Crowded and Complex Classrooms

A look at the state of class size, composition and supports for inclusion in Alberta’s public education system.
Alberta has a world-renowned public education system. Our teachers and other school staff work hard and provide outstanding educational opportunities.

Unfortunately, students and teachers are not provided with the best supports and, as a result, too many children are falling through the cracks. Optimal learning happens when students and teachers have reasonable class sizes and supports are available to assist students with special learning needs.

### Class Size

**Crowded and Complex Classrooms**

80% of K to 3 classes are larger than the approved target.²

The payoff from class-size reduction is greatest for children from low-income, minority and vulnerable populations.

65% of Albertans believe that class sizes are too big.³

82% of Albertans would support increased funding to reduce class sizes.³

---

1. Only 5 of 61 school boards are meeting the government-approved targets for average class size in K to 3.

2. Class sizes are larger now than 14 years ago, when the government first agreed to tackle the problem.

3. 65% of Albertans believe that class sizes are too big. 82% of Albertans would support increased funding to reduce class sizes.
Class Composition

When compared to classrooms elsewhere in the world, Alberta’s classes are
- twice as likely to include a significant number of students with special needs and
- twice as likely to include students learning in a language that is not their mother tongue (Government of Alberta 2013).

In rural areas, class sizes may be smaller, but classes often include students from multiple grades or courses learning different programs of study in the same room at the same time.

Classes are also impacted by effects of poverty, family breakup, mental health, technology, and other social and cultural factors.

Teachers are less able to address the unique learning needs of a diverse student population when class sizes are large.

Supports for Special Needs

Today’s classroom is very different from the classrooms of even 10 to 20 years ago.

Students who have learning disabilities, students who require additional learning supports and students who have complex health and education needs used to be pulled out into their own special classrooms. Now they are included in virtually all classrooms, and teachers try to individualize learning as much as possible.

The ATA’s 2014 Blue Ribbon Panel on Inclusive Education in Alberta found that there was an increased need for supports and services and that the vision for inclusion in Alberta’s schools had been inadequately implemented (Alberta Teachers’ Association 2014).

The policy of inclusion of students with special needs is a best practice in education, but additional supports for students must be readily available for inclusion to be successful.

6 in 10 Albertans continue to express some level of concern about the amount of in-class support for students with special needs or English language learners.

77% of Albertans would support increased funding to better address these learning needs.

In 2017/18, 50 school boards incurred costs related to supporting special needs that exceeded the amount of funding they were provided. The shortfall in funding for inclusion and ESL supports totalled $119 million across the province.

In extreme instances, undersupported special needs has resulted in incidences of physical aggression against staff. These incidents are increasing.

Over 55 per cent of K to 6 teachers report having witnessed an act of physical aggression by a student against a staff member this school year.
Teachers want what students need, and we believe that students, individually and collectively, achieve better outcomes when public education is well supported.

Addressing issues of class size, composition and undersupported special needs will help ensure that students succeed and that Alberta’s public education system continues to be a global top performer.

Notes
1 www.alberta.ca/class-size.aspx#toc-1
3 Internal ATA public opinion polling conducted by Environics Research, February 2019.
4 www.alberta.ca/k-12-education-financial-statements.asp
5 Internal ATA Member Opinion Survey, 2019.

References