



Five Solutions to Strengthen Public Education in Alberta

STAND FOR EDUCATION
PUBLIC FORUMS 2023



The Alberta Teachers' Association

www.teachers.ab.ca



The Alberta Teachers' Association

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ISBN 978-1-927074-31-2

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All photos unless otherwise noted are from Real Impact.

“Hope changes everything. It changes winter into summer, darkness into dawn, descent into ascent, barrenness into creativity, agony into joy.”

—Daisaku Ikeda

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Preface

A HOPEFUL VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

This report draws on the insights of over 800 Albertans who participated in the Stand for Public Education engagement round-table process conducted in the fall 2022 and winter 2023. The participants convened in communities across rural and urban Alberta, hailing from Medicine Hat to Vulcan, Calgary to Grande Prairie and through a special online virtual round table for those unable to meet in person. Participants at these sessions included parents and guardians, community members, business and civil society representatives, teachers, elected school board and municipal leaders, and representatives of Indigenous and francophone communities. All were invited and all comers were included.

Together these diverse participants identified five priority solutions that they believed would strengthen Alberta's public education system¹ now and into the future. These solutions form the core of a vision for the future of public education in Alberta.

Participants told us that they want to see meaningful reductions in class sizes coupled with enhanced support for students who have complex learning needs. They expressed a desire for a modern curriculum that moves beyond rote memorization and the recitation of facts to instilling critical learning and social skills that will support students throughout their lives. They called for schools to address pressing issues of student mental health and to respond to diverse student needs and circumstances. They expressed a desire to

focus on achieving equity to ensure that great schools are available to all Albertans. To do all these things, they want to see governments make stable investments in public education, not only when there is an election looming or the price of a barrel of oil is high. As outlined in the following pages, taken together these solutions form an action framework, each contributing to a stronger, brighter future for Alberta's children and youth.

Albertans understand the importance of a strong education system and the critical role it plays in strengthening our society, democracy and economy. This understanding has deep roots in the history of our communities from the smallest "4 by 4" to the largest of our cities and is reflected in the support our public education system has enjoyed since the creation of the first school boards, even before Alberta was established as a province. Despite challenges that are also well documented in this report, Alberta's public, separate and francophone schools have been recognized as being among the most successful in the world.

The messages we heard are clear but, frankly, come as no surprise. They are entirely consistent with what has been repeatedly revealed as the consensus opinion of Albertans in multiple consultations, surveys and public opinion polls conducted by the Association, government, community organizations and media over the course of many years. Still, they remind us that creating an education system that can be resilient, innovative, vital

and strong is hard work and requires constant renewal and inspiration. It cannot thrive without the constant and consistent efforts of teachers, school leaders, parents/guardians, grandparents and the community writ large. We have work to do and it needs urgently to be done.

This research report and the activities that gave rise to it would not have been possible without the direct support and energies of ATA locals, Provincial Executive Council members,

Alberta school councils and numerous Association staff. It was led by Dr. Philip McRae and Dr. Lisa Everitt in partnership with external consultants Bill Kilgannon and Susan Petrina of Real Impact. The collective work of these individuals is greatly appreciated and is in the service of a hopeful future for all Albertans.

Dennis Theobald
Executive Secretary

LISTENING TO ALBERTANS, CATALYZING A CONVERSATION

As Albertans and our global community moved through the challenging months of the pandemic, people once again felt inspired to gather. Because of this, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) initiated a wide-ranging public engagement process that included a rally of several thousand Albertans together with a series of open and public round tables to elicit their hopes for their children's education and our public schools into the future.



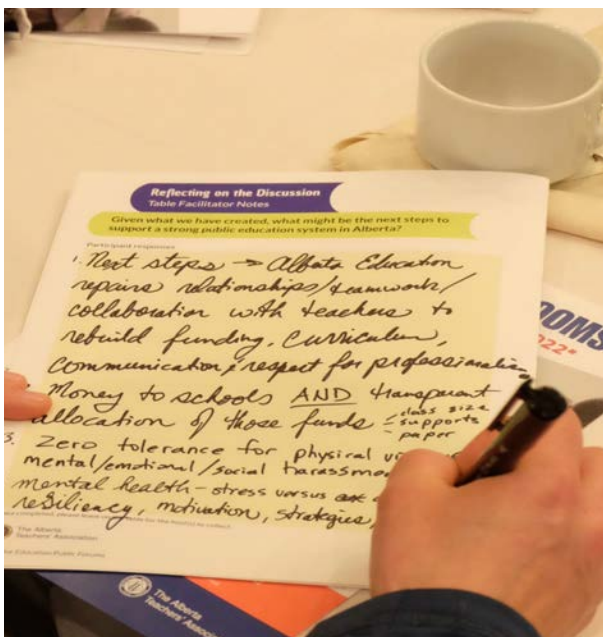
On October 22, 2022, thousands of parents/guardians, teachers and concerned Albertans travelled from every corner of the province to participate in a rally held at the Alberta legislature under the banner “Stand for Public Education.” The rally was an energizing event that launched a year-long educational advocacy campaign in the lead-up to Alberta’s 2023 provincial election. The campaign presented a bold and hopeful vision for the future of education and called on all political parties to commit to this vision in the election scheduled for late May 2023.

Following the rally, the ATA coordinated a series of in-person public round-table discussions and virtual events between December 2022 and February 2023.

Participants were asked to share their thoughts on one key question:

“What are your hopes for Alberta’s children and our public schools so that they can thrive now and into the future?”

The engagement process welcomed a wide audience of Albertans, including active and retired K–12 teachers and school leaders, school support staff, parents/guardians, school board trustees, members of the business community, chambers of commerce representatives, town and city counsellors, preservice teachers and other concerned citizens who support public education.

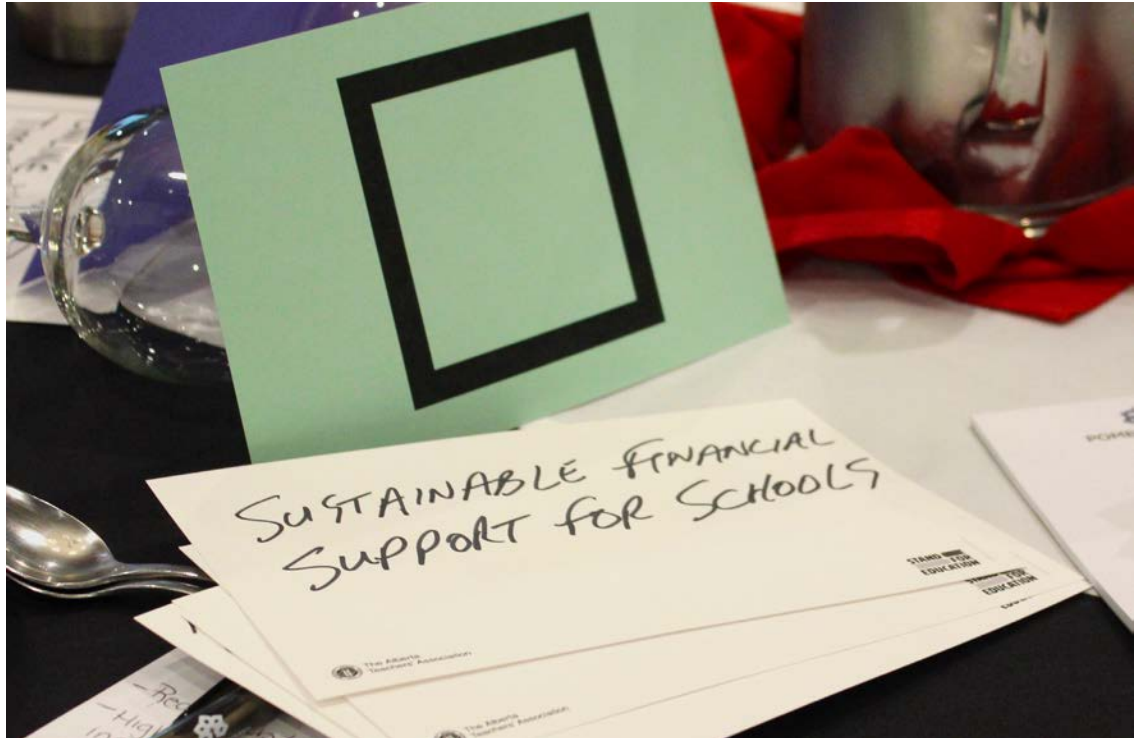




Overall, these public forums gathered feedback from approximately 800 Albertans from a variety of diverse backgrounds across both rural and urban communities.

Four large in-person public events were held in Edmonton, Calgary, Grande Prairie and Medicine Hat, with many ATA teacher locals across the province hosting their

own community round-table discussions. Albertans also had the opportunity to participate in an open virtual round-table discussion or provide their response directly via an online submission page on the Stand for Education website (standforeducation.ca). Two special round-table discussions were held with Indigenous and francophone communities

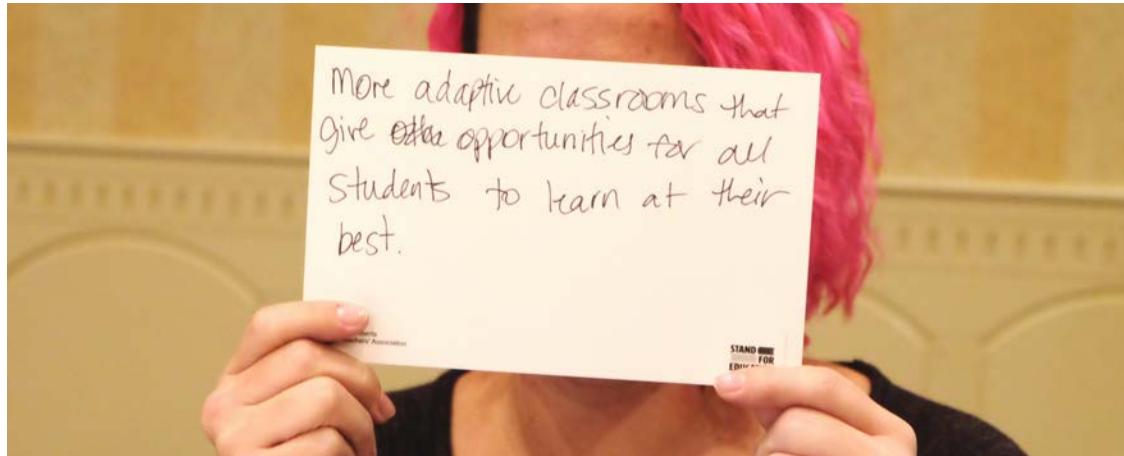


to ensure their voices were both prominently heard on issue of education and recognized for their wisdom and importance.

In addition to the ATA-sponsored events, ASCA asked its school councils to engage parents/guardians to provide input at their meetings and directly via the ASCA

website. Hundreds of parents responded to this call and provided rich and informed perspectives. Other groups contributed their own feedback, including public organizations, preservice teacher groups and post-secondary institutions.

EDUCATION AS A PRIORITY ISSUE IN ALBERTA



Public education is consistently ranked as one of the top five issues of importance for Albertans.²

The public education system has historically enjoyed a high level of public confidence in its ability to produce well-educated citizens able to thrive in a healthy, equitable society and supported by a strong economy.

The cascading effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have only served to amplify the importance of a strong and resilient public education system. Alberta's parents/guardians and teachers were resolute and committed to meeting the educational and social needs of our children and youth, and this was clearly voiced in the public round tables.

Throughout the Stand for Public Education engagement process, Albertans raised deep concerns about the many issues facing our education system and the serious impact this is having on children struggling with academic, social and emotional challenges. In today's Alberta classrooms, far too many students are not getting the supports and attention they need to develop their full potential.

In addition to the ongoing academic, social and emotional challenges students have experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic,

a constant erosion has occurred in the form of underfunding of the system, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources to meet the growing and diverse needs of students, and lack of human and material support(s) specifically for students with *exceptionalities. Parents/guardians, teachers and professionals want solutions to strengthen the future of public education in Alberta.

It was an awareness of the opportunities and concerns that motivated many participants to engage in the round tables and online process. More importantly, these Albertans consistently stated that it was their belief in the importance of a strong public education system that inspired them to come together and share their hopes and visions for the future of education.

**Exceptionalities refers to physical, mental, social and emotional disabilities or differences, including gifted/talented abilities, that may necessitate special attention by those in schools and school communities.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



What We Heard from Albertans

Participants shared many ideas and bold visions for the future of education. Indigenous, francophone and rural participants each had specific concerns related to the challenges faced by their communities, and the need for equity when it comes to education, resources and supports for their children.

Throughout the entire engagement process, Albertans consistently voiced concerns about five interrelated and integrated areas that they believe have systemic impacts on children's education and would establish a strong foundation for their futures and that of the public education system (see Appendix A).

FIVE SOLUTIONS TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

Reduce Class Sizes and Support Complexity

“A cap on class sizes and more funding for support in our diverse classrooms is of the utmost importance.”

- Alberta teacher

A commonly raised issue was rapidly growing class sizes in far too many schools. In addition to growing class sizes, participants were deeply concerned about the increasing number of students with complex and diverse learning needs. Parents/guardians and teachers at every round table were worried about larger classes and more students with complex learning needs and behaviours, and about challenges to getting individual students the supports they need to succeed and reach their potential.

Modernize Curriculum

“Put more emphasis on critical thinking and practical learning instead of rote memorization.”

- Alberta community member

Participants also expressed their frustration with how the Alberta government has developed and implemented the new curriculum for elementary-aged children. Teachers, parents/guardians, school boards members and

educational experts were highly critical of the fact that the development of the new curriculum largely excluded teachers, education leaders and curriculum experts from the process. While the government agreed to scale back the implementation of the curriculum in many subjects, teachers in kindergarten to Grade 3 who are currently implementing the new curriculum repeatedly said that they do not have the resources they need.

Provide Learning Supports

“Readily available mental health supports for students and families, including positions in each school dedicated to connection and re-engagement.”

- Alberta parent

A priority that was constantly highlighted during the engagement process was the lack of learning supports, particularly for children with special and complex learning needs. At every round table, people said it is vital there be more teacher assistants to support children, particularly because the COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected the education and mental health of many children. Far too many children are

not able to be assessed in a timely manner to determine their learning needs. Parents/guardians and teachers from smaller towns and rural areas are particularly concerned about the lack of access to trained professionals like speech and occupational therapy and mental health experts.

Focus on Equity

“A strong public system is imperative if we are to remain a strong democracy. Every child should have the opportunity to develop their potential in a caring, inclusive school.”

- Alberta grandparent

A theme highlighted at the Indigenous and francophone round tables in particular was the inequity that exists within Alberta's school system. Many parents/guardians and teachers talked about how children in rural schools or Indigenous communities do not have access to many vital educational options like computers, science courses, second languages and arts programs.

Many people across all the round-table discussions questioned why the Alberta government has increased funding to private schools in large urban centres where

wealthy students already have access to a variety of school programs within the public system. Concerns about the impact of Alberta's education system were also expressed regarding lack of supports for English language learners and/or francophone resources for new curriculum. Meanwhile, many public, Catholic and francophone school boards were identified as struggling to provide resources and supports to students in lower income communities and not having enough classroom space to accommodate the rapidly growing number of children in suburban schools.

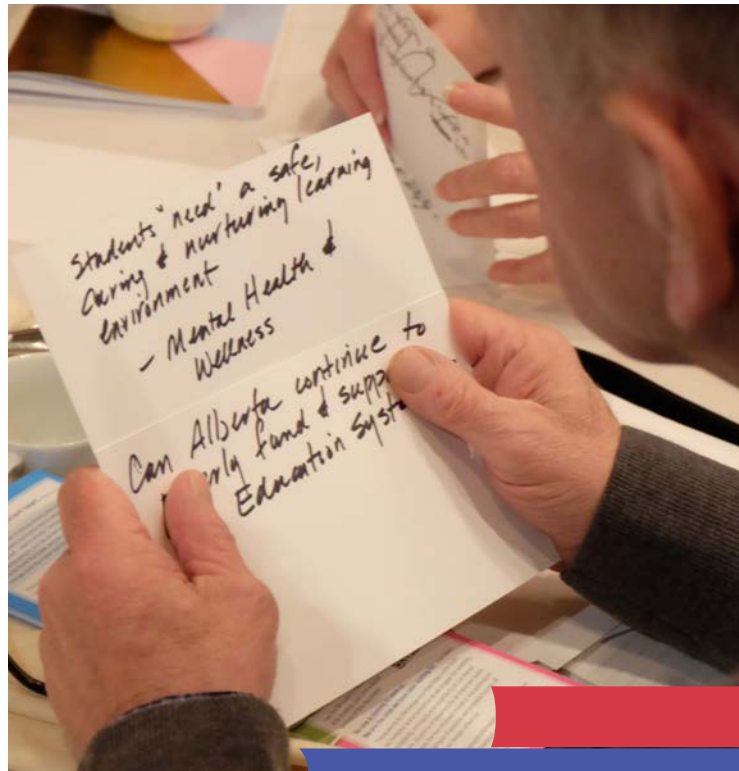
Invest in Public Education

"I would like to see funding that is stable and not dependent on which government is in power. We should not have to be debating funding and fighting for every dollar."

- Alberta business owner

Participants want the Alberta government to invest in a high-quality education system that provides sustainable operational funding that is the highest in the country, not the lowest.

Many participants stated that the Alberta government funding cuts had made issues in education worse. In particular, the government changed the school board funding formula to be based on three-year averages of student populations, which penalizes growing school divisions. Many other round-table participants were angered and frustrated by the government's elimination of class size reduction funding initiatives and drastic cutbacks to program unit funding (PUF), an early intervention program for children with exceptionalities.





Solution 1

Reduce Class Sizes and Support Complexity

"We have incredibly busy schools, with classes that are far too large, and not enough supports for the complex student needs our teachers and administrators are dealing with on a daily basis."

-School trustee

Parents/guardians and teachers across the province consistently raised concerns that too many Alberta students are struggling in large classes while the complexity* of learning needs within the student population is increasing dramatically. Round-table and online participants in the forums said they wanted to see a clear commitment to class size reductions so that students would be able to receive more individualized support(s).

They discussed how Alberta's growing class sizes and complexity are having significant impacts on children with exceptionalities. Many parents/guardians and teachers described how children were not receiving enough direct support from teachers and how there are not enough teaching assistants. Across Alberta, people want their government to commit to a real, actionable plan to reduce class sizes and invest in the necessary supports for children with complex learning needs.

Class size is an important determinant of student outcomes, and one that can be directly established by policy. All else being equal, research on increasing class size shows that it harms student outcomes. Smaller classes allow students to learn and thrive because they receive more individual attention from the teacher. This can directly benefit students with lower academic abilities and support those who are economically disadvantaged. It can also lead to higher levels of achievement.

The research specifically suggests that increasing class size harms not only children's test scores in the short run, but also their human capital formation in the long run. Money saved today by increasing class sizes results in more substantial social and educational costs in the future.

**Classroom complexity refers to having students with multiple needs in one class, including learning, behavioural, emotional and physical.*

ALBERTANS SAID

"More teachers so class sizes are smaller, more paraprofessionals (educational assistants), and more recognition for the important work teachers take on so that in the future we have high-quality, trained people attracted to teaching as a career."

– Parent

"A cap on class sizes and more funding for support in our diverse classrooms is of the utmost importance."

– Teacher

"My son's class has doubled in size this past year, and student behaviour is changing."

– Parent

HOW WE GOT HERE

The Alberta Commission on Learning (ACOL) established provincewide guidelines for class sizes in its 2003 report: junior kindergarten–Grade 3, 17 students; Grades 4–6, 23 students; Grades 7–9, 25 students; Grades 10–12, 27 students.

In 2004, the Alberta government established a separate funding envelope called the Class Size Initiative (CSI). Additional funding was provided to school boards that were above the ACOL averages so they could reduce class sizes.³ In the early years of the initiative, 2,900 additional teachers were hired to reduce class sizes. This helped most school jurisdictions reach the class size average targets in the upper grades by 2010. After 2010, the government shifted funds toward reducing the class size average for kindergarten to Grade 3. However,

core operational funding per student declined as Alberta’s student population grew, so despite the CSI funding, 89 per cent of school jurisdictions still reported their K–3 classes were above ACOL guidelines in 2018–19.

In 2019, the government eliminated the CSI funding and stopped requiring school boards to collect average class size data. Given that kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12) education funding has not kept pace with inflation and population growth since 2019, there were 860 fewer teachers and 1400 fewer support workers in classrooms by 2022.⁴ This explains why, in the latest ATA rapid research studies conducted in October 2022, 64 per cent of Alberta teachers reported that they have seen increased class sizes this school year (see Appendix B).⁵

ATA RAPID RESEARCH STUDY (2022-2023)

Random Stratified Sample Margin of Error +/- 2% (19 times out of 20)

4 in 10

teachers indicated they have more than 33 students in their classes.

85 per cent

of teachers have seen a dramatic increase in the complexity and diversity of student needs.

THE PATH FORWARD

Participants are looking for all political parties to

- **establish a plan to reach ACOL class size requirements** (using a maximum range of students per class, not class size averages per school or jurisdiction);
- **recruit and train** more teachers and educational assistants;
- **commit more individualized support(s)** for all students; and
- **increase infrastructure development** to reach future space needs.

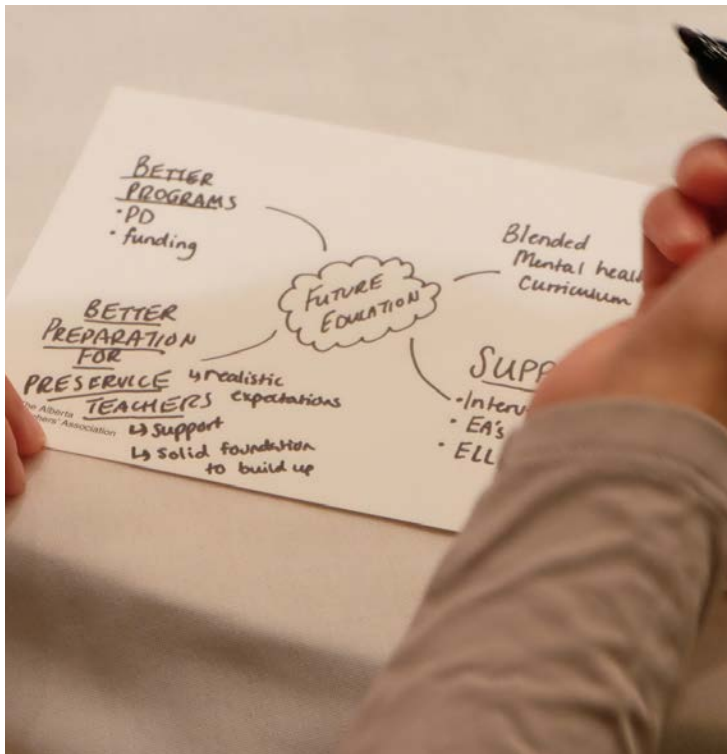
QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Some questions to start the conversation with political candidate(s) and their parties in relation to the path forward.

Solution: Implement a plan to reduce class sizes and complexity.

Q: How will you support children and youth with complex needs (social/emotional, behavioural, cognitive)?

Q: What is your plan to reach the ACOL (2003) class size requirements?



Solution 2

Modernize Curriculum

“Emphasis on critical thinking and practical learning instead of rote learning. Evidence-based and consultative approaches to curriculum development rather imposing politically driven development on unwilling schools and families.”

– Community member

Albertans want their children's education to be based on a modern, high-quality curriculum that will inspire students to learn, become critical thinkers, provide diverse educational opportunities and develop their full potential.

Across the province, parents/guardians, teachers and others consistently shared their concerns and frustrations with the Alberta government's efforts to revise the elementary (K–6) curriculum without fully consulting teachers, school leaders, Indigenous communities and academics. There were consistent calls for a commitment to create a new curriculum process that will listen to and implement the advice of teachers, school leaders, parents/guardians, curriculum experts and others.

ALBERTANS SAID

"There are legitimate issues that need to be reviewed and solved, and we need to be bigger than the game of politics to solve them. This has to be about our kids and the future of our province and country."

– Parent

"The space and ability to safely live within the culture. To have Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy be the foundation of educational planning versus integration into mainstream education. More Indigenous classes like language, history and culture with less filtered information about us in the curriculum. An Indigenous liaison at all schools."

– Indigenous parent

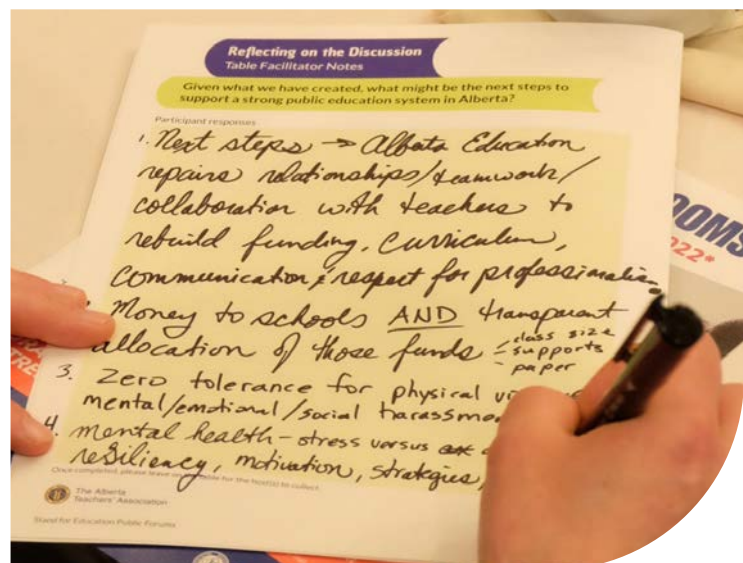
"Des ressources en français qui sont prêtes dès la publication de tout nouveau programme, pas plus tard."

"French language resources that are ready upon release of any new curriculum, not later."

– Francophone teacher

"The government needs to provide more support for teachers expected to implement so many curriculum changes in such a short period of time. They need to take into consideration the rural context and that some teachers teach multiple grades in a classroom."

– School leader



HOW WE GOT HERE

Following the release of the *Inspiring Education* report in 2010, the Alberta government began a process of consulting teachers, academics, school leaders and parents/guardians in the development of a new curriculum for different grade levels that was to be phased in over a number of years. This process continued with a change of government (2015–19) that involved extensive consultations encompassing hundreds of teachers and curriculum experts. A new K–4 curriculum was almost ready to be phased in by the time of the 2019 provincial election.

However, the new government decided to abandon all of the previous work on the curriculum and instead appointed a small panel to develop a new curriculum for K–6 from scratch. When the new K–6 curriculum was released in March 2021, it was highly criticized by curriculum experts, teachers, parents/guardians and Indigenous leaders.

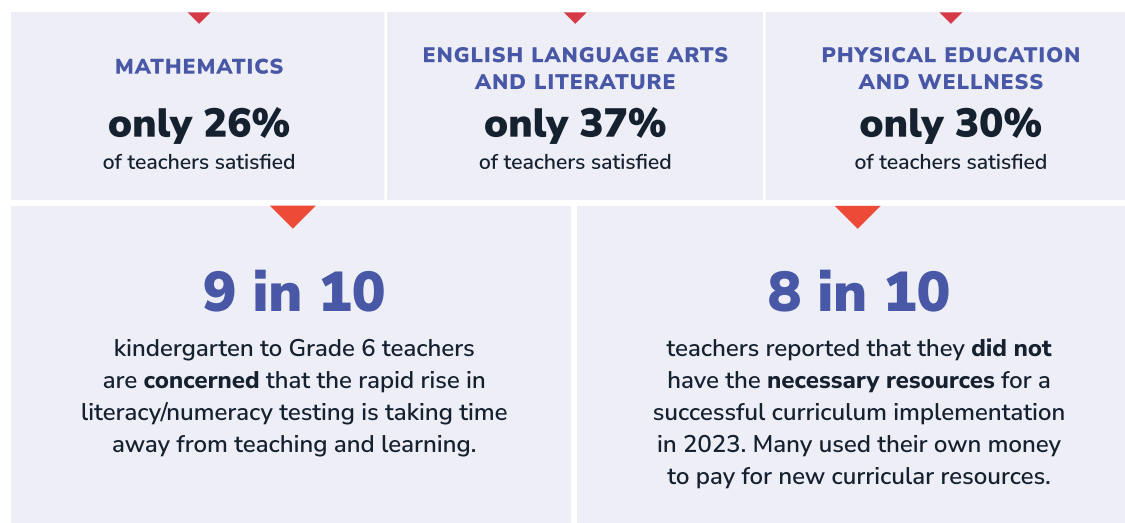
Many others challenged the draft as having racist elements and expressed concern that it omitted the perspectives of the LGBTQ2S+ and other communities.⁶

After parents/guardians and teachers rallied against the new curriculum and 56 of Alberta’s 61 school boards refused to pilot it, the government scaled back its plans and decided to move forward only with curriculum changes in a few subject areas. A new English language arts and literature and math curriculum for K–3 and a new physical education and wellness curriculum for K–6 were released in September 2022. However, even with the scaled-down approach and some government funding to help with the implementation, many teachers and school leaders reported during the round tables that they did not have the resources and supports to successfully implement the new programs of study (see Appendix C).

ATA RAPID RESEARCH STUDY (2022-2023)

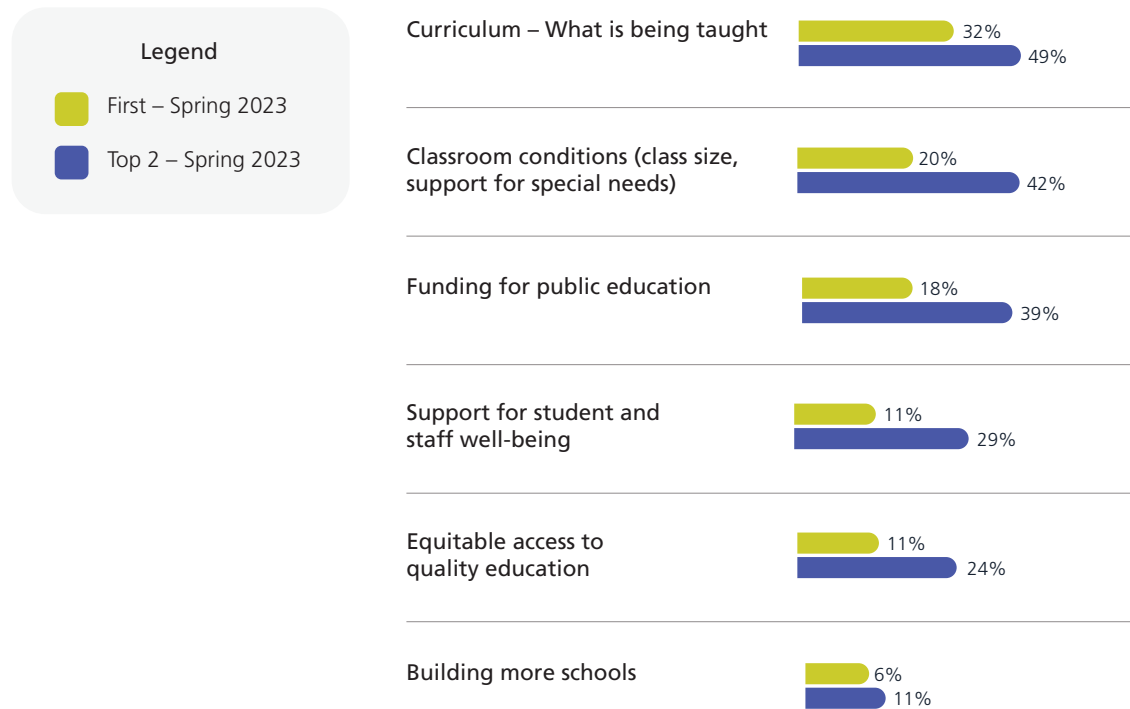
Random Stratified Sample Margin of Error +/- 3% (19 times out of 20)

A spring 2023 randomized research study⁷ of almost 1,000 Alberta K–6 teachers found that levels of satisfaction with the new curriculum were extremely low:



THE PATH FORWARD

In a recent Environics poll of Albertans⁸ conducted in the spring of 2023, Albertans determined that curriculum is the most important of six key education issues.



Participants are looking for all political parties to

- **pause curriculum implementation and commit** to revisiting the timelines for any new development of programs of study;
- **work collaboratively** with teachers, parents/guardians, academic researchers and other educational experts;
- **ensure the new curriculum fosters critical thinking skills** and helps to develop informed citizens;
- **ensure students have access to creative,**
- **diverse opportunities**, including field-trips, music, arts, trades, languages, and real life skills such as personal finances, leadership and collaboration;
- **ensure the teaching of core educational skills**, like math, science, English and social studies; and
- **ensure access to a wide diversity of programs and opportunities** within the public system.



QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Some questions to start the conversation with political candidate(s) and their parties in relation to the path forward.

Solution: Develop a modern, inclusive curriculum.

Q: Will you commit to implementing a new phased-in curriculum that was developed collaboratively with teachers, parents guardians and other educational experts?

Q: What is your position on the new kindergarten to Grade 6 curriculum?



Solution 3

Provide Learning Supports

“More money going to diagnosis and support for neurodivergent children such as those with ADHD and autism. It should not take years to receive a diagnosis through the school system. More educational assistants in classrooms to help teachers.”

– Parent

Children are only able to develop their full potential if they have access to a diversity of learning supports and highly trained professionals. It is vital that Alberta's education system include a comprehensive team approach to support the complex learning needs and mental health of all children.

Research shows that early diagnosis and professional supports for children with exceptionalities is critical, but these supports must be integrated into all schools to help children thrive. This hopeful vision for the future of education requires a comprehensive plan so that ALL students with learning and behavioural challenges are fully supported and have opportunities to experience success in their educational journey.

ALBERTANS SAID

"On a besoin de services, d'orthophonistes, d'ergothérapeutes, de psychologues, de tout personnel qualifié, mais ils n'existent pas. On a déjà embauché ou effrayé ceux qui parlent français."

"We need services, speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, of all qualified staff really, but they don't exist. The French-speaking ones that do have been hired or scared off."

– Francophone teacher

"Re-instate full program unit funding (PUF) and establish full-time kindergarten"

– Parent

"That Indigenous children learn in a system where they can be proud of who they are and where they are from. Families feel welcomed into school communities, respected, and their children seen as gifts."

– Indigenous parent

"More support for students with behavioural, cognitive, neurodevelopmental and mental health needs. Fund today's students, today!"

– Grandparent

"To improve the learning conditions for Alberta's students, provide full funding of all appropriate supports for the learning needs of all students (speech and language pathologists, ELL teachers, mental health professionals, EA's, school nurses, fully funded libraries with librarians, fully funded music and art programs)."

– Community member

HOW WE GOT HERE

In January 2023, the *Calgary Herald* reported that, “According to the latest data from Alberta Education, the number of students coded with exceptionalities — from behavioural and emotional issues to learning and physical disabilities — has grown from 104,000 in 2016, to more than 114,000 in 2019, just before COVID disruptions reduced enrolment overall.”⁹ However, these statistics only include students who have been formally identified with exceptionalities. Thousands of students remain without supports in the classroom because there is inadequate funding for them. Most of them lack formal assessment for their exceptionality so they can get the appropriate and targeted support(s) for speech, occupational therapy, and/or psycho-educational needs.

Despite this growing need, schools boards struggle to provide critically important supports with less funding. “The Calgary Board of Education is facing a \$47 million deficit for exceptionalities funding this year, as the number of students with learning disabilities grows amid an unprecedented, post-COVID enrolment spike in September 2022.”

Similarly, the Edmonton Public School Board eliminated 138 educational assistants, despite the fact the school board projected an increase of 2,800 more students than the year before.¹⁰ Families with children who have exceptionalities and who live in smaller towns are further challenged as schools have difficulty attracting enough professionals like speech and mental health therapists, and many rural and Indigenous school districts struggle to find qualified teaching assistants.

Round-table participants were deeply concerned about the growing mental health crisis among children and youth in Alberta schools. The demand for more mental health programs and professional supports in the education system was already well beyond what was available before the pandemic. The demand for mental health programs and professional supports following the pandemic has been extremely high and beyond the resources within the school and of many communities.

Additionally, participants expressed that the funding, which was cut for supporting children with exceptionalities, must be reinstated to its previous levels. The program unit funding (PUF) was cut in 2019 and forced many school boards to cut back on early intervention supports for children with exceptionalities. The chair of the Edmonton Public School Board described the impact of the change to PUF funding as follows: “We would have served 1,040 students. This year we served 600 students. We went from \$39 million down to \$9.5 million. We had to completely reorganize how we offered supports to kids”.¹¹

Parents/guardians and teachers also said their hopeful vision for the future of education includes more early childhood education supports and a plan to phase in full-day kindergarten. Alberta remains one of the few provinces in Canada that only funds half-day kindergarten.

ATA RAPID RESEARCH STUDY (2022-2023)

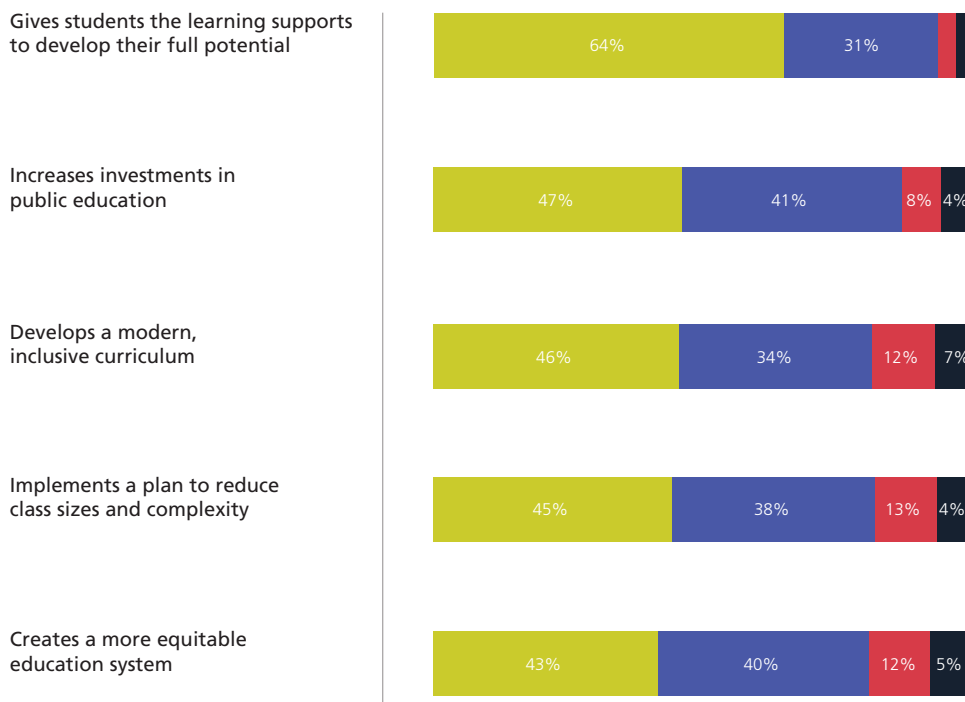
Random Stratified Sample Margin of Error +/- 2% (19 times out of 20)



ALBERTA PUBLIC PERCEPTION POLLING 2023

Margin of Error +/- 3.3%, 19 times out of 20

In a spring 2023 Environics poll,¹² eight in ten think each of five government priorities are at least somewhat important, but the most important is giving students the learning supports they need to excel.



■ Very important
 ■ Somewhat important
 ■ Not very important
 ■ Not at all important

THE PATH FORWARD

Participants are looking for all parties to commit to

- **providing the necessary educational assistants and professional services** in all schools;
- **phasing in full-day kindergarten** and integrating early childhood educational programs in all schools;
- **establishing mental health programs** and ensuring that mental health professionals are in all schools;
- **providing more support** for English language learners and students with exceptionalities; and
- **ensuring that all schools support** antibullying and antiracism education, gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and programs for new immigrants.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Some questions to start the conversation with political candidate(s) and their parties in relation to the path forward.

Solution: Give students the learning supports they need to develop to their full potential.

Q: What is your plan to provide increased support for students with exceptionalities?

Q: How will you resource and support mental health in our public schools?

Q: What is your position on funding and integrating full-day kindergarten and early childhood programming?



Solution 4

Focus on Equity

"It would be helpful to see more money for early intervention with regard to literacy and numeracy, also for funding [for] educational personnel to address grade disparity abilities. Let's support our students and assist them so we can cultivate a healthy future for Alberta."

– School council chair

Public education is one of the most important investments we make in our individual and collective futures. By providing high-quality education to all children, we help our society become healthy, more democratic and prosperous.

The challenge noted by participants is that there is a growing disparity across our education system. While the provincial government has increased funding to private and charter schools, other Alberta schools in the inner city and rural and remote schools are struggling. Many public schools find themselves without the resources, teachers and support staff needed to adequately provide the diverse and necessary learning opportunities for their students.

ALBERTANS SAID

"Fair and equal opportunity in all schools, my child is in a small school and I feel she is missing out on education and sports. We live in a rural area and have so many small schools with no funding. These children deserve the same equal opportunities as other schools."

– Parent

"Public school students should not be denied resources to the benefit of elite, exclusionary schools that may be allowed to pick and choose to serve only the most advantaged of the population."

– Retired school leader

"De l'équivalence réelle, en matière d'expérience pour les élèves et d'infrastructure"

"Real equivalence, in student experience and in infrastructure"

– Community member

My hope is that we see more Indigenous children succeed in the educational setting, and that there is greater fairness."

– Indigenous elder



HOW WE GOT HERE

At round-table discussions and the online forums, many people raised concerns about how Alberta's education system is not equitable and how this impacts children from various communities. While the current funding formula makes some adjustments for variations in socio-economic and geographic challenges, it is inadequate to address the long-standing inequities that have become entrenched over decades.

In particular, teachers and parents/guardians from Indigenous, rural and remote parts of Alberta raised concerns that their children do not have the same learning opportunities, resources or specialized teachers as children in urban centres. As a result, many participants in the rural round tables reported that their children did not have opportunities to engage with important subjects such as a second language, music or trades.

While some rural students had access to various online learning opportunities through the Alberta Distance Learning Centre (ADLC), this changed at the end of the 2020–21 school year when the government defunded the program and closed it permanently.

Parents/guardians from rural areas were also deeply concerned about the growing crisis in school transportation, as the costs and travel times for children were reported to be increasing and companies were struggling to attract school bus drivers.

Many round-table participants also raised the need for more support and programs for children who are living in poverty. A 2022 child poverty report revealed there are 160,000 children living in poverty in Alberta.¹³ While many schools benefit from school breakfast and lunch programs run by charities, there is no comprehensive strategy to support the educational needs of children in poverty.

With many families moving to Alberta from

around the world, teachers across the province described how they don't have the supports to help children learning English, or those dealing with the trauma of escaping war and scarcity and adjusting to a new culture. Many children are fortunate to be able to attend field trips, travel and play sports or in school bands, while other children and their families are not able to afford rising school fees and, thus, miss out on these educational experiences.

Parents/guardians and teachers who shared their concerns about the impact of Alberta's inequitable education system on children questioned the public funding of wealthy private schools and the Alberta government's support for more charter schools. While 91 per cent of Alberta's school children attend public schools (run by public, Catholic and francophone school boards), Alberta is one of the only provinces that provides public dollars to support private schools.

Most of Alberta's private schools are based in the larger cities and, unlike public schools, they are not required to accept all student who want to attend. Alberta government funding for accredited private schools in 2021–22 was \$336 million.¹⁴ (up from \$286 million in 2019). Many round-table participants clearly articulated a desire that the government should stop funding private schools and transfer these funds to the systemic inequities that have evolved over time in Alberta's K–12 education system.

THE PATH FORWARD

Participants are looking for all parties to commit to

- **providing equitable support** for all students, particularly those in rural and remote schools;
- creating a rural public education plan to **attract and retain teachers** and other educational professionals;
- **implementing a comprehensive strategy** to better support children who live in poverty in Alberta schools;
- **ensuring that francophone students have equitable supports**, resources and school infrastructure;
- **ensuring that Indigenous students see themselves in the curriculum**, feel a strong sense of belonging and are equitably supported across their educational experiences; and
- **redirecting government funding for private schools** to new equity programs for children living in poverty.

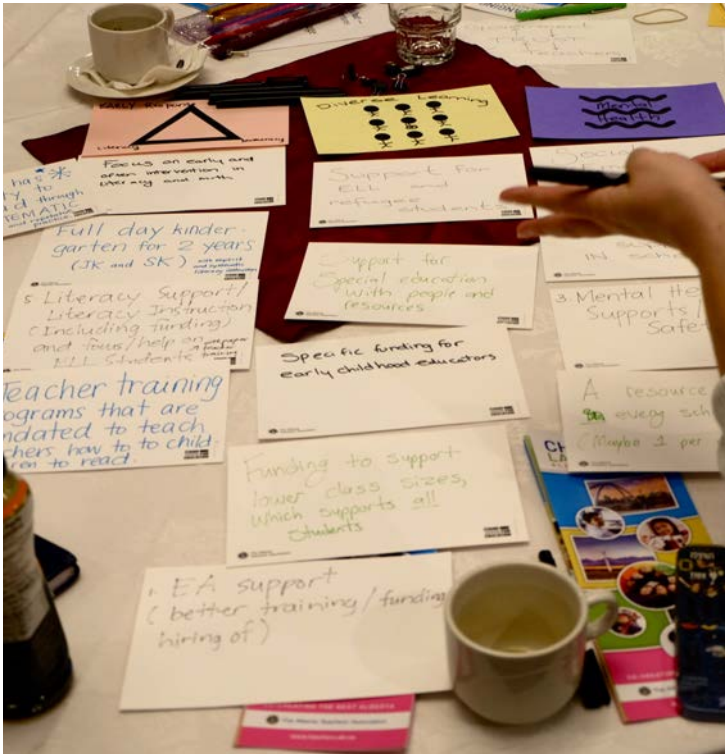
QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Some questions to start the conversation with political candidate(s) and their parties in relation to the path forward.

Solution: Create a more equitable education system.

Q: What is your plan to ensure equitable supports for all students, especially Indigenous and francophone students, and our rural and remote schools?

Q: Would your party transfer current private school funding to support programs for students in poverty?



Solution 5

Invest in Public Education

"I would like to see funding that is stable and not dependent on which government is in power. We should not have to be debating funding and fighting for every dollar."

– Parent

One of the main issues raised by the round-table participants was the lack of funding for new public schools and for the necessary investments to maintain older schools.

Alberta's population has grown by 250,000 people since 2019, and many participants felt that the provincial government has not kept pace with building enough new schools. Calgary, Edmonton and other mid-sized cities are now dealing with many overpopulated schools. In smaller towns and older neighbourhoods in urban centres, many aging schools need significant maintenance and upgrades. Parents/guardians and school councils also raised significant concerns as to why they are fundraising for basic resources like musical instruments, computers and playgrounds for young children. Teachers in the round-table sessions raised the issue of paying hundreds of dollars out of their own pockets to purchase resources in support of the new K–6 curriculum.

Alberta used to have one of the best funded educational systems in Canada,¹⁵ but unfortunately for school children today, these funding increases did not keep pace with inflation and population growth. In 2019, Alberta had the lowest per student operating expenditures of all Canadian provinces.

66 per cent of Albertans believe the managing of the K–12 education system is “on the wrong track.”¹⁶ Janet Brown Opinion Research

Ultimately, a good education system is founded on highly trained professional teachers, teaching assistants, school leaders and staff that are essential to the daily operations of our schools. Despite the fact education funding has not kept pace with Alberta's growing population and class sizes continue to grow, teachers and educational assistants are working hard to provide the best quality education possible to Alberta's children.

However, without more resources, classroom supports, and professional development opportunities, teachers grow more exhausted and many are considering leaving the profession. Many participants were very clear that there needs to be a plan to train, attract and retain more teachers and educational assistants, particularly in more rural and remote communities. The situation is also reaching a crisis point for most school boards and their declining network of substitute teachers, which was severely impacted during the global pandemic. After the past few years of intense stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers need to be better supported and valued so more people will be attracted to the teaching profession.

ALBERTANS SAID

“Il nous faut un continuum de suivi pour les élèves francophones du préscolaire jusqu'à l'université.”

“We need a system that follows and serves students from preschool through to university.”

– Francophone parent

“Plain and simple this government needs to change its approach to public education and provide adequate funding for the greater needs of students. Austerity is no longer an argument.”

– School support staff

“Alberta is the richest province in arguably the best country in the world. There is no reason we cannot provide a world-class education as good as anywhere in the world.”

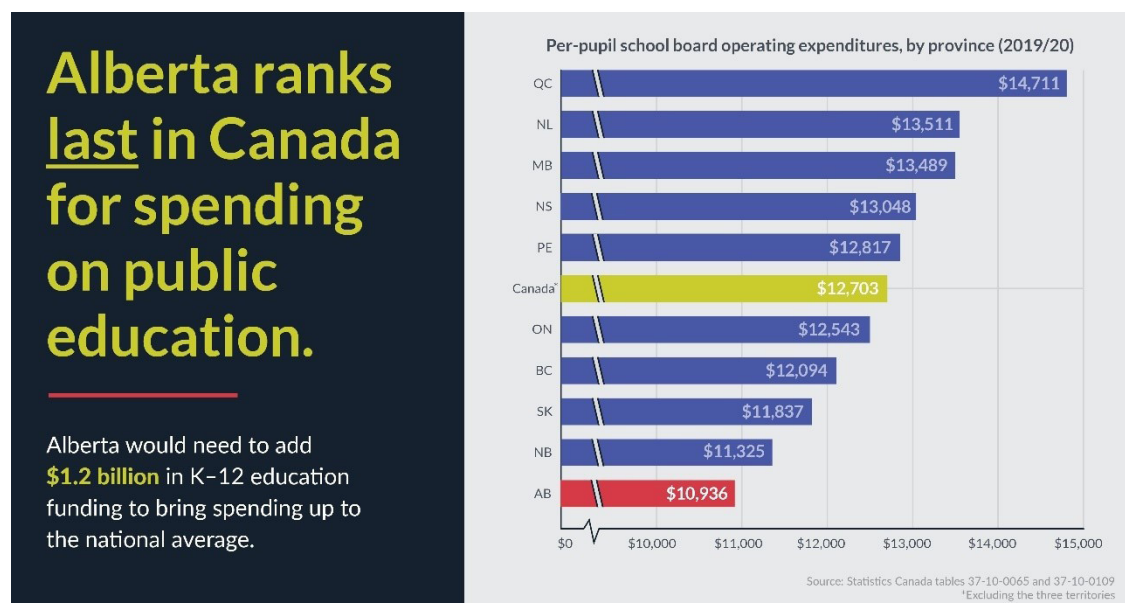
– School leader

"I hope every single one of our children is given the opportunity to go to the college or university of their choice at no cost by either scholarship or grant. This was promised as part of treaty and needs to be honoured."

- Indigenous community member

HOW WE GOT HERE

Using the latest data from Statistics Canada, that ATA determined that per student operating expenses in 2019 were \$1,369 below the national average of \$12,266.



Source: <https://teachers.ab.ca/news/alberta-students-bottom-class-funding>

Given that there were 667,233 students in the K-12 public, separate, francophone and charter school system in 2019,¹⁷ this means that the Alberta government would have had to provide an additional \$914 million in operating funding just to reach the national average of Canadian provinces. At every in-person round-table discussion, participants noted that it is vital the government of Alberta invest more than the national average in the education of Alberta's children given that the education of our children is one of the most important public investments a society can make.

These investments not only help children to reach their full potential, but make our communities healthier and more equitable, and our economies stronger and more resilient. Given that Alberta is one of the wealthiest provinces in Canada, participants noted being very frustrated that per student operational funding for schools had declined to the lowest in the country.¹⁸ Members of the business community in particular noted that while the provincial government has billions in financial surplus, and wealthy individuals and corporations pay the lowest taxes in Canada, Alberta's school children should not be struggling without the necessary resources and supports in our schools.

ATA RAPID RESEARCH STUDY (2022-2023)

Random Stratified Sample Margin of Error +/- 2% (19 times out of 20)

1 in 3

kindergarten to Grade 6 teachers are **concerned** that the rapid rise in literacy/numeracy testing is taking time away from teaching and learning.

THE PATH FORWARD

Participants are looking for all parties to commit to

- **restoring per student public education funding** to above the national average and then indexing funding to inflation and the growing number of students;
- **increasing spending on public school infrastructure** to match population needs;
- **fully funding school resources** (including technology) and playgrounds so there is no requirement for school fees or for parents/guardians to fundraise;
- **expanding the support for professional development**, mentoring and preparation time for teachers and educational assistants; and
- **establishing a plan to recruit** more substitute teachers and ensuring better working conditions for all teachers.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Some questions to start the conversation with political candidate(s) and their parties in relation to the path forward.

Solution: Increase investments in public education.

Q: Will you commit to restoring public education funding to above the national average, and match funding to inflation and the growing number of students?

Q: What is your plan to attract and retain professional teachers and other education workers in Alberta?

Moving Forward: Turning Solutions into Action

It is clear from the many parents/guardians, teachers, business and community leaders who participated in the Stand for Public Education engagement process that Albertans care deeply about the future of education in our province. The extensive challenges and issues facing the education system are having a serious impact on Alberta's children, and people want to see clear commitments to implement solutions.

A very important opportunity exists with the upcoming election in 2023 to make sure Albertans are able to move the province forward on a path to a more hopeful vision for public education and children's future. To achieve this stronger education system, citizens from across the province will need to advocate for these bold solutions to the growing crisis in education, regardless of the government of the day.

The public education system is approaching a crisis point. In the upcoming election, participants believed strongly that all political parties should commit to investing in strengthening the public education system. Alberta's children deserve better and it's time for parents/guardians, teachers and everyone who supports public education to stand up, raise their voices, and demand that all political parties commit to the following the "solutions to strengthen public education."

Ultimately, it is vital that candidates in all political parties see that citizens are taking a stand for public education, including asking candidates to explain where they and their party stand on the five solutions to strengthen public education. The questions in the infographic in Appendix A of this report can

be used to ask candidates to explain where they stand on each of the solutions.

Let the candidates know that if they want Albertans vote and support, then they need to commit to investing in changes to the public education system.

If parties and candidates support Albertans' hopes for the future of education, then they must do what they can to support that candidate to get elected.

The need to stand up for public education does not stop at the election. Regardless of which party forms the next government, the people of Alberta will have to keep the pressure on all elected representatives to make sure that Alberta's education system is there to support all children to develop their full potential.

It's time to call on all political parties to clearly state where they stand on the future of public education, and determine if they will commit to the hopeful vision that Alberta's children deserve.

Now is the time for all Albertans to stand up and take steps to move Alberta forward on the path to a stronger public education system.

Appendices

APPENDIX A – STAND FOR EDUCATION – TAKING ACTION

STAND FOR EDUCATION PUBLIC FORUMS

WHAT WE HEARD FROM ALBERTANS
SOLUTIONS TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC EDUCATION



KEY SOLUTION

Reduce Class Sizes and Support Complexity

"A cap on class sizes and more funding for support in our diverse classrooms are of the utmost importance."
- Alberta teacher



KEY SOLUTION

Modernize Curriculum

"Put more emphasis on critical thinking and practical learning instead of rote memorization."
- Alberta community member



KEY SOLUTION

Provide Learning Supports

"Readily available mental health supports for students and families, including positions in each school dedicated to connection and re-engagement."
- Alberta parent



KEY SOLUTION

Focus on Equity

"A strong public system is imperative if we are to remain a strong democracy. Every child should have the opportunity to develop their potential in a caring, inclusive school."
- Alberta grandparent



KEY SOLUTION

Invest in Public Education

"I would like to see funding that is stable and not dependent on which government is in power. We should not have to be debating funding and fighting for every dollar."
- Alberta business owner



**STAND
FOR
EDUCATION**

Learn more
www.standforeducation.ca



It's Time to Take a Stand for Public Education!



Below are ideas on how you can take action and advocate for the **Solutions to Strengthen Public Education!**

Show You're Standing Up

- Sign up to the Stand for Public Education campaign website (www.standforeducation.ca).
- Ask friends, family, teachers, school council members to get involved in the campaign.
- Share information and campaign materials through your social media networks.

Speak Out With Others

- Plan a letter-writing party! Write an op-ed or letter to an editor.
- Host an informal event to discuss the campaign, and encourage others to get involved.
- With a friend or as a group, go door-knocking to promote the Stand for Public Education campaign.

Engage & Evaluate Candidates

- Host a Coffee With Your Candidate or Pints & Politics event. (Don't forget to invite the media to your event and be prepared to be interviewed!)
- Meet with your candidates and ask them about their priorities for the future of public education.
- Volunteer and/or donate to candidates who commit to strengthening public education.
- Vote for the candidate who shares your values and will commit to strengthening and funding public education.

Question:

Where does *your* candidate stand on public education?

We are asking political candidates and their parties to make commitments to what we heard from Albertans in the public forums as **Solutions to Strengthen Public Education**. Here are some questions to start the conversation.

Solution: **Implement a plan to reduce class sizes and complexity.**

- Q: How will you support children and youth with complex needs (social/emotional, behavioural, cognitive)?
- Q: What is your plan to reach the Alberta Learning Commission's (2003) class size requirements?

Solution: **Develop a modern, inclusive curriculum.**

- Q: What is your position on the new kindergarten to Grade 6 curriculum?
- Q: Will you commit to implementing a new phased-in curriculum that was developed collaboratively with teachers, parents and other educational experts?

Solution: **Give students the learning supports they need to develop to their full potential.**

- Q: What is your plan to provide increased support for students with exceptionalities?
- Q: How will you resource and support mental health in our public schools?
- Q: What is your position on funding and integrating full-day kindergarten and early childhood programming?

Solution: **Create a more equitable education system.**

- Q: What is your plan to ensure equitable supports for all students, especially Indigenous and francophone students, and our rural and remote schools?
- Q: Would your party transfer current private-school funding to support programs for students in poverty?

Solution: **Increase investment in public education.**

- Q: Will you commit to restoring public education funding to above the national average, and match funding to inflation and the growing number of students?
- Q: What is your plan to attract and retain professional teachers and other education workers in Alberta?

Together, these solutions form a framework of action, each one a step along a path to a stronger, brighter future for Alberta's children and youth!



APPENDIX B – COMPLEXITY AND CLASS SIZES 2023

ALBERTA CLASSROOMS

PULSE RESEARCH - FALL 2022*

TOP THREE COMPLEXITIES

- 1  SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL
- 2  COGNITIVE
- 3  BEHAVIOURAL



85%

of teachers have seen a dramatic increase in the **COMPLEXITY & DIVERSITY OF STUDENT NEEDS** this year!



56%

of teachers report a decline in support for students with special needs.



UNREASONABLE WAIT TIMES for speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and psycho-educational assessments for students!

6 MONTHS to NEVER

TEACHER'S VOICE

“I teach Grade 3. I have one student that has been diagnosed with autism and a student with severe behaviour. Three of my students are reading at a beginning of Grade 1 level. One student moved from another country and had no schooling or English before last year. I have seven English language learners who are at least one grade behind in reading and writing.”

Alberta Commission on Learning Recommendations (circa 2003)

“Class composition should be considered by schools in setting class size.”

“Generally, classes with special needs students, students whose first language is not English, and vulnerable and at-risk students should be smaller than the suggested guideline.”

“Classes should also be smaller in cases where there are safety considerations such as vocational classes.”

MORAL DISTRESS

“When one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action.”

Jameton, A. 1984. *Nursing Practice: The Ethical Issues*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Further information about the Association's research is available from Dr Philip McRae at the Alberta Teachers' Association; e-mail: research@ata.ab.ca.

*Pulse Rapid Research Study - September 29 to October 11, 2022
Highly Representative Random Stratified Sample - Margin of Error +/- 2.8% (19 times out of 20)



The Alberta Teachers' Association

C0018-BF-2022.11

ALBERTA CLASS SIZES

CLASS SIZE MATTERS ⚡

“Class size doesn't matter unless you're one of too many kids or the only teacher. When people say class size doesn't matter, they are talking about other people's children.”

~Joe Bower 1978–2016

PULSE RESEARCH - FALL 2022*



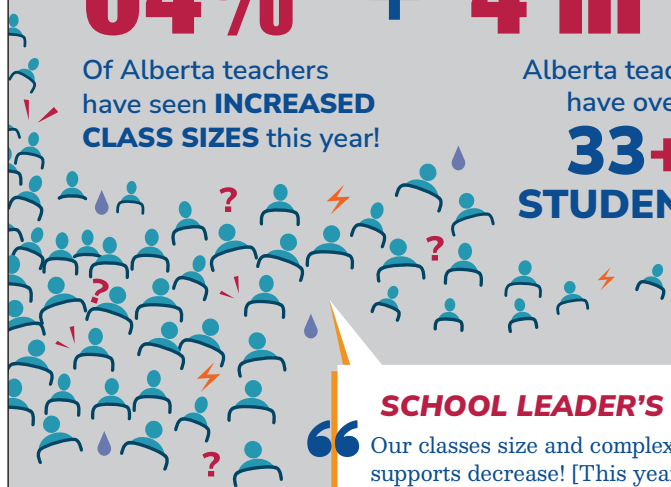
64% + 4 in 10

Of Alberta teachers have seen **INCREASED CLASS SIZES** this year!

Alberta teachers have over **33+ STUDENTS**

LARGEST CLASS SIZES:

- 1** Elementary (Grades 4 to 6)
- 2** High school Science
- 3** Junior high math



SCHOOL LEADER'S VOICE

“Our classes size and complexity continue to increase and our supports decrease! [This year] class sizes for grade seven increased from 25 to 35 students with increased complexity of student needs from behavioural to more significant identified exceptionalities.”

Alberta Commission on Learning Recommendations (circa 2003)

“Establish and implement province-wide guidelines for average class sizes across school jurisdictions.”

Junior kindergarten to grade 3
17 STUDENTS

Grades 4 to 6
23 STUDENTS

Grades 7 to 9
25 STUDENTS

Grades 10 to 12
27 STUDENTS

Further information about the Association's research is available from Dr Philip McRae at the Alberta Teachers' Association; e-mail: research@ata.ab.ca.

* Pulse Rapid Research Study - September 29 to October 11, 2022
Highly Representative Random Stratified Sample (n=1085 teachers 165 school leaders)
Margin of Error +/- 2.8% (19 times out of 20)



The Alberta Teachers' Association

11-2202-06-0000

APPENDIX C – CURRICULUM 2023

ALBERTA CURRICULUM

Elementary Teachers' Feedback on New Curriculum 2023



of K–6 teachers are **CONCERNED** that the rapid rise in literacy/numeracy testing is taking time away from student learning.



ELEMENTARY TEACHER

“The new curriculum will leave **huge** gaps in students' learning in math. It has happened way too fast.”

8 in 10 teachers

DID NOT have the **NECESSARY RESOURCES** for a successful curriculum implementation in 2023.



STUDENTS NEED LESS TESTING, MORE TEACHING AND LEARNING

“It is grossly developmentally inappropriate.”
~Alberta School Leader

“There should have been guaranteed resources to carry out the new curriculum. Everything I am using I have bought with my own money.”
~Alberta Teacher

MATHEMATICS

only 26%
of teachers satisfied

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS AND LITERATURE

only 37%
of teachers satisfied

PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND WELLNESS

only 30%
of teachers satisfied

Further information about the Alberta Teachers' Association research is available by emailing research@ata.ab.ca.

*Alberta Curriculum Implementation Research Study (February 10 to March 6, 2023)
Highly Representative Random Stratified Sample (n=993 kindergarten to Grade 6 teachers)
Margin of Error +/- 3% (19 times out of 20)



The Alberta Teachers' Association



DECLARATION ON CURRICULUM

We, the teachers and school leaders of Alberta, believe

- > Curriculum is about **what should be learned**.
- > Curriculum is **not** about how a particular curriculum outcome should be **taught**.
- > Curriculum **belongs to** and must be **understood** and **supported by Albertans**.
- > In matters of designing programs of study, **teachers must take the leading role**.
- > **Business has a legitimate contribution** to make, but curriculum must address much more than short-term economic objectives.
- > Curriculum should **allow room for inclusion, local innovation and adaptation**.
- > Curriculum design should be guided by a process of **collaborative dialogue**.
- > **Assessment and evaluation** must be **consistent with the curriculum**.
- > **Curriculum implementation** must be properly **supported and paced**.
- > It is the responsibility of **teachers** to **support students** toward a full understanding of the curriculum, and it is the responsibility of the **government and school boards** to **support teachers** in all of their efforts to do so.

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.”
~John Dewey



ENDNOTES

- ¹ In Alberta, public education includes public, Catholic and francophone schools.
- ² Dr. Jared Wesley, University of Alberta, Common Ground, March 2021, <https://www.commongroundpolitics.ca/viewpoint-alberta-major-shifts-in-vote-intentions>.
- ³ Alberta Government, 2019 Class Size Initiative Review, page 6.
- ⁴ *CBC News*, “Increase in Alberta Education Budget lags growth, rising costs critiques say.” February 25, 2022.
- ⁵ ATA Pulse Rapid Research Study, Reporting on Class Size, Complexity, Curriculum and COVID-19 Impacts in Alberta’s K - 12 Schools, Fall 2022.
- ⁶ Dr. Carla Peck, “The Absurd Alberta Curriculum,” Alberta Views Magazine, January 2022.
- ⁷ Alberta Curriculum Implementation Research Study, February 10 to March 6, 2023. Highly representative of the profession of teaching random stratified sample (n=993 kindergarten to Grade 6 teachers). Margin of error +/- 3% (19 times out of 20).
- ⁸ ATA Spring 2023 Public Survey, March 8 to March 29, 2023. (n=859 Albertans). Sample is reflective of the Alberta population according to 2016 Census information .
- ⁹ *Calgary Herald*, January 16, 2023, Special education ‘in crisis’ as CBE faces \$47-million deficit for vulnerable students.
- ¹⁰ *CBC News*, Edmonton Public Schools eliminating 250 jobs as per-student funding drops. May 27, 2022.
- ¹¹ *CBC News*, Alberta school boards lobby to reinstate funding program for children with disabilities and delays. November 28, 2020.
- ¹² ATA Spring 2023 Public Survey, March 8 to March 29, 2023. (n=859 Albertans). Sample is reflective of the Alberta population according to 2016 Census information.
- ¹³ Child Poverty in Alberta: A Policy Choice, Not a Necessary Reality, February 2022, by The Alberta College of Social Workers, Edmonton Social Planning Council and Public Interest Alberta
- ¹⁴ Alberta Education Annual Report 2021-2022, Page 87, Ministry Financial Highlights.
- ¹⁵ *ATA News*, Alberta Ranks Last In Education Funding, December 6, 2022.
- ¹⁶ *CBC News*, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/danielle-smith-rachel-notley-Government-ndp-alberta-janet-brown-1.6638402>. November 3, 2022.
- ¹⁷ Alberta Government Student Population Statistics, Table 5.
- ¹⁸ *ATA News*, Alberta Ranks Last In Education Funding, December 6, 2022.



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