

# Defining Classroom Complexity in Alberta

Classroom complexity is the **real instructional load** for teachers.

It is measured by both the class size plus the full range and intensity of student needs that require **extra planning, supports and coordination** with teachers, specialists, educational assistants, and parents or guardians.

## Top Five Areas of Greatest Classroom Complexity

as reported by teachers

- 1 Social or emotional
- 2 Behavioural
- 3 Cognitive
- 4 ESL, EAL or ELL
- 5 Socioeconomic

Image created with Chat GPT and Adobe Firefly

Typical

Typical

Typical

Typical

Typical



The Alberta Teachers' Association

## Complexity Index

### Individualized Supports (IPP/ISP/BSP/SIS)

Requires formal individualized student support plans, frequent instructional adaptations, ongoing monitoring and often additional adult supports.

### Mild to Moderate Specialized Needs

Requires daily adjustments to instruction (scaffolding), trauma-informed strategies and collaboration with specialists where intensity/frequency increases with need(s).

### Severe or Multiple Specialized Needs

Requires intensive all-day intervention, multidisciplinary involvement, safety planning, environmental modifications, and substantial direct adult support (often one to one).

### Refugees and Newcomers

Requires added language instruction plus academic and psychosocial or settlement supports due to interrupted schooling, and possible trauma/displacement supports.

### Gifted

Requires enrichment and extension beyond core programming.

Calculate the complexity of your classroom!



abteach.cc/ComplexityCalculator



#### Learn More

Contact Philip McRae, PhD  
Alberta Teachers' Association  
Email: [research@ata.ab.ca](mailto:research@ata.ab.ca)

#### Scan the QR Code!

Read the full 2026 research report online at [teachers.ab.ca](http://teachers.ab.ca)

# The Complexity Effect

More complex classrooms mean heavier instructional loads for teachers.

1 student without complexities



1 "typical" learner



1 gifted student



1.25 "typical" learners



1 student who needs individualized supports



1.5 "typical" learners



1 student with mild to moderate specialized needs



1.5 "typical" learners



1 newcomer or refugee student



1.5 "typical" learners



1 student with severe or multiple specialized needs



2 "typical" learners



## What Alberta teachers are saying

“Our [class size] numbers keep **increasing** and funding keeps decreasing.”

I feel like **a fraud** telling parents the system line that inclusion is the best for their child. Inclusion only works when the **resources and supports** are in place.”

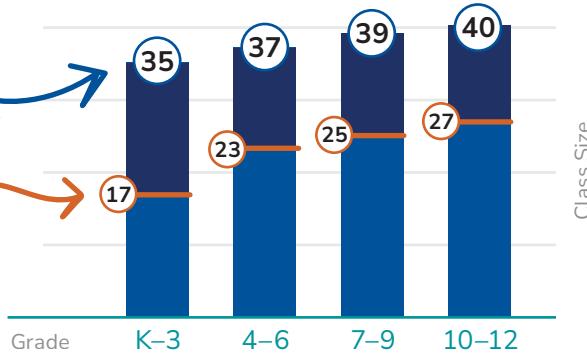
Many students [with complex needs require] individual or small cluster supports that I, **on my own**, cannot provide.”

Alberta's class size average  
adjusted for complexity



Alberta's class sizes, adjusted for complexity

Alberta's Commission on Learning recommended class sizes



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