

MASE New Leaders Cohort  
October 26, 2022  
Presenter Biographies

**Melanie Kray**

Executive Director of Special Services  
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Melanie Kray has been a special education director for the past 9 years, currently serving as the Executive Director of Special Services at SouthWest Metro Intermediate District. Prior to working as an administrator, Melanie worked as a school psychologist for 19 years. As a school psychologist, she worked for Southern Plains Educational Cooperative, SWWC Service Cooperative and Central Public Schools. She has been active in designing and implementing creative programs to meet the needs for students with disabilities. She is the co-chair of the MASE Professional Development Committee.

**Holle Spessard**

Director of Special Education, RLIF for Region 9  
South Central Service Cooperative  
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Holle Spessard has been a special services administrator for the past 12 years, currently serving the South Central Service Cooperative as the Director of Special Education, RLIF for Region 9. She previously served as the Director of Special Services for Tri-City United Schools. Prior to working as an administrator, Holle worked as a level IV EBD teacher for Benton-Stearns Education District and prior to being a teacher, she worked as a paraprofessional. She has been active in the development of programming for students with developmental/cognitive disabilities within her district and she strives to continue to enhance opportunities for students. Holle is an active member of MASE and is the co-chair of the Professional Development Committee.

**Amy Ernst**

Director of Special Education  
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Amy Ernst is the Director of Special Education for Buffalo Hanover Montrose School District. This is her 8th year serving BHM schools and her 14th year in special education leadership. Prior to her role as an administrator, Amy was a special education teacher in the Monticello School District. She is currently also an adjunct professor in Educational Administration and Leadership for St. Cloud State University. Outside of school, you can find her spending her time with her husband Mark, four daughters and two step-sons. Amy was the 2019 recipient of the MASE New Special Education Leader Award.

**Erin Toninato**

Executive Director  
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Erin Toninato serves as the Executive Director for the Minnesota Administrators for Special Education (MASE) organization. Erin entered this role on July 1st of this year after completing a long career in education. Erin has a wealth of experiences including working as a special education administrator, teacher, and paraprofessional. Erin firmly believes that each of those roles has been instrumental in developing her leadership style.

Erin has a long history of MASE involvement including serving multiple years as the Area Rep, Secretary, and participation on numerous committees. In 2018 Erin was named the Minnesota Special Education Administrator of the Year.

Erin's leadership style is collaborative and founded on the firm belief that every person has value and that every voice is important. As your Executive Director, Erin strives to support members of MASE in the important work that you do through ensuring systems are in place that support high standards and positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

**Cherie Johnson**

Executive Director  
Goodhue County Ed. District  
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Cherie Johnson is in her sixteenth year at the Goodhue County Education District. Prior to working in Goodhue County, Cherie was the Assistant Director of Special Education

for the Red Wing School District. Cherie received her master's in Special Education at Marywood University in Pennsylvania. She received her Director of Special Education Administrative license from the University of Minnesota. She has served on the MASE Board and committees for 15 years and on MASA committees for seven years. Cherie served as a co-chair on the Governor's School Finance Working Group in 2019 and 2020. Cherie has a passion for school finance and has worked to develop finance boot camps for special education directors and business managers in the state.

**Danielle Theis**

Director of Special Education  
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Danielle Theis has been working successfully with youth who experience mental health and behavioral challenges since 1990. She prides herself in assisting schools in becoming trauma responsive. Danielle is a licensed psychotherapist, Director of Special Education, and K-12 Principal. Danielle has served as the Administrator in Setting IV programs in public schools for seven years. Danielle was Principal of New Dominion School of Gerard Academy for ten years serving students within a residential treatment facility. Danielle currently serves as the Director of Special Services for Owatonna Public Schools. Danielle is one of 30 Master Trainers for Life Space Crisis Intervention in the world. She is acknowledged by the Minnesota Department of Education as an expert in reducing restrictive procedures and working effectively with children who display significant behavioral challenges. Danielle provides trainings and consultative services to support children experiencing mental health and behavioral challenges, and the adults who serve them, in our schools and communities.