



Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia

British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec are three Canadian jurisdictions where Principals and Vice-Principals are not members of the provincial teachers' unions. In recent years, these provinces were joined by a fourth: Nova Scotia is the most recent province to bring educational leaders together outside of a union framework.

Tim Simony, Executive Director of the Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia (PSAANS), has been involved in the leadership and evolution of PSAANS since its inception in 2018. The BCPVPA was pleased to speak with Tim about the formation of PSAANS, the journey, and what lies ahead.

What led to the formation of PSAANS?

TS:

"The formation of the organization stemmed from a report written by Dr. Avis Glaze, who was commissioned in 2017 by then-Premier Stephen McNeil and the Nova Scotia Liberal government to review the public education system and recommend ways to improve its effectiveness. At the time, the government believed that, given the province's population of fewer than one million people, there should be ways to make the system operate more efficiently.

"Several key recommendations emerged from the report, one of which was board governance. First, over the years, there had been challenges with elected school boards, including instances where the province had to step in due to dysfunction. Second, a major issue was a labour dispute between the Liberal government and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) during a previous contract negotiation. Multiple tentative agreements were presented to NSTU members, but each was rejected, leading the government to impose a contract. This was preceded by a prolonged period of work-to-rule, which highlighted, at least from the government's perspective, the difficulties of having Principals, Vice-Principals, and central office administrators



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PSAANS

within the NSTU. The work-to-rule action imposed strict limitations on when administrators could report to work and what tasks they could perform, creating significant challenges.

"The third concern was the province's difficulty in implementing systemic change. Any government-mandated initiative had to pass through elected school boards, often resulting in variations across the province. What was intended as a uniform policy would ultimately take on eight different interpretations as it was implemented regionally. These were three of the major issues, among others, that the report addressed.

"The timeline was remarkable in hindsight. I was traveling to Calgary in January 2018 when the report was released, and I started receiving text messages

from colleagues asking what it meant and what I thought the province would do. At the time, I reassured them that the report had just been released and that no decisions would be made hastily. But, within 48 hours, the government announced it would adopt the vast majority of the recommendations, one of which was the removal of administrators from the teachers' union."

What was the reaction after that?

TS:

"The reaction in early 2018 was largely one of concern about what this would mean for the future. Looking back at why the government made

this decision, I think it was clear to most people. It stemmed from the challenges of the work-to-rule period, which highlighted the difficulty of meeting the obligations outlined in the Education Act while also adhering to the restrictions imposed by labour action. For school and system administrators, balancing those two realities was impossible. It's like the saying about holding two truths simultaneously, but you simply couldn't do it in this case. As that spring unfolded, the focus shifted to understanding what this change would mean moving forward.

"At the time, I was part of the Department of Education's Principals' Forum Standing Committee, which had been established in the fall of 2017 to bring forward the voice of school-based administrators. That committee became the precursor to forming an association because when the question arose about what the future might look like, this was the group that was already in place to begin the work. We reached out to both the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA) and the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) to learn what it was like to operate outside of a union.

At the first PSAANS AGM in 2018, more than 800 members participated in a visioning exercise led by Brave Space. This graphic captures the shared priorities, from immediate challenges to long-term goals, shaping the Association's advocacy and leadership development in public education.



"This committee essentially planted the seeds for that work. We were already discussing the future, and since we were a vetted group of administrators selected through an application process from across the regions, we were well-positioned to take on the challenge. It was a high-performing group, and we recognized that the stakes were significant – both for the education system as a whole and for individual administrators. The province chose a design approach that not only removed administrators from the teachers' union but also established the Association's structure, pension and

benefit protections, professional learning grants, return-to-the-classroom provisions, and long-term compensation safeguards. Many of these elements directly addressed concerns raised by our colleagues in BC and Ontario about challenges they had faced in their early years.

"To implement this, the government set up an application process for an interim board of the Association, which would begin on August 1, 2018, and lead the organization toward its first Annual General Meeting at the end of October. In just two



and a half months, the interim board was tasked with establishing a democratic election process so that elected directors would be in place by the AGM. Through my role on the committee, I became part of this interim board. The board elected me as the interim chair, I was subsequently elected to the board, and then the board chose me as the first chair of the Association.”

How important was it that you had the support of government?

TS:

“It was critically important. One of the key takeaways from my conversations with Association leaders in BC and Ontario was how different the communication landscape was in 2018 compared to when those provinces went through similar transitions. With the presence of email and modern communication tools, the process in Nova Scotia unfolded much differently than it had across the vast geographies of BC and Ontario. The Nova Scotia government responded quickly to the need to establish something new.

“The Deputy Minister of Education at the time, Cathy Montreuil, had been involved in the early days of the OPC, so there was internal expertise and institutional knowledge, along with valuable insights from external experiences. Many of our discussions centered on fundamental questions that, in the end, we didn’t have to navigate; these included the continuation of health and dental benefits, the transition from one benefits plan to another, and the risks that could have posed. Once it was confirmed that the vast majority of employment conditions would remain similar to what administrators had historically experienced within the union, it eased a lot of concerns.

“At the time, there was speculation that a significant number of administrators would leave their roles to remain in the NSTU. In reality, only a handful made that decision, and for some, it had nothing to do with the union but rather personal circumstances.”

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What were some successes, and some obstacles, that you experienced?

TS:

“One of our key successes was how we structured the Board of Directors. Instead of allocating seats purely based on population, we built flexibility into the bylaws, allowing additional board seats to be used for appointing members to enhance diversity. This could include efforts to balance gender, sexual orientation, race, or professional roles. For example, if all elected directors were Principals and there were no Vice-Principals or central office staff, those appointed positions could help ensure broader representation.

“This flexibility proved valuable and, two years later, we were able to add a designated position for a member representing administrators of African descent and one for Indigenous ancestry. That was a significant win – it allowed us to further move away from rigid structures while ensuring no one felt compromised. The board has a strong track record of making decisions by consensus, with a balanced composition of elected and appointed members. True board success and collaboration goes beyond simply selecting like-minded individuals: the strength

of its diversity is demonstrated in how effectively the board leads, engages in meaningful dialogue, and reaches consensus.

“The other watershed moment was how the legislation was written. It allowed PSAANS to continue accessing NSTU services, except for grievance and arbitration processes related to employment concerns or contract negotiations. Since we were no longer eligible for collective bargaining, there was no mechanism for arbitration in the event of an impasse. However, the NSTU could have provided negotiation representation for the Association. With this in mind, we worked hard to establish an interim affiliation agreement with the union, whereby PSAANS would pay a percentage of the dues collected. Our dues,

by legislation, are tied to the same rate as those of unionized teachers, so it seemed logical to explore an affiliation model.

“But there was a pressing concern. We were only two and a half months old, and what if a member needed protective services on September 1? How would we support them? Initially, we operated under a temporary affiliation agreement with the NSTU, but we needed to formalize it. Certain legislative entitlements – such as Professional Development (PD) grants, and allowing administrators to return to teaching while maintaining seniority and competing for positions on equal footing with unionized teachers – depended on maintaining affiliation.



PSAANS 2024-2025 Board of Directors

Standing (L to R): Mike Corbett, Scott Murchison, Danielle Aucoin, Stacy Thorburn (Secretary), Amy Hunt (Chair), Cheyanne Gorman-Tolliver, Sheldon States, Isaac Schurman, Paul Landry

Seated: (L to R): Brian van den Heuvel (Treasurer), Kevin Gobien, Natalie Hagerty, Mamoon Brace (Vice-Chair), Keri Butler, Kathy Weatherbee, Theresa Nickerson

Absent: Marc Poirier, Steve Wells

"In February 2019, when it came time to vote on affiliation, we realized that we had been treating two separate issues as one: the affiliation itself, and the affiliation funding and service arrangement that came with it. The proposed affiliation agreement we had negotiated with NSTU staff was ultimately not supported by their elected provincial executive. Moreover, the financial arrangement they countered with would have left PSAANS unable to sustain itself.

"The analogy I used when speaking to members was that we were looking for a simple one-bedroom apartment with basement laundry and no parking. The union, however, only offered a two-bedroom penthouse with access to a swimming pool and two parking spaces. We simply couldn't afford that – we needed only the essentials.

"As a result, we did not enter into any financial arrangement with the union, and no funds flow to them from PSAANS. In early March 2019, we established our own internal protective services and hired a Coordinator of Member Services. We brought everything in-house. While the membership ultimately voted to remain affiliated with the NSTU, there is no financial agreement between the two organizations."

How is your relationship with the teachers' union?

TS:

"Our relationship with the NSTU has been very positive. One advantage we had in how events unfolded was that, prior to being removed from the union, there was no movement among administrators advocating for separation. The work-to-rule period had been difficult, and there was no particular warmth toward the government of the time regarding its treatment of public education, teachers, and administrators. But there was also no broad desire or urgency among administrators to leave the NSTU.

"In terms of the separation from the union and the affiliation agreement, that, too, was not a PSAANS

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decision. We actively worked toward securing a manageable agreement that would have allowed us to retain significant services from the NSTU, at least through the early stages of our development. However, we were unable to reach a financial arrangement that we could sustain. That necessity – not a choice – led to a clear separation. Everyone understood the reality: we could not afford to send 80% of our dues to the union while also funding services and having the resources to be responsive to priorities that were directly relevant to administrators.

"From the beginning, our approach has been rooted in collaboration and strong relationships. We have been deliberate in avoiding conflict unless there is a clear and necessary purpose, and we ensure that everyone understands our reasoning when we do take a position. Much of this thinking was shaped by conversations with colleagues in BC and Ontario, where early divisions at the separation of administrators from the teachers' unions have had generational impacts on both groups.

"The same principle applies to our relationship with government. One of the key differences between PSAANS and the Associations in BC and Ontario was the issue of legal disputes over assets. At the time of our separation, administrators made up about 10% of the NSTU membership. While we could have pursued legal action over financial assets, we carefully weighed the relational cost of such a move. Given the time and energy that would have been required for a lawsuit, we ultimately chose not to pursue that path, because you can never underestimate the long-term consequences of a fractured relationship."

What is the structure of PSAANS? How do you fit into the provincial education framework?

TS:

“A major structural distinction of our Association is that we represent not only Vice-Principals and Principals but also all educational leaders in central offices across Nova Scotia’s seven English Regional Centres for Education and the provincial French school board, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP), as long as they hold a Nova Scotia teaching license. Typical job titles include Coordinator of Student Services, Family of Schools Supervisor, Director of Programs, and Regional Executive Director of Education (RED) who serves as the CEO of the regional centre. One of the major outcomes of the Avis Glaze report was the dissolution of the seven English school boards, which were replaced by Regional Centres for Education, while the CSAP remained as the province’s only school board. Unlike in any other province, our membership encompasses all educational leaders, from Vice-Principal to Regional Executive Director, which is our equivalent to a CEO.

“It has been insightful to engage with organizations like the OPC, the Association des directions et des directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO), and the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario (CPCO) to learn about their structures. From the outset, our dual mandate has been a defining part of our identity: serving both the system’s needs and the needs of individual educational leaders. Our members—including Principals, Vice-Principals, and all central office roles—are, in fact, the leadership of the entire system.

“We have consistently amplified this position to distinguish ourselves from the NSTU, emphasizing that we are not a union, but a professional association dedicated to educational leadership and excellence, all in service to the students of Nova Scotia. That is our core mandate.

If you think of regional education structures in corporate terms, in some Canadian jurisdictions the CEO is equivalent to a Superintendent, while in others, it is a Director of Education.

In Nova Scotia, the CEO is referred to as the Regional Executive Director (R.E.D.).

The next level down includes directors – such as the Director of Human Resources, Director of Programs, or Director of Operations – who are the next most senior leaders. In Nova Scotia, the Director of Programs often steps in as Acting CEO when the Regional Executive Director is away.

Below that, Coordinators play a key role, and Family of Schools Supervisors serve as the direct contacts for Principals, overseeing and supporting 20+ schools within a region.

All of these individuals are PSAANS members.

"In terms of provincial structures, we have secured key agreements that strengthen our role. When our terms and conditions of employment were established in 2018, much of the language was adapted from the existing Teachers' Provincial Agreement (TPA), with some modifications, primarily around discipline and grievance procedures. In 2022, we successfully negotiated our first formal terms and conditions of employment, which included a key provision: PSAANS representation must be included at every provincial committee table related to the work of school and system leaders. This significantly enhanced our voice with the Department of Education in ways that did not exist prior to 2018.

"This was particularly valuable during the pandemic, as we were able to provide input alongside the NSTU in shaping back-to-school and remote learning plans. Having an administrator's perspective at the table proved essential, ensuring that discussions always considered how policies would be implemented and operationalized at the school level through the leadership of Principals and Vice-Principals, as well as at the system level through coordinators and directors.

"One other unique aspect of PSAANS, due to the language in the legislation, is that membership is automatic – it is not voluntary. All educational leaders are automatically PSAANS members. Even a retired administrator who subs for a day at Halifax West High School is a PSAANS member for that day. Membership is entirely tied to role and employment status."

Is there anything that you think you would have done differently in forming the organization?

TS:

"There have likely been times when some members wished we had been more vocal or taken a stronger public stance on certain issues. However, our strategy has always been to work directly with government,

whether that is through the Minister or the Deputy Minister. While this approach has proven effective, it can sometimes be difficult to communicate. Members may assume that some of our successes just happened on their own when, in reality, they were the result of behind-the-scenes advocacy.

"The NSTU has a well-established communication approach, amplifying both achievements and challenges with equal clarity. In recognition of our members' roles, our Association's messaging is responsive while also measured. We highlight our successes, and we strive to communicate about our challenges thoughtfully and with restraint. As a result, there is a natural oscillation in our communication, but it tends to be delivered with a moderate tone. We continue to refine this approach, and the board has identified areas for further improvement. However, through our strategic planning process, we heard directly from administrators, and their feedback has been largely positive. Members appreciate that they aren't overwhelmed with emails, value the professional tone of our communications, and recognize that we speak up when it matters. Many also understand that much of our advocacy happens behind the scenes, beyond what can be shared in a newsletter. That's encouraging feedback as we continue strengthening our communication.

"One of the ongoing questions for us has been local engagement. By design, we did not establish a local structure modeled after the NSTU, but that has meant we've had to navigate how we can best engage members across broad geographic regions. In some areas, a Principal may be the only administrator for 50 to 100 kilometers before reaching the next Principal. This is a different experience than that of teachers, who often have many colleagues within the same building.

"I also realized early on that the Liberal government, having created PSAANS, had a vested interest in ensuring its success. There was a lot at stake for them, as our Association represents all education system leaders. When the Progressive Conservative government took office, we were pleased that they recognized the value of the organization and

its structure. They didn't make any changes or discuss returning administrators to the union, which reinforced the importance of what we had built.

"We have benefited from strong relationships, though we recognize that this will inevitably be tested at some point in the future. That is why we have prioritized setting a solid foundation for independence, because we know that not every day ahead will be marked by a climate of support. Through careful financial management, despite leaving behind our assets, we are now in a stable financial position with the means to operate independently."

What does the future look like for PSAANS?

TS:

"We are merging with a partner organization that has been in Nova Scotia for 30 years – the Educational Leadership Consortium of Nova Scotia (ELCNS). Established three decades ago, ELCNS was created to provide professional development for aspiring education leaders. It began with small courses, such as a 10-module program covering key foundational areas, including education law and labour relations.

At the first PSAANS AGM in 2018, members captured key priorities from table discussions, shaping the vision that informed the facilitated graphic, and that continues to guide the Association's work today.



“Over time, ELCNS has developed a structured Aspiring Leaders Program, which many regions now use to prepare teachers for Principal and Vice-Principal roles. In addition, they offer the Instructional Leadership Academy, which is equivalent in depth to a master’s degree but is designed with a strong focus on the practical aspects of instructional leadership in classrooms. The theoretical framework includes a full semester on diversity, equity, and inclusive classrooms, as well as coursework on coaching practices and action research. The program runs over three years, with six full Saturdays of class time in each semester.

“For PSAANS, the challenge has been planning for future growth. We were looking at expanding professional learning to develop educational leaders, but ELCNS has already been operating effectively in that space for 30 years. Their work began as an initiative supported by the Department of Education, as it continues to be, but ELCNS also brings together representatives from the NSTU, PSAANS, all of the universities, the Black Educators Association (BEA), and Mi’kmaw Kina’matnewey (MK), which oversees the Indigenous education system in Nova Scotia.

“When we considered the future, it became clear that competing with ELCNS would benefit no one. That left two options: establishing a closer partnership or integrating ELCNS within PSAANS. We chose the latter. By bringing ELCNS into PSAANS, we are positioning it as our professional learning branch while maintaining its distinct identity.

“This is particularly important because school leadership development begins with teachers – most participants in these programs are not administrators yet. By maintaining ELCNS as a separate entity, teachers who are NSTU members may find it easier to engage in its programs without the perceived complexity of taking a course directly from PSAANS.

“We are now in the process of making this transition happen, with the goal of bringing ELCNS in-house by August 2025. This is a major step forward, not just for maintaining and refining existing models,

but for reimagining what professional learning for educational leaders will look like in the future.”

Is there anything else that you would like to share?

TS:

“I want to express my gratitude to the BCPVPA for our ongoing relationship, which dates back to 2018. Over the years, we have built on that connection, along with the OPC, ADFO, and CPCO. This network of Associations forms a strong foundation for the work ahead and the challenges we will all continue to face. As we know, the complexity of our work is only increasing.

“It has been invaluable to have a seat at the table with government, bringing a perspective that is informed not just by the Nova Scotia experience but by insights from across the country. This reinforces that the issues we face are not unique to us – they are part of a broader national conversation. Education, by its nature, can be quite siloed. It has a distinct culture that is not always easily understood by those outside the field, which is why external perspectives can be beneficial. Without them, we can often fall into the habit of doing things the way they have always been done.

“As educational leaders in each of our provinces, we carry enormous responsibility for public education – it is the backbone of society. The future of Canada rests with the students in our schools today. As professional associations, we must continue using our voices to amplify the significance of our work. It is critical, both now and in the future, that we champion our profession and advocate for the continued strength of public education.”

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