

Executive Director Board Report

Kristen Ninni, Ph.D.

September 11th, 2026

General Overview

It has been a smooth and successful start to the 2026–27 school year. As you know, launching a new school year takes many hands, significant preparation, and strong collaboration. I would like to recognize our entire administrative team, Central Office staff, and all our CASE educators for the many hours they have dedicated to supporting students throughout our region and beyond. Their hard work and dedication does not go unnoticed.

I am also grateful for the collaborative and highly dedicated manner in which we are implementing our new collective bargaining agreement. We continue to meet regularly with union leadership to support implementation, answer questions, and ensure shared understanding.

Additionally, it is evident that our partnership with member districts is grounded in strong leadership, genuine collaboration, and a shared commitment to doing what is best for students. It is a gift to continue this journey alongside our CASE community.

Opening Day

On Wednesday evening, August 26, CASE hosted more than 150 staff members at Medinah Shriners to celebrate the start of the 2026–2027 school year. The evening began with refreshments and an opportunity to reconnect, followed by welcoming remarks from CASE Board Chair Dr. Joseph Williams. We were also grateful to Board of Directors members Dr. David Hill, Dr. Jeff McHugh, and Doug Eccarius for joining us and demonstrating their support for CASE staff.

This evening gave me an opportunity to highlight the important work completed over the summer, welcomed 21 new CASE employees, and shared my personal “why” for serving students, families, educators, and member districts. Staff reflected on their own purpose and wrote personal why statements. Finally, we participated in a lively CASE Family Feud activity. The celebration provided a meaningful opportunity to recognize our dedicated staff, strengthen connections, and launch the year with a shared commitment to the important work in serving the students and families in our communities.

Monarch Academy Update

Monarch Academy is currently serving 18 students in three classrooms. We have two primary classrooms and one intermediate. All three classrooms have experienced a positive start to its second year, with students making meaningful progress in

communication, regulation, transitions, daily routines, and independence. Early accomplishments have included successful arrival routines, increased independent participation in personal-care tasks, a student's transition to a full-day schedule, and students using individualized supports to regulate and return to learning following challenging moments.

Continuous improvement remains a strong focus. Staff have participated in professional learning related to CPI/Ukeru, AAC and TouchChat, behavior intervention plans, supervision, crisis response, related-service integration, and Predictable Chart Writing, an inclusive literacy routine that allows students to participate through speech, AAC, pointing, and other forms of communication. Classroom coaching, team meetings, data collection, and ongoing problem-solving continue to strengthen instructional consistency and ensure that each student is supported in growing independence, building communication, and creating new possibilities.

Directors of Special Education Meeting

The CASE District Directors' Meeting, facilitated by Tricia Sharkey, provided an important opportunity for special education leaders from CASE member districts to collaborate, share best practices, problem-solve, and support one another in their professional practice. Discussion topics included legislative and procedural updates, CASE staff evaluations and professional learning, bilingual evaluation resources, Embrace access and emerging AI features, SEL universal screeners, referral processes, instructional coaching, out-of-state reevaluations, and Monarch Academy. Directors also worked through real-world case studies and shared district practices, resources, and strategies to strengthen services and outcomes for students across the CASE region.

Director of Special Education Meetings will take place on Fridays from 1:00 - 3:00 PM at the CASE Office on the following dates:

August 28, 2026	January 22, 2027
September 25, 2026	February 19, 2027
October 30, 2026	March 19, 2027
November 20, 2026	April 23, 2027
December 11, 2026	May 21, 2027

Infinitec Board

I am pleased to share that I have accepted an invitation to serve on the Infinitec Executive Board. The CASE Executive Director has served as a valued member of the Board for the past 15 years, and I am honored to continue this longstanding partnership.

In this role, I will attend Infinitec's annual Executive Board meeting, provide guidance and expertise as opportunities arise, and support awareness and use of Infinitec services within CASE and our professional network. This involvement will also help ensure that CASE remains connected to valuable resources and broader regional collaboration.

Legislative Update: Key Legislation for CASE Member Districts

Youth-in-care placements: Separate public day schools serving students placed through foster homes, children's homes, orphanages, or state residential units must meet Illinois requirements for approved special education facilities and services for the educational services to receive funding.

Reference: Public Act 104-0524; 105 ILCS 5/14-7.03 and 105 ILCS 5/14-1.08a.

Twice-exceptional students: Illinois has established recommended best practices for students who are both gifted and talented and have a disability. These include individualized, strength-based supports; appropriate academic challenge; flexible grouping; multiple ways to demonstrate mastery; and culturally and linguistically responsive assessments. School boards may, but are not required to, adopt policies permitting written educational plans that address both advanced abilities and disability-related needs.

Reference: Public Act 104-0822; 105 ILCS 5/22-50.

Transition-aged students: By January 1, 2027, districts must provide information about the federal Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Program to students and their parents or guardians at the initial transition meeting and again during the student's final year of high school.

Reference: Public Act 104-0615; 105 ILCS 5/14-8.03.

School psychologists: Beginning January 1, 2027, the law clarifies the broad range of services school psychologists may provide, including evaluations, universal screening, counseling, behavioral and mental-health supports, crisis response, consultation, and family engagement. Revised qualification requirements take effect by July 1, 2027.

Reference: Public Act 104-0605; 105 ILCS 5/14-1.09 and 105 ILCS 5/14-1.09a.

Service animals: Beginning January 1, 2027, required in-service training concerning student accommodations must include the Americans with Disabilities Act as it applies in schools, including information about service animals. Reference: Public Act 104-0628; 105 ILCS 5/10-22.39.

Legislation to Watch

Deaf, hard of hearing, and DeafBlind children: Beginning July 1, 2028, an annual language assessment must be offered to parents or guardians of children who are deaf, hard of hearing, or DeafBlind, consistent with IDEA and the Department of Early Childhood Act. Reference: Public Act 104-0658; Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or DeafBlind Children Act.

Color-vision screening: Beginning with the 2027–2028 school year, color-discrimination testing must be included in required vision screenings for children in kindergarten and grades 2 and 8. Reference: Public Act 104-0761; 105 ILCS 5/2-3.124 and 410 ILCS 205/4.5.

Early Intervention autism diagnosis: Beginning January 1, 2028, appropriately qualified and trained speech-language pathologists may diagnose autism spectrum disorder in certain children under age three as part of the Illinois Early Intervention Program. Reference: Public Act 104-0561; Illinois Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology Practice Act, Section 8.4.

Looking Ahead

- Note the change in the October Board Meeting from October 2nd to October 9th
- IAASE - October 22nd and October 23rd

Thank you for your ongoing partnership.

Respectfully submitted,
Kristen Ninni
Executive Director, CASE