



CASS

College of
Alberta School
Superintendents



Continuing
Education
Program

LEARNING LAB

*Managing Aggressive Student Behaviours:
A System Education Leader's Learning Lab*





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Overview

- Learning Labs are designed to facilitate active learning, collaboration, and practical application of knowledge as it relates to system education leadership.
- Learning Labs are designed to be worked through independently or collaboratively. Sessions will be offered at CASS Conferences, but the resources are also designed for use by individuals or teams outside of conference sessions.

Connection to Research

- Learning Labs are used in various educational settings, including schools, universities, professional development programs, and corporate training, to enhance learning outcomes and provide a dynamic and immersive learning experience.
- Each Learning Lab includes relevant research related to the lab topic.

Application

- Stories of practice case studies demonstrate the application of concepts within a school authority.
- Practical application and reflective exercises help solidify understanding of the material and allow participants to apply their learning to their own context.
- Learning Lab topics can be applied to a variety of school authority contexts.

Learning

Lab

Study

- Each Learning Lab allows participants to deepen their understanding of a specific topic and reflect on related case studies from practice.
- Interactive and hands-on elements keep participants actively engaged in their learning process.
- The focus on real-world application aids in developing practical skills that can be directly applied in professional or personal contexts.

Synthesis

- Synthesis questions, which are designed to allow participants to synthesize their learning and consider applications to their own context or professional growth as a system education leader, accompany stories of practice case studies.
- When Learning Labs are done in a collaborative setting, sharing diverse ideas and experiences can contribute to system education leaders' learning.

Introduction

- The purpose of this Learning Lab is to strengthen excellence in system education leaders' professional practice as it relates to managing challenging and aggressive student behaviours within their school authority.
- Participants will explore system education leadership strategies to support schools, empower staff, and ensure consistent, compassionate approaches to aggressive behaviours that prioritize both students' and staff's safety and well-being.
- This Learning Lab has been designed to align with the following Professional Practice Standards (Alberta Education, 2023a, 2023b):



Learning Outcomes

As a result of participating in this session, participants will have the opportunity to:

- analyze case studies to deepen their understanding of system education leaders' roles in managing aggressive student behaviours
- engage in collaborative conversations that surface diverse perspectives and promising practices
- identify strategies and systemic conditions supporting safe, consistent, and compassionate responses to aggression
- reflect on their own leadership practices and consider how to strengthen supports within their school authorities
- leave with practical insights and shared strategies that can be adapted to their local contexts

Guiding Questions

- What strategies can system education leaders implement to address and manage challenging and aggressive student behaviours at the system level?
- What are the successes and challenges system education leaders experience in addressing and managing challenging and aggressive student behaviours, and how can these be leveraged to achieve optimum learning for all students?

CEP Credits

- For information on credit allocation for the completion of this Learning Lab, please refer to the [Accreditation Requirements](#) document on the CASS CEP website.

Acknowledgements

This Learning Lab was developed to support system education leaders in building safe, caring, and inclusive learning environments across Alberta.

Although the case studies included in this resource are fictional, they were informed by the collective wisdom, lived experiences, and professional insights of system leaders across Alberta. Their willingness to share challenges, reflections, and successes has shaped the learning embedded in this work.

- Special thanks are extended to Irene Donaldson, Director of Education Services, Diverse Learning Supports, with Wolf Creek Public Schools, for her thoughtful consultation and meaningful contributions to this Learning Lab. Her insight, experience, and commitment to supporting system leaders greatly enriched the quality and relevance of this work.
- Alberta Education provided conditional grant funding that supported the development of this Learning Lab.
- Thank you to all the participants in this Learning Lab for engaging with vulnerability, courage, and a shared belief that every student and every adult deserves to learn and work in a place where they feel safe, respected, and supported.

Disclaimer

The case studies and examples presented in this Learning Lab are entirely fictional and were created for professional learning purposes only. Any resemblance to actual persons, students, staff members, schools, or school divisions, past or present, is purely coincidental. The names of individuals, schools, and communities used throughout are fictional and do not represent any real people or organizations.

These scenarios are designed to support reflection, dialogue, and professional growth among Alberta system education leaders and should not be interpreted as depictions of real events or circumstances.

Connection to Research

Effective system leadership in times of complex student behaviour cannot rely on instinct or isolated experience alone. It must be grounded in evidence-based practice, provincial policy, and a clear understanding of how student behaviour, adult responses, and system structures interact.

This Learning Lab draws on current research, Alberta Education frameworks, and leadership standards to anchor the case studies in both theory and practice. The sources highlighted in this section provide the foundation for understanding aggressive student behaviour as a multifaceted issue shaped by neurobiology, trauma, inclusion, staff wellness, and system coherence.

Education Act

Education Act, Statutes of Alberta, 2012, Chapter E-0.3. https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/1266.cfm?page=E00P3.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779846450

The Education Act sets the legal foundation for student conduct, staff responsibilities, and safe, caring, and respectful learning environments in Alberta schools. It outlines expectations for student discipline, board policies, and the duty of school authorities to provide safe spaces free from physical and emotional harm.

Specifically, Section 33 (1)(d) requires that boards provide a “welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging” (p. 51). Further, Section 33 (1)(e) ensures that a continuum of supports and services be provided for all students (p. 52). Finally, Section 33 (3) outlines the requirement to establish and maintain codes of conduct for students and includes criteria for the creation and sharing of these codes (p. 53).

The Act empowers principals and superintendents to take action when student aggression threatens safety, while also emphasizing inclusion and rights-based approaches. It provides the legal context within which schools must balance student safety, dignity, and due process.

Implementing a Continuum of Supports and Services: A Resource Guide for School and School Authority Leaders

Alberta Education. (2022). *Implementing a continuum of supports and services: A resource guide for school and school authority leaders*. <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/17f94fa5-05ae-4bfa-af99-6deac0775087/resource/d8c9a97e-835d-4b79-9a51-9f4b8cd0b550/download/edc-implementing-continuum-supports-services-resource-guide-school.pdf>

This resource outlines a tiered continuum of supports that school authorities should implement to meet diverse student needs. It emphasizes early intervention, collaborative problem-solving, and data-informed decision-making. For aggressive student behaviour, the guide highlights the importance of layered supports, from universal classroom strategies to specialized interventions, for high-risk students. It provides system leaders with guidance for aligning policies, staff capacity, and resources to respond proactively to aggression.

Connection to Research

Guidelines for Time-Out in Alberta Schools

Alberta Education. (2019a). *Guidelines for time-out in Alberta schools*. <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/863776d5-0db5-4f05-b65d-291de9cdc8b5/resource/469342d4-b25a-4287-8845-a001051acb77/download/edc-guidelines-for-time-out-in-alberta-schools.pdf>

These guidelines clarify the appropriate and ethical use of time-out strategies when managing student behaviour, including aggressive incidents. The document emphasizes that time-out should be used only as a planned, supervised, and least-restrictive intervention. It outlines safe procedures, documentation expectations, and parental communication requirements. Its guidance helps school authorities ensure that responses to aggression uphold student dignity and comply with legislation.

Standards for Seclusion and Physical Restraint in Alberta Schools

Alberta Education. (2019b). *Standards for seclusion and physical restraint in Alberta schools*. https://www.alberta.ca/system/files/custom_downloaded_images/ed-standards-for-seclusion-and-physical-restraint-in-alberta-schools.pdf

This policy establishes mandatory standards for the use of seclusion and physical restraint when student behaviour poses imminent danger. It provides definitions, reporting protocols, and requirements for training and parental notification. The conditions under which restrictive interventions may be used legally and ethically are defined, underscoring that these practices are emergency measures and must be accompanied by proactive planning and post-incident review.

Positive Behaviour Supports

Alberta Education. (2024). *Positive behaviour supports*. <https://www.alberta.ca/positive-behaviour-supports>

This resource introduces positive behaviour supports (PBS) as a proactive, evidence-based approach to improving student behaviour at individual, classroom, and school-wide levels. It promotes functional behaviour assessments, reinforcement of prosocial behaviour, and reduction of punitive responses. The framework aligns with Alberta's tiered support model and encourages schools to systematically collect behavioural data and build intervention plans. It reinforces that aggression is best addressed through prevention, consistency, and collaborative problem-solving.

Connection to Research

Reporting on Class Size and Complexity, Aggression, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Alberta's K–12 Schools (Fall 2023)

Alberta Teachers' Association. (2024). *Reporting on class size and complexity, aggression, and artificial intelligence (AI) in Alberta's K–12 schools (Fall 2023)*. https://legacy.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/COOR-101-39_ReportingOnAlbertaK-12Schools_2024-02-14.pdf

This research report examines rising classroom complexity in Alberta schools, with specific attention to student aggression, unsafe behaviours, and teacher stress. It highlights that teachers are experiencing increasing rates of physical and verbal aggression from students, often linked to unmet mental health needs and insufficient supports. The report provides current data demonstrating that aggression is no longer an isolated issue but instead a systemic challenge tied to resource shortages and inclusion pressures. It calls for policy reform, increased staffing, and more mental health supports to ensure safe learning environments.

Classroom Complexity Grant: Supporting and Strengthening the Strategic Purpose

College of Alberta School Superintendents. (2023). *Classroom complexity grant: Supporting and strengthening the strategic purpose*. <https://cass.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Classroom-Complexity-Report-Final-Copy-10.23.23.pdf>

This document summarizes how Alberta school divisions use provincial funding to address classroom complexity, including aggressive student behaviour. It identifies promising practices such as mental health partnerships, enhanced behaviour supports, and professional learning for staff. The report recognizes that behavioural incidents are a key factor contributing to classroom complexity and teacher burnout. It underscores the need for system-level coordination and sustainable funding to support educators' dealing with chronic aggression.

System Education Leaders' Roadmap to Addressing Classroom Complexity

College of Alberta School Superintendents. (2024b). *System education leaders' roadmap to addressing classroom complexity*. <https://cass.ab.ca/resources/eleadership-guide-system-education-leaders-roadmap-to-addressing-classroom-complexity/?section=1>

This guide offers a practical roadmap for superintendents and system leaders to address classroom complexity, including behaviours such as aggression and violence. It emphasizes leadership actions such as establishing clear protocols, allocating resources for behaviour support, and building cross-ministry partnerships. The document highlights system accountability for safe learning environments and proactive planning. It positions aggression not as an individual teacher problem but instead a system-level leadership responsibility.

Connection to Research

Addressing Classroom Complexity at the System Level: Environmental Scan and Review of Literature

College of Alberta School Superintendents. (2024a). *Addressing classroom complexity at the system level: Environmental scan and review of literature*. <https://cass.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/FINAL-Classroom-Complexity-Literature-Review-and-Environmental-Scan-June-3-2024.pdf>

This literature review provides insight into how classroom complexity is evolving in Alberta, including increasing aggression, dysregulation, and mental health challenges among students. It emphasizes that aggression should be understood within larger systemic issues, such as staffing shortages, underfunded inclusive education, and rising student needs. The report identifies evidence-based strategies for system leaders, including tiered supports, trauma-informed practices, and staff wellness initiatives. It connects aggressive behaviour to broader structural and leadership responsibilities.

Addressing Classroom Complexity at the System Level: A Focus on Challenging Student Behaviours

College of Alberta School Superintendents. (2025). *Addressing classroom complexity at the system level: A focus on challenging student behaviours*. <https://cass.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/CASS-Learning-Lab-Classroom-Complexity-Challenging-Student-Behaviour.pdf>

This guide offers a practical roadmap for superintendents and system leaders to address classroom complexity, including behaviours such as aggression and violence. It emphasizes leadership actions such as establishing clear protocols, allocating resources for behaviour support, and building cross-ministry partnerships. The document highlights system accountability for safe learning environments and proactive planning. It positions aggression not as an individual teacher problem but instead as a system-level leadership responsibility.

Lost and Found: Helping Behaviorally Challenging Students (and, While You're At It, All the Others)

Greene, R. W. (2016). *Lost and found: Helping behaviorally challenged students (and while you're at it, all the others)*. Jossey-Bass.

Ross Greene builds on the Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) model introduced in *Lost at School*, offering educators and leaders practical strategies for working with students who exhibit challenging or aggressive behaviour. The book reframes aggression as the result of lagging skills and unsolved problems, not defiance or manipulation. Greene provides step-by-step guidance for identifying triggers, building relationships through empathy, and collaboratively developing solutions with students. The resource offers a proactive, relational framework that reduces power struggles and promotes skill development. For school and system leaders, it models how compassionate, problem-solving approaches can create safer and more supportive learning environments for all learners.

Connection to Research

Collaborative Response: Three Foundational Components That Transform How We Respond to the Needs of Learners

Hewson, K., Hewson, L., & Parsons, J. (2022). *Collaborative response: Three foundational components that transform how we respond to the needs of learners*. Corwin Press.

This book introduces the Collaborative Response (CR) model, which emphasizes three foundational components: collaborative structures and processes, data and evidence, and a continuum of supports. The authors argue that traditional models of individual teacher responsibility are inadequate for meeting the complex needs of students today, including those whose behaviour escalates into aggression. It provides a system-wide framework for proactively identifying student needs, aligning supports, and coordinating teams rather than relying on reactive discipline alone. For leaders and systems in Alberta (or elsewhere), the model offers actionable tools and structures to shift from “responding to problems” towards building a collaborative culture where every student is seen as “our” student, including those who display challenging or aggressive behaviour.

Examining Child Maltreatment Through a Neurodevelopmental Lens: Clinical Applications of the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics.

Perry, B. D. (2009). Examining child maltreatment through a neurodevelopmental lens: Clinical applications of the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 14(4), 240–255.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15325020903004350>

In this article, Perry examines how childhood maltreatment and trauma affect brain development and behaviours, especially those that may be labelled as “challenging” or aggressive in educational settings. He presents the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT) and argues that understanding brain development stages helps practitioners more effectively intervene. This is relevant to aggressive student behaviour because many aggressive behaviours stem from neurodevelopmental dysregulation rather than purely volitional misconduct. For school and system leaders, this research offers a framework that aligns with inclusive, trauma-informed educational practice—shifting the lens from punishment to regulation and skill-building.

Connection to Research



Use these self-reflective questions to consider the connection between the research and your local context.

- What policies and procedures does your school authority have in place to address challenging student behaviours?
- How do provincial standards and legislation inform your leadership decisions?
- How robust is your school authority's continuum of supports and services?
- How does your leadership honour and recognize that behaviour is not just a classroom issue, but also a system responsibility?
- How can theory and research be applied in your daily leadership actions? How might the theory and research inform long-term system improvement?



Grounded in Being

“Kids <u>DO</u> well if they can.” (Greene, 2016, p. 17)	Initial Response What comes up for you when you hear this phrase?	Connection to System Supports What supports exist in our system to help students who can't yet do this well? Where are the gaps or growth opportunities?

Grounded in Being

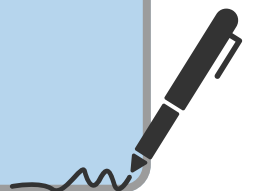
“Kids <u>DO</u> well if they can.” (Greene, 2016, p. 17)	Initial Response What comes up for you when you hear this phrase?	Connection to System Supports What supports exist in our system to help students who can't yet do this well? Where are the gaps or growth opportunities?

Grounded in Being



Use these self-reflective questions to reflect on the *Being* activity and consider opportunities for leveraging this activity in your own context.

- How has this activity influenced or reinforced your understanding of the phrase “kids do well if they can”?
- Which of your initial responses surprised you the most?
- What assumptions or beliefs about student ability, behaviour, or motivation did you notice in your own reactions?
- How do your current system practices and supports reflect or conflict with this belief?
- What changes might occur in our schools or systems if we consistently operated from this mindset?
- What is one action you could take as a system education leader to align your practice or policies with this philosophy?



Case Study 1 - Pine Valley Middle School Context

Background Information

- Pine Valley Middle School is part of a midsize rural Alberta school division serving approximately 4,500 students across 10 schools. The school authority has a strong commitment to **inclusive education** and has made significant progress in developing tiered supports for students with diverse learning and behavioural needs.
- Over the past several years, Pine Valley Middle School has earned a reputation for being collaborative and student centered. Teachers, educational assistants, and administrators regularly engage in professional learning on trauma-informed practice and restorative approaches. Despite this strong foundation, staff members have reported **increasing complexity in student needs**, particularly among students with neurodevelopmental differences such as autism, ADHD, and anxiety disorders.
- Whereas most staff understand these students' complex needs and the supports they require, a few have expressed frustration and questioned whether accommodations "rewarded poor behaviour." These divergent beliefs about inclusion and accountability created quiet tension within the staff.
- At the system level, the inclusive learning team began collecting behaviour incident data and developing a division-wide *tiered behaviour support framework*, but the rollout was still in the early stages. The superintendent also initiated *communities of practice* for assistant principals to share strategies related to complex student behaviour, recognizing that system coherence in this area was still developing.
- The Pine Valley Middle School incident would become a catalyst for deep reflection across the school authority about how well its structures, beliefs, and training supported staff to meet neurodiverse learners' needs and how system education leaders could strengthen consistency and confidence among adults.



Case Study 1 - Pine Valley Middle School Application

Incident Overview

- One student, Mason, a Grade 8 learner diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), has been attending Pine Valley since Grade 6. Mason is intellectually capable and articulate but experiences significant challenges with sensory regulation, unpredictability, and social communication. He thrives in structured, predictable environments but becomes dysregulated when confronted with sudden changes, loud noises, or ambiguous instructions.
- To best support Mason's success, a multidisciplinary team worked collaboratively with his parents, the school psychologist, an inclusive learning coordinator, and an occupational therapist to develop a detailed individual behaviour support plan (IBSP). The plan outlined proactive strategies designed to help Mason remain regulated and engaged throughout the school day. All parties signed the plan. Key components of Mason's plan included the following:
 - providing advance notice for schedule or routine changes
 - offering access to a sensory space and noise-cancelling headphones when needed
 - using clear, concise verbal communication paired with visual cues
 - scheduling frequent check-ins with his educational assistant (EA) to support transitions and problem-solving
- On a Thursday morning, the school was running a modified schedule for an assembly. Mason's homeroom teacher notified him about the schedule change that morning, but there was a problem: His regular EA was away, and the substitute EA was unfamiliar with his visual supports.
- During math class, Mason began pacing and asking repeatedly when lunch would start. The teacher, trying to continue the lesson, told Mason to "sit down and stop interrupting." When Mason persisted, the teacher raised their voice, saying, "You need to control yourself."
- Mason covered his ears, began shouting, and threw a binder across the room. When a classmate laughed nervously, Mason interpreted it as mockery, causing him to kick over a chair and run from the classroom. The teacher then activated the school's crisis response plan.
- In the hallway, Mason struck a locker, screamed, and took a swing at the assistant principal, who attempted to stop him from running toward the exit. Two staff members guided other students to safety while the school counsellor and principal worked to de-escalate the crisis.
- It took nearly 25 minutes for Mason to calm down in a quiet sensory space. The principal contacted Mason's parents, and he spent the rest of the day working in a quiet location.
- Although no one was seriously injured, several students were shaken, and the teacher was emotionally distressed. By the end of the day, rumours about "a student attack" had spread through the community, and concerned parents began contacting the school.

Case Study 1 - Pine Valley Middle School Study

System-Level Learning

- The incident prompted the school authority to reflect deeply on its capacity to support neurodiverse learners. The following actions were implemented within months:
 - autism training for all EAs and classroom staff, focused on sensory regulation and communication
 - creation of substitute orientation materials for students with IBSPs or medical needs
 - increased collaboration with external specialists such as occupational therapists and behavioural consultants
 - division-wide emphasis on adult regulation and predictability, ensuring that every adult in the system understands their role in maintaining safety and inclusion
- One year later, the division reported a decrease in major behavioural incidents among students on the spectrum and improved staff confidence in implementing proactive strategies.

Successes

- Staff followed the division's crisis response procedures, ensuring that students were evacuated safely and the incident was documented promptly.
- The principal and counsellor relied on calm, low-verbal communication and sensory supports to help Mason re-regulate, avoiding physical intervention.
- Families were informed the same day through a carefully worded message emphasizing student safety, confidentiality, and the school's commitment to inclusive education.
- The superintendent requested an incident review, inviting inclusive learning staff, occupational therapists, and psychologists to develop a proactive action plan.

Challenges

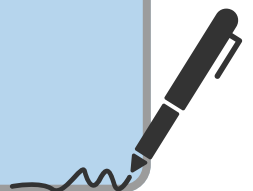
- The absence of Mason's regular EA and the lack of substitute training revealed vulnerabilities in the system's ability to provide consistent support for students with complex needs. Although the support plan was in place, inconsistent implementation and varying levels of staff comfort with autism-support strategies created conditions for escalation.
- Several staff members expressed fear and uncertainty about supporting students with autism who display aggression. The teacher involved described feeling "helpless and unprepared."
- Parent concern and social media speculation focused on safety and inclusion, challenging the school to reaffirm public trust while protecting student confidentiality.
- The division identified the need for structured professional learning on autism, communication supports, and de-escalation strategies to reduce reliance on reactive responses.

Case Study 1 - Pine Valley Middle School

Synthesis



- How do system education leaders ensure consistency in the implementation of behaviour and safety plans when staff members are absent or turnover occurs?
- What professional learning structures best build capacity for supporting students on the autism spectrum?
- How can communication and community messaging balance safety, confidentiality, and inclusion advocacy?
- What leadership practices help staff remain calm, confident, and compassionate during and after high-stress incidents?
- How can data from critical incidents inform ongoing system learning and resource allocation?



Case Study 2 - Prairie Ridge Elementary School Context

Background Information

- Prairie Ridge Elementary School is a K–6 school in a rapidly growing Alberta community. The school serves approximately 420 students and is part of a school authority recognized for its strong commitment to **inclusive education** and early intervention supports. The school authority's philosophy emphasizes that *every student belongs in their community school*, and leaders have worked diligently to build staff capacity in differentiated instruction, trauma-informed practice, and collaborative problem-solving.
- In recent years, however, the school has experienced a **noticeable increase in students with complex social-emotional and behavioural needs**. The community itself has changed significantly, with new housing developments attracting families from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Although the diversity has enriched the school environment, it has also placed new demands on student services, mental health supports, and professional learning related to complex behaviour and regulation.
- At the system level, the inclusive learning team was monitoring a rise in critical incident reports across several schools, particularly those involving staff injuries or parent complaints following aggressive student behaviour. The superintendent and assistant superintendent of inclusive learning had begun reviewing crisis response procedures, Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) compliance requirements, and staff wellness supports. They recognized that schools needed confidence, coherence, clear expectations, accessible resources, and consistent communication protocols when responding to behavioural crises.



Case Study 2 - Prairie Ridge Elementary School Application

Incident Overview

- Andrea is a Grade 4 learner with a history of emotional dysregulation and physical aggression. Andrea's individual program plan (IPP) identified academic and social goals, and her behaviour support plan (BSP) outlined proactive strategies such as sensory breaks, visual schedules, and the use of calm, non-confrontational communication. The school-based team frequently reviewed the plan, which Andrea's parents and all involved school staff signed. Andrea received support from a family school liaison worker and a mental health clinician.
- Despite these supports, incidents of aggressive behaviour were increasing. Andrea's triggers were often related to task avoidance, perceived criticism, or denial of a preferred activity. She responded to frustration by yelling, hitting, or throwing objects. These behaviours escalated quickly if adults reacted with raised voices or physical proximity.
- Staff members worked hard to implement the plan consistently, but turnover in educational assistants and limited access to specialized programming in the region created challenges. At times, Andrea required one-to-one supervision, which strained staffing allocations. Teachers expressed concern about balancing safety with inclusion, particularly when other students witnessed aggressive outbursts.
- In late February, Andrea experienced a severe behavioural outburst during a literacy lesson. The incident began when a preferred activity was denied, triggering frustration and dysregulation. Within minutes, desks were overturned, a chair was thrown, and the classroom teacher was struck and scratched repeatedly.
- The class was evacuated under the school's crisis protocol, while the principal, family school liaison worker, and other staff worked to de-escalate the situation. Though calm was eventually restored, several students were distressed and expressed fear about returning to class.
- The teacher sustained visible injuries, including lacerations that broke the skin and required medical attention. She also required time off because of the traumatic nature of the event.
- Within 24 hours, the incident had expanded beyond the classroom. Multiple parents contacted the principal and central office, expressing concerns about safety. One parent contacted a local media outlet. Another filed a complaint directly with Alberta Education about "unsafe learning conditions."
- The superintendent's office was immediately notified through the school authority's critical incident reporting process, triggering a full system review of both the incident and the broader conditions contributing to it.

Case Study 2 - Prairie Ridge Elementary School Study

System-Level Learning

- This incident highlighted the tension between safety, inclusion, and system accountability. Through post-incident reflection, division leaders identified several areas for growth:
 - developing clear communication protocols for staff, families, trustees, and Alberta Education
 - establishing crisis response guidelines that balance student dignity with staff safety
 - expanding professional learning for all staff on behaviour escalation cycles, trauma-informed de-escalation, and the emotional toll of aggressive incidents
 - strengthening wellness supports for staff who experience or witness violence in the workplace
 - reviewing system resource allocation to ensure schools have equitable access to specialized supports and behavioural expertise
- The incident became a case study for division-wide professional learning, reinforcing that effective leadership requires preparedness, empathy, and system coherence.

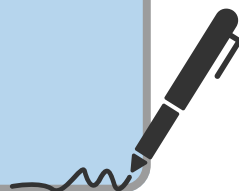
Successes

- The principal followed division crisis protocols, ensuring emergency response, student supervision, and a debrief for affected staff and students. OHS reporting was completed, and the teacher received appropriate medical and psychological support.
- Within 48 hours, the superintendent convened a multidisciplinary response team, including inclusive learning specialists, mental health clinicians, and the communications manager, to address the situation's operational and reputational aspects.
- The division crafted a carefully worded communique to parents emphasizing student and staff safety, confidentiality, and commitment to inclusive education. Alberta Education was briefed directly on the division's response plan, which included additional staff supports and safety monitoring.
- The division used this event to review and strengthen system-wide crisis response procedures, including protocols for staff injury, family communication, and Alberta Education notification.

Case Study 2 - Prairie Ridge Elementary School Study

Challenges

- The injured teacher expressed fear of returning to the classroom. Colleagues questioned the school authority's commitment to staff safety and whether inclusion was being prioritized over protection. This created tension within the school's professional culture.
- Parents of other students began circulating a petition demanding Andrea's removal, citing safety concerns. Social media posts intensified community scrutiny. The principal received dozens of calls and emails daily, limiting their capacity for instructional leadership.
- When the local newspaper published an article about "violence in classrooms," the story gained provincial attention. Trustees received calls from constituents, and Alberta Education requested a formal incident summary from the superintendent.
- Despite the intensity of Andrea's needs, no specialized program placement was available within the division, and external options had lengthy waitlists. The system faced a moral and logistical dilemma: how to keep everyone safe while upholding the right to education.



Case Study 2 - Prairie Ridge Elementary School

Synthesis



- How can system education leaders uphold inclusive education values while ensuring staff and student safety, particularly when community pressure demands exclusion?
- What leadership competencies are most critical when managing high-profile incidents that draw attention from parents, media, trustees, and Alberta Education simultaneously?
- What structures, partnerships, or protocols in your school authority ensure a coordinated, consistent crisis response—and where might gaps remain?
- How can transparent, values-driven communication be used to build or rebuild trust after a public incident involving aggression in schools?
- How can school authorities integrate wellness supports, trauma-informed debriefing, and professional learning into their ongoing crisis management and inclusion frameworks?



Case Study 3 - Prairie Valley High School Context

Background Information

- Prairie Valley High School is a Grade K–12 school serving approximately 850 students in a midsize Alberta community. The school is well known for its **inclusive programming**, strong extracurricular participation, and family-like atmosphere. The school authority has invested heavily in digital learning technologies, emphasizing innovation and student engagement, but has also faced growing concerns about **social media misuse and online harassment** among adolescents.
- Over the past several years, leaders across the division have noticed that **student conflicts increasingly originate online**, often outside school hours, and then carry over into classrooms, hallways, and buses. These situations have become more complex with the rise of anonymous social media platforms and instant image and video sharing.
- In response, the school authority launched a Digital Citizenship and Well-Being Framework. The framework emphasizes respectful technology use, empathy, and restorative approaches to conflict.
- Despite these proactive measures, educators report feeling ill-equipped to manage the speed and intensity of online conflicts that escalate into in-person aggression. School leaders are often left to navigate heightened community emotions, privacy concerns, and police involvement—all while maintaining a focus on learning and inclusion.
- In this context, Prairie Valley High School became the centre of a high-profile incident that tested every level of the system: school operations, crisis communication, community trust, and students' and staff's mental health and safety.



Case Study 3 - Prairie Valley High School Application

Incident Overview

- In early April, a conflict that began on Snapchat between two groups of Grade 10 students quickly escalated from teasing to targeted cyberbullying and threats. Over the weekend, students exchanged insults, circulated manipulated photos, and tagged peers in degrading posts. Several group chats were created, amplifying the conflict through screenshots, name-calling, and inclusion of additional students.
- By Sunday evening, parents began contacting the principal, expressing concern about possible retaliation at school. The principal notified the school resource officer and division leadership, who advised increased supervision and a staff briefing for Monday morning.
- When students arrived the next day, tension was evident. Arguments broke out in the hallways, and teachers and support staff intervened multiple times, reporting escalating verbal aggression to administration.
- At lunch, two female students from opposing groups confronted one another near the school's front entrance. The verbal dispute rapidly turned physical, drawing a crowd of onlookers. Within moments, several other students joined the altercation. The situation became chaotic. Bystanders shouted and filmed while staff attempted to intervene without success.
- A nearby bus driver stepped in to help separate students and was accidentally struck, sustaining a mild concussion. Several students involved in the fight required minor medical attention, and two bystanders were also injured.
- The principal called 911, and police arrived within minutes, detaining two students and dispersing the crowd.
- Videos of the incident circulated almost immediately on TikTok and Instagram, spreading widely within the hour. Misinformation quickly followed, including exaggerated claims of "gang violence" and "multiple serious injuries," which fueled anxiety among parents and community members. By evening, the school and division office had received hundreds of phone calls, emails, and social media messages demanding information and reassurance.

Case Study 3 - Prairie Valley High School Study

System-Level Learning

- The incident underscored that digital conflict is system work and not simply a school-level problem. In the months following, the division:
 - expanded its digital citizenship and well-being framework to include parent education sessions and staff training on digital forensics and early conflict detection
 - partnered with local RCMP to co-develop a Social Media Crisis Response Protocol
 - introduced restorative practices training for administrators to address relational harm
 - reviewed OHS and critical incident reporting to ensure all adult injuries were logged and debriefed through a trauma-informed lens
 - strengthened communications procedures for faster, more unified division-level messaging during crises

Successes

- Staff followed established crisis procedures, securing nearby students and ensuring medical care for the injured. The principal maintained calm communication with emergency responders and police.
- Division leaders deployed the wellness and crisis response teams to provide on-site support for staff, students, and the bus driver. Counselling services were made available for several days following the incident.
- The superintendent's office released a public statement within 2 hours, acknowledging the incident, affirming safety, and outlining the school's commitment to restorative follow-up.
- The division initiated a multi-agency debrief with the RCMP, Alberta Health Services, and the school's parent council to identify both prevention and recovery strategies.

Challenges

- Multiple videos of the fight circulated widely, often with misleading captions. The speed of online sharing outpaced the division's ability to correct misinformation, heightening community tension.
- Parents of injured students demanded accountability, and several questioned whether school leaders could have prevented the fight given the early warning signs.
- Several staff members and students reported distress, hypervigilance, and difficulty returning to normal routines. The bus driver required time off and formal workplace safety documentation under OHS legislation.
- The incident became front-page news locally, and Alberta Education requested a detailed report. Division leaders faced pressure to demonstrate strong leadership, transparency, and empathy in the public eye.

Case Study 3 - Prairie Valley High School

Synthesis



- How can system education leaders build capacity among staff to recognize and de-escalate online conflict before it enters the school environment?
- What communication protocols ensure timely, unified messaging to families, trustees, and Alberta Education during public incidents?
- How can restorative and relational approaches help communities recover trust after violent or viral events?
- What supports are necessary for injured or traumatized staff and students following high-stress incidents?
- How might school authorities leverage partnerships (e.g., police, mental health, digital safety organizations) to create safer digital and physical spaces for students?

Case Study 4 - Willow Creek School Context

Background Information

- Willow Creek School is a K–12 rural school serving approximately 500 students. The school is known for its close-knit community and long-serving staff, many of whom have deep relationships with families across generations. The school authority has prioritized **inclusive learning environments**, encouraging staff to support students with complex needs in their neighbourhood schools.
- In recent years, the school authority introduced new *Behaviour Support and Safety Guidelines*. These guidelines emphasize proactive regulation; clear communication; safe, ethical de-escalation practices; and strict limits on the use of physical restraint.
- Despite these expectations, implementation has been uneven across the division. Whereas most staff are confident in proactive supports, some hold outdated beliefs about discipline and control.
- These inconsistencies in adult approach and understanding created system vulnerability, which was an issue that would become apparent during a single afternoon science lesson.



Case Study 4 - Willow Creek School Application

Incident Overview

- At Willow Creek, one Grade 7 student, Liam, had a diagnosed emotional-behavioural disorder and a behaviour support plan (BSP) developed collaboratively with his caregivers and specialists. The plan included proactive cues, movement breaks, and nonverbal redirection strategies. Staff were advised to avoid “power struggles” and use calm, low-tone communication.
- However, over time, inconsistent follow-through eroded predictability for Liam. Newer staff members were unfamiliar with his plan and occasionally used sarcasm or public correction to prompt compliance. These strategies inadvertently triggered his defensiveness and dysregulation.
- On a Monday afternoon, during a science lab activity, Liam became frustrated when he was asked to redo a project step. The teacher, already managing a noisy class, responded sharply, “You know the rules. Stop arguing and get back to work.”
- Liam muttered under his breath and pushed materials off the table. Another teacher, passing by, entered the room and said, “Don’t start this again, Liam.” When Liam began shouting, the teacher moved closer, attempting to direct him physically back to his seat.
- Within moments, the situation escalated. Liam stood up, kicked his chair, and shouted that he wanted to leave. The teacher blocked the doorway, saying, “You’re not going anywhere until you calm down.” Liam tried to move past, and the teacher grabbed his arm to stop him. Two other staff members arrived to help but used physical restraint without following the division’s safety protocol.
- Liam screamed, attempted to pull free, and both he and a staff member fell to the ground. Other students witnessed the incident, some recording it on their phones. Liam was later escorted to the office, crying and shaking.
- During the principal’s debriefing with the teacher, the teacher shared that he had felt he “had to win” in the moment and believed that backing down would undermine his authority in front of the class.
- The next day, Liam’s parents filed a complaint alleging unsafe restraint and emotional harm. Several staff members reported distress from witnessing the event, and the superintendent initiated an internal review under OHS and student safety policies.

Case Study 4 - Willow Creek School Study

System-Level Learning

- The incident catalyzed significant system-wide improvement:
 - mandatory de-escalation and restraint training for all staff
 - clearer behaviour plan monitoring processes at the division level
 - emphasis on adult wellness and emotional regulation in staff learning
 - collaborative repair processes with families to rebuild trust
 - in-depth review of Alberta Education's guidelines around seclusion, restraint, and time-outs, which also led to updating administrative procedures
 - integration of Ross Greene's (2016) "Kids do well if they can" philosophy into all behavioural frameworks to reinforce empathy and skill-building over compliance
- The teacher's reflection shared during the debrief with the principal revealed a critical factor in the escalation: the adult's need to assert control outweighed the de-escalation strategies outlined in Liam's behaviour support plan.

Successes

- The principal immediately contacted division leadership, ensuring all required documentation, parent communication, and staff debriefing took place within 24 hours.
- The superintendent's team launched a non-punitive review focused on learning, not blame, and included OHS, inclusive learning, and external behavioural specialists.
- The division recognized the need for stronger adult regulation training and re-anchored professional learning around evidence-based crisis prevention frameworks.

Challenges

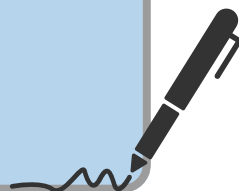
- Staff reflection revealed a lack of confidence in managing high-intensity behaviour without control-based approaches. The "poking the bear" dynamic—adult escalation through tone, proximity, or sarcasm—was common across several classrooms.
- Failure to follow the BSP directly contributed to the escalation. This raised critical questions about accountability, substitute orientation, and system monitoring.
- Liam experienced trauma related to restraint, while staff described guilt and emotional fatigue. Other students reported fear and confusion, having witnessed adults restraining a peer.
- The incident triggered parental complaints, a temporary OHS investigation, and reputational harm to the school's image as a safe, inclusive environment.

Case Study 4 - Willow Creek School

Synthesis



- How can system education leaders ensure fidelity in implementing individualized behaviour plans across all staff?
- What system structures support adult regulation and reduce the likelihood of adult-triggered escalation?
- How can leadership balance learning-focused accountability with staff psychological safety after critical incidents?
- What are the ethical and procedural expectations around restraint use in Alberta schools, and how can these be reinforced proactively?
- How can school systems shift culture from reactive discipline to proactive compassion when managing complex student behaviour?



Pulling It All Together



Use the following questions to connect your learning to your own context and your role as a system education leader. You can capture your responses and thoughts on the notes pages.

Beliefs and Mindsets

- What beliefs about student behaviour and capability guide your leadership decisions?
- How do your responses and the culture you shape reflect the principle that “kids do well if they can”?
- How might your school authority’s current practices reflect or challenge this mindset?

Leadership and Accountability

- How do system leaders create the structures, communication pathways, and psychological safety needed for staff to act consistently and compassionately under stress?
- In what ways do your school authority’s policies and professional learning priorities support or constrain trauma-informed, inclusive practice?

Coherence and Communication

- How do you ensure coherence between school-level actions and system-level expectations during and after a crisis?
- What strategies strengthen communication among school leaders, trustees, Alberta Education, and the community, especially when emotions run high or incidents are public?

Wellness and Capacity-Building

- How do you attend to staff wellness and emotional regulation as a system-level leadership responsibility?
- What proactive supports (coaching, debriefing, reflective supervision) exist to help adults recover, learn, and grow after a behavioural crisis?

Learning and System Improvement

- How can school authorities embed ongoing reflection from critical incidents into system learning processes (e.g., data review, communities of practice, coaching cycles)?
- What one action could you take to strengthen system coherence and adult capacity to prevent, de-escalate, or respond to aggression compassionately and consistently?

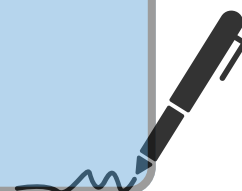
Pulling It All Together



Use the following questions to connect your learning to your own context and role as a system education leader.

- Which of the four case studies resonated most with your current context?
- How has your thinking about aggression, inclusion, and system education leadership evolved through these discussions?
- What conversation will you continue when you return to your division, and with whom?
- What is one action you will commit to as a result of participating in this Learning Lab?

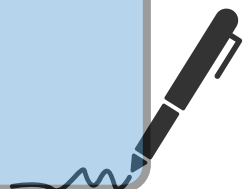
As you carry this learning forward, remember:
**Systemic change begins with adult reflection.
Every compassionate, consistent leadership
action strengthens the culture of safety, trust,
and belonging that makes learning possible.**



Notes



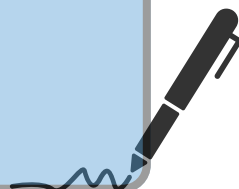
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Notes



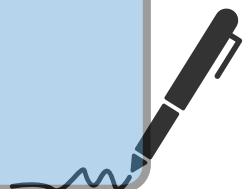
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Notes



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