

Case Study 3: Staff Recruitment and Retention, Growth and Strain

System leaders face the paradox of opportunity and overload as Alberta's education system receives a historic staffing investment to address class size, burnout, and inclusion pressures.

Context Overview

In late fall 2025, Alberta Education announced a province-wide funding settlement aimed at addressing ongoing workforce pressures. Each jurisdiction received funding equivalent to 15% of their current certificated teaching staff and 10% of their Educational Assistants (EAs) to support classroom capacity, inclusive education, and a mental health continuum of supports.

The new funding came with immediate complexities:

- The new positions must be filled by June 2026 in a context where teacher shortages persist in several rural regions.
- Educational assistants remain in short supply, with recruitment competition from health care, early learning centers, and community organizations.
- School authorities must balance speed of hiring with fit, quality, and sustainability, ensuring the influx of new staff strengthens, not strains, existing division culture.
- Boards and staff associations are seeking clarity and equity in allocation across schools, while principals express concerns about onboarding, mentoring, and available space.

System leaders must determine how to turn rapid expansion into long-term retention and professional belonging, especially in smaller or geographically dispersed areas.

The announcement has created what one leader called “*a good problem wrapped in a wicked one.*”

Realities include:

- **Recruitment bottlenecks:** Competing with other jurisdictions for the same limited pool of qualified candidates.
- **Equity and allocation tension:** Urban schools expect proportional additions, while rural schools argue for need-based distribution.
- **Workforce culture risks:** A sudden wave of new staff may dilute established professional communities and stretch mentorship structures.

- **Unclear sustainability:** The funding is confirmed for two years, with renewal dependent on fiscal outcomes.
- **Operational stress:** Space, supervision, and onboarding systems are not yet scaled for this magnitude of growth.

System leaders are under pressure to act quickly, ethically, and strategically maintaining transparency and morale while managing competing narratives of celebration and caution.

Artifact A – Excerpt from Government Announcement (September 2025):

“To ensure every student has access to high-quality instruction and learning support, the Government of Alberta will fund an immediate increase of 15% in certificated staff and 10% in classified instructional support positions for all jurisdictions, effective January 2026.”

Artifact B – Workforce Study Findings (CASS, 2024):

- Teacher and leader attrition rates averaged **10% or less** over five years.
- Top retention factors:
 - Meaningful professional learning and mentorship
 - Strong division culture and belonging
 - Visible support from system leaders
- Less effective strategies included one-off PD or generic wellness efforts that lacked relevance or differentiation.

Artifact C – Board Communication:

“This funding represents both celebration and caution. Recruitment must not become a revolving door. Integrity of process and culture must remain at the forefront.”

Artifact D – Teacher Email:

“We’re excited to have more hands on deck, but worried onboarding this many new people could change the feel of our division. I hope leadership is ready to support both new and existing staff through this shift.”

Guiding Questions: Phase 1, Initial Sensemaking

Focus Area	Guiding Question
Identifying Complexity	What makes this expansion opportunity more complex than a simple staffing increase?

Adaptive Challenge	What underlying systems must adapt, not just scale to make this successful?
Stakeholder Dynamics	How might different groups perceive this opportunity differently?
Framing the Work	How might you reframe this from a “recruitment challenge” to a “culture-building opportunity”?
First Moves	What first steps or conversations would you initiate to build clarity, trust, and direction?

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

Guiding Questions: Phase 2 – Adaptive Response

Focus Area	Guiding Question
Reframing	How does this nuance reveal deeper system dependencies?
Adaptive Capacity	What leadership behaviours or conditions are critical to maintain stability and momentum?
Networks & Relationships	Who needs to be engaged now to co-create adaptive solutions?
Balancing Innovation & Stability	How can you remain agile while upholding accountability and transparency?
New Actions	What immediate adaptive moves would you take to protect culture, sustain morale, and mitigate financial risk?