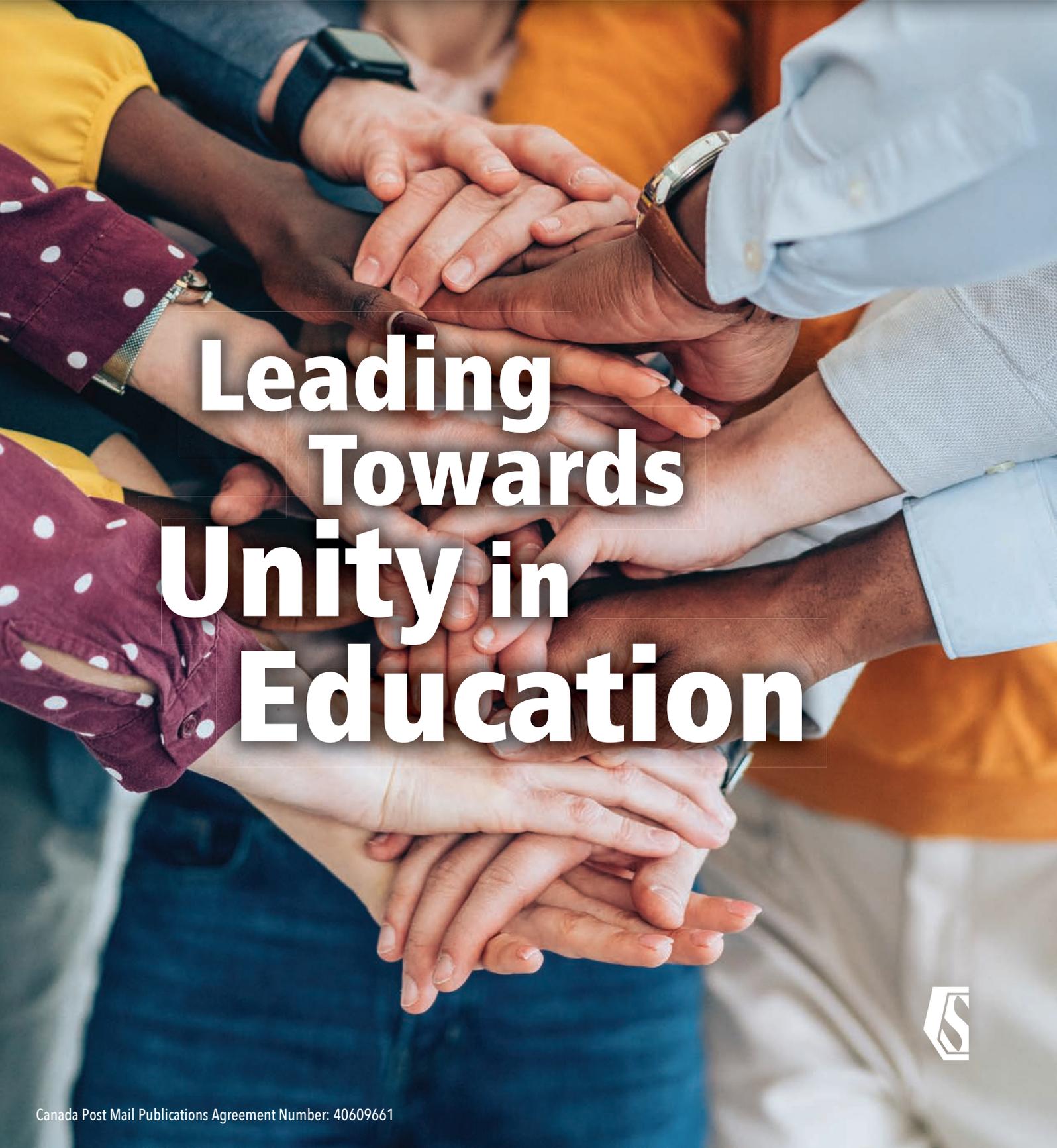


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Spring 2026

the CASS CONNECTION

The official magazine for the College of Alberta School Superintendents



Leading Towards Unity in Education



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The CASS Connection

The official magazine for the College of
Alberta School Superintendents
Spring 2026

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Message from the Minister of Education

Demetrios Nicolaidis | Alberta Minister of Education and Childcare

Across Alberta, our shared commitment to ensuring every student has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive unites us. We are fortunate to live in a province that offers real choice in education – through different school systems, instructional approaches, and program focuses. While no two schools or boards are alike, our collective goal remains constant: building a system that helps every child reach their full potential.

Unity in education is more than a theme – it is a daily practice. It appears when teachers collaborate across grade levels, when school authorities engage their communities or share lessons learned, and when government invests in strong, evidence based strategies that address real classroom needs. True leadership means recognizing that although each school jurisdiction has its own context, we all share responsibility for preparing the next generation of Albertans for their future. When our priorities align, we strengthen the entire system, creating a more resilient foundation for student success today and for years to come.

Today, Alberta's schools face challenges unlike any we have seen before. Many have experienced rapid enrolment growth, with more than 80,000 new students joining the province in the past three years. In Calgary, nearly one third of students speak English as a second language. These pressures contribute to increasing class sizes and rising classroom complexity.

Several recent initiatives demonstrate how the province is working to address these challenges and build long-term capacity. Through the School Construction Accelerator Program, Alberta is investing \$8.6 billion to build or modernize more than 130 schools, creating up to 200,000 new or renovated student spaces by 2032. This work includes major expansions,

The Opportunity to Learn, Grow, and Thrive

new high schools, modular classrooms, and accelerated timelines that move shovel-ready projects forward months ahead of schedule.

Recognizing that infrastructure alone is not enough, government has also established the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee. This committee – where Dr. McMann represents the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) – has gathered provincewide data on class size and complexity. That data is guiding decisions and helping direct funding where it is needed most.

In addition, the province has launched the Teacher Advisory Council, a dedicated forum for direct engagement between educators and myself. This council will strengthen communication, elevate teacher voices, and provide insight on issues such as classroom complexity, student behaviour, and teacher preparedness. Its work will align with the release of updated class size and composition data, reinforcing government's commitment to transparency and evidence informed decision making.

Together, these initiatives reflect a shared understanding that unity is strengthened not only through relationships, but through action. By expanding student spaces, listening to those on the front lines, and supporting systemwide collaboration, government is demonstrating its commitment to building an education system that is adaptive, inclusive, and aligned with the needs of today's learners.

Unity in education is more than a theme – it is a daily practice.

Leadership toward unity means investing in people as much as infrastructure – supporting teachers through professional collaboration, empowering administrators with clear policy direction, and engaging families with accessible information and meaningful dialogue. Strong public education depends on strong partnerships, and our ability to meet future challenges relies on the connections we build today.

While many differences exist both inside and outside our classrooms, as long as we move forward with the shared purpose of creating the best possible future for our children, we will succeed in supporting their success and addressing the challenges facing Alberta's education system.

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Message from the President

Michael McMann | College of Alberta School Superintendents

In the Spring 2026 issue of the *CASS Connection*, the theme “Leading Towards Unity in Education” resonates powerfully through the voices and initiatives of Alberta’s educational leaders. The feature articles collectively illustrate that unity is not merely an aspiration – it is a lived reality, shaped by intentional collaboration, shared vision, and the celebration of diversity across our school communities.

Across Alberta, unity in education is being built through trust, interdependence, and collaborative leadership. School divisions are fostering resilient and caring environments where every member feels valued and empowered to contribute. Leaders are coming together to navigate challenges, drawing on collective wisdom and support networks to make decisions that reflect the best interests of their communities. Professional learning networks are strengthening relationships and enhancing leadership capacity, showing that unity thrives when differences are respected and harnessed for shared growth. Unified approaches to teaching

Leading Towards Unity in Education: A Message Inspired by Alberta’s Educational Leaders

and learning, anchored in clear frameworks and collaborative practices, empower joyful, rigorous, and inclusive environments for all students. Engagement is further strengthened by amplifying student voices, ensuring that diverse perspectives inform decision-making and guide the direction of educational planning.

As we look ahead to the Spring 2026 Learning Conference and other gatherings, these stories remind us that unity in education is a journey – one led by courageous, collaborative, and compassionate leaders. Together, we are building a future where every learner, educator, and community member is united in purpose and possibility.

Call to Action

Let us each take up the challenge to lead towards unity in our own spheres – by fostering collaboration, amplifying diverse voices, and building bridges across our communities. Whether you are an educator, administrator, student, or parent, your commitment to unity will shape the future of education in Alberta. Join the conversation, share your ideas, and actively participate in upcoming events like the Spring 2026 Learning Conference. Together, let’s create an educational landscape where unity is not just a theme, but a guiding principle for all.

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Message from the Chief Executive Officer

David Keohane | College of Alberta School Superintendents

“If you want to go fast, do it alone. If you want to go far, do it together.”

This often-cited African proverb resonates deeply when applied to K-12 education. Public education has never been about speed or individual gain. It is about stewardship and shared responsibility, which is also work that unfolds over time and across generations. Education is inherently collective, where students learn in communities, professionals grow through collaboration, and systems succeed when purpose and practice remain aligned. The spring edition of *CASS Connection* reflects this reality and offers compelling examples of what it looks like when leaders choose to make a difference by doing the work together.

Readers will discover system leaders who relied on collaborative networks during periods of labour disruption, demonstrating how shared leadership strengthens both confidence and capacity. The stories tell of school authorities intentionally partnering with communities to build trust, identity, and belonging, including in a minority-language

Going Far, Together: Making Unity Matter in Education

context where education plays a vital role in sustaining culture and connection.

This edition also highlights leaders who have aligned instructional practice through shared professional learning, creating coherence across classrooms, grades, and systems. From thinking classrooms to system-wide learning frameworks, these examples show how unity is fostered when educators learn together and commit to common approaches while honouring local context. Other stories emphasize the importance of collaboration across governance models, including charter authorities working collectively to strengthen leadership capacity, and school systems creating meaningful opportunities for student voice at decision-making tables. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate how intentional collaboration supports clarity in complex work, reinforces public confidence,

and positions education as a shared professional responsibility.

The common thread being witnessed should not be mistaken as uniformity, but as an alignment that involves leaders choosing to connect their work to a broader professional community and a shared sense of responsibility.

As the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), our organization is pleased to share these stories of practice. They reflect the professionalism, care, and leadership present across Alberta’s Public, Separate, Francophone, and Charter systems. As you explore the articles that follow, consider how these examples resonate within your own context or even become applicable to existing needs. Together, they remind us that while system leadership in education can be demanding, it goes the distance, sustains its importance for communities, and is always more impactful on student learning when its work is shared by everyone.



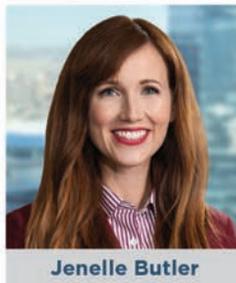
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Longview School Sports Day in Longview Alberta, a community event where parents and community members take part in a number of outdoor sports and activities. Photos courtesy of Christopher Fuzessy.

Fast Forward Flourishing CommUNITY



Students taking part in the Explore program at Ecole Percy Pegler School in Okotoks Alberta. These Grade 5 and 6 students raised and released trout into a local pond.

By Dr. Christopher Fuzessy and Sara Fox, Foothills School Division

So difficult to say that we are living in turbulent times. Our societal context is global, ongoing, increasingly unpredictable, and indicative of our present and a foreseeable future. It is important to acknowledge this reality as our schools and systems are not only expected to exist but thrive in this construct.

Rural schools and communities across Alberta face unique and rapidly evolving challenges driven by economic shifts, population changes, and increasing complexity in social and environmental contexts.

In considering the contextual elements we face, Foothills School Division is proactively and intentionally acting in this direction, the *Safeguarding Rural Schools and Communities* initiative. Our plan

aims to establish a collaborative framework, beginning in the spring of 2026, that empowers schools, municipalities, families, local businesses, and local leaders and service organizations to work together for the well-being and resilience of all children and families.

Our work is largely informed and inspired by the following books and their Canadian scholars, practitioners and authors; including Michale Ungar, *The Limits of Resilience*, Jessica Riddell, *Hope Circuits*, and Adam Kahane, *Transforming Systems*, among others. Their respective field of expertise include systems change, community resilience, higher education, and education at large.

Our conceptual framework and focus are on changing leadership through systems change and building community; and this is in direct collaboration with our communities.

Our guiding principles include:

- *Flourishing for All*: Inspired by contemporary research, our work's foundation is a commitment to human flourishing – prioritizing belonging, well-being, and lifelong learning.
- *Systemic Resilience*: The initiative recognizes that strong, coordinated systems are needed to help families and youth access resources, navigate challenges, and overcome barriers.
- *Intentional Partnerships*: Schools, municipalities and local governments, and local business, leaders, and service organizations must intentionally align goals, share knowledge, and coordinate services to create the conditions for thriving.

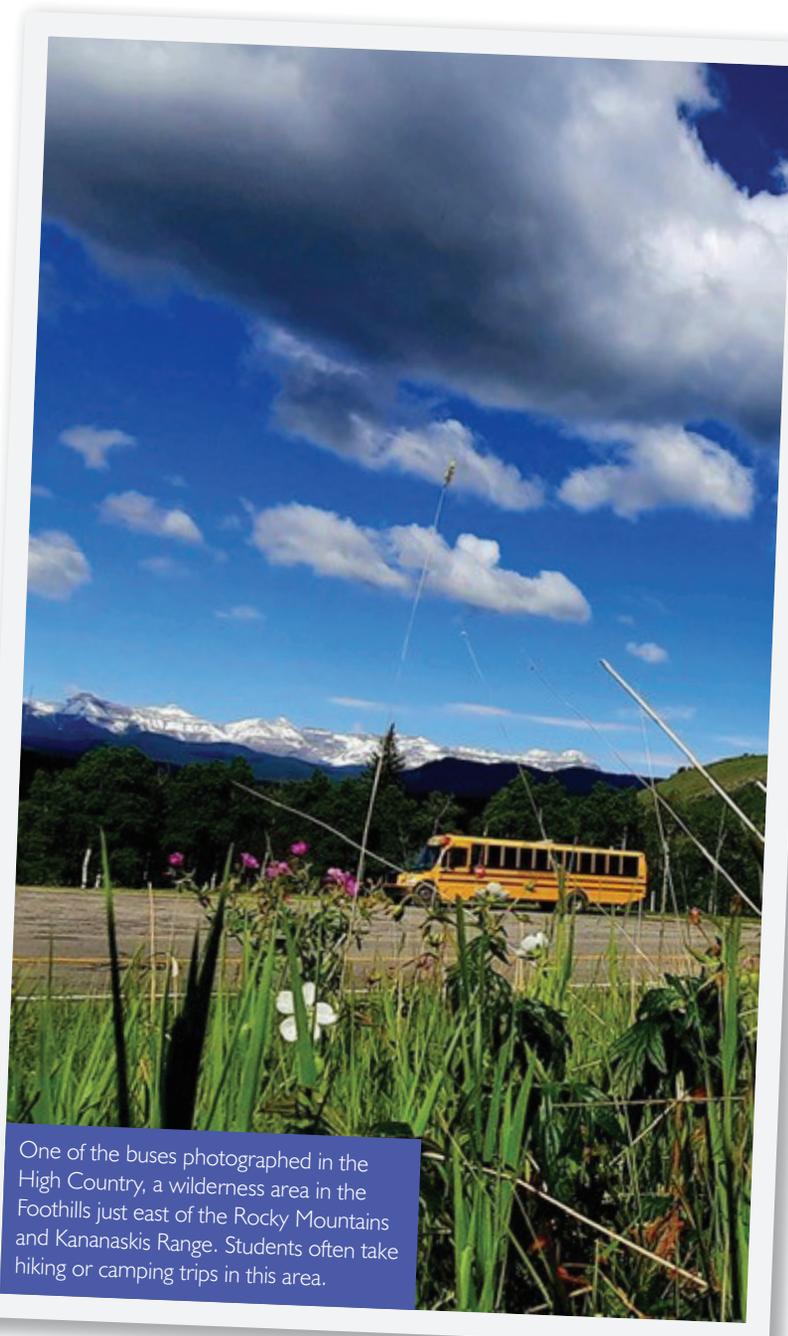
Beginning in January of 2026, we are bringing together a group of 22 employees, representatives of a variety of roles across the organization who have kindly volunteered to provide voices, recommendations, and insights into the following topics and themes over four working group sessions:

- Student supports,
- Belonging and well-being,
- Emerging technology and AI,
- Advocacy, and
- Community.

Our intention is to design generative conversations situated in ‘How might we?’ questions, compelling quotes, and open-ended questions. Our facilitation includes generative facilitated dialogue and the development of a series of recommendations for system change through world café style activities.

Our goal is to surface and rethink the systems we work within and to create new ways of being and doing in our local community

Our conceptual framework and focus are on changing leadership through systems change and building community; and this is in direct collaboration with our communities.



One of the buses photographed in the High Country, a wilderness area in the Foothills just east of the Rocky Mountains and Kananaskis Range. Students often take hiking or camping trips in this area.

– leveraging or refining the structures that already exist to promote a more responsive and resilient society. And woven throughout is a need to determine and act on how we embed this moving forward. This is not a one-off engagement opportunity that checks off a box. Rather, we envision a continuing feedback loop embedded in the organizational culture, and ethos, built by and with our team.

Mirroring this work, we are concurrently bringing together high school students from all high schools to consider the same questions, as well as parent voice through our Council of School Councils to add further important voices to these conversations, and recommendations.

Our Executive Team and Trustees (Lead Team) will be attending these gatherings, but importantly, not participating. Our Lead Team’s role is to provide this opportunity, to listen to the stories that emerge through this process, to act on what we hear within our constraints, and to support the establishment of pathways that achieve our goals.

Our Lead Team will consider the recommendations that emerge from this project through budget discussions in the spring of 2026, the Division Education Plan 2024-2029 (Year Three), and embed further actions into future strategic planning.

Our work does not end here. We are aware and cognizant that we cannot accomplish our goals alone. Later this spring, we are inviting shareholders and leaders from across Foothills County to engage in the recommendations from our students and staff team. An initial meeting, planned for May, invites participants to learn about the context, and the defined need to build new partnerships, and do this differently to support one another in our local community.

A second meeting, planned for the fall of this year, allows shareholders time to consider the discussions from earlier in the year, and move to action; defining how we can create redundant systems of support for the community we live in and the community we concurrently serve.

Here, we take the following key actions:

- Engage rural and urban leaders, including school divisions, local governments, Indigenous partners, community resource services, service groups, faith groups, and businesses, to co-design responsive, place-based solutions and partnerships that prioritize our local community.
- Build stronger working relationships and resilient support networks.
- Map local resources, identify gaps, and develop collaborative strategies to address both immediate and systemic challenges.

- Centre equity, inclusion, and cultural relevance – *a place for all* – in all partnerships and interventions.

In a time where divisiveness is extensive, we are choosing shared prosperity and to come together to safeguard a successful future for our students and their families. There is a moral imperative to engage in intentional design and planning work that provides hope, and in the words of author and professor Jessica Riddell, *critical hope* – to overcome, to build forward, to rethink our systems, and to co-construct a positive and emergent local community.

Our work begins now. ■

Dr. Christopher Fuzessy has worked in nearly every role in education over the course of his career, moving to Alberta from Montreal three years ago to join the Foothills team as Superintendent of Schools. He holds a B.Ed., M.A., and Ph.D. in Education.

Sara Fox is the Manager of Communications and Community Engagement for Foothills School Division. Her previous work in mental health and addictions, and study of anthropology continue to shape her approach, grounding her commitment to strengthening the well-being of the communities she serves.

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Leading Together Through Labour Disruption:

The Power of CASS Member Collaboration

By Dr. Andrea Holowka
and Vince Behm, Christ the
Redeemer Catholic Schools

This article has been written as a discussion between Andrea and Vince, and has been edited for clarity, to allow for each perspective to be heard.

Dr. Andrea Holowka: During my 12 years as an associate and chief superintendent, I experienced many challenges similar to my provincial colleagues. Navigating significant issues such as the pandemic, changes in legislation, internal shifts in leadership, and countless issues with students, families, and staff has been the reality of all educational leaders over the past decade. Being a system leader requires significant wisdom, discernment, and fortitude which can only be gained through experience or what I refer to as “going into the trenches.”

Although I had been in the trenches many times during my career as a system leader, I had not anticipated the difficulties that a provincial labour disruption would pose and the extent to which my leadership acumen and resilience would be tested. However, experience taught me that effective leadership in challenging times depends on collaboration. Therefore, who you choose to have alongside you in the trenches is critical to your leadership success.

During what we would begin to refer to as “regular times,” my collaborative thinking partners would be comprised of my Christ the Redeemer senior leadership team of



Vince Behm and Dr. Andrea Holowka, the authors of this article. Photos courtesy of Dr. Andrea Holowka.



Andrea and Vince working alongside administrators in co-creating positive learning resumption after the labour disruption.

superintendents and directors, our incredibly strong team of school-based administrators, and my trusted superintendent colleagues across the province. In these “irregular times” one of my most significant groups was absent, that being my school leaders. Without collaboration from those working most closely with our students, families, and staff, my decisions around contingency planning and resumption carried greater vulnerability and a higher risk of error.

Dr. Holowka and Vince Behm: To overcome this void, we needed to shore up our critical thinking partnership teams. Like many chief and deputy superintendents during this time, we ensured that our senior leadership team met regularly, creating detailed plans for operations and communication, internally and externally. We could not be more pleased with the dedication of our senior team during this time, to enable alignment, coherence, and compassion at the core of each plan and decision.

Dr. Holowka: However, this was not a time to lead in isolation. Relying on collaborative partnership with trusted system leaders across the province was also paramount to both the success of our leadership and for the camaraderie required during such an arduous time. Recognizing that we would

be limited in the scope of understanding of the timing or conditions of our return, continual dialogue with other superintendents equipped me and my team with a more complete understanding of the provincial context, while also deepening a network of colleagues in whom I could confide, seek counsel, and share my plans and materials for the greater good.

Many of these College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) members are those I met in my previous roles on the CASS board or through other system leadership connections. I am especially thankful for the friendship and counsel of CASS President Mike McMann, First Vice President Dr. Reagan Weeks, Zone 2/3 Director Krimsen Sumners, and former CASS Metro Director Lynnette Anderson, with whom I connected almost daily, and the countless other chief superintendents who were always a call or a text away.

Behm: When I first joined CASS, my superintendent at the time encouraged me to build connections with leaders across the province, not simply because building connections with perspective holders is an indicator of the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS), but because relationships broaden your perspective, sharpen your judgment, and strengthen leadership through collaboration. This advice proved invaluable,

and it is now one of the first pieces of mentorship I offer to new CASS members, as these external relationships have consistently benefited me in clear and practical ways.

Membership in CASS made forging these relationships natural, through formal opportunities like Zone meetings and professional development sessions, and informal moments of connection at gatherings, conversations between sessions, and quick calls or texts when support was needed. During the recent labour disruption, I relied heavily on relationships built through CASS Zone 5, my service on the CASS Board, and ongoing connections with associate and deputy superintendents across Alberta. Because these relationships were grounded in trust, our collaboration included not only sharing strengths and successes, but also the vulnerability that comes with real partnership – openly naming challenges, surfacing issues, and learning together through difficult decisions and lessons along the way.

In particular, I am grateful for the steady counsel of Deputy Superintendent Wes Miskiman (Golden Hills School Division) and Associate Superintendent Al Davidson (Foothills School Division). The collective wisdom from them, and from the many others I consistently rely upon across the province, strengthened our internal leadership

and helped our senior team refine decisions and messaging for CTR Catholic.

Dr. Holowka: Most importantly, I became very grateful to my own central office team for their diligence and dedication. It became evident very early on that our resumption would be imperfect, and it has indeed been flawed in many ways. However, when you enter into the trenches with colleagues that you trust implicitly, there is comfort in knowing that your commitment to each other and those you serve will persevere and ultimately prevail. Specifically, I am grateful to my chief deputy superintendent, Vincent Behm, whose meticulous attention to detail, knowledge of the division, and support for our collective vision allowed for resilience and resolve in maintaining our vision toward supporting students, families, and most importantly, our staff during this vulnerable time.

Dr. Holowka and Behm: Fullan describes “systemness” as enabling a mindset of connection and responsibility towards the system as a whole.¹ Being connected to other superintendents, experiencing similar challenges and working collaboratively toward collective solutions created innovative, responsive, and caring approaches that benefited our individual school divisions and, hopefully, the larger resumption of public education across Alberta. While there are many challenges that remain unresolved, it is our hope that our system leaders will continue to work collaboratively and compassionately as we support our communities into the future. ■

Dr. Andrea Holowka is the Superintendent for Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools. Since 1995, she has led as teacher, principal, associate and chief

superintendent, including system leadership roles with the Calgary Board of Education and Calgary Catholic School District.

Vincent Behm is the Chief Deputy Superintendent for Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools, serving approximately 10,000 students. With over 30 years in Catholic education, he has served as a teacher and principal, including elementary, junior high, and senior high leadership.

REFERENCE:

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Alex Mardell
Branch Manager

Le Conseil scolaire FrancoSud :



De gauche à droite:
Monique Baker, Elizabeth
Tremblay, Céline Tassé, et
Rémi Lemoine.



Quand l'école devient le pilier de la vitalité francophone

Par Monique Baker, Elizabeth Tremblay, Céline Tassé, et Rémi Lemoine, Conseil scolaire FrancoSud

En milieu linguistique minoritaire, l'éducation dépasse la simple transmission de connaissances : elle devient une acte de préservation culturelle et un vecteur essentiel de continuité identitaire. L'école francophone offre aux élèves un espace où se construit un rapport positif à la langue, où se développe la confiance, et où se forge une autonomie qui dépasse le cadre scolaire pour s'étendre à la vie communautaire. Au sud de l'Alberta, le Conseil scolaire FrancoSud illustre avec force cette mission. Par une approche holistique fondée sur la collaboration et l'engagement communautaire, il transforme l'expérience éducative en un parcours profondément ancré dans la culture, la langue et l'identité francophones.

L'école au cœur d'un écosystème de réseautage

Le FrancoSud constitue une institution intégrée et connectée à son milieu. Loin d'un fonctionnement en vase clos, il s'appuie sur une collaboration étroite et durable avec divers organismes francophones, permettant d'offrir aux familles un continuum de services et de ressources en français.

Cette synergie est d'ailleurs confirmée par les acteurs de terrain. Esdras Ngenzi, Directeur général du Centre d'accueil pour nouveaux arrivants francophones (CANAF), souligne « Le CANAF souhaite réaffirmer l'importance stratégique de son partenariat avec le Conseil scolaire FrancoSud. Au fil des années, cette collaboration a joué un rôle déterminant dans l'accueil et l'intégration de milliers de familles francophones à Calgary et dans le sud de l'Alberta. Ensemble, nous contribuons à renforcer la vitalité, la cohésion et la diversité des communautés francophones de la région. »

Parmi ces collaborations, celle avec le Portail de l'Immigrant Association (PIA) occupe également une place structurante.

En favorisant la création de souvenirs positifs et de liens sociaux forts en français, le FrancoSud encourage les élèves à poursuivre leur engagement linguistique et culturel bien au-delà de leur parcours scolaire.

Fatou Diouf, Gestionnaire des programmes et des stratégies, précise « Le partenariat avec le Conseil scolaire FrancoSud est essentiel... Il permet de créer une continuité réelle entre l'école, la famille et la communauté. À travers le programme des Travailleurs en établissement dans les écoles (TÉÉ) et des initiatives comme le Salon des métiers, ce partenariat favorise non seulement l'intégration et la réussite éducative, mais aussi l'ouverture des élèves sur leur avenir professionnel. »

Pour le PIA, cette collaboration représente un engagement commun à bâtir une francophonie inclusive et à renforcer le sentiment d'appartenance.

La construction identitaire est plus qu'un programme, c'est une fierté

La construction identitaire constitue l'axe central de l'action éducative du FrancoSud. L'objectif n'est pas seulement de transmettre une langue, mais de

former des citoyens capables d'assumer et de valoriser leur héritage francophone dans un environnement majoritairement anglophone. Les projets artistiques, les rassemblements culturels et les initiatives pédagogiques permettent aux élèves d'explorer la diversité de la francophonie canadienne et internationale.

En favorisant la création de souvenirs positifs et de liens sociaux forts en français, le FrancoSud encourage les élèves à poursuivre leur engagement linguistique et culturel bien au-delà de leur parcours scolaire. Cette démarche contribue à l'émergence d'une fierté durable et d'un engagement identitaire profond.

Assurer la vitalité et l'épanouissement de la communauté

La réussite du modèle FrancoSud se mesure à la vitalité de la communauté et à la capacité des jeunes à s'y projeter activement. Cette vitalité passe par un environnement sain et sécuritaire, comme le rappelle Marie-Claude Côté, Directrice générale du Réseau santé Alberta (RSA), « Le partenariat entre le RSA et le Conseil

scolaire FrancoSud est essentiel pour soutenir la vitalité de la francophonie. Ensemble, nous créons des ponts entre le secteur de l'éducation et de la santé. Grâce au circuit des écoles francophones, le RSA renforce ses liens avec les familles, ce qui permet une meilleure diffusion de l'information sur les programmes facilitant l'accès à des soins de santé en français. »

Le FrancoSud offre une éducation rigoureuse menant à un bilinguisme de haut niveau. En s'appuyant sur le pluralisme additif, l'approche du conseil valorise les acquis linguistiques et culturels des élèves tout en enrichissant leur parcours, leur permettant de bâtir une carrière solide sans jamais se couper de leurs racines. En misant sur des partenariats structurants, le FrancoSud ne se contente pas de former des élèves : il bâtit l'avenir de la francophonie albertaine. ■

Monique Baker s'est jointe au Conseil scolaire FrancoSud à titre de directrice générale adjointe des Services éducatifs en juin 2022, puis a été nommée directrice générale en 2024. Elle exerce un leadership

stratégique et innovant, profondément engagé envers l'éducation francophone, au service de la réussite des élèves et de l'excellence du système scolaire.

Elizabeth Tremblay occupe le poste de Directrice du service de la pédagogie au FrancoSud, où elle met à contribution son expérience diversifiée et son engagement envers la réussite des élèves en milieu francophone minoritaire.

Comptant plus de 33 ans d'expérience en éducation, Céline Tassé occupe actuellement le poste de superviseuse en inclusion au Service aux élèves du Conseil scolaire FrancoSud, où elle collabore avec une équipe multidisciplinaire afin de répondre aux besoins d'élèves répartis dans 19 écoles du sud de l'Alberta.

Rémi Lemoine occupe le poste de Directeur général adjoint au sein du Conseil scolaire FrancoSud. Il a développé une compréhension approfondie des systèmes éducatifs en milieu minoritaire grâce à son expérience professionnelle à titre de direction d'école, auprès de la Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, du Conseil des écoles fransaskoises en Saskatchewan et de la Commission scolaire francophone du Yukon.





A Blueprint for Brilliance: Uniting Learners in a Thinking Classroom

High school students working through the Marching Band problem. This problem is attributed to John Grant McLoughlin. Photos courtesy of Dr. Jessie Shirley.

By Dr. Jessie Shirley, Grande Prairie & District Catholic Schools

Grande Prairie and District Catholic School Division (GPCSD) has embarked on a four-year journey focused on engaging students in deep thinking. Drawing from practical research that promotes authentic learning in a student-focused environment, all teachers at all grade levels in all subject areas have committed to learning, collaborating, and designing best practices from the Building Thinking Classrooms¹ 14-stage framework.

GPCSD prioritizes the 'why' behind all initiatives. It is a place where questions are asked and approaches are explored, ensuring we are not simply jumping through the hoops. Rather, we spend time exploring and attempting to find the most effective practices to keep students engaged and thinking in joyful, collaborative ways. Over the years, we have explored many different

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THINKING

- 1 problems
- 2 how we give the problem
- 3 how we answer questions
- 4 room organization
- 5 how groups are formed
- 6 student work space
- 7 autonomy
- 8 how we give notes
- 9 what homework looks like
- 10 hints and extensions
- 11 how we consolidate
- 12 formative assessment
- 13 summative assessment
- 14 reporting out

OPTIMAL PRACTICES FOR THINKING

- begin lessons with good problems
- use verbal instructions
- answer only *keep thinking questions*
- defront* the classroom
- form visibly random groups
- use vertical non-permanent surfaces
- foster autonomous actions
- have students do *meaningful notes*
- use *check your understanding* questions
- manage *flow*
- consolidate from the bottom
- show where they are and where they are going
- evaluate what you value
- report out based on data (not points)

¹ 14 Key Practices from the Building Thinking Classroom Framework, courtesy of Building Thinking Classrooms, Liljedahl, 2021.



Kindergarten students discussing the Country Road problem, working to find how many numbers they can represent by connecting paving stones to houses. This Building Thinking Classroom (BTC) exercise is adapted from the Liljedahl (2021) text.

pedagogical and assessment approaches, seeking a unified approach to learning that could activate participation, independence, joy, and wonder.

Hargreaves and Shirley report that the best learning environment “facilitates and supports students’ active engagement in learning, encourages co-operation, and promotes behaviour that benefits other people.”² In addition, to better support students’ learning, students of today need skills that include being able to solve complex problems, work collaboratively, think creatively, think analytically, and be persistent.^{3, 4, 5, 6, 7}

What is BTC?

What happens when central office staff, a small school improvement team, and a BTC expert come together? A little bit of magic. Enter the Building Thinking Classroom¹ (BTC) – a research-informed framework designed to transform traditional classrooms into spaces where students are actively engaged in meaningful, high-level thinking. At its core, a BTC is one in which students are authentically engaged in problem-solving, building a culture of curiosity, perseverance, and conceptual understanding in the classroom.

The BTC framework is comprised of 14 key practices that address how teachers organize and deliver learning experiences, from the physical set up of the classroom to the ways students interact, collaborate, and communicate their ideas. These approaches work synergistically to foster autonomy,

collaboration, and deep engagement. Students in a thinking classroom are constantly invited to make decisions, take risks, and build on one another’s reasoning – skills essential for both academic success and lifelong learning.

A unified approach

Our school division is currently in year two of our BTC four-year undertaking. Relying on the leadership and guidance of Christie Watson, our Asst. Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, as well as Kyle Webb, a BTC Consultant, GPCSD staff participate in eight learning days throughout each school year that focus on the philosophy, the pedagogy, and the assessment practices within the Building Thinking Classroom. Years one and two are focused on making changes to the classroom such as using vertical non-permanent surfaces (where students work standing in visibly random groups); developing rich problems that all students can attempt and are worthwhile thinking about; providing minimal, targeted hints or extensions to guide learning; and shifting the role of the teacher from a deliverer of content to a facilitator of thinking. These professional development sessions are specifically tailored for:

- Administrators and Central Office Staff: All leaders within the division have committed to building their knowledge base and supporting teachers in their classrooms.
- Any classroom teacher who has the desire to deepen their understanding of this initiative: These sessions help build capacity within a school culture and allow for individual teachers to further their learning and make change within the classroom at a more rapid pace.
- Teacher Leads: This group is comprised of teachers who put their name forward to receive formal training from BTC expert, Kyle Webb and would then lead grade level or subject area groups during division professional development days.
- School Leads: This group is also dependent on teachers volunteering to receive formal training, however these participants would afterwards be responsible for assisting administrators as they support teachers within their daily classrooms, ensuring a team of champions and knowledge in each school.

Professional development days within the division involves formal learning in the morning (led by either administrators or teacher leads), and teacher collaboration and lesson development (with grade level groups or subject area groups) in the afternoon.

In years three and four, we plan to address consolidation, assessment, and reporting out. One of the noteworthy questions we plan to explore comes from Liljedahl: “If learning days are now full of collaboration, and if learning days are rehearsals for tests, then why are tests still done individually?”¹

Our implementation approach is entirely dependent on teachers taking a major role in driving this initiative, with administrators learning alongside, supporting when needed. Studies have found that external factors such as a culture of risk-taking, quality professional development, supportive leadership, and opportunities for collaboration are critical for effective implementation of change among teachers.^{8, 9, 10, 11} As Harris explains, “the involvement of teachers in the change process is critical and...collaborative forms of practice are more conducive to successful implementation.”

What have we learned?

GPCSD has found implementation of the BTC framework particularly beneficial – it has enhanced teacher professional growth and collaboration and provided a positive learning culture for both teachers and students alike. However, three pieces of compelling evidence has been noted within our classrooms:

1. Teachers have reported an increase of student engagement and resilience. Problem-solving in one kindergarten classroom resulted in a full 40 minutes of active, joyful engagement!
2. A more equitable classroom environment was reported by many teachers. In many instances, we were unable to identify students within the random groupings that were previously labelled as ‘requiring supports.’
3. Deep learning was happening due to student-to-student communication. Many teachers realized they no longer had to be the ceaseless keeper of knowledge - they realized their job was to generate and unearth the knowledge that existed within the room. This, in turn, has

impacted their pedagogy to be more student-centered.

Conclusion

Implementing Building Thinking Classrooms represents a powerful shift from traditional, teacher-centered instruction toward a more student-centered, thinking learning environment. In GPCSD, the benefits are far-reaching for both students and teachers where we see improved engagement, enhanced equity, stronger teacher practice, and the development of critical life-long skills among students. BTC has gifted us with a fresh perspective on learning. As Shirley and Hargreaves suggest, “Let’s not just reimagine education. Let’s re-enchant it”² and let’s do it together! ■

Dr. Jessie Shirley serves as Superintendent of Grande Prairie & District Catholic Schools and is deeply committed to pedagogical approaches that are engaging and meaningful for both students and teachers. Jessie brings extensive experience as a classroom teacher, District Lead for Numeracy, coordinator for the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, and Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning.

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Unity Through Leadership:



The Charter School Leadership Network at the Calgary Girls Charter School. Photo courtesy of Denise Budgen.

Collaborative Professional Learning Across Charter School Authorities

By Denise Budgen, on behalf of the Charter School Leadership Network

As system administrators, we know that leadership can be a surprisingly solitary role. Even in environments grounded in collaboration, many of our most complex decisions are made in isolation—under time pressure, resource constraints, and competing priorities. For Charter School leaders in Alberta, that isolation can be amplified by the distinct mandates, visions, and pedagogical approaches that define our schools. In response to that reality the Charter School Leadership (CSL) Network was formed.

One member stated, “The most valuable part of this work is the opportunity to connect, talk honestly, and work through real problems of

practice with other leaders. These collaborative conversations build trust and confidence, and they are just as meaningful for middle leaders as they are for system and school administrators.”

The Charter School Leadership (CSL) Network is a voluntary professional learning initiative bringing together leaders from eight Alberta Charter School Authorities. Grounded in a shared belief that leadership capacity matters, it focuses on developing the human and relational skills leaders need to enact excellence in their own unique contexts.

Why leadership learning – together – matters

Breakspear and Rosenbrock, in *The Pruning Principle: Mastering the Art of*

Strategic Subtraction within Education, remind us that “professional development... is one of the most important levers for school improvement” and that when done effectively, it has the potential to lift practice across an entire system.² Importantly, they caution that the goal is not *more* professional development, but better professional learning – embedded, relevant, and sustained.²

For those of us serving in leadership roles, the question is not whether learning matters, but how to design it so that it genuinely shapes practice. The CSL Network arose out of this very question.

Early on, CSL Network members made several commitments:

- Learning would be **in person**, creating both focused space and relational connection;
- Learning would be **ongoing**, designed as a series rather than isolated events;
- Learning would focus on **everyday leadership practices** – communication, relationships, decision-making, and prioritization;
- Learning would honour the reality of limited time and resources.

These design choices reflect well-established principles in the literature. Effective professional learning is more likely when it is embedded in role and context, sustained over time, and supported by leadership.² Just as importantly, it must be clearly framed, purposeful, and directly connected to the work leaders do each day.¹

From theory to practice: How the network works

The CSL Network is stewarded by a volunteer steering committee representing multiple member schools. Learning is organized as a series of five half-day sessions hosted by member schools reinforcing shared ownership and collective responsibility.

Each session intentionally balances **expert input** with **generative dialogue**. External facilitators provide frameworks and language. Currently, *The Pruning Principle* has resonated deeply with Network members. The discipline of intentionally *pruning* meetings, initiatives, and professional learning has both personal and system-level relevance. It revolves around a deceptively simple question: If this learning is not improving how we work together to improve student outcomes, why are we doing it at all? Reform it or stop doing it.¹

Another member said, “Leadership can be isolating, and having intentional, consistent time set aside to learn together changes that. When the learning is sustained over time and built around conversation, not just presentation, it allows for deeper reflection and has a much greater impact on how we lead in our day-to-day work.”

Building collective efficacy across difference

One of the most powerful outcomes of the CSL Network has been the growth of collective efficacy – that belief in our ability to influence outcomes. For leaders, those beliefs are shaped not only by personal

For those of us serving in leadership roles, the question is not whether learning matters, but how to design it so that it genuinely shapes practice.

mastery experiences, but by what we observe in others – vicarious experiences.

The Network creates space for vicarious experience – opportunities to hear how peers in similar roles navigate obstacles, adapt frameworks, and enact change in diverse contexts. These moments matter. Seeing credible and respected peers succeed fosters confidence that we, too, can overcome obstacles.

Equally important is the role of social persuasion – the encouragement and challenge that emerge from trust-based professional relationships. Over time, the CSL Network has intentionally cultivated norms of openness, collaboration, and mutual respect.

Another member said, “Our schools are very different by design – each with its own mission, vision, and focus – but at the end of the day, we are all leading people. Having space to learn alongside leaders from other schools reminds us that many of our challenges are shared, and that learning from each other strengthens our practice, even across very different contexts.”

Leadership networks as a system strategy

High-quality professional interaction, as Hargreaves and Fullan note, does not emerge by chance. It must be deliberately designed.³ The CSL Network does this by connecting leaders around shared problems of practice, inquiry, and action—conditions shown to increase both efficacy and impact.³

For Charter School leaders, the Network sessions represent one of the few times each year that Charter administrators and learning leaders gather together. The informal conversations matter –but so does the disciplined structure that keeps the focus on leadership learning.

Perhaps most importantly, the CSL Network provides voice and agency. Leaders shape the learning they believe they need. Costs are shared. Hosting is shared.

Ownership is collective. This allows the Network to do together what would be difficult – if not impossible – to do alone.

Unity through leadership

Unity means respect for difference grounded in shared commitment to learning, reflection, and improvement. It means recognizing that leadership is strengthened not by having all the answers, but by asking better questions – together. As Eugene Ionesco said, “it is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.”² The CSL Network continues to live into that idea, creating space for leaders to think deeply, learn purposefully, and lead with greater clarity and confidence. ■

Denise Budgen, BA, B. Ed., M. Ed., is the Coordinator of Instruction for Foundations for the Future Charter Academy and a member of The Charter School Leadership Network Steering Committee. She is privileged to represent this work on their behalf.

The Charter School Leadership Network Steering Committee: Denise Budgen, FFCA; Shashi Shergill, Connect Charter; Julie Jansen and Graeme Finlay, Westmount Charter; Kerry Blum, STEM Innovation Academy; Kim Hoey, Calgary Arts Academy; and Jenele Jones, Calgary Girls Charter School.

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Optimal Learning:



School and division leaders united in purpose through collaboration. Photos courtesy of Lynnette Anderson.

How Edmonton Catholic Schools Journey Together in Unity

By Lynnette Anderson, Dr. Ryan Feehan, and Terri Peterson, Edmonton Catholic School Division

At Edmonton Catholic School Division (ECSD), unity does not require uniformity. Instead, unity is maintained by our shared values, and expressed through our common vision, common language, and common commitment. With 95 schools serving over 51,000 students, ECSD has a diverse community of leaders and educators. Although we speak with many voices, we are united towards our mission, which is to provide a Catholic education that inspires students to learn and that prepares them to live fully and to serve

God in one another. In this article, we share how ECSD's Optimal Learning journey has unified us towards our mission. We also describe how time is dedicated – through monthly leadership meetings and an annual two-day Leadership Academy – to ensure that Optimal Learning Conditions are lived consistently across ECSD.

ECSD's Optimal Learning journey began in 2023 with the question: What does the best possible learning look like for our students? This question led us to the academic literature on Optimal Learning, which explores a state of learning that

exceeds the mere transmission of knowledge. Indeed, this literature suggests that educating students under an Optimal Learning framework can yield life-long learners who see learning as a living process rooted in faith, freedom, and hope. It was at this point that ECSD's Executive Leadership Team decided to make Optimal Learning our overarching model for what learning should look like for every learner – grounded in strong pedagogy, deep care, and our Catholic faith.

We should note, however, that ECSD's Optimal Learning journey was more than

just adopting a framework from academic literature. We created our own learning framework by listening fully to the voices within our ECSD community. From previous experience, we knew that an open and collaborative process was necessary to fully transform teaching and learning. Teachers, principals, system leaders, trustees, and students reminded us that teaching becomes lifegiving when it's aligned with what we believe, what we feel, and what we do. This collaborative process was supported by the research of Dr. Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, who works closely with ECSD to help us understand the importance of teaching "with our head, heart, and hands."¹

The unity of head, heart, and hands led us to reflect on who we want our students to become. To this end, we collaborated with our ECSD community to create ECSD's Portrait of a Graduate, which articulates the Student Competencies we hope to cultivate in students. These Student Competencies are:

- Faith Filled Stewards,
- Discerning Believers and Seekers,
- Critical Thinkers and Problem Solvers,
- Creative and Innovative,
- Empathetic and Inclusive,
- Life-Long Learners,
- Resilient and Wellness Focused,
- Ethical Digital and Global Citizens, and
- Effective Communicators and Collaborators.

We believe these competencies equip students with the skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Once we had clarified the Student Competencies we aim to develop in students, our next step was to consider and the Learning Conditions in which these competencies could *take root*.

Continuing with this garden metaphor: if an optimal learner is a thriving plant, then the Student Competencies would be the qualities of the plant we wish to cultivate, such as a strong stem, large leaves, and fruit for harvest; the Learning Conditions would be what we can control to create that thriving plant, such as fertilizing the soil, watering regularly, and removing weeds. In other words, to cultivate the above-mentioned Student Competencies in our students, we believe that the following Learning Conditions should be in place:

- Catholic Faith Permeation,
- Well-Being and Catholic Spiritual Formation,
- Joy and Rigour,
- Ownership of Learning,



Building cohesion and shared direction together.

Once we had clarified the Student Competencies we aim to develop in students, our next step was to consider the Learning Conditions in which these competencies could take root.

- Creativity and Risk Taking,
- Applied and Collaborative Learning,
- Real-World Connections,
- Assessment and Feedback, and
- Lifelong Learning.

With the above preliminary work in place, ECSD is now at the point of our Optimal Learning journey where we collaboratively create resources, success indicators, and conversation tools that can be used across our division to help staff in understanding each Learning Condition – thereby identifying strengths, naming areas for growth, and planning next steps. These Learning Conditions are not add-ons; they are our heartbeat of learning. They guide how assessment informs growth, how learning connects to authentic contexts, and how classrooms become places where joy and rigour live side-by-side. To ensure these Learning Conditions are lived consistently across ECSD, Optimal Learning guides our collective practice so that we continue to journey together in unity.

To enhance this unity, we have learned the importance of regularly dedicating time for the Executive Leadership Team, division leaders, and principals to discuss Optimal Learning. In the Fall 2025 issue of the *CASS Connection*, we wrote an article² explaining how each of ECSD's six superintendents is assigned to a group of schools, which we call their Stewardship Group. In that article we detailed how each Stewardship Group breaks out from our monthly leadership meetings to collaboratively discuss, in the words of Michael Fullan, "...what works ... and what doesn't." In short, Optimal Learning is discussed at monthly leadership meetings, either with all the principals together or when the much smaller Stewardship Groups break out. In addition to these leadership meetings, the other primary vehicle for maintaining unity and coherence among our principals is Leadership Academy.

ECSD's annual two-day Leadership Academy is a commitment to our leaders,

whereby we provide them with dedicated time and space to build a shared understanding. Leadership Academy strengthens our common language and ensures that instructional leadership is aligned across schools and anchored in the same shared vision. When we align our efforts, coherence deepens and shared action follows across all of Edmonton Catholic Schools.

Since our adoption of Optimal Learning, Leadership Academy has been where understanding of the Learning Conditions is deepened and connected to school-based leadership. This increased understanding supports a shift from shared language to shared action, which ultimately becomes increasingly visible in the daily work of our schools. After each Leadership Academy, principals return to their schools with a shared set of understandings, common conversation tools, and faith-centered commitments. The flexibility within our Learning Conditions allows principals and teachers to achieve ECSD's common aim of Optimal Learning while honouring each school's unique context, as is evident by collaborative response, systemwide improvement, and a strengthening alignment in walkthroughs.

To conclude, we revisit our original question: "What does the best possible learning look like for our students?" ECSD's Optimal Learning journey has guided us in collaboratively identifying Student Competencies, and from those we identified Learning Conditions. By deliberately creating these Learning Conditions across Edmonton Catholic Schools, we are confident that every student will receive "the best possible learning," such that they thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually, while at the same time developing skills and competencies to grow and succeed.

We maintain unity across our 95 schools by holding monthly leadership meetings as well as a two-day Leadership Academy, thereby fostering an open and collaborative environment for our principals. ECSD's Optimal Learning journey grounds us in a shared vision of learning, allowing our teachers to continuously design learning that is truly optimal, and thereby form whole persons, strengthen communities, and draw every heart closer to God. ■

Lynnette Anderson is the Chief Superintendent of Edmonton Catholic Schools, bringing nearly 30 years of dedicated service in education. Lynnette

is deeply committed to fostering student success by creating inclusive, faith-filled learning environments where every student is empowered to thrive.

Ryan Feehan serves as Superintendent of Leadership Services for Edmonton Catholic Schools. Holding a doctorate in Educational Leadership, Ryan is dedicated to developing leaders by cultivating strong school leadership and fostering collaborative learning environments.

Terri Peterson is Superintendent of Learning Services with Edmonton Catholic Schools, bringing over 35 years of dedicated service to inclusive education and professional development. She leads with a commitment to faith-based learning and student success.

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Rotary Clubs in Southern Alberta, District 5360, sponsor students to attend a variety of youth programs. Encourage students to reach out to their program of interest.

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<p>Rotary Youth Program of Enrichment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find your voice Grow leadership skills Succeed as a team Make a difference in your community <p>May 1 - 4, 2026 Ages 13 - 17</p>	<p>Rotary Adventures in Career & Financial Wellness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to manage your money Develop a career path Learn how to set financial goals <p>July 9 - 12, 2026 Ages 14 - 17</p>	<p>Rotary Alberta Youth Entrepreneurship Camp</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create and launch a business as a team Learn business management Learn marketing and advertising Sell your products and keep the profits <p>August 9 - 15, 2026 Ages 13 - 15</p>
<p>Rotary Youth Leadership Award</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership fundamentals and ethics Communication skills Problem-solving and conflict management Community and global citizenship <p>May 7 - 10, 2026 Ages 15 - 17</p>	<p>Youth Exchange Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop lifelong leadership skills Learn a new language and culture Build lasting friendships with young people from around the world Become a global citizen <p>Summer Exchange 2026 Ages 15-17.5 Long-term Exchange 2027-28</p>	<p>Interact</p> <p>For youth 12-18 who want to connect with others in their community or school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have fun while doing service projects Learn about the world Local Rotary Club guidance

Student Voice at the Board Table:

Advancing Assurance and Shared Responsibility in Rural Public Education

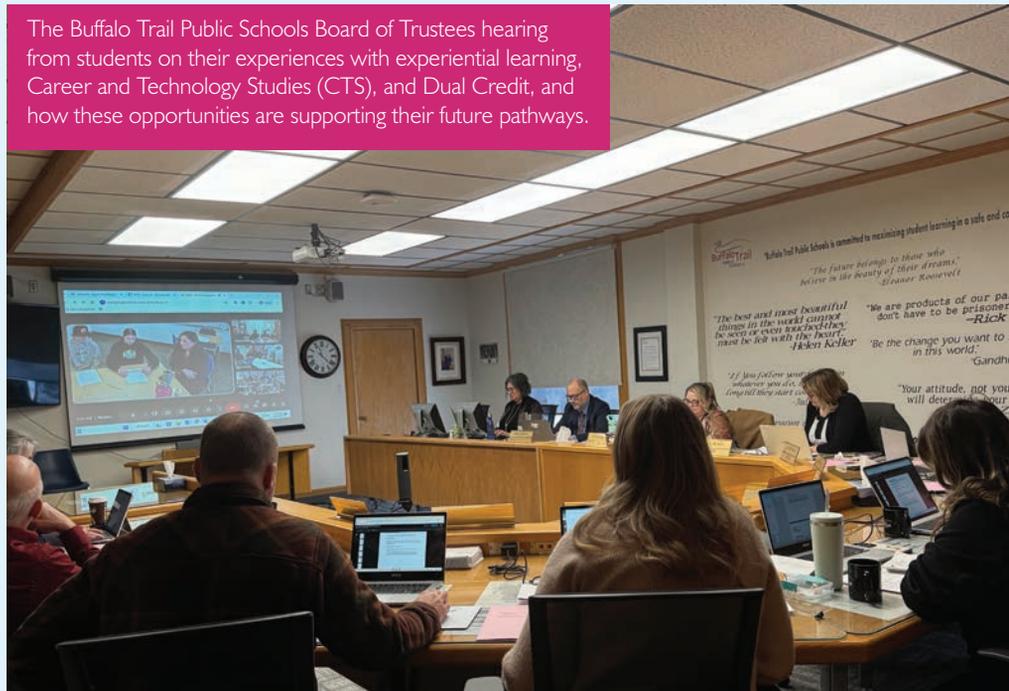
By James Trodden, Camille Quinton, and Michelle Webb, Buffalo Trail Public Schools

Shared responsibility in public education is strengthened when systems are coherent, responsive, and grounded in the lived experiences of learners. Alberta's Assurance Framework emphasizes the importance of shared responsibility, continuous improvement, and meaningful engagement as cornerstones of quality education. In rural public school systems, where context matters deeply, these principles are best realized when student voice is intentionally embedded in governance processes.

At Buffalo Trail Public Schools (BTPS), the regular inclusion of students at the Board of Trustees table has become a key assurance practice. Each month, students from multiple schools and grade levels meet with the Board of Trustees to share their perspectives on questions aligned to BTPS's Four-Year Education Plan priorities. Students are invited to speak about what is happening in their school communities and to share a "wish" or "want" connected to the focus area. These conversations span a range of topics, including literacy and numeracy, safe and caring schools, programming, and community connections.

By inviting students to present at monthly board meetings, the division has strengthened alignment across governance, leadership, and learning while ensuring that system direction remains responsive to local context. This approach has enhanced confidence in decision-making; informed refinements to the Four-Year Education Plan and fostered a shared sense of purpose across the system.

The Buffalo Trail Public Schools Board of Trustees hearing from students on their experiences with experiential learning, Career and Technology Studies (CTS), and Dual Credit, and how these opportunities are supporting their future pathways.



The Buffalo Trail Public Schools Board of Trustees hearing from students about foundational literacy and numeracy, including strategies that support their learning and growth.



By grounding governance discussions in student experience, the division strengthens coherence between provincial expectations and local implementation, a key expectation of the Assurance Framework.

Student voice as an assurance strategy

The Assurance Framework identifies engagement as a foundational element of quality education, emphasizing the importance of authentic relationships and shared understanding among students, families, staff, and communities. While student engagement is often measured through surveys and participation data, BTPS has found that direct student voice at the governance table provides powerful qualitative evidence that deepens system understanding.

Students who present to the Board of Trustees share reflections on priorities identified in the four-year plan. These insights contribute to a richer picture of student experience, one that complements achievement data and other assurance measures. For trustees and senior leaders, hearing directly from students strengthens confidence that governance decisions are aligned with student needs and aspirations.

This practice also reinforces the Assurance Framework's emphasis on shared accountability. Students are not positioned as passive recipients of decisions, but as partners in the assurance process, contributing meaningfully to conversations about quality and improvement.

Honouring local context in rural public education

Local context is a critical component of assurance, particularly in rural Alberta. BTPS serves diverse communities spread across a large geographic area, where schools play a central role in community identity and cohesion. Student voice at the board table provides essential context for

understanding how system priorities are experienced across varied rural settings.

Students frequently speak about the strengths of rural public education, strong relationships, a sense of belonging, and access to caring adults, as well as challenges related to transportation, programming access, and future pathways. These perspectives help trustees and leaders interpret assurance data through a rural lens, ensuring that decisions respect local realities rather than relying solely on system-level averages.

By grounding governance discussions in student experience, the division strengthens coherence between provincial expectations and local implementation, a key expectation of the Assurance Framework.

Informing student growth and learning supports

Student presentations often provide insight into student growth and achievement beyond academic outcomes alone. Learners describe how engagement, relevance, and support influence their motivation and success. Their reflections have reinforced the understanding that wellbeing, safety, and belonging are prerequisites for learning, an alignment that mirrors the Assurance Framework's integrated approach to student success.

In several instances, themes raised by students, such as mental health supports, transitions, or access to experiential learning, have prompted deeper analysis of learning supports and services. These conversations have informed system-level discussions about resource allocation, program development, and professional learning, ensuring that supports are responsive and evidence-informed.

Refining the Four-Year Education Plan through evidence

The Four-Year Education Plan serves as the division's strategic roadmap and a central assurance artifact. At BTPS, student voice is intentionally used as a source of ongoing evidence to inform the plan's implementation and refinement. Rather than treating the plan as static, the division views it as a living document that evolves through continuous engagement and reflection.

Student presentations provide recurring qualitative evidence that helps validate system priorities, surface emerging trends, and assess the impact of strategies over time. Trustees and senior leaders regularly reference student insights when discussing progress toward outcomes, ensuring that assurance conversations remain grounded in learner experience.

Strengthening governance and public confidence

Effective governance is central to assurance. Inviting students into governance spaces has strengthened the Board of Trustees' capacity to fulfill its role with clarity and confidence. Student voice provides an additional lens through which trustees can test assumptions, ask informed questions, and ensure alignment between policy, strategic direction, and lived experience.

For students, participating at the board table builds leadership capacity, civic understanding, and confidence. For the system, it reinforces transparency and trust, key contributors to public confidence in rural public education. Families and communities see that student perspectives are valued at the highest levels of decision-making, reinforcing the credibility of the public system.

As Alberta's public education system continues to focus on trust, transparency, and continuous improvement, intentionally elevating student voice at governance tables offers a powerful example of assurance in action; one that keeps students at the heart of decision-making and moves systems forward together. ■

James Trodden is an Assistant Superintendent, Camille Quinton is an Assistant Superintendent, and Michelle Webb is the Superintendent of Buffalo Trail Public Schools.

Strengthening Well-Being Through Unity in Education



The Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP) is your trusted health and wellness provider, operating as an Employee Life and Health Trust governed by 10 Trustees. As a not-for-profit organization created more than 55 years ago by the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association, ASEBP provides holistic health benefits, programs, and services that support more than 64,000 covered members and their dependants.

As I transition to my role as Chief Executive Officer, I do so with deep appreciation for ASEBP's history and with a clear commitment to the years ahead. My leadership has always centred on collaboration and relationship-building because strong systems grow from strong relationships. Unity is not simply a concept. It is a daily practice that shapes how organizations work, how decisions are made, and how people experience support. ASEBP's long-standing success reflects the power of partnership, as continued coordination across the education sector remains essential to meeting the evolving needs of school communities.

Governance that brings voices together

Unity is woven into ASEBP's structure. With 10 Trustees appointed equally by the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association, the governance model brings together diverse perspectives from across the education landscape. This shared approach ensures that decisions reflect real conditions in schools and remain



By Jocelyn Plakas-Lock, Chief Executive Officer, ASEBP

grounded in the needs of employers and employees.

The structure also supports transparency and thoughtful planning. By bringing voices together, it models what unity in education looks like in practice: balance, respect for differing viewpoints, and a commitment to shared goals.

Unified vision for ASEBP's future

ASEBP's strategic and operational plan, One ASEBP, aligns all teams around shared

goals. This alignment drives innovation, streamlines processes, and strengthens service consistency for employers, covered members, and staff. Whether through modernized technology, integrated workflows, or coordinated customer service, the aim is to ensure a seamless experience at every step.

The Journey to 2030 Strategic Plan builds on this foundation by setting a long-term vision for sustainable, covered member-focused progress. The plan emphasizes continuous improvement, deeper engagement with stakeholders, stronger prevention-focused strategies, increased administrative efficiency, and a commitment to operating as a high-performance not-for-profit organization. This direction ensures ASEBP remains responsive to the evolving needs of Alberta's education sector while continuing to add value to the people it serves.

Built for Alberta's education community

ASEBP is designed specifically for school divisions and the people who work in them. This focus allows ASEBP to shape benefits and programs that reflect the realities of school environments. Feedback from

employers, covered members, and school trustees guides ongoing improvement, ensuring that benefits remain relevant, accessible, and aligned with sector needs.

From the first year of a school employee's career through to retirement, ASEBP's benefits and supports are built for Alberta's education sector.

Sustainability that prioritizes covered members

As a not-for-profit organization, ASEBP focuses on long-term sustainability rather than profit. Rate adjustments occur only to balance actual claim costs with premiums collected, and any surplus funds are reinvested directly into the Plan to support future stability. This pooled resource model supports financial stability and responsiveness, setting ASEBP apart from traditional insurance providers.

Several programs help reduce high-cost claims and promote early intervention. The Sick Leave Support program provides early case management to help reduce the duration and impact of disability leaves. The Employee and Family Assistance Program, which is available at no cost to employers, offers early mental health support through

confidential counselling, coaching, and access to wellness resources. These early interventions can reduce reliance on higher-cost health services, improve outcomes, and contribute to long-term sustainability.

Supporting well-being across the education workforce

ASEBP delivers several value-added services designed to help school divisions promote employee wellness. Workplace wellness consultants support employers in understanding the factors that contribute to absenteeism and long-term disability and assist in developing strategies to support healthier workplaces. ASEBP also offers additional coverage options, including the Supplemental Plan for casual and part-time staff and the MyRetiree Plan, which provides continuity of coverage for covered members transitioning into retirement.

Across all programs and services, the focus remains on ensuring that covered members can access meaningful supports for their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. When education employees are supported in these areas, they are better equipped to create healthy learning environments for students.

Moving forward, together

ASEBP's greatest strength is its collaborative foundation. Covered members, employers, Trustees, partners, and staff each contribute to a system guided by shared purpose. When education employees are supported in their well-being, the positive impact extends into classrooms and communities across Alberta.

As CEO, I look forward to continuing this work – strengthening partnerships, advancing innovation, and ensuring that every decision supports the people who dedicate their careers to Alberta's students. ■

Jocelyn Plakas-Lock is the Chief Executive Officer at the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP), overseeing daily operations of the organization and ensuring its alignment with the strategic direction. She has more than 25 years working in the not-for-profit sector, with 15 of those years being in the benefits industry specifically. Jocelyn holds a Bachelor of Science with Specialization in Psychology from the University of Alberta and a Master of Social Science (Human Services) from the Queensland University of Technology.



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