



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS



2026 EXCELLENCE AWARDS

Behind the Nomination:

*Patterns of Superintendent Excellence from the
2026 NASS Award Nominees**

PUBLISHED

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2026

PRODUCED BY

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CONTRIBUTORS

37 nominees of the 2026
NASS Excellence Awards

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Program Schedule.

Honoring & Pursuing Excellence

October 7–9, 2026

The Seabird Resort · Oceanside, CA

Wednesday Awards Night

OCT 7

5:00 pm **Welcome Reception & 2026 Awards Presentation**
Dr. Robert Slaby, Executive Director, NASS
Matt Kinnaman, Awards Committee Chair
Recognizing Past Superintendents of the Year · Presenting the Award Category Winners · Presenting the 2026 Superintendent of the Year

5:30 pm **2026 Superintendent of the Year Finalist & Winner Remarks**

6:00 pm **NASS Hosted Dinner**

Thursday Panels & Presentations

OCT 8

6:00–8:00 am **Breakfast**

8:00 am **Welcome & Special Introductions**
Welcome Remarks: Dr. Theresa Daem, Founder, NASS
JASON Learning: Dr. Eleanor Smalley, President & CEO
NASS Innovation Cohort in partnership with Apple: Dr. Jerram Froese & Dr. Jena Collins
New Era Superintendents: Matt Kinnaman, Founder & President

8:20 am **Feature Presentation**
Dr. James Capolupo, 2014 NASS Superintendent of the Year

8:45 am **NASS MEMBER PANEL 1**
Communication & Engagement
Being the Chief Communicator and Involving the Community
Moderator: Dr. Robert Slaby
Dr. Robin Cochran, Washington County Schools, KY
Dr. Benjamin Churchill, Poway Unified School District, CA
Dr. Trenton Hansen, Jurupa Unified School District, CA

9:15 am **NASS + New Era Partnership**
Matt Kinnaman, Founder & President, New Era Superintendents

9:30 am **NASS + Apple Innovation Initiative**
Culminating 2025–2026 & Introducing 2026–2027
Dr. Jerram Froese, Education Development Executive
Dr. Jena Collins, Manager, Strategic Initiatives

9:45 am **BREAK**

10:00 am **NASS MEMBER PANEL 2**
Finesse & Agility
Understanding and Managing Responses to Differing Needs, Expectations, and Viewpoints
Moderator: Tom Burton
Dr. Alice Barfield, Glades County Schools, FL
Dr. Michelle Rodriguez, Stockton Unified School District, CA
Walter Leipart, Gilman School District, WI

Thursday continued

OCT 8

10:45 am **NASS MEMBER PANEL 3**
Innovations in Education
Pioneering Strategies Focused on Success for All

Moderator: Matt Kinnaman
John Hannah, Morton School District, WA
Dr. Alice Barfield, Glades County Schools, FL
Robert Scott Langford, Sumner County Schools, TN

11:15 am **FEATURE PRESENTATION**
Superintendent Leadership Stories
Powered by Mosaic

12:00 pm **Lunch Hosted by NASS**

12:55 pm **JASON + NASS Joint Projects Presentation**
Entrepreneurship Credentialing · Online Community · Superintendents' Executive Leadership Center
Dr. Eleanor Smalley, President & CEO, JASON Learning
Matt Kinnaman, Founder & President, New Era Superintendents

1:45 pm **NASS MEMBER PANEL 4**
Technology & AI
Using Today's Tools to Drive Effective District Management and Maximize Student Success
Moderator: Dr. Jill Gildea, Colorado Early Colleges, CO
Thomas Scarice, Westport Public Schools, CT
Dr. Henry Webb, Kenton County School District, KY
Dr. Gordon Amerson, Val Verde Unified School District, CA

2:15 pm **Solution Spotlight Table Discussions**

3:15 pm **Today's Takeaways: Table Discussions**
Dr. Robert Slaby, Executive Director, NASS

3:45 pm **BREAK**

5:00 pm **NASS Networking Reception *The Shelter Club***

6:00 pm **Hosted Off-Site Dinners**

Friday Featured Presentations

OCT 9

6:00–8:00 am **NASS Hosted Breakfast**

8:00 am **Superintendent Leadership Stories Revealed**
Powered by Mosaic

9:00 am **The Future of NASS**

9:30 am **Conference Culmination: Closing Thoughts & Prize Drawing**

LOCATIONS Breakfast and lunch take place in **The Shore Room**. All other functions take place in the **Seagaze Ballroom** unless otherwise noted.



With Gratitude.

The 2026 Honoring & Pursuing Excellence NASS Conference was made possible by the generous support of our sponsors and partners.

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JASON Learning

JASON Learning provides curriculum and learning experiences in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) for K–12 students and high-quality professional development for teachers. JASON is partnering with NASS to develop a new collection of leadership resources specifically focused on the unique challenges of school district superintendents.



New Era Superintendents

New Era Superintendents is a fast-growing national community of leaders committed to doing “whatever it takes” to ensure all students have the best opportunity to achieve proficiency in math and reading.



Mosaic

Mosaic helps education leaders capture, reflect on, and share the stories behind their leadership. Mosaic powered *Behind the Nomination*, this year’s study of patterns of superintendent excellence, and the conference’s Superintendent Leadership Stories sessions.



Stay connected with NASS

For more information on membership, visit nass.us or scan the code.





A nomination tells you what a leader accomplished.

Their story tells you how.

Every year, the National Association of School Superintendents (NASS) recognizes the leaders who exemplify excellence in education. The 2026 Excellence Awards drew seventy-five nominees from districts across the country, spanning every size, region, and demographic.

We invited each nominee to share, in their own words, the story behind their nomination: the catalyst, the choices, the lessons that led them to be recognized. Thirty-seven leaders chose to share their stories.

Despite the array of contexts these superintendents operate in, we found several patterns emerge across the stories that we can learn from as we endeavor to continue to support and promote excellence in school district leadership.

What follows is a description of each pattern, where it showed up in the stories, and practical advice for leaders looking to refine their approach. We hope this serves both as a recognition of the contributors and as a resource for the field, demonstrating what is possible.

BY THE NUMBERS

75

Award
nominees

37

Stories
shared

19

States
represented

5

Patterns of
practice

From tribal lands and suburban centers, to agricultural towns and tech hubs, to the largest buildings in Ohio and the smallest schools in Wisconsin.

The five patterns

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 01 | Own the Narrative
<i>Treating communication as core leadership work, not a delegated function.</i> | p. 02 |
| 02 | Refuse False Choices
<i>Holding rigor & relationships, accountability & empathy, urgency & patience together.</i> | p. 04 |
| 03 | Design Coherent Systems
<i>Converting disconnected effort into aligned outcomes.</i> | p. 06 |
| 04 | Turn Threats Into Innovation
<i>Treating crisis as a catalyst rather than an obstacle.</i> | p. 08 |
| 05 | Put Community in the Driver's Seat
<i>Building vision with a district, not delivering it to one.</i> | p. 10 |



01 PATTERN ONE

Own the Narrative.

Districts that do not tell their own story have it told for them.

When **Brian Nichols** became superintendent of New Kent County Public Schools in Virginia, the district had no real digital presence. The local newspaper and TV stations were the storytellers. Nichols decided that was not going to work in the fastest-growing county in the state. He became, in his own framing, the chief storyteller. He built school sites, district channels, his own superintendent accounts on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, and he uses them to share what is actually happening in classrooms. People in New Kent now feel they know him because they have watched him do the work in person.



I had to be the chief storyteller and share the amazing students, staff, and community I serve. People feel like they know me because they have seen me drive my bus, sled down a hill on a snow day, or even surprise a staff member with an award.

Dr. Brian Nichols, Superintendent, New Kent County Public Schools
NEW KENT, VIRGINIA

Doug Straley took the same posture in Louisa County, Virginia, where the rural division has earned awards from the Virginia Department of Education and the 2023 Best School Divisions in America Award. He calls his framework WE, not ME. The weekly #TeamLCPS MVP Awards video series has become the cultural backbone, recognizing peers in public, every Friday, on camera. Straley's principle is direct: where there is a void in communication, negativity will fill it.



Culture is not a thing, but it is THE THING. Having clear, precise, and positive communication channels to all members of your TEAM will create a culture of belonging and ownership that will help you set the standard.

Doug Straley, Superintendent, Louisa County Public Schools
MINERAL, VA

In Poway Unified School District, **Dr. Benjamin Churchill** inherited a 34,000-student San Diego system carrying legacy trust issues from previous financial decisions and prior leadership concerns. He responded by creating new infrastructure: a small set of clear priorities, communicated relentlessly, paired with student-produced media and a superintendent podcast that lets the community hear the work in his own voice.



Leadership is less about doing it all and more about creating focus, clarity, alignment, and trust so people move forward together. Build a small number of clear priorities, communicate them relentlessly, and align your systems around them.

Dr. Benjamin Churchill, Superintendent, Poway Unified School District
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

Taylor Poston in Lake Dallas ISD, Texas, learned the lesson in her first month, when a campus safety concern revealed that families were missing district updates and losing trust. She personally implemented a new communication platform, then visited each campus to train staff face to face. The result, in her words: families now know the platform by name, and when speculation surfaces online, parents come to bat for the district by sharing screenshots of district communications themselves.

Dr. Trenton Hansen at Jurupa Unified School District in California frames the same idea structurally. His emphasis from day one was on building a system, not running events. Internal and external communication, multi-platform, with feedback loops that turn community members from recipients into collaborators.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Excellent superintendents have stopped outsourcing their narrative. The discipline of consistent, authentic communication — across platforms, in person, even in moments of calm — is the foundation that makes every other initiative possible. A district that does not actively tell its story will have one assigned to it.

TO REFINE YOUR APPROACH

Reflect on how your district shows up in moments of calm, not just moments of crisis. Where is the storytelling consistent, and where does it disappear? Identify one channel you control directly (a superintendent newsletter, a podcast, a video series) and commit to a cadence you can sustain for a full school year. The leaders in this section demonstrate the power of a proactive posture and a publishing schedule.



02 PATTERN TWO Refuse False Choices.

The most recognized leaders share the instinct to reject either-or framings the rest of the field treats as inevitable.

Dr. Reza Namin runs Maine Indian Education's three Wabanaki schools under the dual jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Education and the Maine Department of Education. Would the district focus on lifting academic results or honoring cultural authenticity? Namin's framework, "Rigor, Relevancy, and Relationship," refuses the trade-off. Grade 5 students at Indian Township School saw an 11 RIT-point gain in Math and Reading in a single trimester, while Indian Island School rose from 36% to 49% in math proficiency in 1 semester, & Grade 6 reading proficiency improved 58% in 1 year.



For too long, those two things were framed as competing priorities. Rigor, Relevancy, and Relationship is our answer. Rigor means high academic standards while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Dr. Reza Namin, Superintendent, Maine Indian Education
INDIAN ISLAND, MAINE

+11 RIT pts

Math & Reading in 1 trimester at Indian Township School (Gr 5).

36→49%

Math proficiency at Indian Island School in one semester.

94.3%

St. Vrain Valley graduation rate, 2024—highest in Denver Metro.

Dr. Jackie Kapushion in St. Vrain Valley Schools, Colorado, has produced dramatic gains for historically underserved populations in the district. Graduation rates rose from 86.3% in 2019 to 94.3% in 2024. The mechanism was not lower expectations, but rather earlier intervention paired with the highest expectations she could set.



Sustainable change required both global innovation, preparing for evolving workforce demands, and surgical precision, refining existing systems for maximum impact.

Dr. Jackie Kapushion, Superintendent, St. Vrain Valley Schools
LONGMONT, COLORADO

Dr. Jonathan Cooper in Mason City Schools, Ohio, runs what he calls a “momentum strategy”: a Fusion team that takes initiatives to district-wide scale, and a Futures team that operates as an agile R&D arm, surfacing what is next and feeding it back to Fusion. Most districts treat scaling & innovation as competing functions. Cooper treats them as paired teams, each with the right talent, sharing one vision.

Dr. Michelle Carney Ray-Yoder in Central Regional School District, New Jersey, describes her first six months as showing up at every event she could and letting people get to know her as a person first. She calls it loving people up. Empathy and accountability are not traded against each other in her practice; they reinforce each other.

Dr. Karen Cheser in Durango School District, Colorado, uses Ikigai, the Japanese concept of finding the intersection of passion, skill, livelihood, and impact, to guide student-centered learning design. Adults in Durango model Ikigai for students. The framework holds student agency and high standards in the same hand.

"They held two values together harder than the field expected them to."

— ON THE BOTH/AND HABIT, 2026 COHORT —

WHY THIS MATTERS

The leaders being recognized in 2026 don't split the difference, they reframe the discussion. The both/and habit is more than a stylistic choice: it is, increasingly, the defining feature of what works.

TO REFINE YOUR APPROACH

Listen for the trade-offs your team treats as inevitable. "We can either raise standards or support struggling students." "We can either move fast or bring people along." "We can either honor tradition or modernize." Each one is a hint. Ask what an integrated answer would look like, and assign someone the job of designing it. The leaders in this section did not abandon their values to find the both/and. They held two values together harder than the field expected them to.



03 PATTERN THREE Design Coherent Systems.

Most districts struggle not from a lack of effort, but from disconnected effort. Coherence is the multiplier.

Jason Faulkner in Adair County, Kentucky, inherited a district where some teachers were still using textbooks from when they themselves were students. He did not run a single intervention. He realigned the budget with academic priorities, established diagnostic assessment frameworks, and put himself directly into the instructional process. Each move alone would not have moved performance the way the set of moves, in alignment, did.

Dr. Nathan Fisher arrived at Roselle Public Schools in New Jersey and recognized the pattern immediately. Hard-working educators, pockets of success, no through-line. He spent his first years building Vision 2027, a unifying direction that connects every initiative, embeds itself into goals, evaluations, and professional learning, and holds the whole system accountable to one set of priorities.



We were operating in pockets. There was activity, but there was not always alignment. What was missing was a unifying direction, a clear, shared vision that could connect our efforts.

Dr. Nathan Fisher, Superintendent, Roselle Public Schools
ROSELLE, NEW JERSEY

Dr. Adam Ehrman in Bourbonnais Elementary School District 53, Illinois, calls his philosophy upstream leadership: invest in strong Tier 1 instruction so problems are prevented rather than remediated downstream. Bourbonnais is now one of fewer than 100 districts nationwide to surpass pre-pandemic achievement levels and has been designated a Model PLC school, putting it in the top 1% of schools nationally.

319%

PreK enrollment growth at Lake Dallas
ISD after universal access redesign.

Top 1%

Bourbonnais E.S.D. 53 — Model PLC
designation, nationally.

4Pillars

SPEED 802's filter for every district
decision: Academics, Stewardship,
Culture, Communication.



Be a Systems Architect who builds a Culture of Success. Do not be interested in being a great school district. Be obsessed with it.

Dr. Adam Ehrman, Superintendent, Bourbonnais Elementary S.D. 53
BOURBONNAIS, ILLINOIS

Dr. Tina Halliman runs SPEED S.E.J.A. District 802 in Chicago Heights, Illinois, a special education cooperative serving fifteen member districts and students with severe and profound special needs. She organizes everything around four pillars: Academic Programming and Achievement, Financial Stewardship, Climate and Culture, and Communication. Every decision is filtered through whether it strengthens one of those four. Adult wellness, including a districtwide mindfulness program, is not an add-on. It is the recognition that excellence cannot be expected from people who do not feel supported.



Transformation does not happen through programs. It happens through intentional leadership that aligns people, purpose, and systems.

Dr. Tina Halliman, Superintendent, SPEED S.E.J.A. District 802
CHICAGO HEIGHTS, ILLINOIS

Dr. Kelly O'Sullivan in Lake Dallas ISD, Texas, redesigned PreK from a compliance program into a universal access point. Enrollment grew 319%. The system change, not the program addition, is what produced the gains. As she put it: initiatives with the greatest impact are those that shift systems, not just services.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Coherence is becoming the marker of excellence. The districts being recognized are not doing more things. They are doing fewer things, in alignment, with discipline. That is the difference between activity and outcome.

TO REFINE YOUR APPROACH

Inventory your district's current initiatives and ask which ones share a unifying through-line and which ones do not. The honest answer is usually uncomfortable. Pick one anchor (a vision, a set of pillars, a graduate profile) and make every initiative either connect to it visibly or sunset. Then embed the anchor in goals, evaluations, and professional learning so people can see where it lives in their daily work. Coherence is built by subtraction more often than addition.



04

PATTERN FOUR

Turn Threats Into Innovation.

Excellent superintendents do not avoid crisis.

They convert it.

When Florida legislation threatened underutilized schools in Sarasota County with charter colocation, **Terry Connor** could have responded defensively. Instead, he convened community stakeholders to redesign each underutilized school with distinctive programming, an integrated transformation strategy across multiple campuses with K-8 models, technology magnets, and workforce-development partnerships. Sarasota's choice-program enrollment came back at record levels. As a result, the legislation did not weaken Sarasota's enrollment story, it strengthened it.



Playing it safe is not what leadership is about. Take calculated risk and communicate clearly with opportunities for buy-in, and you can accomplish innovative things that meet expectations of stakeholders.

Terry Connor, Superintendent, Sarasota County Schools
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

Rashon Hasan in Plainfield Public Schools, New Jersey, turned competitive pressure into a strategic bet. He convened a cross-functional stakeholder group to vet emerging technology, and Plainfield became one of the first districts to procure Apple Vision Pro for use at the secondary level. The competitive threat became the opening for what Hasan calls leveling the playing field.

Krish Mohip walked into Proviso West, a Chicago-area high school where, two years prior, 800 students lacked schedules five weeks into the year. He moved the entire central office into the school. Proviso West became #1 in Illinois for chronic truancy reduction and #5 for chronic absenteeism reduction across all 1,300 non-charter high schools in the state. ELA growth improved 225%. Math growth improved 295%. Daily attendance climbed from 72.7% to 89%.



Leadership should never shy away from difficult districts and work. Districts like these have teachers and students who are craving high-quality leadership and expectations. Zip codes do not determine outcomes. We do.

Krish Mohip, Superintendent, Proviso School District
FOREST PARK, ILLINOIS

Rick Amero returned to Kennebec Intra-District Schools (RSU 2) in central Maine and was greeted by eight grievances on his first day. Each pay period people were worried that their paychecks were wrong. Amero's response was operational, almost unglamorous: get payroll right, get procedures right, hire the right people, then build trust. By the next July payroll, accuracy was restored. His acronym, KIDS First, kept the focus where it belonged.

At Uplift Michigan Online School, **Tonya Lowry's** story is the starkest in the cohort. During a Michigan winter that produced historic snowfall and sub-zero temperatures, one of Uplift's families, two parents and three students, lost power in the camper they were living in. They had no gas, and no way to fill the generator. Lowry secured donations, drove two hours each way, and personally transported the family to a hotel for three days, then drove them home with food and supplies once it was safe. She had built the donor network and grant-funded supply chain *before* the crisis hit.



We show up. We show up in all ways and not just ways schools are traditionally expected to. Kids aren't learning well if they are hungry, cold, or without clean clothing.

Tonya Lowry, Superintendent, Uplift Michigan Online School
STEPHENSON, MICHIGAN

Dr. Walter Leipart took the same long-arc approach to a slow-motion crisis in Gilman, Wisconsin. To reverse decades of decline, he partnered with University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension to conduct objective community analysis. Then he convened more than 200 community members to set three rural-revitalization goals, and applied the same empowerment principles inside the school district. Crisis that had been treated as inevitable became the precondition for shared agency.

+295%

Math growth improvement at Proviso West under Mohip's leadership.

73→89%

Daily attendance climb at Proviso West.

200+

Gilman, WI community members convened to set rural-revitalization goals.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The leaders who shared their stories don't wilt under external pressure – they explore what it makes possible. The reframe is fast, the execution is faster, and the threat becomes the starting point of the next chapter.

TO REFINE YOUR APPROACH

Build the systems that let you act rapidly when external pressure arrives. Tonya Lowry's donor network was in place before the storm. Terry Connor's stakeholder relationships predated the legislation. Rick Amero's discipline of listening tours preceded the operational fixes. The reframe is faster when the infrastructure for response already exists. Build it in calm seasons.



05 PATTERN FIVE Put Community in the Driver's Seat.

Vision delivered to a community fails. Vision built with a community sticks.

Dr. Neil Gupta tells a story about his interview for the Oakwood City Schools superintendency in Ohio. He was asked what his vision for the district would be. His answer: the community should be very concerned if an outside candidate had a vision before stepping foot in the community. Three years in, the engagement process he ran on arrival, including surveys, focus groups, a key communicators group, and a core team for shared mission and vision, continues to shape every initiative. He calls the recently completed Portrait of a Learner the most engaged initiative of his 27-year career.

Dr. Robin Cochran in Washington County Schools, Kentucky, talks about building bigger tables, formal structures that ensure family engagement is institutionalized rather than added on. Her district is becoming a model for Family Friendly certification through the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. The subtle shift in language leads to large changes in practice: from school-does-this-for-families to school-and-families-work-together-for-children.



These are my people. I am their people. Families are not an afterthought, they are partners. That is a non-negotiable. We have built bigger tables, literally and figuratively, so that every voice has a seat.

Dr. Robin Cochran, Superintendent, Washington County Schools
GSPRINGFIELD, KENTUCKY

Kirk Koennecke arrived at Eanes ISD in Austin, Texas, and said yes to every conversation request. Coffee shops. Parking lots. Bus rides. Lunch lines. He spent time in every building, served lunch, rode the bus. By the end of his entry plan he had logged 379 meetings and collected more than 1,000 individual comments. The data drove the strategy. The strategy drove trust.



I began by saying yes to as many conversations as possible. We talked in coffee shops, offices, parking lots, and on neighborhood walks. Listening and leaning into learning about developing leadership in others is a community-building exercise.

Kirk Koennecke, Superintendent, Eanes ISD
AUSTIN, TEXAS

Dr. Walter Leipart applied the same principle in Gilman: more than 200 community members shaping the village's future alongside the school district, with the conviction that voice and engagement are what produce results.



When individuals have a voice in the process and are engaged in creating the outcomes of a community's vision, people are empowered to achieve results.

Dr. Walter Leipart, Superintendent, School District of Gilman
GILMAN, WISCONSIN

Dr. Robert Scott Langford built Sumner Ready in Sumner County Schools, Tennessee, by convening 300 community leaders to backwards-plan from graduation to kindergarten. Sumner Ready is now embedded in district report cards. Students themselves have initiated programs to upcycle prom dresses for accessibility, build seventy beds for classmates in need, and create a Hands on Sumner volunteer site. When community is the co-author, students become co-authors too.

379

Entry-plan meetings logged by Eanes ISD's superintendent in his first months.

1,000+

Individual community comments collected to shape strategy.

300

Community leaders who backwards- Sumner Ready from planned graduation to kindergarten.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The most effective contributors in 2026 are not delivering vision. They are convening it. They treat the community as the source of strategy rather than its audience. The strategy that comes back is more durable than any they could write alone.

TO REFINE YOUR APPROACH

Identify where in your district community engagement is structural and where it is episodic. Episodic engagement looks like one-off forums, surveys distributed at decision time, and "input gathered" before vision is announced. Structural engagement looks like standing committees, formal partnership models, and processes where the community shapes the question, not just the answer. Pick one decision currently on your plate and run it through a structural process instead of an episodic one.



CLOSING SYNTHESIS

Placed side by side, the same five practices appear.

The thirty-seven contributors to this paper did not coordinate. They lead districts that do not share boundaries, do not share resources, and often do not share challenges. Yet placed side by side, the same five practices appear:

01

Own the district narrative.

02

Refuse false choices.

03

Design coherent systems.

04

Turn threats into innovation.

05

Put community in the driver's seat.

This is the shape of modern superintendent excellence as practiced every day, in dozens of districts spanning nineteen states, in tribal lands and suburban centers, in agricultural towns and tech hubs, in the largest buildings in Ohio and the smallest schools in Wisconsin.

The implications for NASS members are practical. The patterns can be adopted, named, and built into the next generation of superintendent practice as the role itself is changing: from operator to architect, from communicator to convener, from manager to systems designer. The leaders being recognized in 2026 show what that change looks like when it is being lived.

NASS will continue surfacing the practices, naming the leaders behind them, and connecting the people doing the work. The story of superintendent excellence is not a list of accomplishments. It is a body of practice. And it belongs to all of us.

A NOTE FROM NASS

From operator to architect. From communicator to convener. From manager to systems designer. The role itself is changing, and these leaders show what that change looks like when it is being lived.

Thank you to our nominees who shared

The leaders below are 2026 NASS Excellence Award nominees who voluntarily shared the story behind their nomination through a structured storytelling session in April 2026. The synthesized patterns in this paper draw directly from their words.

Rick Amero

Superintendent, Kennebec
Intra-District Schools (RSU 2)
HALLOWELL, ME

Jonathan Cooper

Superintendent, Mason City
School District
MASON, OH

Tina Halliman

Superintendent, SPEED
S.E.J.A. District 802
CHICAGO HEIGHTS, IL

Brian Breeden

Superintendent, Clever R-V
School District
CLEVER, MO

Adam Ehrman

Superintendent, Bourbonnais
Elementary S.D. 53
BOURBONNAIS, IL

Rashon Hasan

Superintendent, Plainfield
Public Schools
PLAINFIELD, NJ

Tiffany Brunson

Superintendent, ESD 159
MATTESON, IL

Kenneth R. Hamilton

Superintendent, Edgemont
Union Free S.D.
SCARSDALE, NY

Trenton Hansen

Superintendent, Jurupa
Unified School District
JURUPA VALLEY, CA

Michelle Carney Ray-Yoder

Superintendent, Central
Regional School District
BAYVILLE, NJ

John Hannah

Superintendent, Morton
School District
MORTON, WA

Jackie Kapushion

Superintendent, St. Vrain
Valley Schools
LONGMONT, CO

Karen Cheser

Superintendent, Durango
School District
DURANGO, CO

Jonathan Hinke

Executive Director, Strategic
Initiatives, Putnam County
School District
PALATKA, FL

Billy Kirk

Superintendent, Commerce
City Schools
COMMERCE, GA

Benjamin Churchill

Superintendent, Poway
Unified School District
SAN DIEGO, CA

Jason Faulkner

Superintendent, Adair
County Schools
COLUMBIA, KY

Kirk Koennecke

Superintendent, Eanes ISD
AUSTIN, TX

Robin Cochran

Superintendent, Washington
County Schools
SPRINGFIELD, KY

Nathan Fisher, EdD

Superintendent, Roselle
Public Schools
ROSELLE, NJ

Matthew Link

Superintendent, Northern
Lehigh School District
SLATINGTON, PA

Terry Connor

Superintendent, Sarasota
County Schools
SARASOTA, FL

Neil Gupta

Superintendent, Oakwood
City Schools
OAKWOOD, OH

Tonya Lowry

Superintendent, Uplift
Michigan Online School
STEPHENSON, MI

Robert Scott Langford
*Superintendent, Sumner
County Schools*
GALLATIN, TN

Reza Namin
*Superintendent, Maine Indian
Education*
INDIAN ISLAND, ME

Taylor Poston
*Director of Communications,
Lake Dallas ISD*
LAKE DALLAS, TX

Walter Leipart
*Superintendent, Gilman
School District*
GILMAN, WI

Brian Nichols
*Superintendent, New Kent
County Public Schools*
NEW KENT, VA

Thomas Scarice
*Superintendent, Westport
Public Schools*
WESTPORT, CT

Shelley McKinley
*Superintendent, Texas
Juvenile Justice Dept.*
STATE OF TEXAS

Morgan Nugent
*Superintendent, Fall River
Joint U.S.D.*
BURNEY, CA

Chadd Springer
*Chief of Police, Lake Dallas
ISD*
LAKE DALLAS, TX

Krish Mohip
*Superintendent, Proviso
School District*
FOREST PARK, IL

Kelly O'Sullivan
*Deputy Superintendent, Lake
Dallas ISD*
LAKE DALLAS, TX

Doug Straley
*Division Superintendent,
Louisa County Public Schools*
MINERAL, VA

Michael Volpe
*Superintendent, Hillsborough
Township District*
HILLSBOROUGH, NJ

METHODOLOGY

NASS invited every 2026 Excellence Award nominee to share the story behind their nomination: what was the catalyst, the decisions, the lessons learned? Each contributor participated in a structured storytelling session in April 2026, participating in an interview designed to elicit the underlying decisions, behaviors, and mindsets that led to the positive outcomes they've seen. Verbatim quotes used in this paper come from those sessions. Roughly half of the seventy-five 2026 nominees opted into the voluntary exercise; the thirty-seven contributors named above are those whose stories appear here.

** Please note that for the purposes of this report, "Nominees" refers only to those who were originally nominated, not those who were fully eligible to receive a NASS Excellence Award.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is published by the National Association of School Superintendents in recognition of the 2026 Excellence Award nominees. Storytelling capability powered by LeadersAtlas Mosaic.



NASS

*National Association of School Superintendents
United in Common Purpose · Each Other's Success*



Mosaic by LeadersAtlas

*Helping leaders surface, showcase, and
study the success of their groups.*



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

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