

# Stories of Practice - Leading the Recruitment and Retention of Educational Assistants



**CASS**

College of  
Alberta School  
Superintendents



Continuing  
Education  
Program



# Welcome and Introductions

# Presenters

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## Session Agenda

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Overview of latest Educational Assistant study
3. Focus on Recruitment
4. Table discussion
5. Focus on Retention
6. Table discussion
7. Wrap up

# Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants

## EA Research Study:

<https://cass.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Leveraging-the-Role-of-Educational-Assistants.pdf>

## Highlights

- Alberta based study
- Survey and focus group respondents
- A mix of rural, urban and metro school authorities responded to the survey - **representing 17% of the Alberta student population**
  - **Just over 2100 EAs**

# Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants

## Recruitment

- **All** respondents said it was very difficult or difficult to recruit qualified EAs

## Retention

- 58% of respondents stated that it was very difficult or difficult to retain EAs
- 17% of respondents stated that it was easy to retain EAs

# Leveraging the Role of Educational Assistants

## Literature Scan

- Local recruitment at the school level was common (Deer & Herringer, 2023)
- Seeking qualified EAs with specific skills related to student learning needs was the goal (Groom & Rose, 2005)
- “Grow your own” practices were common (Chopra et al. 2024)

## Recruitment

- Most common practice - **advertising** and **word of mouth**
- Most common to hire immediately and provide necessary professional learning opportunities

# Context - Challenges for Recruitment

- Current action regarding Complexity Teams provide challenges, as well as opportunities regarding the recruitment of qualified EAs.
- It appears to be more common for rural school authorities to have challenges recruiting qualified EAs, however urban and metro school authorities note that challenges are present as well
- Some school authorities indicated that postings for a qualified EA would be up for weeks, if not months

# Recruitment

The next section brings examples of practice from school authorities in relation to recruiting EAs.

# Sturgeon Public Schools

Our Board of 7 Trustees govern Sturgeon Public School Division of just over 5000 students from Pre-Kindergarten through to Grade 12.

Our schools include:

- 1 - Hutterite Colony School
- 1 - EPI School
- Learning Centre - Home Education, Shared Responsibility, Online Learning



# Sturgeon Public Schools

Sturgeon Public School Division is located just north of Edmonton and serves students from across Sturgeon County from St. Albert in the west to Redwater in the East.

County Population is 20,061

Sturgeon County is 2084 km<sup>2</sup>

Our school populations range from 24 students in a small rural school setting to 983 students in our largest high school.



# Sturgeon Public Schools

We employ approximately 125 Educational Assistants in our 17 schools.

Our unique strength lies in the close-knit nature of our community, where everyone feels connected. This fosters a sense of belonging and support, creating an environment where your contributions truly make a difference.



# Sturgeon Public Schools

Our Educational Assistants are part of the CUPE Union ~ Local 4625.

We have 4 classifications of EAs and the role has a number of supports included within the classifications including:

- Educational Assistants 1, 2, and 3
- Educational Assistant 4
  - EA Coaches
  - Early Childhood Educators
  - LPNs
  - Therapy Assistants
  - Office Assistants
  - Administrative Assistants



# Sturgeon Public Schools

Recruitment Strategies include:

- Attending job fairs at
  - Area Colleges
- Promoting Dual Credit options for High School students to gain credit toward an Educational Assistant Diploma
- Hosting “So you want to be an EA” ~ Coffee with Principals and EA coaches
- Educational Assistant Handbook describing the role and responsibilities



# Sturgeon Public Schools

## Recruitment Strategies continued:

- Post on job boards that are more universal, Apply to Education, Indeed, social media (Facebook and Instagram) as well as school websites
- Remuneration of compensation for Educational Assistants to be competitive and comparable with neighbouring divisions



# Prairie Rose Schools



Prairie Rose encompasses a large geographical area (approximately 29,117 sq. kilometres) in southeastern Alberta. It borders Saskatchewan to the East and the United States to the South.

Prairie Rose Public Schools serves a predominantly rural population of approximately 6,900 students in junior kindergarten through grade 12. A Board of seven trustees operates 18 Public Schools, 18 Hutterite Colony Schools, Coulee Collegiate (a high school distance learning school in partnership with Medicine Hat Public Schools and the Medicine Hat College), and 2 Islamic schools in Calgary.

# Prairie Rose Schools



In addition to in-person K-12 programming, PRPS also provides online supported, shared responsibility and full parent-driven home education options through our Home Plus Learning Network program. High school online credit options are also available for students involved in team sports through South Alberta High School.

We currently employ approximately 125 Educational Assistants.



# PRPS Recruitment Strategies: How do we recruit Educational Assistants in a Geographically Diverse Division?

- Prairie Rose's 2025–2030 Education Plan emphasizes improving learning outcomes and placing student support staff where needed to help students succeed across our wide, rural service area.
- PRPS increased allocations for student support (including EAs) from about \$2M to nearly \$3.3M over the past 3 years, funding more complex needs positions and supports reflective of student and community needs.
- Remuneration: PRPS has implemented wage and benefits adjustments for support staff (including EAs) to remain competitive, recognizing staff recruitment is essential to a thriving learning environment.
- We continue to strongly encourage students and community members in the PRPS region to pursue EA certification and return to work locally. Growing our own pipelines reduces geographic barriers.

# PRPS Recruitment Strategies: How do we recruit Educational Assistants in a Geographically Diverse Division?

- Working Conditions: We pride ourselves on balancing the well-being of our students and our staff. We offer enhanced student programming opportunities, deep and rich community partnerships, and, with 11 different municipalities in our school division, a rural community lifestyle.
- Division Wide and School- Based Social Media (Facebook and Instagram).
- School Messenger - request to families for names of potential candidates.
- Recruiting Locally: Posting Job Ads in rural community post offices and coffee shops.

# Table Discussion

What has worked and what has not worked regarding recruitment of EAs in your school authority?

# Retention

## Literature Scan

- Provide professional learning opportunities
- Address remuneration and working conditions
- Respect: participation with recognition
- Equip teachers to work collaboratively
- Administrative and leadership buy-in.

## Survey and Focus Group

- Need for recognition of EAs
- Ongoing professional learning required
- Call for coordinated resources and learning opportunities provincially
- Leadership commitment to EAs is required

# Context - Challenges for Retention

- The emergence of Complexity Teams plays a significant role in opportunities and challenges for school authorities
- EA recognition is variable within and across school authorities
- Leadership challenge - how to develop a consistent approach to working with EAs with your school authority

# Retention

1. **Purpose** ...it's about improving student outcomes. It's not retention for the sake of retention.
2. **Capacity**...collective efficacy strengthens inclusive practices and in turn, supports retention.
3. **People** ...rarely leave places where they feel seen, heard, supported and respected...where they belong.

# Leveraging Research: Implementation Drivers



**Competency:** selection, training and coaching

**Organizational:** data driven, facilitative administration and systems intervention

**Leadership:** technical and adaptive

# Leadership Drivers

## **Adaptive**

- Engage those closest to the challenge (EA feedback)
- Prioritize relationships to support meaningful work
- Create conditions for people to generate solutions (design thinking)

## **Technical**

- Structure professional learning in EA schedules (9 hrs/year)
- Roles and responsibilities (system and school leadership)

# Competency Drivers

## Selection

- Learning coaches and administrators with strong inclusive practices

## Training

- Train-the-Trainer: Coaches and administrators trained in design thinking and support tools
- Divisional Training: PL based on defined problems of practice
- Communities of Practice: EAs engaged to lead some learning

## Coaching

- School and divisional leaders provided ongoing PL and coaching during implementation

# Organizational Drivers

## Decision Support Data System

- Monitored implementation and adjusted practice and supports
- Problems and solutions documented in SharePoint
- Contextual data used to guide decisions (PL needs, challenges)

## Facilitative Administration

- Leaders protected EA collaboration time
- Regular meetings with EAs to identify and remove barriers

## System Intervention

- District team provided additional supports when needed
- Access to specialized services and community partners
- Ongoing collaboration with CUPE

## Impact

1. **Purpose** ...it's about improving student outcomes. It's not retention for the sake of retention.
2. **Capacity**...collective efficacy strengthens inclusive practices and in turn, supports retention.
3. **People** ...rarely leave places where they feel seen, heard, supported and respected...where they belong.

# PRPS Retainment Strategies: How do we RETAIN Educational Assistants in a Geographically Diverse Division?

- **CONSISTENT AND TIMELY ON-BOARDING AND STRUCTURES: WHAT IS GOING WELL?**
  - Centralized EA Coaching Model: Student Experiences Team Members (EA Coach) who models interventions and coaches in real time.
  - Standardized On-Boarding: Yearly Division Wide EA Orientation Day each August that focuses on safety, regulation, trauma sensitive ways of being, and continuum of supports and services
  - Consistent Processes ( collaboration and touch bases with teachers re: Individualized Program Plans, Behavior Support Plans, Safety Plans, etc.)

- ***CONSISTENT AND TIMELY ON-BOARDING AND STRUCTURES: WHAT IS GOING WELL?***  
***Continued***
  - School-Based Team Partnerships: Principals, Learning Support Teachers, Therapy Assistants, Therapy Service Providers, and Teachers all work together to ensure EA's are getting daily feedback, direction, and clarity in supporting instruction and intervention rather than delivering it independently.
  - EA internship Program (Edmonton Public Schools); 75 out of 125 EA's have completed this program with resounding success and positive feedback.

# PRPS Retainment Strategies: How do we RETAIN Educational Assistants in a Geographically Diverse Division?

- ***SKILL ENHANCEMENT: WHAT IS OUR CURRENT FOCUS?***
  - Training for Complex Behavior: Complex Community of Practice
  - Training for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Intervention
  - Understanding of Inclusive Education Practices Collaboration Skill Building: to reduce sense of isolation
  - Skills for a Unique Context: With Colony Schools, Alternative Programming, and small rural school settings, EA's must be prepared to be adaptive and flexible
  - Learning Rounds for EA's

# PRPS Retainment Strategies: How do we RETAIN Educational Assistants in a Geographically Diverse Division?

- ***FEEDBACK FROM OUR EA'S - WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO NEXT?***
  - MORE Trauma-informed and relationship based de-escalation strategies
  - MORE “Behavior 101” (Parabytes, Behavior 360, Inclusive Learning, Circles from the Start)
  - BETTER Understanding of student profiles (asd, adhd, odd, mental health diagnoses and challenges, functional behavior assessment basics)

- ***FEEDBACK FROM OUR EA'S - WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO NEXT?  
CONTINUED***

- INCREASED Collaborative practices: how to work effectively with school-based teams
- BETTER Understanding of Student Communication supports: AAC, visuals, environmental structuring for nonverbal and/or significantly delayed learners
- Dedicated time for collaboration, planning and communication (increasing FTE from 27.5 hours per week to 30 hours minimum).

# PRPS Retainment Strategies: What do we need to RETAIN Educational Assistants in a Geographically Diverse Division?

- ***WHAT WOULD HELP US RETAIN GOOD PEOPLE?***
  - Sustainable Funding Models
  - Province-wide CORE training standards so that all EA's, regardless of division, have a strong baseline skill set and competences (EAQS)
  - Recognize the professionalism of the role: especially in Complex Teams (behavior and medical support)
  - Consistent Classroom Complexity Data to be submitted to Alberta Education annually

# SPS Retention Strategies - Professional Development Opportunities

Professional Development to Enhance Skills and Understanding

## **Address current trends in EA work**

- Trauma Informed PD - regulation strategies, TCIS, Behaviour Response
- Specialized Programming - supporting student to have access points to learning (ABBLS-R, AFFLS)
- Information about student diagnoses including Autism, ADHD, ODD, OCD, FASD, Trauma, Intellectual Disability and more
- Parabytes training
- EA Coaching opportunities - on the job, in the classroom, with the students, intentional supports

# SPS Retention Strategies - Recognition of Working Conditions and Personal Impact

## Focusing on Reflective Practices

- Being attune to EA experiences related to:
  - Student dysregulation
  - Staff injury
  - Student medical needs
  - Student learning and programming needs
- Working with teachers and EAs to understand the roles and responsibilities of each person and their shared responsibilities as a team
- Beginning Teachers Training - working with helping professionals, understanding the role of an EA and the support and expertise they bring to our classrooms

# SPS Retention Strategies - A Responsive Approach

## Incident Reports Informing Trends and Areas of Needed Support

Data from Incidents Inform:

- Strategies being used
- Difficulties being seen in classrooms/schools across the Division
- Complexities that have not been addressed or needs that have not been met
- Working conditions for EAs and Teachers in our classrooms
- How/Where the EA Coaches should be focusing their supports
- Divisional needs
  - Informing Professional Development for Leadership, Teachers and EAs
- Continued/Ongoing data informing programming

# SPS Retention Strategies - What more can be done?

Elevate and value the Educational Assistant role

- Ensure the EA role is recognized as a vital part of student success through meaningful inclusion in school teams and supportive working conditions

Align funding with the complexity of student need

- Advocate for sustainable funding models that reflect an increasing number and complexity of students requiring supports

Provide targeted, ongoing professional development

- Focussed PD that builds practical skills and confidence in supporting diverse learners

# SPS Retention Strategies - What more can be done?

Ensure consistent training and clear role expectations

- Provide Division wide training and guidance so expectations are consistent and approaches are common

Establish standards that support skilled practice

- Identify core competencies and professional expectations that help maintain a high standard of support for students while recognizing the specialized nature of the role

Job-Embedded learning and coaching

- Provide opportunities for EAs to develop skills directly within classrooms through modeling, coaching, and collaborative practices with teachers and EAs

# Table Discussion

What are the opportunities and challenges regarding retention of EAs in your school authority?

What is at least one productive action you will take away with you today?

## Wrap up

- Recruitment and retention of EAs is local and contextual
- Recognition of EA roles is critical
- The role of EAs is significant in the educational success of students
- Leadership actions are significant in leveraging the role of EAs

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**Thank you for  
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