



Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants in Alberta

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*College of Alberta School Superintendents
Suite 1300, First Edmonton Place
10665 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5J 3S9
P: 780.540.9205
E: admin@cass.ab.ca
www.cass.ab.ca*



Abstract

This study examines shared practices for enhancing the skills of educational assistants (EAs) in Alberta, with a particular focus on strategies that support recruitment and retention. The research employed a mixed-methods design, combining a review of relevant literature with data collected through an online survey and a subsequent focus group of system education leaders. Fourteen school authorities participated in the survey, representing approximately 17% of Alberta’s student population (Government of Alberta, 2025). A primary finding was the significant challenge of recruiting EAs in school authorities, as all survey respondents indicated it was difficult or very difficult to hire qualified EAs. Retention was also reported as difficult by respondents. EAs are highly valued for providing instructional, curricular, and emotional support, particularly to students with exceptional learning needs. When hiring, school authorities ranked interpersonal skills as the most important requirement, but current professional learning needs focused on specialized knowledge and abilities related to individualized education plans and assistive technology. Focus group participants stressed that EAs were challenged by the increasing complexity of student and family needs (including trauma and mental health). Although local authorities employed creative methods like peer coaching and collaborative professional learning, structural and systemic barriers, such as limited time for collaboration and resource allocation, persisted. The study concludes that to maximize the impact of EAs, systemic and provincial coordination of resources and expertise is crucial to building capacity across all school authorities.

Keywords: educational assistants, professional learning, special education, K–12 education, system educational leadership

Acknowledgement

As a provincial organization, CASS acknowledges that we are on traditional territory, gathering grounds, meeting place, and travelling route of the Treaty 6 First Nations, the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Dene, and Nakota Nations; Treaty 7 First Nations, the Blackfoot Confederacy of the Siksika, Kainai and Piikani Nations, the Îyârhe Nakoda Nation of the Chiniki, Bears paw and Goodstoney Nations, and the Tsuut'ina Nation; Treaty 8 First Nations of the Cree, Dene Tha, Dane-zaa and Denesuline Nations, and the traditional homeland of the Métis Nation. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit of the past footsteps who have shaped this land and those of the present and future who will continue to shape it for centuries to come.

CASS is committed to restoring and honouring the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and strongly believes that truth must be acknowledged to move forward to reconciliation. Engaging in respectful, responsible, and reciprocal relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities is the path forward to reconciliation. CASS calls upon collective communities to build a stronger understanding and relationship of all the people who dwell on this land we call home.

Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants in Alberta

This study examines how shared practices identified by Alberta school authorities can be leveraged to strengthen the role of educational assistants (EAs). These practices are grounded in supporting and enhancing the skills and knowledge of EAs to promote student learning and development. The study includes a brief review of relevant literature, along with survey and focus group data collected from participants working in Alberta school authorities.

Purpose

The purposes of the Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants study were to:

- identify strategies to enhance the skills of EAs
- explore strategies for the recruitment and retention of EAs

A survey and focus group approach was determined to be best suited to obtain the necessary data during the period from September to November 2025. An additional element in the purpose was to explore the strategies for recruitment and retention of EAs in underserved areas of the Alberta. Given the small number of respondents for the survey, it was impossible to determine meaningful results for underserved areas of the province, although the challenges rural school authorities face are mentioned. Data collection and analysis tools used were MS Forms, Excel, Notebook LM, and QualCoder (an open-source qualitative software package including ChatGPT tools).

Literature Scan

This literature scan examines the roles of EAs in a variety of educational settings, primarily in Canada but also internationally. The term “educational assistant” is applied in the Alberta context. The EA role has been referred to as teacher or classroom assistant, teacher or classroom aide, para-professional, learning support worker, and other terms (Blatchford et al., 2009; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Groom & Rose, 2005). Each term used to identify EAs is connected with an educational, historical, and political perspective where the individual may be required to have specific employment skills or knowledge, be assigned specific roles in working with a student or group of students, and be directed by a teacher or a team of educational professionals, such as speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, or behavioural specialists. In Alberta, the term used to refer to individuals who provide specific and often specialized support to children is “educational assistants” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2023; Government of Alberta, 2024).

The primary focus of this study was to determine through literature and perspectives of system education leaders about how to “leverage” the role of EAs. The term “leverage,” in this case, means to examine ways of enhancing the skills and knowledge of EAs to achieve optimal educational outcomes for all students. Although EAs generally support students with special educational needs, all students in the education system benefit through helping such students achieve their learning goals

(Government of Alberta, 2024).

Roles and Responsibilities of EAs

Although specific roles and responsibilities EAs play in Canada and globally may vary, their core responsibilities are similar. In general terms, EAs provide instructional and curricular support to students under the direction of a teacher (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Government of Alberta, 2018). They may provide direct reinforcement activities to individuals or small groups, focusing on highly guided tasks that may be physical, cognitive, or verbal (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023; Conn, 2019; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Farrand & Deeg, 2021). They also provide pedagogical supports related to the educational goals and expected outcomes for a student or group of students (Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Conn, 2019; Corral-Granados, 2024). In some cases, EAs provide specific aid for special education needs that are physical, cognitive, behavioural, social, or emotional (Blatchford et al., 2009; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015). The roles and responsibilities of EAs are valued and significant to the educational goals of students and educators.

A key factor of EA effectiveness is the ability to form close, positive relationships with students. They are often trusted adults with a positive rapport with students, often including some of the most challenging students in a classroom (Conboy, 2021). EAs are a source of support for students who rely on them to get through challenges (Groom & Rose, 2005). They may also provide specific students with tools and mechanisms to cope emotionally beyond academic or cognitive tasks (McEwen, 2019). In addition, EAs can have a positive impact on student progress when

they are specifically trained and prepared to deliver structured interventions with guidance from the teacher and school (Alborz et al., 2009, as cited in Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Webster et al., 2013).

The fundamental role of EAs is to support teachers in carrying out the educational mission of the school and to enhance the educational experiences of students (Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015). This role includes supporting instruction, curriculum, students, and the teacher (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023). Common responsibilities for EAs fall into the following categories, all of which are directed by a teacher and/or an educational team:

- direct instruction and reinforcement of activities to further the educational program (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023; Blatchford et al., 2009; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015)
- support for students with exceptional learning needs (Bosanquet & Radford, 2019; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Webster et al., 2013)
- curriculum implementation of specific skills or tasks (Bosanquet & Radford, 2019; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Groom & Rose, 2005; Webster et al., 2013)
- classroom activities, routines, and reinforcement of key tasks (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023; Farrand & Deeg, 2021; Rochovská et al., 2024)
- specific strategies related to curricular, emotional, and relational support (Government of Alberta, 2018; Lewis, 2025)

Along with pedagogical and instructional activities, EAs also provide non-academic support that can be crucial for some students. These activities are also often directed by a teacher or learning team:

- EAs are recognized for their role in supporting children’s mental health, nurturing close relationships that foster trust and empathy. Children frequently approach EAs rather than teachers when they have personal problems (Conboy, 2021; Deer & Heringer, 2023; Government of Alberta, 2024; Groom & Rose, 2005).
- EAs provide support for students that often involves simply talking and listening, normalizing worries, and providing a constant, caring presence that some see as a parenting role or a secure person for discussing sensitive topics (Conboy, 2021; Government of Alberta, 2024; Groom & Rose, 2005).
- EAs help maintain classroom order by constantly monitoring students, keeping them on task, and reinforcing established behavioural expectations (Blatchford et al., 2009; Chopra et al., 2024; Groom & Rose, 2005).
- EAs assist teachers by managing materials and resources, creating displays, and other tasks that may relieve teacher workload (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2023; Chopra et al., 2024; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015).
- EAs who share cultural and linguistic backgrounds with students often serve as crucial cultural bridges and mediators between the teacher, students, and their families. (Chopra et al., 2024; Farrand & Deeg, 2021; Villeneuve, 2009).

Recruitment Practices

Within the literature, Groom and Rose (2005) provided the most developed and extensive activities outlining the recruitment and hiring of EAs. They, with information from others, identified the following activities related to the cultivating and recruitment of EAs to school-based positions:

- recruiting locally by encouraging parents or local people connected to the school. This strategy is particularly important for schools looking for individuals with indigenous background or knowledge (Deer & Heringer, 2023)
- seeking EA candidates who have experience working with specific types of students, whether physical, behavioural, cognitive, or emotional (Groom & Rose, 2005)
- prioritizing personal qualities (Groom & Rose, 2005)
- grow your own practices (Chopra et al., 2024), which can be started with individuals with limited knowledge or experience, but with time, commitment, and dedication, those individuals become highly skilled, which may pave the path to further education and credentialing of EAs

Retention Practices

The actions that school authority leaders must take to retain and support EAs are varied. Several productive actions were described in the literature. An important characteristic was the expectation that EAs would continue to learn and grow.

Providing Professional Learning/Professional Development

Providing locally developed professional learning modules for EAs can be helpful and cost effective, however specific and robust training models and structural supports are helpful. Developing knowledge and skills regarding pedagogical practices with students, such as scaffolding, explaining actions, elaborating actions, and defending responses, can have positive educational impact (Bosanquet & Radford, 2019).

Specialized and targeted professional learning may be necessary or desired, but may be limited by time set aside for EAs and the cost of such learning opportunities (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023; Chopra et al., 2024).

Remuneration and Working Conditions

Addressing working conditions, including financial commitment and support through the provision of collaborative time (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010) and pay (Chopra et al., 2024; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015), was considered important to the retention of EAs and recognition of their value to schools.

Communication Protocols and Standard Procedures

Providing EAs with dedicated time for planning and communication with teachers and related educational professionals was critical to their success with students (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015).

Respect: Participation with Recognition

- leadership buy-in (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010; Tristani et al., 2020)

- recognition of time spent collaborating and in joint program development (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010)
- establishment of communities of practice to provide ongoing support (pedagogical, emotional, social) to EAs (Corral-Granados, 2024; Jollimore & Fisher, 2016)

Structural and Organizational Factors

Although EAs' commitment is high and aspirations for the educational and emotional growth and development of children are evident, structural and organizational factors may prevent them from achieving the hoped-for goals with children and teachers (Corral-Granados, 2024). Some emerging factors are:

Equipping Teachers for Collaboration

Teachers often feel ill-equipped to provide instruction for the diverse learners in their classrooms (Lyons, 2012). This perceived lack of capacity often leads to the assignment of instructional responsibility to the least trained staff: the EA. Initiatives must focus on building classroom teacher capacity for inclusive instruction and working effectively with other staff in classrooms (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023; Lyons, 2012).

Reciprocal Trust and Autonomy

Effective collaboration relies on team members' ability to respect and trust each other's knowledge, competence, and experience. EAs should have the autonomy of action and freedom of judgment necessary to perform their roles, which reinforces their professional self-esteem. Effective collaboration should create space for reflection

on practice (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010).

Rural Versus Urban Settings

Population density can influence inclusive education placements. Some research suggests students with autism spectrum disorder in rural areas are more likely to learn in inclusive settings due to a lack of specialized settings that may be found in urban areas (Irvine et al., 2010; Minuk et al., 2024).

Administrative and Leadership Buy-In

The success of collaborative models where EAs are included as integral to the education program of special needs students, is heavily reliant on active administrative support and leadership (Lynch & Ferguson, 2010; Tristani et al., 2020).

Research

This study involved the collection of data from participants in system education leadership roles within Alberta school authorities.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this project:

- How do Alberta school authorities recruit and retain EAs?
- What strategies are in place to enhance the skills of EAs in Alberta school authorities?
- What are the professional learning needs of EAs in Alberta school authorities?

Methodology

An online survey was determined to be the most direct way of collecting information from system education leaders in school authorities. The survey instrument was developed and pilot tested with leaders from three Alberta school authorities. Feedback from respondents in two school authorities informed revisions to the survey (see Appendix A). The finalized survey collected descriptive information about respondents' school authorities; all data were anonymized. Open-ended responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach involving systematic categorization and theme development (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The survey also invited respondents to participate in an online focus group. The goal of the focus group was to gain a deeper understanding of survey responses and to determine professional learning/development activities that were thought to be most

effective. The focus group meeting was transcribed, and participants were provided the opportunity to review the transcript and make clarifications as needed. The finalized transcript was analyzed using a process of categorization and thematic analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Research Findings

Survey Results

The Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants survey was advertised in *CASS Connects*, an e-newsletter sent to all CASS members. The invitation to participate was posted and 14 participants from school authorities responded. CASS regulated members (system education leaders) were asked to complete the survey. The survey respondents did not reply to all the questions, but where possible, the number of respondents is identified in the findings. The responses were collected between September 23 and October 9, 2025.

The survey respondents represented school authorities across the province. The respondents' school authorities represented 128,000 students, or approximately 17% of Alberta's student population (Government of Alberta, 2025). Respondents indicated that they collectively employed 2,127 EAs at the time of the survey.

Respondents were asked about the ease with which EAs were recruited and retained in the school authority (Figure 1). All respondents stated that it was very difficult or difficult to recruit and hire qualified EAs. In terms of retaining qualified EAs, just over 58% indicated that it was very difficult or difficult, 25% indicated that it was neither difficult nor easy, and almost 17% of respondents stated that it was easy to retain EAs.

Figure 1

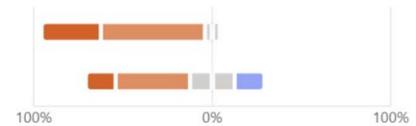
Relative Ease of Recruiting or Retaining Educational Assistants (N = 12)

7. Please rate each statement according level of difficulty or ease.

● Very difficult ● Difficult ● Neither difficult nor easy ● Easy ● Very easy

It is easy to recruit and hire qualified educational assistants.

It is easy to retain qualified educational assistants.



Survey respondents were asked to rate the internal and external professional learning and skill enhancement opportunities EAs had in their school authorities (Figure 2). Internal opportunities were those events held or were organized for EAs within the school authority. External opportunities were those events provided to EAs outside of the local school authority offerings or independently sought by EAs outside of the regular jurisdictional offerings. For internal opportunities, 50% of respondents offered 1–3 opportunities to EAs per year. The other 50% of respondents offered from 4 to more than 7 opportunities per year. There was no indication of the duration of the professional learning sessions. Further, just over 83% of respondents stated that EAs were provided between 1 and 3 external learning opportunities over the span of a year. Almost 17% of respondents indicated that EAs had between 3 and 6 external learning opportunities per year.

Figure 2

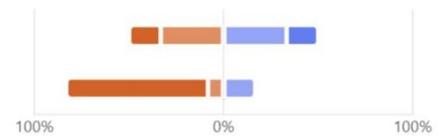
Opportunities for Professional Learning for Educational Assistants (N = 12)

8. How would you rate the opportunity for professional learning and skill enhancement for EAs:

● Very limited opportunities (1/year) ● Few opportunities (2-3/year) ● Some opportunities (4-6/year) ● Many opportunities (7+ /year)

In your school authority?

External to your school authority



When asked how EAs were assigned to their positions, survey respondents indicated that about one third of them were assigned to specific students. About 38% of EAs were assigned to a classroom or group of students. About a quarter of EAs were assigned to a school, and one school authority respondent indicated that EAs were assigned to a specific teacher.

Survey respondents were asked to rank order the skills EAs required for positions available in the school authority (Figure 3). This ranking was not straightforward, as multiple variables in the knowledge and skills required, the assignment contemplated, and attributes expected of EAs were highly contextual. With this challenge in mind, respondents provided the following ranking of the importance of required skills:

1. Interpersonal skills and values (collaboration with teacher, students, parents; empathy and respect for diverse learners)

2. Specialized knowledge and abilities (familiarity with individualized education plans, assistive technologies, adaptive equipment)
3. Communication skills (verbal, written)
4. Instructional support skills (adapt or modify learning activities for specific students, scaffolding)

Several comments were made in the “Other” category for the question about required skills. School authority respondents stated expectations regarding specialized skills such as non-violent crisis intervention, working with students with complex needs (social-emotional, mental health, behaviour, physical), trauma-informed practices, and fostering an inclusive value or belief system.

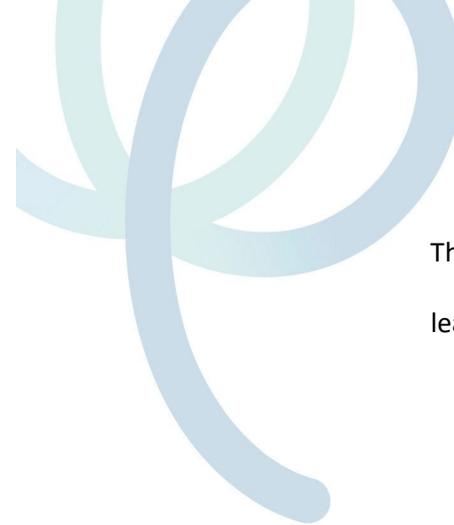
Figure 3

Rank Order of Skills Education Assistant Require When Hired (N = 12)

10. Please rank, in order of importance, the educational assistant skills required when a person is **hired** to a position? Recognizing that there are varied knowledge and skills required for each position, **consider your current needs** in the school authority.



Survey respondents were asked to identify the professional learning requirements of EAs who were already working within the school authority (Figure 4).



This question was to identify priorities for learning and skills for EAs. The ranking of learning requirements were:

1. Specialized knowledge and abilities (familiarity with individualized education plans, assistive technologies, adaptive equipment)
2. Interpersonal skills (collaboration with teacher, students, parents; empathy and respect for diverse learners)
3. Instructional support skills (adapt or modify learning activities for specific students)
4. Communication skills (verbal, written)

In the "Other" category, leaders from school authorities identified EA learning and skill development regarding student regulation, understanding sensory needs, supporting students who have experienced trauma, and focusing on inclusive values and beliefs.

Figure 4

Rank Order of Required Professional Learning Opportunities (N = 12)

12. Please rank, in order of importance, the **professional learning opportunities** required for educational assistant skills or knowledge development in your school authority? Recognizing that there are varied knowledge and skills required for each position, consider the **current professional learning needs** for educational assistants in the school authority.



The remaining questions were open ended, generating qualitative comments from survey respondents. All comments were aggregated, and the content was categorized into themes by the researcher. Table 1 provides a summary of the questions and most common themes.

Table 1

Most Common Themes From Open-Ended Survey Questions (N = 14)

Survey Question	Themes in Order of Most Common Responses
Q14 What actions does your school authority take to recruit EAs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advertising (overwhelmingly the most common theme) Word of mouth
Q15 What actions does your school authority take to retain educational assistants?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional development and learning opportunities Supportive work environment and culture Valuing EAs through recognition and appreciation events, compensation and benefits, wellness and work-life balance
Q16 In what ways do you enhance the skills of educational assistants in your school authority?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structured professional development time On-the-job and experiential learning/ coaching Collaboration with external specialists and agencies Use of online learning (often structured in modules)
Q17 What professional learning activities are provided for your educational assistants? Please list titles of internal opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Varied internal professional learning opportunities (with local school authority staff) Specialized training focused on student needs – Parabytes, online modules, Edmonton Public School EA Learning Modules, AHS modules, The Consortium, learning specialists Regularly scheduled and paid professional learning time Collaborative and multi-disciplinary learning – with teachers and specialists
Q18 What PL activities are provided for your EAs? Please list titles of external opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External specialist support (e.g., psychologists, OTs, PTs, SLPs) Structured and paid professional learning opportunities Conferences, keynotes, and specialist events School and principal-driven access and individualization
Q19 What are the most successful activities that enhance the skills of EAs in your SA?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding student needs through varied professional learning activities, peer coaching, and online learning modules Targeted professional development and training including differentiating what EAs need based on the local context Collaborative professional development with teachers
Q20 What are the current most needed professional learning requirements for educational assistants with positions in the school authority? Please list descriptive topics of professional learning/development needed at this time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborative time for professional learning Community of practice development Use of structured case study models Promotion of solution-focused thinking

Note. EA = educational assistant; OT = occupational therapist; PT = physiotherapist; SLP = speech and language pathologist; SA = school authority.



Focus Group Results

A focus group took place for those survey respondents willing to set aside time for a more in-depth conversation about EAs. Nine system education leaders representing eight school authorities participated. The questions for the focus group (Appendix B) were sent to participants ahead of time. The meeting was transcribed, and participants were provided the opportunity to clarify and revise their comments. The finalized transcript was analyzed through a process of categorization and thematic analysis, resulting in the identification of the most common themes:

Increasing Complexity of Student and Family Needs

Participants describe complexity in student profiles and family situations, with students presenting more learning, behavioural, medical, social, and emotional challenges than students who did not have special education needs. Complexity was nuanced and often context-dependent, encompassing trauma, socioeconomic instability, family dysfunction, mental health issues, and a variety of medical or psychological diagnoses. The notion of “complexity” also extended to school-family dynamics, where EAs are engaged as front-line workers trying to support demanding and nuanced family needs.

Professional Learning, Training, and Capacity Building for EAs

A central focus was placed on the need for foundational and ongoing professional learning for EAs. Innovative training approaches, such as peer coaching, mentorship, job-embedded learning, professional development sessions, and communities of practice, were identified as important. Challenges to providing high-

quality, sustained training included limited financial and time resources, ensuring access in rural/remote areas, and maintaining training momentum in the absence of unusual events like labour disruptions.

Collaboration and Multidisciplinary Approaches

The importance of collaboration among EAs, teachers, leaders, specialist staff, and, where possible, external agencies was raised. Mechanisms included communities of practice, collaborative inquiry cycles, team meetings, and structured consultation from multidisciplinary teams (such as speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, behaviour specialists). Although collaboration was identified as essential for responding to complex cases and building collective efficacy, systemic barriers, especially in rural areas, made multidisciplinary approaches challenging to implement consistently.

System-Level and Structural Challenges

Many participants expressed frustration at structural barriers including shortages of funding, insufficient staff, recruitment and retention difficulties (especially for rural/remote schools), lack of time for professional development, and the fractured nature of current professional supports. There was a strong call for systemic, province-wide strategies and government coordination rather than relying on individual school divisions to “go it alone.” Sustainability and equity were identified as major concerns, emphasizing the necessity of a coherent, well-resourced system that supports EAs, and staff in general, to meet the diverse and growing needs of students and families.

Peer-to-Peer Support and Mentorship

Peer learning and support, through mentorships, roundtables, coaching from senior EAs, lunch and learns, and less formal networking, were stated as essential for EA professional growth and morale. Peer structures foster confidence, real-time problem-solving, and practical sharing of field-tested strategies. These approaches were particularly valuable when relationships were non-hierarchical, providing psychological safety for new or less experienced EAs to ask questions and experiment.

These five themes most often emerged in the focus group transcript, reflecting systemic, practice-based, and relational aspects of the current contexts for EAs.

Discussion

The literature review and findings of the school authority survey and focus group brought together several important insights for leveraging the role of EAs in Alberta. Key elements in terms of recruitment and retaining EAs, emerging professional expectations and learning needs, and the wider political context were raised.

Recruitment and Retention

From the survey and focus group findings, recruiting and hiring qualified EA candidates poses a challenge for school authorities. School authority personnel tended to hire EA candidates who were available immediately with the intention of providing necessary and specialized professional learning opportunities to address specific student needs. Challenges between rural and urban settings were also evident. Hiring qualified EA candidates for specific locations was problematic for many rural school authorities.

School authorities approach retaining EAs in various ways. A common theme was to begin with the recognition that EAs are part of an integrated and valued team working to support students with specialized needs. How school authorities show recognition and value varied, and having EAs identify for themselves what they value may be important for school authority personnel to undertake. Though it was common among respondents to communicate the value EAs play in the education system, structural and systemic challenges such as the lack of collaborative time, resource allocation, pay, and professional learning opportunities remain in place.

EA Professional and Learning Needs

School authorities use their resources creatively to support the learning needs of EAs. With limited resources (personnel, expertise, finances), they provide various forms of learning opportunities for EAs. School authority respondents would like to provide more opportunities. Activities that seem to be promising within the literature and according to the focus group respondents are peer coaching, collaborative professional learning with teachers, developing communities of practice, access to specialists, online learning modules, and paying for professional learning time.

Social and Political Challenges

The level of commitment of EAs to student learning and success was recognized as high. Despite this positive intention, challenges exist to meeting the educational needs of the students they work with. Some limitations were described in previous sections. What was evident was the call for coordinated resources and learning opportunities at a provincial scale. Smaller school authorities have many of the same

needs for qualified EAs, however due to systemic barriers, they cannot access the necessary learning opportunities to enhance EA skills and knowledge. Provincial coordination to build EA capacity through professional learning is considered to be a worthy pursuit.

The role of principals and system education leaders in central school authority offices is critical to the success of EAs. For example, how resources are allocated within a school or school authority is a leadership decision. Also, how EA time is allocated and recognized is a leadership decision. The literature and research respondents identified that when leaders were supportive of EAs, student learning was enhanced.

Conclusion

This research study provided a brief overview of literature relevant to EAs, their importance in educational tasks and their roles working with students and teachers in Alberta. The research information highlighted specific opportunities provided for EAs, as well as their learning needs and the province-wide challenges that are evident. School authorities in Alberta are working within their means to enhance the role and skills of EAs. More could be accomplished in leveraging the role of EAs if systemic and provincial resources and expertise were coordinated and made available to all school authorities.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

* Required

Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants This is a survey designed to collect information about strategies school authorities use to enhance the skills of Educational Assistants who provide support in addressing the complexity of students' learning needs. The survey will also gather information on the strategies used to recruit and retain educational assistants. The information will be compiled, analyzed, and shared in a research report to CASS members in early 2026. Please complete ONE survey per school authority.

Introduction This College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) survey is intended to collect current information regarding educational assistants (EAs) and the ways in which school authorities work with and enhance the roles EAs play in classrooms and schools. The data will be collated, analyzed and shared with CASS members. The research information will also be used to highlight and share the strategies school authorities use to enhance the roles of EAs. The information will be shared as a research report and as presentations in a variety of venues for the benefit of system education leaders. The survey participants will not be identified and any identifiable information will be anonymized. Only the researcher will have information on the school authorities that have completed the survey. The survey is voluntary, however, all school authorities are encouraged to respond. The responses will be helpful to other school authorities! *System level data you will need to access for the survey:* current student population, number of EA positions, recruitment activities, retention activities, listing of professional learning opportunities for EAs. Once you have compiled your school authority data, the survey will take about 30 minutes to complete. If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Dr. Edgar Schmidt (edgar.schmidt@cass.ab.ca).

1. What is the name of your school authority?
2. To which CASS **Zone** does your school authority belong or is located within? *
 - 1
 - 2&3
 - 4
 - 5
 - 6

Other

3. If "Other" was chosen in Question 2, please identify the region your school authority is located.

4. What is the current student population of your school authority? *

5. What is the current Full Time Equivalent (FTE) of educational assistants in the school authority?

6. What number of people fill the EA positions in your school authority currently?

7. Please rate each statement according to level of difficulty or ease. *

	Very difficult	Difficult	Neither difficult nor easy	Easy	Very Easy
It is easy to recruit and hire qualified educational assistants	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is easy to retain qualified educational assistants.?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. How would you rate the opportunity for professional learning and skill enhancement for EAs: *

	Very limited opportunities (1/year)	Few opportunities (2-3/year)	Some opportunities (4-6/year)	Many Opportunities (7+/year)
In your school authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
External to your school authority	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. How are EAs assigned to their positions? Check all that apply*

To a teacher

- To a student
- To a classroom (group of students)
- To a school

10. Please rank, in order of importance, the educational assistant skills required when a person is **hired** to a position? Recognizing that there are varied knowledge and skills required for each position, **consider your current needs** in the school authority. *

Communication skills (verbal, written)

Interpersonal skills (collaboration with teacher, students, parents; empathy and respect for diverse learners)

Instructional support skills (adapt or modify learning activities for specific students)

Specialized knowledge and abilities (familiarity with Individualized Education Plans, assistive technologies, adaptive equipment)

Other

11. If you chose "Other" in the previous question, please describe the skills or knowledge required when **hiring** educational assistants.

12. Please rank, in order of importance, the **professional learning opportunities** required for educational assistant skills or knowledge development in your school authority? Recognizing that there are varied knowledge and skills required for each position, consider the **current professional learning needs** for educational assistants in the school authority. *

Communication skills (verbal, written)

Interpersonal skills (collaboration with teacher, students, parents. empathy and respect for diverse learners)

Instructional support skills (adapt or modify learning activities for specific students)

Specialized knowledge and abilities (familiarity with Individualized Education Plans, assistive technologies, adaptive equipment)

Other

13. If you chose "Other" in the previous question, please describe the skills or knowledge required for the professional learning of educational assistants currently holding positions in the school authority.

Narrative Information

Please provide responses that are as complete as possible.

14. What actions does your school authority take to recruit educational assistants?

15. What actions does your school authority take to retain educational assistants?

16. In what ways do you enhance the skills of educational assistants in your school authority?

17. What professional learning activities are provided for your educational assistants? Please list titles of **internal** opportunities to the school authority.

18. What professional learning activities are provided for your educational assistants? Please list titles of **external** opportunities to the school authority.

19. What are the most successful activities that enhance the skills of educational assistants in your school authority?

20. What are the current most needed **professional learning requirements for educational assistants** with positions in the school authority? Please list descriptive topics of professional learning/development needed at this time.

21. I would be willing to participate in a 60 minute focus group (September or October) on this topic to provide further information and context. *

Yes

No

22. If you responded YES to the previous question, please provide your contact name and email for follow up.

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants – Focus Group

Nov. 18, 2025; 4:00–5:00 PM

Questions

- Tell us about your current school authority, number of students and number of EAs employed.
- What would you say are your most successful strategies for enhancing the skills of Educational Assistants in your school authority?
- What evidence do you use to say that these strategies are most successful?
- What are the current greatest needs for enhancing the skills of educational assistants in your school authority?
- What does “complex” mean when referring to students? (This question was added during the focus group discussion.)
- Is there anything else you would like to say about leveraging the role of educational assistants in Alberta?