

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

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.

MOST

PREVALENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

LEAST

Calculate the complexity of your classroom!



abteach.ca/ComplexityCalculator



The Alberta Teachers' Association

Learn More

Contact Philip McRae, PhD
Alberta Teachers' Association
Email: research@ata.ab.ca

Scan the QR Code!

Read the full 2026 research report online at 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.”

“

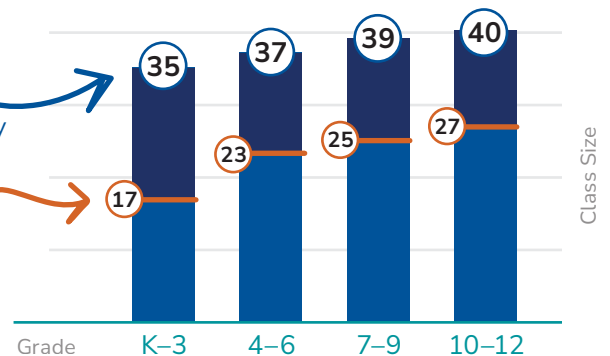
Many students [with complex needs require] individual or small cluster supports that I, **on my own**, cannot provide.”

Alberta's class size average
adjusted for complexity

38

Alberta's class sizes,
adjusted for complexity

Alberta's Commission on
Learning recommended
class sizes



The Alberta Teachers' Association

Learn More

Contact Philip McRae, PhD
Alberta Teachers' Association
Email: research@ata.ab.ca

Scan the QR Code!

Read the full 2026
research report online
at teachers.ab.ca

