



Leading System Responses to Aggressive Student Behaviour

Insights from Alberta
System Education Leaders



CASS

College of
Alberta School
Superintendents



Continuing
Education
Program

Key System Realities



This study explored how system education leaders respond to these challenges, framing aggressive behaviour as a system-wide issue requiring coordinated supports and leadership.



RISING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Aggressive student behaviour is an increasing concern across Alberta school systems, reflecting growing complexity in student needs, system capacity, and cross-sector coordination.



COMPLEX BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES

System education leaders report a shift in the frequency and intensity of aggressive incidents, particularly among students with neurodevelopmental, trauma-related, and mental health needs.



LEADERSHIP RESPONSES TO AGGRESSION

This qualitative study explored how system education leaders across Alberta perceive and enact their roles in responding to aggressive student behaviour.



A SYSTEM DESIGN CHALLENGE

This study positions aggressive student behaviour not as a disciplinary issue, but as a system design challenge requiring coordinated leadership and coherent supports.

PARTICIPANTS

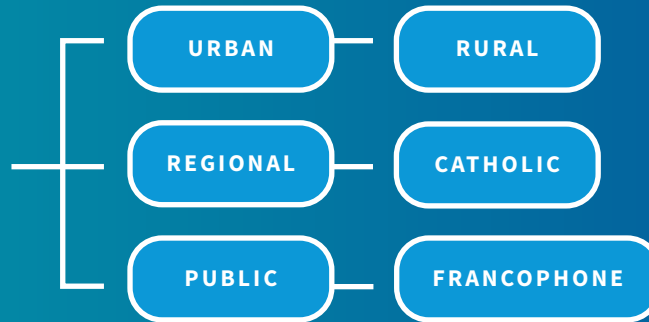
System education leaders participated in in-depth interviews for this study.

Insight into current conditions, proactive strategies, reactive responses, and system-level needs were provided.

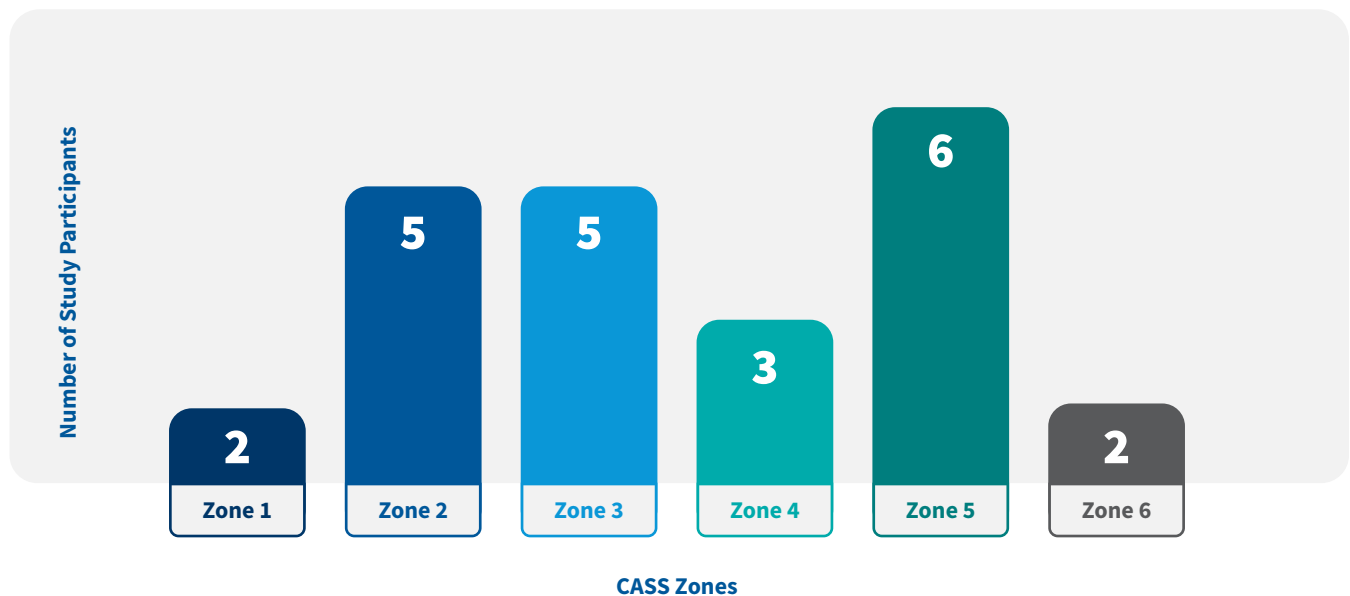
INSIGHTS FROM

 **19**

SYSTEM EDUCATION LEADERS
FROM 18 SCHOOL AUTHORITIES



Participants Represented All Six Cass Zones



 This study offers a comprehensive view of needs shaping responses to **aggressive student behaviour** across the province.

Key System Realities

System education leaders highlighted challenges while also noting growing challenges

1

Leadership Factor

Leadership emerged as a critical factor in shaping system response, particularly in building coherence, guiding crisis response, and sustaining inclusive practices across schools.

2

Behavioural Communication

System education leaders consistently described aggressive behaviour as communication of unmet need, regulation difficulty, trauma response, or neuro-developmental complexity rather than intentional defiance.

3

Increasing Incidents

Participants reported increasing frequency and severity of aggressive incidents, contributing to growing pressure on schools, classrooms, and system supports.

4

Prevention & Response

Collaborative, team-based approaches were identified as essential to both prevention and response, while concerns related to staff safety, emotional well-being, and workforce sustainability continue to grow.

5

Inclusive Practices

Although inclusion remains a deeply held value across systems, leaders described increasing challenges in sustaining inclusive practices without sufficient staffing, programming, training, and interagency supports.

Supporting Findings



17 PARTICIPANTS
Identified leadership as critical to effective response.



15 PARTICIPANTS
Reported increasing frequency and severity of aggressive incidents.



14 PARTICIPANTS
Identified concerns related to staff safety and sustainability.



16 PARTICIPANTS
Described tensions related to inclusion and system capacity.

Aggression is increasingly understood as communication of unmet need rather than intentional misconduct.

Proactive System Design Strategies

System education leaders emphasized that **effective response depends on proactive system design rather than isolated interventions** after escalation occurs. Participants emphasized the importance of supports that build system capacity over time.

Key Proactive Strategies Identified

Effective response requires coordinated systems, not isolated interventions.

1

Collaborative Problem-Solving & Response

Structured collaboration, case conferencing, and shared expertise were identified as essential to preventing escalation and reducing professional isolation.

2

Front-Loaded Programming & Planning

Participants emphasized proactive planning for students with complex needs, including transition planning, modified programming, and coordinated supports before challenges intensify.

3

System Coherence & Universal Behavioural Strategies

System-wide consistency in behaviour frameworks, social-emotional learning, shared language, and expectations were described as stabilizing conditions across schools.

4

Mobile & Responsive Capacity-Building Supports

Mobile support teams and coaching models were valued for providing timely, collaborative, in-class support that strengthens staff capacity over time.

5

Building Leadership & Staff Capacity

Professional learning related to trauma-informed practice, neurodevelopment, crisis response, and inclusive leadership was identified as critical to sustainable system response.

Reactive System Responses

Although proactive approaches were consistently prioritized, system education leaders described increasing demands related to crisis response, formal escalation pathways, and complex placement decisions.

Inclusion without adequate support risks becoming unsustainable.

Key Reactive Strategies Identified

1

Formal Escalation Pathways

System education leaders described the importance of clear and consistent processes for incident reporting, violence/threat risk assessment, case conferencing, and coordinated system-level response.

2

Programming & Placement Decisions

Participants described situations where transitions, specialized programming, or short-term placement changes were necessary to support safety, regulation, and student success.

3

Post-Incident Debrief & Staff Care

Structured debriefing, staff check-ins, and recovery processes were identified as important components of workforce sustainability and long-term staff well-being.

4

Data-Informed Decision-Making

Participants emphasized the need for stronger system use of data to identify trends, improve planning, and strengthen both proactive and reactive responses.

System Tensions Leaders Must Navigate

These tensions are not problems to be solved, but conditions that system education leaders must intentionally navigate through leadership, system design, and ongoing reflection.

Inclusion and belonging versus safety and sustainability.

Philosophical commitments versus operational realities.

Proactive system design versus reactive crisis response.

Local responsiveness VS. system coherence.

Implications for System Education Leaders



The findings suggest that strengthening system response requires coordinated attention to leadership capacity, inclusive system design, collaboration, staff sustainability, and interagency support.

Effective response depends on coherent systems, not isolated efforts.

1

Strengthen Inclusive & Responsive System Design

Redefine inclusion as a dynamic continuum of support

Increase provincial capacity for autism and behaviour supports

Strengthen interagency coordination and role clarity

2

Build Leadership & Staff Capacity

Strengthen leadership capacity for managing complexity

Expand mobile capacity-building supports

Prioritize staff safety, recovery, and sustainability

3

Formalize Collaborative Response Structures

Formalize collaborative response as a core system process

Improve system use of data to inform planning and response

4

Sustain System Learning & Innovation

Support ongoing cross-system learning and innovation

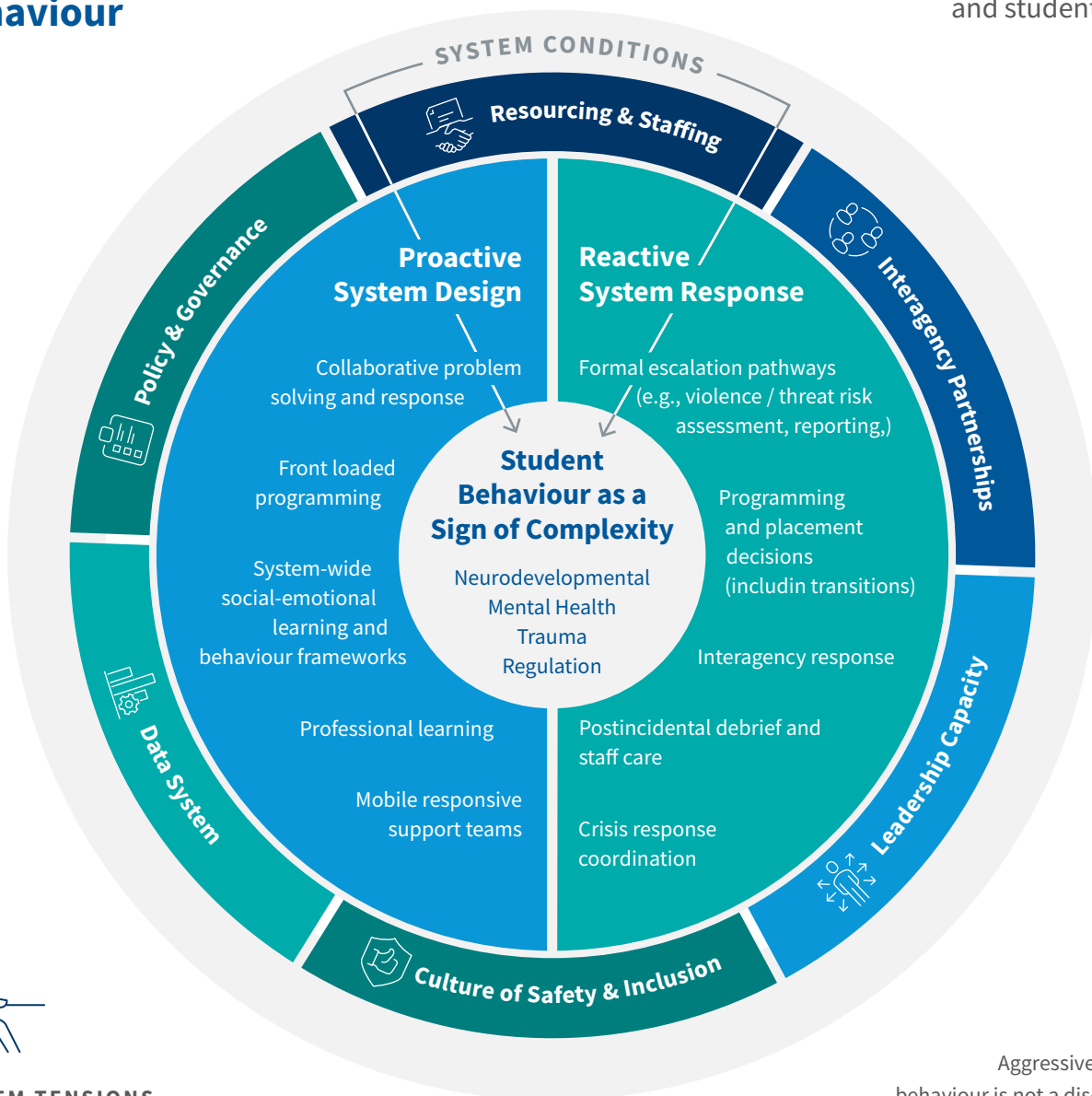


Supporting students with aggressive behaviour is not solely a school-based challenge. It is a system leadership responsibility requiring coherence, capacity, collaboration, and sustained cross-sector commitment.



System Response to Aggressive Student Behaviour

An integrated model of system conditions, leadership response, and student need.



SYSTEM TENSIONS

- Inclusion ↔ Safety
- Capacity ↔ Complexity
- Proactive ↔ Reactive

Aggressive student behaviour is not a disciplinary issue, but a system design challenge requiring coordinated leadership and coherent supports.

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Additional Resources

For more detailed information and references,
[please click here to view the full report](#)

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

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