Coach Beard who has the answers. I have an idea, but he has the answers. And sometimes that will switch where he'll call me up. The great thing too is our team of 10 provincial directors and our senior management officials all rely on each other for that kind of support and knowledge when we don't have it ourselves. I really do think you need a team approach, and you need a good partner. Any time you're leading a school or a system, it's hard to do that in isolation. And like in *Ted Lasso*, for our group of directors that work closely together, our group chat is actually called the Diamond Dogs. ○

"It's just a group of people who care, Roy. Not unlike folks at a hip-hop concert whose hands are not in the air." – Ted Lasso

In the next part of this series, we'll get to know more about how Steve and Ryan's program explores hopeful system leadership through the lens of Ted Lasso. Their Canva presentation from this summer's CASSA conference is currently available on the CASSA website. You'll find it under the 2025 Conference Presentations section under the Annual Leadership Conference tab.

To reach out to Steve and Ryan about their Hopeful Leadership program, contact stephenperchard@nlschools.ca and ryan Kelley@nlschools.ca.

Announcing the 2025 Recipient for the Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award

Since 2002, the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) has highlighted the extraordinary efforts of Canadian school system leaders through the annual presentation of a national leadership award. From 2002 to 2023, this award was known as the EXL Award.

As of 2024, this award has been known as the Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award. It recognizes CASSA members who have exhibited exemplary leadership ability and who have enhanced school administration. CASSA is grateful for the continuing support of this award by Nelson Canada, Canada's leading K to 12 educational publisher.

There were three nominees for the award in 2025; Dr. Souhail Soujah, Kevin Kaardal, and Michael McMann. The recipient of the 2025 Nelson Excellence in Leadership Award, Kevin Kaardal, was announced at this year's conference in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, on July 4.

Warmest congratulations to Kevin, who will be invited to attend the 2026 National Conference on Education, presented by AASA (The School Superintendents Association), in Nashville, Tennessee, as Canadian Superintendent of the Year.

Here are profiles on each of the deserving 2025 nominees.

KEVIN KAARDAL British Columbia School Superintendents Association

Kevin Kaardal is the superintendent of schools/CEO of Central Okanagan Public Schools, a position he has held since 2015. He previously served as assistant superintendent, deputy superintendent, and superintendent of schools for Burnaby Public Schools as well as an advisor for the College Board of Canada. His career in public education has included



Kevin
Kaardal

roles as a teacher, principal, and district senior leader in Alberta and British Columbia.

Under Kevin's leadership, his district's graduation rates increased from 88 per cent to 96 per cent. He led improvements of district Indigenous graduation rates from 76 per cent to 86 per cent and exceeded the provincial graduation rates for new Canadians and students with disabilities.

He played multiple key roles in the district and provincial responses to the pandemic. BC's Interior Health Authority Deputy Chief Medical Health Officer noted Kevin's contributions helped to prevent outbreaks at the height of the pandemic, dispel misinformation, and support the quick uptake of vaccinations among staff and families to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Among his professional honours, Kevin has received the Academic Excellence Award from the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education Excellence in Teaching; the Young Professional Award for the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance; an Excellence in Teaching Award; and the Alberta Teachers'

Association Health & Physical Education Council Certificate of Achievement.

He has published numerous articles on diverse educational leadership themes for CASSA; led workshops on leadership development and teaching and learning improvement; and presented on subjects including equitable transitions to post-secondary education, environmental education, and AI.

At a systems level, he implemented new structures, policies, and procedures to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of Central Okanagan Public Schools. This included setting up Families of Schools structures, ensuring accountability for each learner, and increasing classroom support for students with disabilities.

Kevin has served as the president, vice president, and treasurer of BCSSA; the vice president of Basketball BC, and the president of Basketball Alberta Coaches. He was the president of CASSA from 2022 to 2024. He currently serves as CASSA past president. He has been a member of CASSA for seven years.

[Kevin Kaardal was featured as one of the newsletter's Faces in the Crowd in the December 2017 issue.]

SOUHAIL SOUJAH Northwest Territories Superintendents Association

Dr. Souhail Soujah is the superintendent of education for the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC), based in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. He has been in this role since 2022.

Dr. Soujah's previous roles in education leadership include superintendent of education for Yukon Education, based in Whitehorse; assistant deputy minister with the Yukon Department of Education; and school principal in various communities in Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Yukon. He began his career in public education as an educational assistant in British Columbia.



Dr. Souhail
Soujah

He is known for his commitment to equity, inclusion, Indigenous language revitalization, and student well-being. His work in these areas have made a lasting impact across the Northwest Territories and beyond.

Among his accomplishments as a system leader, Dr. Soujah is noted for his advocacy for Indigenous and Northern education through programming and initiatives targeting literacy, numeracy, and social responsibility. He is a champion of the ConnectedNorth network, partnering with TakingItGlobal to provide genuine and relevant educational content for remote communities across the North.

Dr. Soujah also developed and implemented a regional strategy for mental health advocacy and support for students, staff, and school communities. He has empowered, mentored, and promoted grassroots administrative leadership from within community.

He has developed and implemented administrative mechanisms, protocols, and policies to support efficiency, effectiveness, and fiscal responsibility. This has included leading the way to adopt software, AI-powered entities, and cross-platform technologies to better support school communities.

To support well-researched and strong decision-making at the local level, Dr. Soujah has promoted the use of analytical tools and data collection. He has shared his learnings and expertise through a number of publications and presentations over the last two decades, including in the *Leaders*

& *Learners* magazine and at CASSA's national conference.

Dr. Soujah has been a member of CASSA for five years. He is the recipient of both the 2025 NWT Superintendents' Association Distinguished Service Award and the 2025 CASSA-ACGCS Distinguished Service Award.

[A longer profile on Dr. Soujah appeared in the January 2025 issue of *Leaders & Learners*.]



Michael
McMann

MICHAEL MCMANN **College of Alberta School** **Superintendents**

Michael McMann is the CEO/superintendent of schools for the Fort Vermilion School Division in northwestern Alberta. He has also served as associate superintendent of teaching and learning and director of high school completion.

Michael is the recipient of the 2024 Excellence in Education Award from Dyslexia Canada, the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Award, the 2025 King Charles III Coronation Medal for Excellence in Contributions to Alberta's K-12 Education System, and the 2024 Social Innovation Award from the University of Alberta.

For the past seven years, Michael led the implementation of a new teacher education program that has a full teaching position in the final year of study. He advanced both literacy and numeracy in the province through numerous projects with the Alberta Research Network. He also implemented a New Collegiate School system with an alternative calendar and diploma exams in December.

He developed literacy and numeracy screeners that are now used in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. He has presented research at a variety of professional gatherings including the Society of the Scientific Study of Reading in Copenhagen and Calgary and the Assessment in Mathematics Collective Annual Conference. He has also presented at events for CASS, ULead, Dyslexia Canada, Green Hectares, and the Alberta Research Network.

Michael has contributed to a number of publications, including *CASS Connects* and the *Learning and Instruction Journal*, as well as various academic papers.

He is a current board member of Northwestern Polytechnic, the largest post-secondary institution in northern Alberta. He also serves as a director on the board for the J. P. Das Centre on Developmental and Learning Disabilities. Michael is a lead partner with the AIM Collective and a national thought leader with Green Hectares. He is the current second vice president and Zone 1 director for CASS, and he previously served as the organization's first vice president.

In addition to his work in education, Michael is also a provincial community partner member of Covenant Healthy, a people's warden with St. Luke's Anglican Mission, and a wildfire and flood lead with the Northern Disaster Service.

Michael has been a CASSA member for 15 years. ○

**Congratulations to
the 2025 nominees,
and to Kevin
Kaardal who took
top spot!**

**Keep your eyes out
for the 2026 round
of nominations and
awards opening
soon.**

Write for *Leaders & Learners* Magazine!

Leaders & Learners reaches readers every summer and winter, sharing stories about how your schools, districts, and community partners are supporting each student through programs, partnerships, and professional development. Articles may highlight new technologies, curricula, PD opportunities, outdoor learning lessons, Reconciliation, learning for new Canadians, recovery learning after the pandemic, etc., from across Canada!

We are currently looking for topics for our Winter 2025 issue.
This magazine will be mailed out in January 2026!

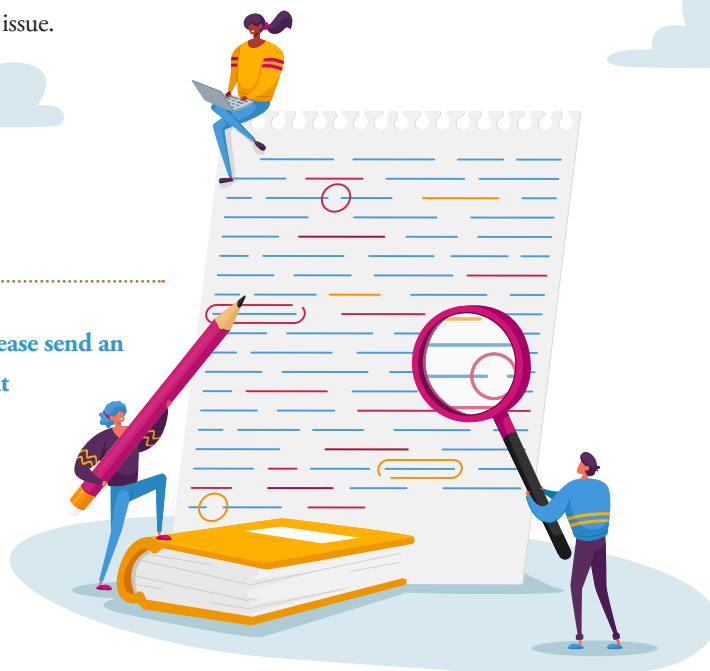
Details:

Abstracts due October 6, 2025
Final article due November 10, 2025

If you have an article idea that you wish to submit, please send an abstract to Jenna Collignon, editor of the magazine, at jcollignon@matrixgroupinc.net, and copy reg_klassen@cassa-acgcs.ca.

Note:

If your abstract is accepted, you will be notified and provided with a word count and further details. Articles cannot be company or product promotional.



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