

Understanding Classroom Complexity: From Data to Action

Classrooms in Alberta today are more complex than ever. A single class can include, but is not limited to, students with diverse academic, behavioural, language, and mental health needs, alongside those requiring enrichment. Teachers are expected to meet these needs while delivering curriculum, managing classroom dynamics and ensuring every student progresses. The demands on teachers and support staff are high, and the diversity of needs continues to grow.

As Premier Danielle Smith has noted, classroom complexity is driven by a convergence of academic, behavioural, socioeconomic, linguistic, emotional and mental health factors. Complexity is not the exception; it is the norm. Schools are now communities where learning and well-being must be considered jointly for all students to thrive.

The [Aggression and Complexity in Schools Action Team Report](#) (2025) found that rising behavioural challenges often reflect unmet learning and support needs rather than isolated discipline issues. Its findings now inform the Class Size and Complexity Cabinet Committee, which uses classroom data to guide provincial funding and policy decisions. Class size and complexity are major pressures on Alberta's education system. While measurement is improving, responses are still catching up.

Classroom complexity arises from several interconnected sources:

- **Complex learners:** Students arrive with diverse cognitive, behavioural, and language needs, including learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, attention challenges, and emerging mental health concerns. Some are English language learners, while others require enrichment to remain engaged. Other points from the provincial government's data collection include those students with an Individualized Program Plan (IPP), refugees, those waitlisted for assessment, and First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.
- **Classroom composition:** Complexity is not just about individual needs but how they intersect. Teachers may be responsible for multiple individualized learning plans, wide academic skill gaps and behavioural supports simultaneously.
- **Societal factors:** Economic pressures, immigration patterns and pandemic-related learning disruptions influence student readiness, engagement and classroom dynamics. Examples include homelessness, substance abuse and food insecurity.

A significant challenge is delayed access to formal assessment. Classroom-based learning assessments can indicate a student is struggling, but they do not explain why. Without timely identification, interventions often address symptoms rather than root causes. Teachers end up supporting students whose needs are visible but not fully understood, limiting the effectiveness of classroom strategies and system-level planning. Additionally, teachers may not have the skillset required to effectively address these specialized learning needs, or there are simply too many needs requiring attention that it becomes too difficult for sufficient support to be provided.

Alberta has taken important steps, including increased funding and the introduction of Classroom Complexity Teams designed to bring specialized expertise into schools. Jurisdictions facing similar challenges emphasize the need for autonomy in deciding how best to address complexity in their schools, such as deploying learning specialists, speech-language pathologists, behavioural supports and mental health resources to the classrooms where they're needed most. Public school boards remain well-positioned to understand what actions will have the greatest impact in their school divisions, as they are grounded in the lived experiences of staff, students and families at the school level.

Responding effectively requires strong collaboration between the province and locally elected school boards. While the province sets funding frameworks, curriculum direction and data systems, boards translate policies into practice—allocating resources, designing programs and working directly with families. As the province and boards co-ordinate supports, attention must extend beyond elementary classrooms. Junior and senior high students face equally complex needs and require targeted interventions to ensure they are prepared to transition successfully into the workforce and become contributing members of society.

The next step is deliberate use of data to drive solutions: tiered intervention systems, multidisciplinary teams, and improved assessment practices that connect academic outcomes to cognitive, behavioural and socioemotional needs. Understanding complexity is the first step. Acting on it—through co-ordinated effort, shared accountability and a focus on outcomes—is what will ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed. That partnership between the province and local boards, policy and practice, will define the future of public school education in Alberta.

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*The **Public School Boards' Association of Alberta** represents more than two-thirds of public school boards that account for more than 800 schools and more than 250,000 students across the province. We believe public schools are the first choice of our communities, where all our children learn and live the values of democracy together, reflecting our hope and shaping the future of our communities.*