

ALARM BELLS
RINGING!



Voices From Schools

A survey of Alberta Classrooms
February 2015



Public Interest Alberta

Summary/Background

Public Interest Alberta's recent *Alberta Classrooms Survey* has revealed substantial evidence of the unacceptable conditions that exist for a considerable number of Alberta's students.

The online survey was conducted in the two months after November 3, 2014 and was completed by 434 individuals (62% teachers, 30% parents, 5% Educational Staff and 2% students.) Edmonton and Calgary together accounted for 47% of responses, with the rest from schools around the province.

While we do not suggest that this survey is "representative" of classrooms and schools in Alberta, the results clearly indicate that the problematic classroom conditions identified in the survey are negatively affecting the learning conditions for far too many children, especially given Alberta's status as a wealthy province.

The concerns expressed by participants have been grouped under seven headings, with brief excerpts from 21 responses chosen to illustrate these issues for this Summary document. (A more comprehensive selection of over seventy responses is available on the PIA Website at www.pialberta.org.)

However, it is important to recognize that these various factors are clearly inter-related. The larger the class size becomes, the more difficult it is to address individual needs. If the supports for inclusive education are not present, it puts more pressure on teachers to do "more with less." Students with behavioural issues can have an impact on teachers' abilities to meet the needs of others in the class. Increased paperwork leads to less time for preparation. Overcrowded schools add to the pressure in classrooms.

In far too many schools and classrooms across the province, these conditions represent clear barriers to the key goal of developing the full potential of all of our children. As a result, children are "falling through the cracks," their needs are not being met, parents are dissatisfied, teachers and support staff are frustrated, and the promise of public education is not being fulfilled as it should be.

1. Impact of large classes combined with complexity and high needs

- The sheer number of students in the class makes it impossible to spend enough time with each child to support them in reaching their full potential. Add to the large class size, a variety of behaviour and social/emotional challenges and much of my day is spent managing behaviours rather than delivering engaging lessons and providing valuable, individualized feedback to my students.... Anxiety and social/emotional challenges make up the greatest area of special needs this year. However I also have a few students who are below grade level in literacy and numeracy skills, which hampers their success in all academic areas... I have no support staff. (Teacher Gr 5 24-26 Grande Prairie)
- A teacher is basically doing crowd control. There is no time to spend with students who are either struggling or need to be challenged. As integration of students with complex needs becomes more and more common, the teachers are expected to provide an education to all of these different types of learners with little support. It means that all the kids fall behind. The ones who are complex learners don't have enough support from a certified teacher, the ones who are average learners under achieve because they aren't getting the attention and encouragement they need and the advanced or gifted learners are bored. Hence we spend thousands of dollars in outside supports like Sylvan learning centre because my grade 4 student can't read, my high school student can't spell... they are smart kids. They need a teacher. I don't blame the school staff. I blame the large class sizes. . (Parent Gr 2/4/9 Calgary)
- One teacher 5 different groups of students (LA and Social). Currently, in my grade 7 class, there are 8 students with IPPs, 9 English Language Learners, 2 students with Learning Support Plans, and two students who have suffered severe emotional trauma. Because the class is large (31), much of my time is spent managing behaviour and doing paperwork. I currently work an extra 2 hours after school plus about 6 hours each weekend. Still, with all of this extra work, I do not feel confident that I am meeting the needs of all my students. I don't have enough time to plan for all of the needs my students have nor can I contact all of the parents I would like to. As a teacher with 9 years of experience, I feel that in the last few years my job is getting harder, not easier. (Teacher Gr 7/8 Ft. McMurray)

2. Challenges of dealing with impact of children with ‘behavioural needs’

- In the smaller classes there is minimal structure and children with behavioural issues are very distracting to the others. In the larger classes it seems the structure is excessive because of the need to control the possible chaos of 32+ students, and there is personal interaction/evaluation. The teachers seem like they are just trying to keep their heads above water and cope the best they can... My daughter in grade 1 has been told to ignore the Kindergarten boy who repeatedly punches other students whenever he is upset. She came home and said “It was my turn to get punched today Mommy” ??? (Parent Gr 1 30-32 Parkland)
- 3 children in the school that need diapering, have no speech, one who usually rolls around on the floor and moans. Staff regularly bruised and bitten. Recently teacher was bitten so badly blood was spurting out of her arm. These three are so labour intensive that other children in other grades with special needs get no service. No proper services for the three children. No proper supports for the staff team being pulled in to keep finger in the dike. Staff have been issued protective arm sleeves. Give me a break. This is not the role of the regular classroom teacher. (Retired Principal Airdrie)
- Autism - limited verbal, screams high pitch screams often, runs every 7-10 mins, functions at about 3 yr old development level, funding only provides .5 assistant time ... The child cannot be left alone so two EAs are required throughout the day and funding is only providing .5 of an assistant. School had to go thousands into debt to ensure adequate coverage. No extra support for the remaining students with high needs. (Teacher Gr 1 18-20 Edmonton)

3. Early learning challenges

- The teacher is divided too thinly. There is not general extra support for these kids... A day home cannot operate with one adult being responsible for 24 children so why can a classroom? (Parent Gr K 24-26 Ponoka)
- [Special needs] Autism, Down's syndrome, behaviour challenges, sensory disabilities, language and fine motor delays, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome ... Having one Educational assistant for a class of 30 students where 10 are identified as having special needs is not enough support. (Educational Staff Gr K 30-32 Edmonton)
- Kindergarten - Several students with severe violent behaviors; screaming, kicking, biting, hitting, pinching, scratching, throwing things, flipping tables, punching, stabbing people with pencils and other objects, swearing, yelling, hurting others on purpose, refusal to follow instruction or rules. Other students who are non-verbal, need to be fed and diapered, who are in wheelchairs. Some who are non-verbal, run away, need constant supervision, do not communicate with others, can be easily upset and become violent. Some students with emotion disabilities who cry uncontrollably. Many students who do not understand social cues and acceptable behaviors. Students who do not speak or understand English so often exhibit negative behaviors. Several students who have undiagnosed learning disabilities or other problems that causes them to struggle to focus or meet classroom expectations both academically and socially. A few students who are very intelligent and would benefit from more challenging programming but still need to socialize with peers. (Parent Gr K Lethbridge)

4. English language learners

- Half of my class is ELL. Some will likely code out with learning disabilities throughout the next year, but resources for testing them are scarce ... No support staff available. (Teacher Gr 2/3 24-26 Edmonton)
- High numbers of students are ESL learners- almost 60% of my classes. As a math/science teacher I get no aid time to help with this. In addition to the above mentioned ESL learners. I have 4 students with learning disabilities - low IQ , dyslexia, and one child who is hard of hearing and requires a hearing aid and FM transmitter to hear me. 27-29 students. I get no support for my hard of hearing student, no ESL support at all, and one aid for a half hour every second day to help with math support for the 3 students with math learning problems. In addition to lack of support staff, we also lack consistent access to technology that could assist with the issues some of these students are facing. (Teacher Gr 8 27-29 Calgary)
- Each day I face an incredibly diverse group of kids. There are 8 Coded students, 12 English Language Learners, and several other students who require academic and emotional support. I struggle constantly with meeting the needs of everyone and have no classroom support to help with this. I feel terrible that I'm not able to read daily with my student who has just arrived from China. I'm also wishing I had more time for extension tasks with my gifted student ... There is no additional support in my room. Our AP takes some kids a couple times a week for guided reading. I'm hoping to get an education assistant soon. (Teacher Gr 5/6 27-29 Calgary)

5. The need for support staff

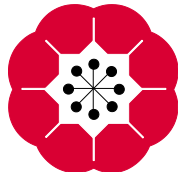
- Several students in the class are coded and require the support of an educational assistant. Educational assistants at my school are so overextended that they are unable to dedicate an adequate amount of support for these kids... I have one student with a severe physical disability and four additional students with mild to moderate learning disabilities in this particular class... The EA assigned to my student with the severe physical disability is supposed to be dedicated to him full-time, but has a list of several others who she is also expected to support (some in my classroom and others in different classrooms). This is obviously impossible for her to achieve. (Teacher Gr 12 33-35 Edmonton)
- I have in a class of 38 usually about 7 students with special needs. In every class this would include English as second language learners, behaviour needs students LSP, and learning disabled students LSP, as well as MAX students... I have only had three classroom aids in the last 8 years of teaching at my current school, each for one period of teaching time out of four blocks only, for one semester of the year only. With the number of students in my class being consistently at this level of needs and quantity, this is unacceptable. Because I don't teach one of the four core areas, I am left alone the majority of time to try and support these students. (Teacher High school 36-38 Calgary)
- High behaviour children clustered. Putting out fires all day the average child gets little attention. No matter how hard we all try. The teacher is amazing but has been given an unrealistic workload with Special needs students and kids with fine motor and speech needs clustered in... We have 6 special needs children I have one with ASD one to one he is wonderful but the high behaviour kids with little to no support take up all the teachers time and cause the other children to be fearful. It is a safety concern and I think there needs to be better policy in regards to students threatening or harming other students and disturbing a healthy learning environment. (Educational Staff Gr K Lethbridge)

6. Condition of schools and classrooms

- Most of my students have had to have their fees waived due to low income. We were given a budget to buy school supplies for them. It's November and we are almost out of pencils. I've had to buy my class basic supplies like paper, pencils, white board markers, bandaids, and erasers. I have only 2 prep periods of 40 minutes with which to complete all my planning, marking, and evaluation for this diverse a set of learning. I don't have the time, despite my best efforts, to meet the needs of my students. Despite working until 6 most evenings and never taking a day off on the weekends, I'm behind. I'm working with a computer that is over 10 years old. My classroom technology is even older than that. I have 5 laptops (4 that work) which have to be shared with other classes (66 students in total). Most of my students have to bus over an hour just to get to school. They're exhausted from being up so early when they arrive at 9, and are just as spent when they leave at 3:45. (Teacher Gr 5/6 21-23 Calgary)
- It is difficult at times depending on if you have behavioral issues with a few students. If you are tending to these issues it leaves no room to help other kids academically. Resources and space to pull these kids out and help them individually is almost impossible. Sometimes we sit in the boot room when it is warm out and do work. Sad and stinky. (Educational Staff Gr 3 39 or more Lethbridge)
- This class does not have a classroom, as the portables expected for this school which were supposed to be completed by the summer have yet to be completed as of November 3rd. In the morning the class (call this class 'A') is split in half, and each half is then combined with another complete grade 4 class (classes 'B' and 'C'), making for a total of 35 students in two different classrooms for the morning. In the afternoon class 'A' is pulled out of the other classrooms, and reunited in a kindergarten classroom that is then available. As this is not actually 'their' classroom, the students must carry all their supplies and work in a shoebox from place to place. The teacher of class 'A' also has no permanent space, as she splits her time in classroom 'B' and 'C' in the mornings to be with her students, and then works from the kindergarten room in the afternoon . (Parent Gr 4 21-23 Red Deer)

7. The importance of providing the right conditions

- My Down's syndrome student has full assistance, so that gives me the time to get to the other children in my class. In addition, I have a very small class size this year. Each day is a dream and I feel like a real teacher this year. I am able to have a positive impact on my students compared to past years where I was just putting out fires in my over populated under supported high needs class. I do not want this year to end! (Teacher Gr 4 18-20 Edmonton)
- Thankfully this is the first year our Early Literacy Assistant is working with grade 2 students and she has been a HUGE help! She is trained in speech and language development so she is really making a difference in my students' education. (Teacher Gr 2 18-20 Medicine Hat)
- I have one educational assistant who works mainly with the autistic student. This is the first time in several years that I have had an EA and it has made a world of difference. I have had up to 29 students in the past 4 years, with extreme high needs students, and no EA assistance. This year I feel like I can actually breathe! (Teacher Gr 6 21-23 Claresholm)



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