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Leading System Responses to Aggressive Student Behaviour: Insights from Alberta System Education Leaders



Research Report

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Executive Summary

Aggressive student behaviour is an increasing concern across Alberta school systems, reflecting growing complexity in student needs, system capacity, and cross-sector coordination. Although schools have long supported students with behavioural challenges, system education leaders report a shift in both the frequency and intensity of aggressive incidents, particularly among students with neurodevelopmental, mental health, and trauma-related needs.

This qualitative study explored how system education leaders across Alberta perceive and enact their roles in managing aggressive student behaviours. Nineteen education leaders, from 18 school authorities, participated in in-depth interviews, providing insight into current conditions, proactive strategies, reactive responses, and system-level needs.

Key Findings

Findings reveal key understandings that system education leaders must navigate:

- Aggression is understood as a signal of complexity, not misconduct. System education leaders consistently described behaviour as communication of unmet needs rather than intentional defiance.
- System complexity is increasing. System education leaders reported rising frequency and severity of incidents, contributing to strain on schools and staff.
- Collaborative, team-based approaches are central to effective practice. Structured collaboration, case conferencing, and shared expertise were identified as critical to prevention and response.
- Staff safety and sustainability are emerging system priorities. System education leaders reported growing concern regarding physical safety, emotional well-being, and workforce retention.
- Inclusion requires greater flexibility and system coherence. While strongly upheld as a core value, inclusion was described as increasingly complex to enact without sufficient supports.

System Tensions

Findings reveal persistent tensions that system education leaders must navigate:

- Inclusion and belonging versus safety and well-being
- Philosophical commitment versus system capacity
- Proactive system design versus reactive crisis response

These tensions are not problems to be solved, but conditions to be managed through intentional system education leadership.

Key Recommendations

- Redefine inclusion as a dynamic continuum of supports
- Strengthen leadership capacity for managing complexity
- Formalize collaborative response as a core system process
- Expand mobile capacity-building supports
- Strengthen interagency coordination and role clarity
- Increase provincial capacity for autism and behaviour supports
- Prioritize staff safety, recovery, and sustainability
- Improve system use of data to inform planning and response
- Support ongoing cross-system learning and innovation

Conclusion

This study suggests that aggressive student behaviour is not primarily a disciplinary issue, but a system design challenge. Effective responses require coordinated leadership, coherent structures, and sustained investment in inclusive, responsive systems that support both students and staff.

Introduction

This research was made possible through Alberta Education conditional grant funding to provide current, relevant, and research-based information that supports system education leaders in their work to manage aggressive student behaviour. This study is grounded in the premise that aggressive student behaviour is not solely a matter of individual student conduct, but a system design challenge requiring coordinated, system-level response.

Background and Context

Across Alberta, aggressive student behaviour is increasingly understood as a significant and pressing challenge within K–12 education systems. Though aggression in schools has long been documented in both research and practice, recent evidence suggests that both the frequency and complexity of aggressive behaviours are intensifying, creating substantial impacts on students, educators, and learning environments.

Findings from the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA, 2024) indicate that more than half (52%) of teachers and nearly three-quarters (73%) of school leaders report experiencing bullying or violence in their work environments during the 2023-24 school year (p. 11). These experiences most often occur in person and are frequently associated with student behaviour within classroom contexts. At the same time, there is evidence of increasing prevalence of persistent, lower-level forms of aggression such as verbal threats, intimidation, and hostile interactions, which contribute to a broader climate of instability and stress within schools.

Beyond individual incidents, aggression must be understood within the broader context of growing classroom complexity. A significant majority (approximately 90%) of Alberta teachers and school leaders report increases in the diversity and intensity of student needs, particularly in areas related to social-emotional development, behavioural regulation, and mental health (ATA, 2024, p. 6). Provincial and system-level analyses further reinforce that classroom complexity is driven by intersecting factors, including increasing numbers of students requiring specialized supports, delays in access to services, staffing shortages, and broader societal influences (CASS, 2024a). These conditions create environments in which schools are required to respond to increasingly complex needs with constrained resources.

The post-pandemic context has further intensified these dynamics. Teachers and school leaders report that students are “struggling with a lack of

social skills, a lack of focus and declining reading abilities” (ATA, 2024, p.7). At the same time, broader societal influences, including increased social media use, heightened polarization, and community-level tensions, are increasingly reflected within school environments. More than two-thirds of educators report observing demeaning or hateful remarks among students related to identity and social issues (ATA, 2024, p. 2). These patterns reinforce longstanding findings that aggression in schools is shaped not only by individual student characteristics but also by broader social and environmental contexts (ATA, 2020).

Parallel findings are reflected in recent provincial engagement work. The Aggression and Complexity in Schools Action Team (2025) identified student aggression as a “multifaceted challenge rooted in a complex web of individual, social, and systemic influences” (p. 4), including mental health needs, trauma, neurodevelopmental differences, socioeconomic pressures, and gaps in access to services. The Action Team further highlighted that schools are increasingly operating in reactive environments, where educators are required to respond to frequent behavioural incidents and escalating situations, often at the expense of proactive planning and instructional time.

This growing complexity has significant implications for educator well-being and system sustainability. Alberta teachers and school leaders report high levels of stress (89%), exhaustion (93%), and declining well-being (ATA, 2024, p.2). System-level reports similarly identify aggressive student behaviour as a key contributor to educator burnout, workforce instability, and challenges in sustaining inclusive learning environments (CASS, 2023). These pressures are compounded by limited access to specialized expertise, insufficient time for collaboration, and increasing expectations placed on educators to respond to complex behavioural and mental health needs within classroom settings.

Importantly, both research and system-level engagement suggest that aggressive behaviour is often a manifestation of unmet needs rather than intentional misconduct. Theoretical and clinical research emphasizes that behaviours frequently labelled as aggressive may reflect lagging skills, trauma responses, or neurodevelopmental dysregulation (Greene, 2016; Perry, 2009). These perspectives align with Alberta-based frameworks such as positive behaviour supports, which emphasize proactive, preventative, and skill-building approaches instead of punitive responses (Alberta Education, n.d.). Together, these approaches reflect a broader shift in educational thinking, from viewing aggression primarily as a disciplinary issue to recognizing it as a signal of complexity requiring coordinated, system-level response.

This shift is also reflected in emerging system-level models of practice. Frameworks such as collaborative response emphasize the importance of structured team-based approaches, data-informed decision-making, and a continuum of supports to address complex student needs (Hewson et al.,

2022). These models challenge traditional assumptions of individual teacher responsibility and instead position student success, and the management of aggressive behaviour as a shared, system-wide responsibility.

Within Alberta, this work is further shaped by a clear legislative and policy context. The *Education Act* (2025) requires school boards to provide “welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments” while ensuring access to a continuum of supports and services for all students (s. 33). Complementary provincial resources reinforce this expectation, emphasizing tiered systems of support, early intervention, and collaborative problem-solving as foundational to effective practice (Alberta Education, 2022). At the same time, policies related to time-out, seclusion, and physical restraint clarify that restrictive interventions must be used only as a last resort, reinforcing the importance of proactive system design and ethical decision-making in response to aggression (Alberta Education, 2019a, 2019b).

Despite this strong policy foundation, system education leaders continue to face significant challenges in translating these expectations into practice. Environmental scans and system-level reports highlight persistent gaps in staffing, access to specialized supports, and coordination across sectors, all of which contribute to increasingly reactive environments and uneven implementation of inclusive education (CASS, 2024a, 2025a). These findings reinforce the need to move beyond individual strategies toward coherent, system-level approaches that align policy, practice, and resourcing.

Taken together, these trends point to a critical conclusion: Aggressive student behaviour in Alberta schools cannot be understood or addressed solely at the level of individual students or classrooms. Instead, it must be situated within a broader system context characterized by increasing complexity, evolving societal influences, and pressures on educator capacity. This context underscores the need for coordinated leadership, aligned policies, and integrated supports that extend beyond reactive responses to focus on prevention, capacity-building, and sustainable system design.

Rationale for the Current Study

Despite growing research on student behaviour, there is limited Alberta-based evidence capturing how system education leaders experience and interpret this work. Much of the existing literature focuses on classroom or clinical intervention rather than on how school authorities organize supports, make placement decisions, and balance competing rights and responsibilities.

This study responds to that gap by examining how system education leaders describe the current context of aggressive student behaviour, what

strategies they view as effective, how they respond when escalation occurs, and what conditions they believe are necessary for sustainable system response.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive design to examine how system education leaders understand and respond to aggressive student behaviour. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather in-depth perspectives on current conditions, proactive strategies, reactive responses, and system-level needs.

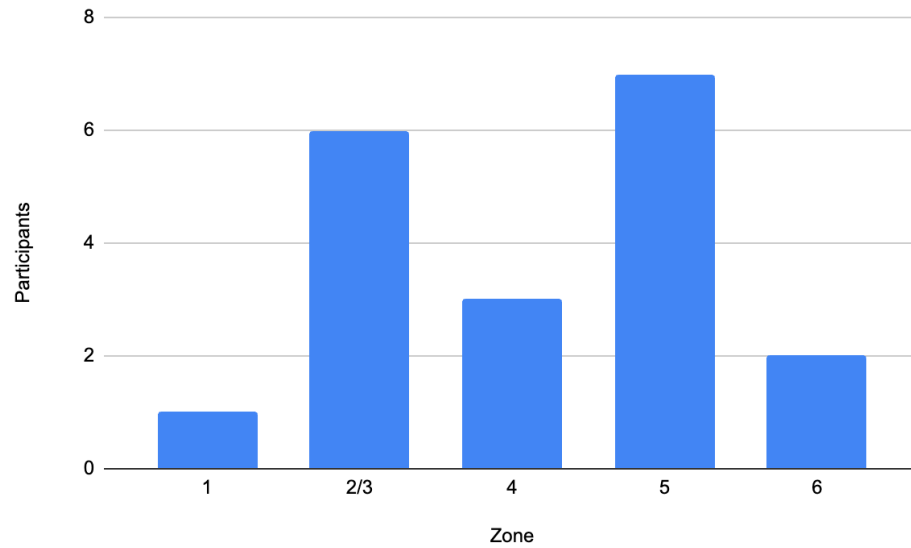
A qualitative approach was selected to capture the complexity, nuance, and ethical tensions inherent in this work and to allow leaders to describe their experiences in their own words.

Participants

Participants included 19 system education leaders from 18 Alberta school authorities. Interviewees held roles such as assistant superintendent, director of student services, and other central office leadership positions with responsibility for inclusion, behaviour, and student supports. Participation was voluntary, and interview data were anonymized during analysis and reporting.

Participants represented a range of geographic contexts (urban, rural, regional), school authority type (public, Catholic, francophone), system sizes, and zones (see Figure 1). All participants were engaged in system-level decision-making related to student behaviour.

Figure 1
Study Participants by Zone



Data Collection

Individual virtual interviews were conducted in September and October 2025 using a semi-structured protocol exploring current context, proactive strategies, reactive responses, and system-level recommendations. Interviews were conversational in nature to allow participants to elaborate on experiences and introduce issues not anticipated by the interview guide. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

All interview transcripts were compiled into a single data set and analyzed using thematic analysis. Coding was guided by four analytic domains aligned to the interview protocol (current context, proactive strategies, reactive strategies, recommendations). Themes were developed inductively within these domains and compared across cases using a matrix to identify recurring patterns and calculate theme frequency. Themes were reviewed iteratively to ensure consistency and alignment across cases, and coding decisions were documented to support transparency. Quantification was used descriptively to indicate the strength and consistency of themes, support transparency, and avoid overreliance on isolated examples.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was enhanced through cross-case analysis, documentation of coding decisions, use of representative excerpts, and explicit alignment between findings and recommendations. Themes were derived from patterns found across multiple interviews rather than single accounts. Coding decisions and theme definitions were documented. Findings are illustrated using representative excerpts to preserve participant voice, with recommendations directly mapped to findings to ensure analytic coherence.

Emerging themes were reviewed with an ATA representative and confirmed to align with patterns observed among teachers in the field. In addition, participants in a session at the CASS Annual Conference (March 20, 2026) engaged with the emerging themes and indicated that the findings resonated with their experiences as system education leaders, providing additional support for the credibility of the analysis.

Limitations

This study reflects the perspectives of system education leaders and does not include direct voices of classroom teachers, students, or families. Findings therefore represent system-level interpretations of aggressive behaviour rather than frontline or lived experience.

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used as a research support tool to assist with aspects of data organization and drafting. Specifically, ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026) supported the preliminary organization of ideas and the refinement of language in early drafts of the study. The researcher retained full responsibility for all methodological, analytic, and interpretive decisions. AI outputs were treated as provisional and were reviewed, revised, and validated through direct engagement with the interview data. All coding, theme development, and synthesis were conducted by the researcher and grounded in the original participant responses.

Generative AI was not used to generate data, conduct independent analysis, or determine findings. Its role was limited to supporting clarity, organization, and efficiency in the writing and reporting process. The inclusion of this statement reflects a commitment to transparency and the responsible use of emerging technologies in educational research.

Findings

Findings from this study highlight the complex and interconnected nature of system responses to aggressive student behaviour. Analysis of interview data revealed several key themes related to leadership, system conditions, proactive and reactive responses, and the impact of increasing student complexity on schools and staff. These themes reflect both the practical realities experienced by system education leaders and the broader expectations outlined in Alberta’s policy and leadership frameworks. The findings are presented thematically, with attention to both proactive and reactive system practices.

Leadership emerged as a critical factor in shaping system responses to aggressive student behaviour (17 of 19 interviews). System education leaders described the need to interpret complex behaviour, guide staff through crises, and maintain coherence between learning and behaviour supports. These expectations align with the provincial *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2023a) and *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2023b), which require leaders to create inclusive learning environments, ensure student and staff safety, and support professional capacity.

Concerns about staff safety and emotional sustainability were prominent (14 of 19 interviews). System education leaders reported physical injuries, trauma exposure, and increased risk of leave of absence among staff. These findings reflect the responsibility of system leaders under the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2023a) and *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2023b) to foster positive, safe, and caring learning and working environments.

Current Context

Aggression as Complexity

Aggressive behaviour was consistently understood as a manifestation of complexity rather than willful misconduct (17 of 19 interviews). System education leaders described aggression as commonly linked to neurodevelopmental differences, mental health challenges, trauma histories, and difficulties with regulation.

This framing reflects a shift away from viewing behaviour through a disciplinary lens toward approaches that are relational, therapeutic, and

individualized. System education leaders emphasized that interpreting behaviour in this way is critical to designing effective supports and responses.

Participants also highlighted the importance of intentionally shifting this understanding within their systems. They described efforts to build staff capacity, align practices, and reinforce shared language that positions aggressive behaviour as a signal of unmet needs rather than defiance. This perspective reinforces the need for system-level approaches that move beyond reactive discipline toward proactive, coordinated responses.

Increase in Frequency and Severity

A majority of participants reported a perceived increase in both the frequency and severity of aggressive incidents (15 of 19 interviews). System education leaders attributed this trend to post-pandemic effects, rising enrolment, and growing student complexity. In smaller and rural systems, even modest increases in the number of students with complex needs were described as having a significant impact on school and system capacity.

This trend has had notable implications for system education leadership. Participants described a shift in their work toward responding to complex individual situations, often in reactive ways. As a result, leaders reported having less time to focus on proactive strategies, data-informed decision-making, and long-term planning. This shift reflects increasing pressure on system education leaders to balance immediate operational demands with the need for sustained, proactive system design.

Tension Between Inclusive Education Philosophy and Lived Reality

A tension between inclusive education philosophy and lived school realities also emerged (16 of 19 interviews). Although system education leaders strongly endorsed inclusion as a foundational principle, many reported that a small number of students appeared to communicate through their behaviour that current learning environments were not meeting their needs. System education leaders described complex ethical dilemmas in balancing the rights of individual students with the safety and learning of peers, as well as the sustainability of staff.

This tension reflects broader system-level constraints. Participants identified challenges related to funding alignment, the availability of local and regional resources, and barriers to effective cross-ministry collaboration. Although inclusion remains a deeply held value, leaders expressed concern that shifting resource availability, evolving provincial priorities, and increasing public pressure may impact the system's capacity to sustain inclusive practices

over time. These findings underscore the need to conceptualize inclusion not as a fixed placement but as a dynamic and responsive continuum of supports.

Concerns About Staff Safety and Sustainability

Concerns related to staff safety and sustainability were prominent (14 of 19 interviews). System education leaders described physical injuries, emotional exhaustion, and increased risk of leave of absence among staff. These conditions were consistently framed as system-level challenges requiring coordinated and intentional responses, rather than reliance on individual resilience.

System education leaders also described the significant emotional and professional strain associated with balancing the rights of students to access education with the safety and well-being of staff and other students. This tension reflects the complex and often competing demands inherent in inclusive education systems, and underscores the need for system-level approaches that prioritize both student support and staff sustainability. Participants emphasized that these pressures contribute to ongoing stress and concern among system leaders, particularly in relation to ensuring safe and sustainable learning and working environments.

Proactive Strategies: Building Capacity Before Crisis

Collaborative Problem-Solving and Response

The consistency of collaborative response across systems suggests that effective management of aggression is less dependent on individual expertise and more reliant on structured, team-based approaches embedded within system design. System education leaders emphasized the importance of structured team meetings, case conferences, and access to shared expertise within schools. These structures were described as essential for preventing escalation and reducing professional isolation for teachers.

In some school authorities, collaborative response processes have been formalized through intentional system design. System education leaders described the allocation of dedicated time within school schedules for team-based planning, the use of consistent tools and structures to gather and analyze data related to student programming, and clear instructional leadership expectations to ensure these processes are implemented with fidelity and rigour.

Front-Loaded Programming and Planning

Front-loaded programming was identified as a key proactive strategy (14 of 19 interviews). System education leaders described the importance of start-of-year planning for students with complex needs, including the development of modified learning goals and clearly articulated learning progressions. These approaches were reported to reduce uncertainty for both staff and students and to lower the likelihood of behavioural escalation.

Participants also described formalized processes to support transitions between grades, classes, and schools. These processes included structured time for file and record reviews, Individual Program Plan development, and collaboration with multidisciplinary teams. Leaders emphasized that investing time early to understand student needs and plan coordinated responses contributes to more predictable learning environments and can prevent incidents of aggressive behaviour. These practices reflect the importance of proactive system design in reducing reliance on reactive responses.

System Coherence and Universal Behavioural Strategies

Many participants emphasized the importance of school authority-wide coherence in social-emotional learning and behaviour frameworks (13 of 19 interviews). Common language, shared expectations, and alignment with policy were described as stabilizing forces across schools.

System education leaders identified clear codes of conduct, consistent behavioural expectations, and progressive discipline policies as examples of universal strategies that contribute to proactive support for student behaviour. These findings suggest that when coherence is strong, systems are better positioned to prevent escalation. Conversely, participants noted that when alignment breaks down or implementation lacks fidelity, incidents of aggressive behaviour tend to increase in both frequency and severity. This underscores the role of system coherence as a foundational condition for effective and consistent responses to student behaviour.

Mobile and Responsive Capacity-Building Teams

Mobile capacity-building teams (e.g., behaviour or specialist teams) were identified as effective system supports (12 of 19 interviews). These teams were valued for providing an external perspective, delivering in-class coaching, and building staff capacity over time rather than offering one-time interventions.

Participants emphasized the importance of on-site, timely coaching and collaboration with classroom teachers and school teams. These findings

suggest that the effectiveness of this approach depends on both responsiveness and relational trust. System education leaders noted that support must be experienced as collaborative and capacity-building, rather than evaluative, to be sustained and impactful. This approach reinforces the role of system-level supports in strengthening classroom practice and reducing reliance on reactive responses.

Building Capacity Across the System

System education leaders emphasized the importance of intentionally building staff capacity to support students with complex behavioural needs. Participants identified professional learning, trauma-informed practice, crisis response training, and ongoing leadership development as key components of this work.

These findings suggest that the impact of capacity-building efforts is strongest when learning is implemented consistently across the system. Leaders emphasized that requiring participation from all staff supports the development of shared understanding, common language, and aligned expectations, contributing to greater coherence in practice. This approach reinforces the importance of system-wide learning as a foundation for consistent and sustainable responses to aggressive student behaviour.

Reactive Strategies: Responding When Escalation Occurs

Formal Escalation Pathways

Most system education leaders described formal escalation pathways for aggressive behaviour (16 of 19 interviews), including incident reporting processes, violence/threat risk assessment, and case conferencing. These pathways were viewed as essential for ensuring consistency and for distributing responsibility beyond the school level.

Participants emphasized that when staff understand escalation processes and system responses are predictable, it contributes to a sense of stability and confidence in the system. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of escalation pathways depends not only on their structure but also on the consistency and responsiveness of system-level follow-through. System education leaders identified system-level engagement in escalated situations as critical to building trust and reinforcing shared responsibility. This finding highlights the role of formal escalation pathways as both procedural and relational mechanisms within system response.

Changes in Programming or Placement

Over half of participants reported that changes in programming or placement were at times necessary (10 of 19 interviews). System education leaders described “hard resets” in programming or transitions to more specialized learning environments that were associated with improved student well-being and reduced aggressive behaviour. These decisions were described as significant and made with careful consideration.

In rural and remote contexts, participants highlighted challenges related to limited access to alternative programming and placement options. Leaders described feeling constrained in their ability to respond effectively to the most complex cases, noting the tension between their responsibility to provide inclusive education for all students and the practical limitations of available resources and supports. These findings underscore the importance of a flexible continuum of supports that includes access to a range of programming options across diverse system contexts.

Post-incident Debrief and Staff Care

Post-incident debrief and staff care were identified as important components of system response (11 of 19 interviews). System education leaders described intentional efforts to check in with staff following incidents

and to frame recovery as a necessary aspect of sustaining workforce capacity. They described the importance of structured debrief processes that allow staff to reflect on incidents, process emotional impact, and identify next steps. These practices were seen as critical in supporting staff well-being and maintaining their ability to continue working effectively in complex environments.

Although many leaders reported confidence in their immediate and short-term debrief processes, they also identified gaps in longer-term follow-up and support. System education leaders expressed a desire to strengthen ongoing check-in processes to ensure that the cumulative impact of repeated incidents is addressed over time, rather than only in the immediate aftermath. This finding highlights the importance of embedding staff care and recovery within system design, instead of treating it as an informal or discretionary practice.

Collection and Analysis of Systemic Data

Systematic data use was not consistently embedded across systems (9 of 19 interviews). Though system education leaders acknowledged the value of tracking suspensions, incident reports, and the utilization of supports, data use appeared less developed than collaborative and relational strategies. Participants described variability in how data were collected, analyzed, and used to inform decision-making. In some cases, data collection was primarily compliance-driven, with limited integration into proactive planning or system-level analysis.

System education leaders noted that strengthening system-level data use could support earlier identification of emerging trends, improve coordination of supports, and enhance the effectiveness of both proactive and reactive responses. This finding highlights an opportunity to further embed data-informed decision-making as a core component of system design.

Summary of Key Findings

Across interviews, system education leaders described a context characterized by increasing complexity and intensity of student need. Aggressive behaviour was rarely framed as a disciplinary issue; instead, it was consistently understood as a signal of unmet need related to neurodevelopment, mental health, trauma, and regulation.

The most consistent patterns pointed to the importance of collaborative structures, leadership capacity, and system coherence in shaping effective

responses. System education leaders emphasized the role of proactive strategies, such as front-loaded planning, capacity-building, and universal approaches, while also describing the significant demands of reactive response processes.

At the same time, the findings point to persistent tensions within system practice. Although inclusion was widely upheld as a shared value, system education leaders described the need for flexibility and responsiveness to sustain inclusive approaches in the context of increasing complexity, resource constraints, and safety considerations. These tensions provide important context for understanding system-level decision-making and are explored further in the following section.

System Tensions in Managing Aggressive Student Behaviour

The findings highlight consistent patterns in how system education leaders understand and respond to aggressive student behaviour, while also revealing a set of underlying tensions that shape decision-making at the system level. These tensions reflect the complexity of balancing competing priorities within inclusive education systems.

System education leaders are not simply implementing strategies; they are continuously navigating complex and often competing priorities. These tensions are inherent to inclusive education systems and cannot be fully resolved. Instead, they must be intentionally managed through leadership, system design, and ongoing reflection.

Inclusion and Belonging Versus Safety and Well-Being

System education leaders consistently affirmed inclusion as a foundational principle. However, they also faced situations in which the needs of individual students, particularly those exhibiting aggressive behaviour, came into tension with the safety and well-being of peers and staff. Participants described the challenge of ensuring that students with complex needs experience belonging and access to appropriate programming, while maintaining safe, predictable, and sustainable learning environments for all.

This tension often requires difficult decisions related to programming, placement, and supports, highlighting the need to conceptualize inclusion as a dynamic and responsive continuum rather than a fixed placement.

Philosophical Commitment Versus System Capacity

Participants expressed strong alignment with trauma-informed, neurodevelopmental, and inclusive approaches to behaviour. However, many noted that system capacity, particularly staffing, expertise, and access to specialized supports, has not kept pace with the increasing complexity of student needs.

This tension reflects a gap between what systems aspire to provide and what current structures and resources enable in practice. System education leaders emphasized that without sufficient capacity, even well-designed

frameworks risk becoming unsustainable, placing increased pressure on schools and staff.

Proactive System Design Versus Reactive Crisis Response

Despite identifying proactive strategies, such as collaborative planning, front-loaded supports, and professional learning, as essential, many system education leaders reported that a significant portion of their time and system energy is consumed by responding to crises.

This creates an ongoing tension between investing in prevention and capacity-building and responding to immediate, high-risk situations requiring urgent action. Participants described the challenge of maintaining focus on long-term system improvement while navigating daily operational demands.

Local Responsiveness Versus System Coherence

System education leaders must balance responsiveness to individual school contexts with the need for consistency across the system. They described the importance of allowing flexibility to meet unique school and student needs, while maintaining clear expectations, processes, and equitable access to supports.

This tension underscores the importance of coherent system design, where flexibility exists within a shared framework.

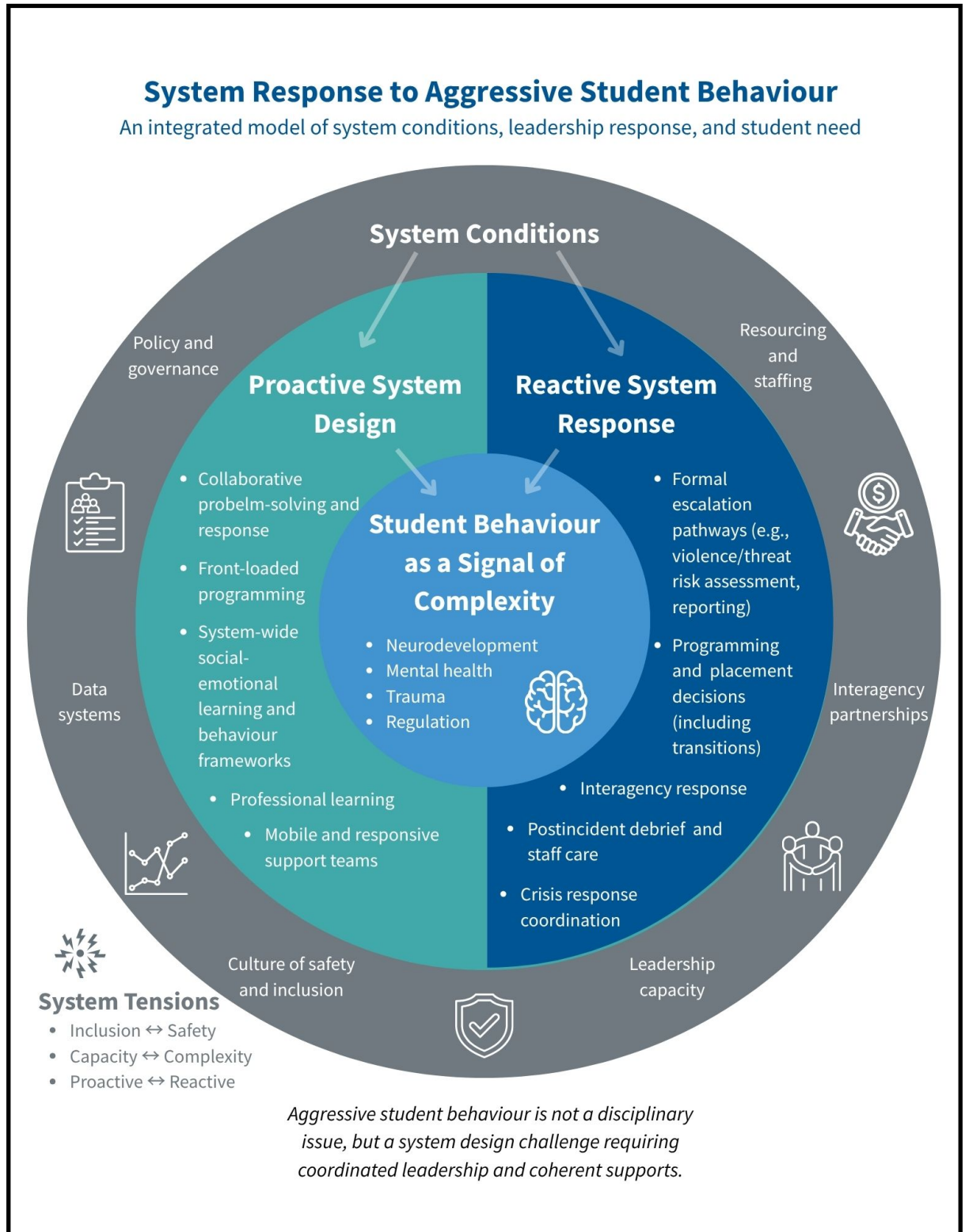
Framing the Work

These tensions are not indicators of system failure; rather, they reflect the inherent complexity of leading inclusive education systems in a rapidly changing context. Effective system education leadership requires the ability to hold competing priorities simultaneously, make context-responsive decisions, and design systems that support both flexibility and coherence. Recognizing and naming these tensions provides a foundation for more intentional, transparent, and sustainable approaches to managing aggressive student behaviour.

The findings and system tensions identified in this study can be understood as part of an interconnected system of conditions, leadership responses, and student need. Figure 2 illustrates an integrated model of system

response, demonstrating how student behaviour emerges as a signal of complexity within broader system conditions. Proactive and reactive strategies are not independent processes, but are shaped by leadership capacity, resourcing, policy, and interagency coordination. The model also highlights the tensions that system leaders must navigate, reinforcing that effective responses require coherence across all elements of the system.

Figure 2
System Response to Aggressive Student Behaviour



Implications for System Education Leadership

The findings from this study suggest that effectively addressing aggressive student behaviour requires a shift in how system education leadership is conceptualized and enacted. Rather than focusing primarily on individual incidents or school-level responses, system leaders must attend to the broader conditions that shape both student behaviour and system capacity.

First, this work requires leaders to design for coherence rather than rely on compliance. Consistent expectations, shared language, and aligned processes across schools are essential for reducing variability in practice and strengthening system response. Without this coherence, even well-intended strategies risk uneven implementation and diminished impact.

Second, system leaders must prioritize proactive capacity-building alongside reactive response. Though crisis response remains an unavoidable aspect of the work, an overreliance on reactive approaches limits the system's ability to prevent escalation. Sustained investment in collaborative structures, front-loaded planning, and professional learning is critical to shifting system effort upstream.

Third, the findings highlight the need to position staff well-being and safety as core system conditions, rather than secondary considerations. Supporting staff through structured debrief, ongoing care, and clear safety processes is essential not only for individual well-being but for the long-term sustainability of the workforce.

Finally, this study reinforces that system leadership in this context requires the ability to navigate ongoing tensions rather than resolve them. Balancing inclusion and safety, responsiveness and coherence, and proactive and reactive demands is an enduring aspect of the work. Effective leaders must be equipped to hold these competing priorities, make context-responsive decisions, and design systems that support both flexibility and consistency.

Taken together, these implications point to a model of system leadership that is intentionally designed, relationally grounded, and responsive to complexity.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to strengthen system capacity, coherence, and sustainability in responding to aggressive student behaviour. Each recommendation reflects patterns identified across interviews and is supported by specific, actionable strategies.

Redefine Inclusion as a Dynamic Continuum of Support

Position inclusion as a flexible continuum of supports that evolves over time, rather than as a fixed placement.

Key actions:

- Recognize short-term or specialized placements as part of inclusive practice
- Require regular review and reintegration planning
- Guard against default or convenience-based placements

Strengthen Leadership Capacity for Managing Complexity

Build system and school leader capacity to respond to complex behavioural needs through sustained, targeted development.

Key actions:

- Provide focused professional learning in trauma-informed, neurodevelopmental, and inclusive approaches
- Integrate this learning within CASS professional learning activities

Formalize Collaborative Response as a Core System Process

Establish collaborative, team-based problem-solving as a standard and nondiscretionary system process.

Key actions:

- Set clear expectations for team meetings and case conferencing
- Protect time for collaboration through staffing and scheduling decisions
- Ensure consistent onboarding into collaborative processes for new staff and leaders

Expand Mobile Capacity-Building Supports

Strengthen access to mobile teams that provide in-class coaching and build staff capacity over time.

Key actions:

- Prioritize funding for coaching-based support models
- Monitor access and wait times to ensure equitable support across schools

Strengthen Interagency Coordination and Role Clarity

Enhance coordination between education, health, child and family services, and justice systems.

Key actions:

- Develop formal interagency protocols
- Establish regular cross-sector case planning structures

Increase Provincial Capacity for Autism and Behaviour Supports

Expand access to specialized expertise in autism and complex behaviour.

Key actions:

- Increase specialist teams with expertise in neurodevelopment and regulation
- Ensure equitable access across urban and rural contexts

Prioritize Staff Safety, Recovery, and Sustainability

Embed staff safety and recovery as core components of system response.

Key actions:

- Establish clear expectations for post-incident debrief
- Integrate psychological health and safety into behaviour frameworks
- Monitor patterns of injury and staff distress as system indicators

Improve System Use of Data to Inform Planning and Response

Strengthen the use of data to identify trends and guide system-level decision-making.

Key actions:

- Monitor suspensions, service utilization, and threat assessments
- Use data to identify pressure points and evaluate impact

Support Ongoing Cross-System Learning and Innovation

Sustain system-wide learning and collaboration focused on aggressive behaviour and inclusion.

Key actions:

- Maintain CASS professional learning opportunities
- Encourage site visits, shared models, and research partnerships

Conclusion

Aggressive student behaviour is increasingly understood by system education leaders not as isolated incidents of misconduct, but as a reflection of growing complexity within students, classrooms, and the broader systems that support them. This study highlights a clear shift in how leaders conceptualize and respond to this work, from discipline-oriented approaches toward relational, developmental, and system-informed practices.

Across Alberta school authorities, system education leaders described a context characterized by rising intensity of need, increasing pressure on staff, and persistent gaps between system aspirations and available capacity. At the same time, they identified consistent and promising practices, including collaborative problem-solving structures, proactive planning, and the development of system-wide coherence in behaviour and learning supports. These approaches reflect a growing recognition that effective responses to aggressive behaviour depend not on individual expertise alone, but on the strength and alignment of system design.

The findings also underscore that this work is inherently complex and shaped by ongoing tensions. System leaders are required to balance inclusion and belonging with safety and sustainability, align philosophical commitments with operational realities, and navigate the competing demands of proactive system design and reactive crisis response. These tensions are not temporary challenges to be resolved, but enduring conditions that must be intentionally managed through thoughtful, adaptive leadership.

The recommendations emerging from this study point to the need for sustained investment in leadership capacity, collaborative infrastructure, interagency coordination, and staff well-being. They also call for a clearer articulation of inclusion as a dynamic continuum of supports, responsive to changing student needs over time. Taken together, these directions emphasize that meaningful progress depends not on isolated initiatives, but on coherent, system-level approaches that are intentionally designed and consistently enacted.

Ultimately, this study positions aggressive student behaviour as a system design challenge rather than a disciplinary issue. Addressing it effectively requires coordinated leadership, aligned policies, and integrated supports that extend beyond the boundaries of individual schools. By strengthening system coherence and capacity, Alberta school authorities are better positioned to create learning environments that are safe, inclusive, and responsive to the full range of student needs, while sustaining the well-being and effectiveness of the educators who serve them.

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Appendix A: Interview Guiding Questions

1. Background and Context

- Can you tell me a bit about your role and responsibilities at the system level?
- How long have you been in a system education leadership role?
- In your experience, how does your position connect with student behaviour and school climate

2. Proactive Roles and Strategies

- What is your role in proactively preventing aggressive student behaviours?
- What system-level strategies, policies, or initiatives have you found most effective in fostering safe and inclusive environments?
- How do you support schools in building capacity to manage student aggression before incidents escalate?

3. Reactive Roles and Responses

- Can you describe a situation where you were required to respond to an incident of aggressive student behaviour at the system level?
- How do you balance supporting individual schools with ensuring consistency across your division?
- What decision-making processes guide your response in these situations?

4. Challenges and Opportunities

- What challenges do you face in addressing aggressive student behaviours at the system level?
- What supports or resources do you wish were more available?
- What opportunities exist to improve system-wide responses?

5. System-Level Conditions and Leadership Influence

- What conditions (e.g., policies, resourcing, partnerships, professional learning) are most critical for success in managing aggression?
- What is your role in shaping culture and ensuring safety across your division?

6. Reflection and Recommendations

- Looking back, what lessons have you learned in your leadership role related to student aggression?
- What recommendations would you offer to other system leaders facing similar challenges?
- What role should Alberta Education or provincial organizations (e.g., CASS) play in supporting this work?

7. Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Appendix B: Self-Assessment: Reflecting on Your Current Practice

This self-assessment invites you to reflect on the extent to which proactive and reactive leadership practices are established across your system to support students with complex behavioural needs.

Rating Scale

Select the rating that best reflects the current reality across your system:

- **1 – Emerging:** This practice occurs inconsistently or in limited contexts.
- **2 – Developing:** This practice is in place in some areas but is not yet consistent across the system.
- **3 – Established:** This practice is consistently implemented across most schools.
- **4 – Embedded:** This practice is fully integrated, proactive, and sustainable across the system.

Part A: Proactive Strategies	Rating	Comments
<p>P1 Collaborative Problem-Solving Structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders establish collaborative structures to support shared problem-solving and coordinated responses. • <i>Examples: team meetings, case conferences, multi-disciplinary collaboration, shared expertise</i> 		
<p>P2 Front-Loaded Programming and Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders ensure proactive planning and structured supports for students with complex needs. • <i>Examples: start-of-year planning, modified programming, clear intervention pathways, proactive support plans</i> 		
<p>P3 System Coherence and Universal Behavioural Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders establish clear, consistent, system-wide approaches to behaviour and social-emotional development. • <i>Examples: behaviour frameworks, SEL integration, shared expectations, consistent policies and practices</i> 		

<p>P4 Mobile and Responsive Capacity-Building Teams</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders ensure responsive supports are available to schools when needs emerge. • <i>Examples: mobile support teams, in-class coaching, responsive consultation, flexible deployment of expertise</i> 		
<p>P5 Building Capacity Across the System</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders intentionally build staff capacity to support complex student needs. • <i>Examples: professional learning, trauma-informed practice, crisis response training, ongoing leadership development</i> 		
Part B: Reactive Strategies	Rating	Comments
<p>R1 Formal Escalation Pathways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders establish clear and consistent processes for escalation when student behaviour presents significant risk. • <i>Examples: incident reporting processes, VTRA protocols, case conferences, agency involvement</i> 		
<p>R2 Programming and Placement Adjustments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders support appropriate adjustments when existing supports are insufficient. • <i>Examples: modified schedules, transitions to specialized programming, referrals to external services</i> 		
<p>R3 Post-Incident Debrief and Staff Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders ensure staff are supported following incidents and that structured debrief processes occur. • <i>Examples: staff debriefs, follow-up support, reflective review, staff wellness supports</i> 		
<p>R4 Collection and Use of Systemic Data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System education leaders collect and analyze data to identify patterns and strengthen system response. • <i>Examples: tracking incidents, suspensions, referrals, identifying trends and gaps in supports</i> 		

Appendix C: Strategies Reflection Activity

This placemat reflection activity was used to engage participants during the session at the CASS Annual Conference on March 20, 2026. Placemats (see below) were provided for each of the five proactive and four reactive strategies identified in the research study. Participants were invited to consider the following questions in relation to each strategy:

Strengths

- Where are you already seeing this strategy in action?
- What is working well?

Stretches

- Where is there opportunity to grow or strengthen practice?

Barriers

- What challenges or conditions make this strategy difficult to implement consistently?

Impact

- What difference does this strategy make for students, staff, and the broader system, when it is implemented well?

Figure 3
Strategies Placemat Activity Sample

