

Case Study 1: Responding to Alberta's Rising Classroom Complexity

Alberta's classrooms are experiencing unprecedented levels of complexity, driven by increased behavioural, social-emotional, and mental health needs, staffing pressures, and community change. System leaders must move beyond reactive interventions to create adaptive, sustainable, and trust-centered systems that can thrive in complexity.

Context Overview

Across Alberta, divisions report escalating levels of student dysregulation, mental health challenges, and learning gaps. According to recent provincial data, the top factors contributing to classroom complexity are behavioural concerns, mental health needs, socio-economic pressures, and an increasing number of students with complex diagnoses or trauma backgrounds.

Teachers describe classrooms as “constantly shifting ecosystems,” with daily unpredictability, from violent outbursts and emotional meltdowns, to significant academic gaps. Meanwhile, educational assistants and mental health supports are stretched thin, and some rural jurisdictions lack access to specialized services entirely.

Leaders face a paradox: maintaining inclusivity and belonging for all while preserving psychological safety and instructional quality.

CASSCON School Division is entering the 2026–2027 school year facing record numbers of behaviour referrals and staff fatigue.

Realities include:

- **Inclusion strain:** Over 90% of classrooms have multiple coded students, and principals report that teachers “are spending more time de-escalating than teaching.”
- **Staffing gaps:** Educational assistant absences have risen by 25%, with few substitutes available.
- **Community pressure:** Parents are demanding “safer learning environments,” while advocacy groups push back against exclusionary practices.
- **Leader tension:** Principals feel caught between inclusion ideals and the operational need to maintain safety and learning continuity.
- **System data:** 68% of teachers report “moderate to high levels of burnout,” and 1 in 3 classrooms experience daily dysregulated incidents requiring intervention.

The School Authority Leader has called an emergency meeting with their executive to determine a coordinated response that balances compassion with accountability, support with capacity, and long-term sustainability with immediate triage.

Artifact A – Excerpt from CASS Classroom Complexity Report (2023):

“Classroom complexity recognizes the dynamic interactions between students, staff, and the learning environment. The sheer number of students who appear to need supports has been overwhelming... teachers report burning out earlier in the year than usual.”

Artifact B – Excerpt from CASS Learning Lab on Challenging Behaviour (2025):

“School authorities emphasize positive behaviour supports and a continuum of services. Division leaders note the importance of building staff capacity in executive functioning, trauma-informed practice, and regulation before crisis occurs.”

Artifact C – Teacher Voice (Survey Comment):

“It feels like every classroom is now inclusive, but we’re not resourced or trained for this level of complexity. Teachers are trying to be counselors, behaviour specialists, and educators all at once.”

Artifact D – Division Incident Report Summary:

- 27% increase in classroom evacuation incidents in 2025-26.
- 18% increase in staff injury claims related to violent incidents.
- Average wait time for external counselling referrals: 8 weeks.

Guiding Questions: Phase 1, Initial Sensemaking

Focus Area	Guiding Question
Identifying Complexity	What makes this scenario a <i>complex</i> system challenge rather than an isolated behaviour issue?
Adaptive Challenge	What underlying systems must evolve to address the root causes?
Stakeholder Dynamics	How might teachers, parents, EAs, and community partners interpret this situation differently?

Framing the Work	How can leaders reframe “behaviour”?
First Moves	What early, visible actions would you take to stabilize classrooms while signaling long-term commitment to staff?

*****THE DISRUPTOR (NUANCE CARD)*****

Guiding Questions: Phase 2, Adaptive Response

Focus Area	Guiding Question
Reframing	How can this moment be used to reframe division-wide understanding of classroom complexity?
Adaptive Capacity	What leadership actions will model calm, transparency, and trust under pressure?
Networks & Relationships	Who must you engage to co-create next steps?
Balancing Innovation & Stability	How do you address staff safety while being mindful of inclusive practice?
New Actions	What adaptive moves would you take immediately and systemically?