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Teaching in Tension: Work, Well-Being and Sustainability in Alberta's Schools

Comparing OECD TALIS 2024 Findings with Alberta Teachers'
Association Research





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Teaching in Tension: Work, Well-Being and Sustainability in Alberta's Schools

Comparing OECD TALIS 2024 Findings with Alberta
Teachers' Association Research

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Executive Summary

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is the world's largest survey of teachers and school leaders. TALIS illustrates conditions of practice across more than 60 national or regional education systems, and many policy-makers and teachers' organizations use TALIS data to drive evidence-informed decision-making.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (the Association) also conducts and publishes research on a wide range of education issues and has done so since its formation.

The OECD released the results from TALIS 2024 in October 2025. Since TALIS 2024 provides an international perspective, the Association reviewed the results alongside its own research. *Teaching in Tension: Work, Well-Being and Sustainability in Alberta's Schools* compares key TALIS 2024 findings for Alberta with Association research conducted since 2020 to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Understanding where the findings overlap or vary will support evidence-informed discussion about teachers' and school leaders' workload, well-being and working conditions, as well as system sustainability.

Overall, the comparative analysis found high convergence between TALIS 2024 and Association research in terms of evidence of sustained work intensification and elevated occupational stress for teachers and school leaders in Alberta. Where the findings vary, this can be attributed to differing research questions and methods from study to study. However, the overarching themes emerging from the TALIS 2024 data and Association research show high alignment and provide detailed insight into the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders in Alberta.

This technical report is organized around

- five descriptive themes that summarize patterned findings across the data from TALIS 2024 and Association research and
- three analytical themes that interpret the structural significance of these patterns for teachers' and school leaders' well-being and the sustainability of teaching and public education in Alberta.

Close examination of TALIS 2024 and Association data establishes that relationships and relationship-building are at the heart of effective teaching and learning in Alberta. The ethics of care and community-building are core strengths of Alberta teachers and school leaders, but this

significant work is largely invisible and is not accounted for in workload distribution in schools. Since the literature affirms that emotional labour can create occupational hazards such as burnout and compassion fatigue, this report urges policy-makers to support relational work as a key organizational component of education work.

The analysis also found that policy churn (curriculum, assessment and change initiatives) is consistently associated with increased teacher and school leader workload and change fatigue, particularly when implementation is under-resourced. In addition, increasing class size and complexity, reduced supports for inclusion, and rising aggression are daily pressure points that accelerate stress and contribute to the moral distress of teachers and school leaders.

Further, the data shows that intentions to leave the profession are increasing among teachers under age 50. Association research suggests that moral distress and conditions of practice are central mechanisms in attrition decisions.

Finally, the research shows that protective factors—collegial support, supportive leadership and hope—remain present in Alberta's public schools and can be strengthened through targeted school- and system-level actions.

Preface

Public education policy and practices in Alberta are informed and strengthened by the study of teachers' and school leaders' experiences of their professional conditions of practice.

This report, *Teaching in Tension: Work, Well-Being and Sustainability in Alberta's Schools*, reflects the Alberta Teachers' Association's continuing commitment to such study. Drawing on findings from the 2024 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and from the Association's own research, this report is a timely contribution to our collective understanding of the conditions shaping teaching and school leadership in this province. Of particular note is the close alignment of the findings of the independent research undertaken by the OECD with the conclusions reached by Association researchers surveying member teachers. Each validates the other.

On behalf of the Association, I extend my appreciation to the author of this report, Lisa Everitt. This work also reflects the sustained efforts of the Association's research team, led by Phil McRae (with support from Lisa Everitt), and our valued university research partners. Their collaborative approach and commitment to methodological rigour have resulted in a report that is both analytically sound and immediately relevant to the realities of practice.

My thanks also go to the Association's Creative and Publishing Services staff, who work to ensure that Association research reports are readable and beautifully rendered.

Most important, this report is built upon the voices and professional knowledge of thousands of Alberta teachers and school leaders. Over time, they have contributed their experiences through surveys, interviews, focus groups and other research engagements. Their willingness to share openly—often in the midst of demanding and complex work—has created an extensive body of information from which important insights may be drawn. This report reflects the professionalism and enduring commitment of Association members to their students, their colleagues and public education.

It is our hope that this work will help inform meaningful dialogue and thoughtful action. By bringing together international evidence and Alberta-based research, it provides a foundation for decisions that will support the well-being of teachers and school leaders and the long-term sustainability of our public education system.

Dennis Theobald

Executive Secretary, Alberta Teachers' Association

Introduction

Teaching in Tension: Work, Well-Being and Sustainability in Alberta's Schools outlines the findings of a comparative analysis between the Alberta data from the 2024 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD 2025a, 2025b) and research conducted by the Alberta Teachers' Association (the Association) since 2020.

TALIS, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is the world's largest survey of teachers and school leaders. TALIS illustrates conditions of practice across more than 60 national or regional education systems, and many policy-makers and teachers' organizations use TALIS data to drive evidence-informed decision-making.

In October 2025, the OECD (2025a) published the results from TALIS 2024. Since TALIS 2024 provides an international perspective, the Association reviewed the results alongside its own research on a wide range of education issues. This technical report compares key TALIS 2024 findings for Alberta (OECD 2025b) with Association research conducted since 2020 to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Understanding where the findings overlap or vary will support evidence-informed discussion about Alberta teachers' and school leaders' workload, well-being and working conditions, as well as system sustainability.

Taken together, TALIS 2024 and Association research provide converging evidence that teaching and school leadership in Alberta have undergone structural intensification since the periods captured in earlier comparative analyses. Although relational commitment, collegial support and professional efficacy remain pronounced strengths, the interaction of classroom complexity, policy churn, time scarcity and declining professional voice is creating conditions that elevate occupational stress and increase attrition risk. This report, therefore, focuses on both

- the strengths that sustain the teaching profession and
- the structural drivers undermining sustainability, with particular attention to equity-differentiated impacts where the evidence permits.

The report first provides a background, outlines the methodological approach of the analysis and looks at the TALIS 2024 demographic profile for Alberta. Then, it explores connections between Association research and TALIS 2024 through five descriptive themes. Finally, it offers a discussion of three analytical themes to provide final observations and recommendations for public education and the flourishing of the teaching profession.

Background

In 2015, the Association published *Teaching and Learning Conditions in Alberta: A Global Perspective* (Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA] 2015). This comparative analysis synthesized six studies focused on Alberta teachers that were conducted between 2011 and 2014 (ATA 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Beauchamp et al 2014; Duxbury and Higgins 2013) and then compared their findings with data from TALIS 2013 (OECD 2014).

The Association's analysis (ATA 2015) found that Alberta teachers consistently reported

- high workloads (often far above the international average);
- increasing class size and complexity;
- limited autonomy and decision-making input;
- dissatisfaction with professional development;
- declining work–life balance; and
- a sense that system demands were undermining their creativity, relationships and well-being.

As reported in the Association's analysis, TALIS 2013 found that Alberta teachers, on average,

- worked about 48 hours per week (8 hours more than the standard 40-hour workweek);
- taught in larger and more-complex classrooms (for example, classrooms with higher proportions of students with English as an additional language or complex needs) than teachers in the average TALIS jurisdiction; and
- experienced weaker alignment between system expectations and local supports for professional learning.

During the 2014/15 school year, amid teachers' negotiations with the government, the Alberta Teacher Workload Study was launched. The study, conducted by R A Malatest & Associates for Alberta Education, was supported by the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta School Boards Association. It tracked Alberta teacher and school leader workloads through time-use diaries, surveys and other instruments and found that, when accounting for all tasks, many worked well beyond the standard 40-hour workweek. The study, which excluded outlier weeks (such as school breaks), found that “the typical work week for a teacher was 48 hours and for an administrator it was 50 hours” (Alberta Education and Malatest 2015, iii).

Further, the results of the Alberta Teacher Workload Study triangulated the TALIS 2013 findings and added greater depth to the understanding of the work lives of teachers and school leaders. The workload study found that Alberta teachers taught students (instructional time) for most (59 per cent) of the school day and completed planning, assessment and grading mostly outside regular work hours (that is, evenings and weekends) (pp iii–iv).

The workload study also revealed high levels of “microtasks” (p v) (such as e-mails or interstaff communications), which interrupted primary work and contributed to stress. A widespread perception among teachers and school leaders was that workload, multitasking, job complexity and “unfamiliar tasks” (p v) had all increased in recent years. While most reported satisfaction with their jobs and believed that their time was well spent, they expressed significant dissatisfaction with regard to work–life balance, time available for collaborating and relentless time demands.

Since the Alberta Teacher Workload Study, Association research has helped paint a picture of teaching in Alberta.¹ Before the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Association published reports on topics such as the work lives of school leaders, the experience of teachers working in alternative school settings, the impact of digital technologies in education, how best to support teachers new to the profession and aggression in Alberta classrooms. This research revealed an increasingly complex education system that demanded significant commitment and effort from teachers and school leaders.

Back in 2009, the Alberta government (then under the Progressive Conservatives) launched the Inspiring Education initiative, which involved extensive consultation and dialogue with the public and education stakeholders to determine what Alberta students would need in order to thrive in an ever-changing world (Alberta Education 2010). The resulting report became “a guiding document for an educational reform agenda that included a complete curriculum rewrite and a revision of the Teaching Quality Standard” (Bohachyk 2016, 389).

In 2014, the government announced its intentions to rewrite Alberta’s K–12 curriculum. This work continued under Alberta’s New Democratic Party (NDP) government, elected in 2015. The resulting draft curriculum received relatively widespread acceptance throughout the education community.

Further, in 2017, the Classroom Improvement Fund, a result of negotiations between the Association and the Teachers’ Employer Bargaining Association, was created to provide support for growing classrooms and increasing complexity. Association research during that time revealed positive effects, particularly in terms of mitigating classroom complexity.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, and education shifted to an online environment to protect public health and keep students and education workers safe. Since then, the education landscape in Alberta has seen significant changes.

To start, Alberta has experienced unprecedented population growth, leading to larger class sizes and increased classroom complexity (McRae 2023). Exacerbating these issues is a new funding formula that has resulted in Alberta providing the lowest amount of per-student funding in Canada (Milne 2025).

Moreover, without involving the teaching profession, the United Conservative Party (UCP) government, elected in 2019, shelved previous curriculum revision efforts and put forward a poorly received draft K–6 curriculum (French 2021). That curriculum has since been implemented, without fully addressing the concerns, and has been followed by new curricula in junior high and high school.

Finally, in the early grades, Alberta teachers have been forced to administer literacy and numeracy screeners that are time-consuming, stressful for students and not useful for supporting student learning (ATA 2024d).

During this time, the Association has continued to conduct research, using a variety of methods (including surveys, interviews and focus groups).

Methodology

This analysis compares the Alberta results from TALIS 2024 and research conducted by the Association.

Selection of Association Research

The Association research selected for the analysis was published within four years of TALIS 2024 being conducted (2020–25).

In addition, only *original* Association research was considered for comparison with TALIS 2024. Therefore, literature reviews were not selected.

Last, the selected Association research had connections with the main areas surveyed by TALIS 2024 (OECD 2025c, 6):

- Diversity and equity
- Use of technology in education
- Socioemotional learning
- Practices and attitudes related to environmental and sustainability education
- Teachers' learning and professional development
- Teachers' work practices
- Teachers' occupational perceptions and institutional environments for teaching
- Teacher, school leader and school characteristics

Ultimately, the following Association research was selected for this analysis:

- Compassion Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Educator Burnout study (ATA 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2024a)
- *Professional Curriculum Analysis and Critique of Alberta Education's 2021 Draft K–6 Curriculum* (ATA 2021c)
- *COVID-19, Caregiving and Careers of Alberta Teachers and School Leaders* (ATA 2022a)
- *Honouring the Voices of Indigenous Teachers and School Leaders in Alberta School Communities* (ATA 2022b)

- *Hope: Resilience and Recovery* (ATA 2023)
- *Exiting the Teaching Profession in Alberta* (ATA 2024b)
- *Reporting on Class Size and Complexity, Aggression, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Alberta's K-12 Schools* (ATA 2024c)
- *Standardized Diagnostic Assessment Tools* (ATA 2024d)
- *Literacy and Numeracy Screeners, Classroom Conditions, Cellphone Bans and AI in Alberta's K-12 Schools* (ATA 2025)

Appendix A provides the details of each study.

Thematic Synthesis Approach

The analysis involved three stages:

- Stage 1: Line-by-line coding of the findings
- Stage 2: Organization of the codes into descriptive themes
- Stage 3: Development of higher-order analytical themes

This structure aligns closely with best practice in thematic synthesis (Thomas and Harden 2008) and meta-ethnographic interpretation (Noblit and Hare 1988).

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools supported the initial coding and pattern identification; however, the thematic interpretation and final categorization were reviewed and validated by the researcher and author of this report.

Stage 1: Line-by-Line Coding of the Findings

Line-by-line coding was conducted across all included Association research and the TALIS 2024 results for Alberta.

The codes were derived inductively from statements by teachers and school leaders, reported findings, and interpretive conclusions.

The codes fell into the following areas:

- Emotional and moral experience
- Workload and complexity
- Professional agency and system trust
- Relational and professional identity
- Exit, attrition and sustainability
- Equity and care burden
- Hope, resilience and protective factors

The coding outputs are detailed in Appendix B.

Stage 2: Organization of the Codes into Descriptive Themes

The descriptive themes represent patterned regularities across TALIS 2024 and Association research and capture shared features of teachers' and school leaders' experiences. These themes answer the question, What is happening in the work lives of Alberta teachers and school leaders?

The thematic synthesis derived five descriptive themes:

- Care work is core work.
- Distress becomes structural.
- Work intensification and moral distress are key pathways to attrition.
- Classroom complexity, conflict and relational strain are daily pressure points.
- Policy churn adds load.

Appendix C presents summaries of the descriptive themes and observable indicators derived from empirical findings.

Stage 3: Development of Higher-Order Analytical Themes

At the analytical level, the descriptive themes were interpreted and synthesized into three overarching interpretive domains (analytical themes).

Analytical themes interpret the broader structural implications for teacher and school leader well-being, the sustainability of the teaching workforce, and the resilience of the public education system.

Three analytical themes were derived from this process:

- Structural conditions are producing systemic professional strain.
- The professional contract between educators and the system is fracturing.
- Relational professional identity functions as the primary protective and stabilizing force.

Appendix D shows how the descriptive themes were interpreted and synthesized to derive the analytical themes.

Appendix E outlines the final integrated thematic structure.

TALIS 2024 Demographic Profile for Alberta

The demographic profile of Alberta teachers participating in TALIS 2024 represents a subsection of Alberta's teaching population.

Alberta administered TALIS 2024 in International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 2, which is lower secondary (Grades 6–9) (OECD 2025a, 15).

In TALIS 2024, Alberta's teaching population was mostly female (63 per cent)² (Table 1.1).³ This represents an increase of 2 percentage points from TALIS 2013 (Table 1.2), which is not significant. The OECD average for TALIS 2024 was 70 per cent female (Table 1.1).

In terms of highest level of formal education completed, 80 per cent held a bachelor's degree, 18 per cent held a master's degree, and 1 per cent held a doctoral degree (Table 1.7).

On average, Alberta's teachers were younger (40 years) than the OECD average (45 years). The proportion of Alberta teachers under the age of 30 was 20 per cent, nearly double the OECD average (10 per cent). The proportion of Alberta teachers age 50 and above was 21 per cent, whereas the OECD average was 37 per cent (Table 1.3).

As expected with a younger teaching population, the average amount of teaching experience for Alberta teachers was 13 years, compared with the OECD average of 17 years. Moreover, nearly 80 per cent of Alberta's teachers had less than 20 years of experience, with 26 per cent having five years or less (Table 1.9). Given Alberta's younger and less experienced teaching workforce, mentorship and the development of leadership capacity should be key strategic priorities.

Novice teachers, defined as “teacher[s] with up to five years of teaching experience” (OECD 2025a, 21), reported working in various school settings, but unlike other jurisdictions, no pattern emerged for Alberta in terms of where novice teachers were employed.

To illustrate, the TALIS 2024 report states that “novice teachers are more likely to work in schools that are privately managed or have more than 10% of students who have difficulties understanding the language(s) of instruction (Table 1.11)” (OECD 2025a, 37). However, in Alberta, most teachers work in the public education system, and there is no tendency to hire novice teachers for more-complex school settings. In Alberta, 24 per cent of novice teachers worked in schools with more than 10 per cent of students who had difficulties understanding the language of instruction, whereas 29 per cent of novice teachers worked in schools with no such students (Table 1.11).

However, compared with Alberta's teaching population as a whole, fewer novice teachers worked in rural areas (21 per cent) than in towns (29 per cent) and cities (26 per cent) (Table 1.11).

In addition, as derived from Table 1.11, teachers with more than five years of experience were more represented in schools with higher percentages of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes, students who had difficulty understanding the language(s) of instruction and students with special education needs.

TALIS 2024 also looked at second-career teachers, defined as “teacher[s] with at least ten years of work experience in non-education roles for whom teaching was not a first career choice” (OECD 2025a, 21).

In Alberta, second-career teachers constituted 11 per cent of the teaching population (Table 1.15). Significantly more second-career teachers were male (14 per cent) than female (9 per cent), but there was no significant difference in terms of age or years of experience.

However, second-career teachers constituted 16 per cent of teachers with under five years of teaching experience (Table 1.15). Since second-career teachers make up such a large part of the novice teacher cohort, mentorship and support for second-career teachers should be a policy focus of the Alberta government.

Finally, it is important to note that Alberta did not meet the TALIS technical standards for participation rates and, therefore, TALIS 2024 ranked the Alberta results as insufficient (OECD 2025a, 18; OECD 2025b, 1). The TALIS requirements are very specific in terms of the number of schools and the number of teachers represented.

Nonetheless, 1,823 teachers of an estimated 11,190 eligible Alberta teachers (16 per cent) participated (OECD 2025a, 268). This response rate is a good reflection of the population of teachers. However, it is not known whether the sample is representative of each subgroup of the teaching population (for example, age, gender or geographic location). Therefore, caution when interpreting the data is warranted.

Descriptive Themes

The following descriptive themes represent patterns in the experiences of teachers and school leaders found across the Alberta data from TALIS 2024 and Association research.

Taken together, the descriptive themes demonstrate that the work of teachers and school leaders in Alberta is shaped by the interaction of relational, structural and policy factors. Emotional labour, structural distress, work intensification, classroom complexity and policy instability collectively define the current experience of teaching.

Descriptive Theme A: Care Work Is Core Work

Alberta's *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education 2023b, 4) requires all certificated teachers in Alberta to build "positive and productive relationships with students, parents/guardians, peers and others in the school and local community to support student learning." Thus, teachers are expected to create safe, caring and empathetic environments in schools and classrooms.

Further, teaching is a highly relational act; therefore, care work is a strong component of pedagogical approaches (Bohachyk 2016).

Recent Canadian research has shown that as part of this relational approach, teachers and school leaders regularly perform emotional labour, including providing care during times of crisis and trauma, which puts them at risk of mental and emotional exhaustion, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Canadian Teachers' Federation [CTF] 2022; Kendrick 2022; Sokal, Trudel and Babb 2020).

TALIS 2024 and Association research paint a picture of how the relational approach in schools unfolds, as well as the impact of that work on teachers and school leaders.

TALIS 2024

TALIS 2024 explored how teachers perceived their relationships with students, parents or guardians, colleagues, and the broader society (including policy-makers and the media).

Relationships with Students

TALIS 2024 found that student–teacher relationships are at the heart of teachers' work in schools.

When asked about their relationships with students, a strong majority of Alberta's teachers agreed that their work was fundamentally relational.

Their responses revealed that they routinely prioritized the student–teacher relationship (Table 6.27):

- Almost all (96 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that teachers and students usually got along well.
- Almost all (99 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that most teachers believed that students' well-being was important.
- Almost all (98 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that most teachers were interested in what students had to say.
- Most (93 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that if students needed extra help, the school provided it.

Further, Alberta teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they

- were aware of their students' feelings (88 per cent),
- showed warmth toward students (95 per cent),
- cared about the problems of their students (94 per cent),
- were empathetic toward their students (96 per cent), and
- cared about the social and emotional problems of their students (93 per cent) (Table 1.44).

Alberta teachers were above the OECD average for all these empathy indicators.

Consistent with the trend across jurisdictions participating in TALIS 2024, Alberta's teachers showed gendered differences in empathy toward students, with female teachers reporting higher rates of empathy overall (Table 1.44). This suggests that the burden of emotional labour—as well as the risk of mental and emotional distress, burnout, and compassion fatigue—is higher for female teachers.

New to TALIS 2024 were questions about how teachers supported students' socioemotional skill development. Overall, Alberta teachers reported a high level of comfort in this area. For example, 91 per cent reported that they were comfortable with providing instruction on socioemotional skills (Table 1.45). In addition, the TALIS 2024 report highlights Alberta for the resources it provides to teachers for supporting socioemotional skills (OECD 2025a, 72).

TALIS 2024 also asked teachers to report on their instructional practices with respect to socioemotional skill development. As Table 1.42 shows, Alberta teachers reported less instructional focus on helping students

- understand their own emotions, thoughts or behaviour (59 per cent) and
- manage their own emotions, thoughts or behaviour (66 per cent).

Rather, Alberta teachers focused more on helping their students

- understand the perspectives of others (81 per cent),
- empathize with others (78 per cent),
- establish and maintain healthy relationships (75 per cent), and
- make caring and constructive choices about their actions (78 per cent).

These results should be considered with the recognition that the dynamics in large classes can make it challenging for teachers to help students individually with socioemotional skills.

Relationships with Parents or Guardians

Relational work and an ethic of care exist between Alberta's teachers, school leaders, and parents or guardians.

Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of Alberta teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they were valued by parents or guardians in their school—well above the OECD average of 65 per cent (Table 6.38). Interestingly, 78 per cent of teachers in city schools agreed or strongly agreed that they were valued by parents or guardians, but in rural schools that fell to 64 per cent. While not statistically significant, this finding identifies a further area of inquiry regarding the difference between teaching in city schools and teaching in rural schools.

Overall, 23 per cent of Alberta teachers reported that they collaborated with parents or guardians at least once per month. In schools with more than 30 per cent of students with special education needs, 32 per cent of teachers reported such collaboration (Table 6.37).

Relationships with Colleagues

Alberta teachers reported high levels of collegiality with each other.

The ability to count on colleagues is an unrecognized source of strength in Alberta schools. As Table 6.8 shows, overall, 93 per cent of Alberta teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they could rely on each other at their school.

A significant difference in this area emerged between rural teachers (100 per cent) and teachers in cities (92 per cent).

Interestingly, significant differences also emerged between various school compositions. While teachers in all schools reported that they could rely on each other at rates of over 90 per cent, this perception was highest among teachers at schools with no English-language learners (ELLs) (99 per cent) and schools with more than 30 per cent of students with special education needs (98 per cent). It was lowest in schools with more than 10 per cent ELL students (91 per cent) and schools with 10 per cent or less students with special education needs (91 per cent). These results suggest that school complexity has an impact on teachers' ability to rely on each other. More research is required to explain why collegiality among teachers might shift as complexity changes.

Alberta teachers reported that approximately 6 per cent of their work time was spent collaborating with colleagues (Table 3.10).

As Table 6.3 shows, the most common forms of collaboration between colleagues were

- exchanging teaching materials (56 per cent),
- engaging in discussions about the learning of specific students (75 per cent) and
- working to ensure common standards for assessing student progress (45 per cent).

Less common forms of collaboration were

- team teaching (21 per cent),
- observing other teachers' classes and providing feedback (7 per cent),
- engaging in joint activities across classes and age groups (22 per cent), and
- taking part in collaborative professional learning (38 per cent).

Table 6.7 shows the change in teacher collaboration across TALIS administrations. Comparing the results from TALIS 2013 and TALIS 2024 reveals increasing collaboration in two areas:

- Engaging in joint activities across classes and age groups
- Taking part in collaborative professional learning

Alberta teachers also reported positive collegial relationships with their school leaders.

As shown in Table 6.17, overall, Alberta teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their school leaders

- had a clear vision for the school (87 per cent);
- encouraged cooperation among teachers to develop new teaching practices (89 per cent);
- ensured that teachers took responsibility for improving their teaching skills (88 per cent);
- ensured that teachers felt responsible for student learning outcomes (92 per cent);
- encouraged staff to have a say in important decisions (79 per cent);
- had good professional relationships with staff (84 per cent), parents or guardians (92 per cent), and students (90 per cent);
- ensured that teacher performance was monitored effectively (81 per cent); and
- provided useful feedback to teachers and other staff (78 per cent).

Furthermore, 90 per cent of Alberta teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their school leaders had confidence in teachers' expertise (Table 6.18).

Table 6.19 details teachers' views of school leaders' relationships with staff by school characteristics. Across various types of schools, Alberta teachers reported positive collegial relationships with their school leaders, with some minor differences. For example, more teachers in city schools (87 per cent) than in rural schools (82 per cent) reported that their school leaders had good relationships with staff.

Notably, more teachers in schools with more than 30 per cent of students with special education needs (94 per cent) reported good school leader relationships with staff than did teachers at schools with 10 per cent or less of such students (82 per cent)—a 12 percentage point difference.

This suggests that some school characteristics can enhance collegiality and collaboration across professional roles. This could be investigated in future research.

Overall, the TALIS 2024 data shows that collegial relationships between school leaders and teachers in Alberta are strong, with school leaders leading collaboratively and prioritizing good relationships with staff, parents or guardians, and students. For the most part, teachers reported that their school leaders respected teachers' expertise, demonstrated confidence in teachers, and focused on learning and pedagogy (instructional leadership).

Relationships with Society, Government and the Media

The TALIS 2024 data reveals the perception of Alberta teachers that they and their profession are not valued by policy-makers, the media and society in general.

Alberta teachers had low rates of agreement with the following statements (Table 7.24):

- "I think that the teaching profession is valued in society" (35 per cent)
- "Teachers' views are valued by policymakers in this country/region" (13 per cent)
- "Teachers are valued in the media in this country/region" (24 per cent)

Alberta teachers' perception that policy-makers valued their views sharply decreased (by 25 percentage points) from TALIS 2018 to TALIS 2024 (Table 7.26). Their perception of being valued by society (Table 7.29) and the media (Table 7.26) also dropped.

Teachers do not have direct relationships or daily interaction with society, policy-makers and the media in the way that they do with students, parents or guardians, and each other. Nevertheless, the TALIS 2024 data reveals that Alberta teachers do not feel valued for their contributions.

Summary

The results from TALIS 2024 show that Alberta's teachers and school leaders work in environments where relational support matters. For the most part, they reported their focus on providing high levels of care for and empathy toward students, strong support for each other and from their school leaders, and the recognition that collaboration with parents or guardians is fundamental to ensuring that students meet their potential.

Association Research

Association research confirms the findings of TALIS 2024 and provides greater insight into the lived experiences of teachers and school leaders engaging in relational work with students, parents or guardians, each other, and the broader community.

Impact of Relational Emotional Labour

In January 2020, the Association partnered with the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP) and researchers from the University of Calgary for a two-year research study called Compassion Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Educator Burnout. The study involved three phases: an online survey (June 2020), qualitative interviews (July–September 2020) and a second run of the survey (January 2021).

The published research emerging from this study documents that, in Alberta schools, relationship-building using emotional labour is routine, expected and professionally normative (ATA 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2024a).

Alberta's teachers had strong agreement about what emotions they were comfortable showing at work, with 86 per cent agreeing that they could show happiness, joy and cheerfulness (ATA 2021b, 12). Feelings that teachers felt they should repress at work included anger (52 per cent) and sadness (54 per cent) (p 13).

Modulating emotions is the foundation of emotional labour (ATA 2020b). Constantly suppressing their emotions puts teachers' mental and emotional wellness at risk; however, emotional regulation is important in connecting and forming relationships with students. Consequently, teachers and school leaders must continually monitor, regulate and present emotions consistent with professional expectations, regardless of their inner state. Moreover, this work is not recognized as part of the formal workload of teachers and school leaders.

Yet Alberta's teachers and school leaders view emotional labour and relationship-building as essential to their work. In the first phase of the research study, when participants were asked to describe what being good at their job meant, 76 per cent of the responses reflected the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education 2023b) and *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education 2023a) competency of fostering effective relationships (ATA 2020b, 25).

In addition, the participants had clear notions of what it meant to be a good teacher, and this led to the feeling that reaching that standard was impossible, given intense workloads and time scarcity. As one participant noted, “I feel the need to give more than is possible and it always feels like it is never enough” (ATA 2020b, 26).

The study’s technical report provides a comparative analysis of the data gathered from the June 2020 and January 2021 surveys (ATA 2024a). It found differences in the impact of emotional labour in terms of compassion fatigue and burnout. More specifically, teachers with more years of service experienced less compassion satisfaction and more compassion fatigue. In addition, teachers showed different symptoms of burnout depending on years of service: “While early-career teachers are more likely to feel emotional or physical fatigue, later-career teachers reported cognitive issues and decision fatigue as a result of overwork” (p 13).

The relational approach in education, combined with an overwhelming workload and complex classrooms, creates a context within which burnout and compassion fatigue are significant organizational risks. For school divisions and the government, this information provides insight into how to provide targeted and specific supports to teachers over the course of their career.

Women and Relational Work

In 2021, the Association launched a study on the impact of caregiving during the COVID-19 pandemic on the careers of Alberta teachers and school leaders (ATA 2022a). This research was conducted with participants who identified as women.

Participants “described spending a great deal of time and energy engaging in ‘emotional heavy lifting with colleagues’ and ‘smoothing over other people’s anxiety’” (p 12). As one secondary school teacher stated,

We’re expected to bring the calm every day, but there is chaos going on in our own lives and in our home. Because no matter what role you step into—whether you’re a parent, a caregiver, whether you’re a teacher—it’s happening everywhere. Your personal, your professional life, and you just feel like you’re keeping all the balls in the air at one time. (p 3)

In addition, participants noted gendered differences in the expectations for providing care and emotional labour, both at home and at work. One participant shared,

When my husband, who is a teacher, shuts the door, they won't bug him. But . . . someone might come through that door at any moment and come ask me for something . . . because as the mom you're the go-to person. (p 14)

The layering of relational and care work at home and at work increases the risk of compassion fatigue and burnout for teachers who identify as women.

Indigenous Teachers and Relational Work

In 2021, the Association, along with researchers from the University of Alberta, conducted an evaluation of the experiences of Indigenous teachers and school leaders in Alberta's public education system (ATA 2022b). Participants shared how they navigated the challenges of working as teachers and school leaders while also bearing the generational impacts of being Indigenous.

The study revealed their

frustration with systemic structures and practices that position Indigenous education initiatives as second-rate in comparison to other educational concerns. [Participants] noted that existing institutional practices do not promote Indigenous education as a stand-alone educational priority. It is most often framed as a special interest topic subsumed beneath broader educational initiatives such as diversity or religious education. (p 7)

This creates tensions for Indigenous teachers and school leaders in terms of their sense of belonging at work.

The challenges are complicated by the fact that "Indigenous educators are in short supply, and school systems take advantage of Indigenous staff by placing the burden of Indigenous 'stuff' squarely on their shoulders" (p 10).

The participants also "shared a wide spectrum of experiences of discrimination or racism within the school and/or division" (p 26). When Indigenous teachers and school leaders witness racism or discrimination toward students or experience it themselves, this adds a complicated layer of care work.

Consistent with the findings on teachers and school leaders in general, this study found that Indigenous teachers and school leaders provide significant relational supports for their students, colleagues and community; however, their emotional labour burden is exacerbated by persistent racism, devaluation of Indigenous education and a lack of support at work.

Nevertheless,

The participants made it clear that they were very willing to take on the responsibilities associated with serving in the difficult roles that they do as Indigenous educators. They do not shy away from such challenges. However, many wished that they were better supported and encouraged by their system leaders when willingly taking on such responsibilities and commitments. (p 7)

Significant work needs to be done in this space. Specifically, there is a need for greater supports and allyship in order to create safety for Indigenous teachers and school leaders at work.

Hope and Relational Work

The Association's research study on hope explored the relational work of teachers and school leaders and identified both threats to and sources of hope (ATA 2023).

For the participants, many threats to and sources of hope were relationally bounded. For example, a theme that arose with school leaders was "being the targets of parent frustrations," which "captures the sense that school leaders were stepping into the line of fire of parent frustrations during the pandemic" (p 50).

In addition, the study garnered teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of whether society valued their work. The findings were very similar to those of TALIS 2024. Roughly one-third of both teachers and school leaders agreed or strongly agreed that society valued their work, but about half did not feel that their work was valued. Also, participants identified government action or inaction as a considerable threat to hope.

Despite feeling undervalued by society and the government, teachers and school leaders indicated that they had collegial support within their school communities, with more than 80 per cent in each group agreeing or strongly agreeing that they could draw on the support of colleagues.

Students also served as a source of hope for both teachers and school leaders: “90 per cent of teachers agreed with the statement that students raise their hope, with the strongest agreement (up to 100 per cent) among more experienced teachers” (p 39). Moreover, “school leaders highlighted the sense of hope that came from supporting struggling students to succeed” (p 41).

Finally, the study found that good relationships and support at school and systemwide made a difference for teachers and school leaders:

In terms of both actions and direct expressions of support, appreciation, trust, and positive acknowledgement of teachers and their work from leaders at varying levels (school leaders, board members, superintendents), supportive leadership fuels teacher hope and empowers them in their work for students. (p 40)

The findings of this study demonstrate that care work is essential to the well-being of school staff and that a relational approach holds promise as an effective way to mitigate the challenging context in which teachers and school leaders work.

Summary

Association research affirms that care work and relational work are at the heart of teaching and school leadership in Alberta. It notes that emotional labour in teaching and school leadership can be both a source of stress and a protective factor for well-being: distress arises when educators must suppress or mask their emotions, whereas well-being is supported when their internal feelings align with their outward emotional expressions.

Further, Association research has found that while all members of the teaching profession carry responsibility for relational approaches and emotional labour, this work is not distributed evenly. Women and Indigenous people tend to carry higher relational burdens.

Conclusion

Taken together, the TALIS 2024 data and Association research confirm that relational work, including emotional labour, is at the centre of the care work provided by teachers and school leaders in Alberta's schools. This work is invisible and has significant impacts (both positive and negative) on teachers' and school leaders' well-being.

In addition, the research reveals the importance of being seen and heard at work. Teachers and school leaders feel valued in their school communities (colleagues, parents or guardians, and students), but

they struggle with whether they are valued by society, the media and the government. This suggests that relational work is not constrained by school walls but also applies to the broader community.

Consequently, policy-makers should consider the mechanisms necessary at the micro, meso and macro levels to support relational work as a core consideration for teaching and school leadership. Supports should also recognize that collegial relationships and supportive leadership can function as important protective factors, buffering against the negative impacts of workload intensification and emotional strain. These relational supports represent key organizational resources that help sustain professional well-being.

In essence, the findings of TALIS 2024 and Association research demonstrate that care work is foundational to the functioning of Alberta's public education system. In this respect, emotional labour functions as part of the critical infrastructure of school divisions. However, because emotional labour is largely invisible and, therefore, unsupported, teachers and school leaders are vulnerable to compassion fatigue, burnout and occupational strain.

Descriptive Theme B: Distress Becomes Structural

In Alberta, various factors in recent years have contributed to distress among teachers and school leaders.

In 2020, Alberta Education shifted its funding formula from funding per student, which was calculated at specific times of the year, to a weighted moving average. The new formula used past, current and projected enrolment to calculate funding for each new school year. The rationale provided for the change was that education funding would be more stable and predictable (Alberta Education 2020a).

At the time, Riep (2021, 15) projected that “forty-three school boards, which serve more than 80 per cent of the K–12 students enrolled in Alberta, [would] see a reduction in per-pupil funding in 2020–21.” The impact has been particularly harsh for school jurisdictions that have experienced significant growth in the years since the formula was introduced (Knopp 2024).

The impact of the funding change was exacerbated by record population growth in Alberta between 2020 and 2024,⁴ which added at least 57,108 students to Alberta schools.⁵ The increasing number of students has further strained the diminishing resources of Alberta's public education system.

Finally, the extreme stress that the COVID-19 global pandemic placed on teachers and school leaders across Canada has been documented in both the grey and the academic literature (Agyapong et al 2022; ATA 2020a; CTF 2022; Corrente, Ferguson and Bourgeault 2022; Sokal, Trudel and Babb 2020).

In Alberta schools, the lack of resources, increasing number of students and impact of COVID-19 have combined to create stressors that must be considered and resolved at organizational levels. TALIS 2024 and Association research have documented the damaging effects of stress and workload intensification on teachers and school leaders.

TALIS 2024

The results from TALIS 2024 shed light on how Alberta teachers perceive their stress and well-being relative to their international counterparts, as well as identifying the sources of teacher stress.

Teacher Stress Levels

One of the most disturbing findings of TALIS 2024 is that Alberta teachers reported the highest levels of stress internationally.

When asked whether they experienced stress a lot in their work, 42 per cent of Alberta teachers reported that they did (Table 2.13). Teachers in Costa Rica reported the second-highest levels of stress, at 36 per cent. The OECD average was 19 per cent. Therefore, Alberta teachers reported high levels of occupational stress at rates more than double the international average.

Further, Alberta teachers' stress is on the rise. The proportion of teachers reporting that they experienced stress in their work significantly increased—by 15 percentage points—from TALIS 2018 to TALIS 2024 (Table 2.4).

In addition, the TALIS 2024 results for Alberta suggest that work commitments impinge on teachers' personal lives, as well as their mental and physical health. For example, only 6 per cent of Alberta teachers indicated that their job often left them time for their personal life (Table 2.4).

Long Work Hours

Examining the number of hours per week that Alberta teachers reported working, including the time spent on specific tasks, helps account for teachers' high levels of stress.

According to the TALIS 2024 data, Alberta teachers worked an average of 47 hours per week, which is higher than the OECD average of 41 hours (Table 3.10). Teachers in only three other countries reported higher work hours: Singapore (47 hours), New Zealand (48 hours) and Japan (55 hours).

Other Sources of Teacher Stress

In addition to long work hours, Alberta teachers reported their most common sources of stress as “having too much marking (52%), being held responsible for students’ social and emotional well-being (51%), and maintaining classroom discipline (48%)” (OECD 2025b, 10).

Compared with TALIS 2018, Alberta teachers in TALIS 2024 reported significantly higher levels of stress in the following areas (Table 3.17):

- Having too much lesson preparation (up 7 percentage points)
- Having too many lessons to teach (up 6 percentage points)
- Having too much marking (up 10 percentage points)
- Having too much administrative work (up 10 percentage points)
- Having extra duties due to absent teachers (up 15 percentage points)
- Maintaining classroom discipline (up 19 percentage points)
- Being intimidated or verbally abused by students (up 9 percentage points)
- Keeping up with changing requirements from the government, school authorities and schools (up 13 percentage points)
- Addressing parent or guardian concerns (up 8 percentage points)
- Modifying lessons for students with special education needs (up 11 percentage points)

Summary

The results from TALIS 2024 show that teachers in Alberta are experiencing increasingly high levels of stress and long work hours. This signals that Alberta’s public education system is under serious strain, with its most valuable resource—teachers—at significant risk for occupational harm, including burnout and attrition.

Association Research

Association research deepens understanding of the impact of high levels of stress, heavy workloads and long work hours on teachers' and school leaders' well-being and offers glimpses into the day-to-day work of teachers and school leaders.

While the Association has not researched teachers' and school leaders' hours of work within the timeframe selected for this analysis (2020–25), the documented high levels of burnout and compassion fatigue in teachers, as well as declining resources, point toward long work hours.

Teacher and School Leader Stress and Well-Being

Several Association studies have explored teacher and school leader stress and well-being.

A key finding from the Compassion Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Educator Burnout two-year study was that education workers (including teachers, educational assistants, school administrators and support staff) “regularly do crisis work and trauma work when working with students, colleagues and staff, but they are given very limited training and are unprepared to deal with the emotional aftermath of providing assistance to students suffering through traumatic events” (ATA 2021b, 11).

Further, the semi-structured interviews in phase 2 of the study revealed the cost of this work to teachers' and school leaders' well-being: “Several participants described compartmentalizing their work personas separately from their personal selves as a way to protect and guard their hearts against harm at work” (ATA 2021a, 17).

In addition, the study's two online surveys, which spanned the length of the study and used the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) scale to assess levels of compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue, found that “most teachers experience both moderate compassion satisfaction and moderate compassion fatigue” (ATA 2024a, 4), with more-experienced teachers showing higher levels of compassion fatigue.

Finally, “burnout symptoms [were] a significant issue for teachers across all levels of experience” (ATA 2024a, 10). More specifically, teachers reported the following symptoms:

- Lack of energy (92 per cent)
- Exhaustion (88 per cent)
- Concentration problems (70 per cent)
- Reduced initiative to complete work-related tasks (70 per cent)
- Sleep disorders (60 per cent)
- Reduced performance of work-related tasks (57 per cent)

The Association's December 2023 pulse survey (ATA 2024c) revealed the current state of teachers' and school leaders' mental and emotional well-being: "Only 22 per cent of respondents reported feeling somewhat or very happy, whereas a striking 89 per cent reported feeling stressed and 93 per cent reported feeling exhausted at the end of the day over the past week" (p 2).

Finally, the Association's research study on hope (ATA 2023) revealed that almost one-third of Alberta's teachers found it "impossible to approach work in a healthy manner" and more than half felt that "they were unable to attend to their own well-being at work" (p 28). The responses from school leaders followed the same pattern.

Summary

Association research reveals that stress, lack of support for classroom conditions, and high demands on their energy and time are depleting Alberta's teachers and school leaders in a systemic and widespread fashion.

In considering these findings, it is important to remember that subgroups of teachers experience stressors differently.

For example, in the Association's research on caregiving during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and school leaders who identified as women reported intensified caregiving demands, both professionally and personally. They described managing students' emotional needs alongside their own family caregiving responsibilities, often without adequate structural supports. This resulted in elevated stress, emotional exhaustion and moral distress (ATA 2022a).

Indigenous teachers and school leaders in Alberta also described the demands specific to them as Indigenous people within the education system, as well as in their own communities, which intensified their stress and emotional exhaustion (ATA 2022b).

The work of teaching and school leadership is edging toward unsustainable expectations and has high potential to result in health consequences for teachers and school leaders. While the solutions must consider all teachers, the focus should be on examining supports for those who experience inequity across the school system.

Finally, Association findings suggest that psychological distress is increasingly becoming an occupational hazard of teaching rather than an intermittent or individual experience.

Conclusion

Taken together, the TALIS 2024 data and Association research reveal the larger structural factors at play in the urgent problem of teacher and school leader wellness in Alberta's schools.

The consistency of distress indicators across studies, career stages and contexts suggests that teacher and school leader stress is emerging as a predictable occupational condition produced by organizational design. Individual effort is not enough; systems and schools must also support teacher and school leader well-being.

Thus, the Association's Compassion Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Educator Burnout study introduced the HEARTcare framework, which could be enacted to support teacher and school leader well-being (ATA 2021a). HEARTcare acknowledges that school systems, schools and individuals all have a role to play in teacher and school leader wellness. Further, HEARTcare promotes the importance of professional support in achieving wellness, as well as wellness planning design that incorporates approaches specific to education workers.⁶

Descriptive Theme C: Work Intensification and Moral Distress Are Key Pathways to Attrition

Teacher attrition and teacher shortages are a concern globally. In their report on global teacher shortages, UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024, 18) indicated that to ensure quality education for all by 2030, "44 million additional primary and secondary teachers are needed globally."

The reasons teachers leave the profession are complex and are linked to both individual and systemic factors, including workload intensification, accountability structures, a lack of respect, low salary, and mental and emotional health challenges (Amitai and Van Houtte 2022; Clark and Antonelli 2009; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas 2016).

TALIS 2024

TALIS 2024 explored teachers' intentions to leave the profession, as well as how job satisfaction and classroom stressors are linked to those decisions.

Intentions to Leave Teaching

TALIS 2024 found that, overall, 22 per cent of Alberta teachers planned to leave teaching in the next five years (Table 7.1). Intentions varied by age.

In Alberta teachers under age 50, the intention to leave teaching within five years doubled from 2018 to 2024, from 7 per cent to 14 per cent (Table 7.4).

Of particular concern is teachers under 30. In this age group, the percentage of teachers planning to leave teaching within five years more than doubled since 2018, from 9 per cent to 21 per cent (Table 7.2).

Finally, 58 per cent of teachers 50 or older indicated that they planned to leave teaching in the next five years—well above the OECD average of 48 per cent for that age group (Table 7.1).

These results point in a troubling direction. They indicate that Alberta is at risk of a large number of teachers, across all age categories, leaving the profession.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction appears to be a key determinant of whether teachers remain in the profession.

The TALIS 2024 report (OECD 2025a, 235) notes that “regression analyses using TALIS 2024 data show that teachers who, all in all, are satisfied with their jobs are five times less likely to want to leave teaching within the next five years than their colleagues who are not satisfied with their jobs.” This finding held even after accounting for school composition, teacher characteristics and school location (Table 7.8), which suggests that job satisfaction is an extremely important predictor for teacher retention.

TALIS 2024 found that, in Alberta, “74% of teachers ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that they are satisfied with their terms of employment (barring salaries) (higher than the OECD average: 68%). Teachers’ satisfaction with their terms of employment (barring salaries) has decreased by 9 percentage points since 2018” (OECD 2025b, 9). This drop in Alberta teachers’ job satisfaction is, when combined with job satisfaction indicators, a signal that the stressors in Alberta’s public education system are causing teachers to reconsider their choice of career.

Table 7.63 shows that Alberta teachers, while more satisfied with their salaries than the OECD average, were increasingly less satisfied: “Between 2018 and 2024, teachers’ satisfaction with their salaries decreased by 26 percentage points” (from 76 per cent to 50 per cent) (OECD 2025b, 10). This was consistent across school locations; teachers in schools in rural areas, towns and cities all showed a significant decline in salary satisfaction (Table 7.76).

Classroom Stressors

TALIS 2024 used statistical analysis to show the relationship between teachers' intentions to leave teaching and classroom stressors (Table 7.12).

As shown in Table 3.16, the top stressors in Alberta were

- maintaining classroom discipline,
- supporting students with special education needs and
- being responsible for students' socioemotional well-being.

Summary

The TALIS 2024 results for Alberta confirm a growing risk to the teaching profession. As their work becomes increasingly complex and demanding, Alberta teachers are signalling that they will not make a career commitment to teaching.

The TALIS 2024 data reveals a slide in teachers' satisfaction in all areas of employment, but the most pronounced is the drop in salary satisfaction.

These findings apply to all teachers; however, early-career teachers are most at risk of leaving the profession, followed by teachers under 50.

The TALIS 2024 findings should serve as a call to Alberta's government and school boards to consider putting strategies in place for teacher attraction and retention.

Association Research

The Association's research on teachers exiting the profession reinforces the TALIS 2024 findings and probes more deeply to discover teachers' and school leaders' reasons for leaving, including moral distress.

Reasons for Exiting the Profession

In the Association's research study on exiting the teaching profession (ATA 2024b), an intake survey and semi-structured interviews found that conditions of practice were the primary driver of teacher attrition. Respondents cited "class size and complexity challenges [as] by far the most pressing issue (91 per cent)" (p 8).

Moral Distress

In the study's semi-structured interviews, teachers revealed their emotional distress. They used phrases such as *heartbreaking*, *haunts me*, *difficult to see* and *frustrated* in describing "the compromises they feel like they have to make to stay in the teaching profession" (ATA 2024b, 24).

Other Association studies have identified moral distress as an issue in education.

The concept of moral distress comes from the literature on nursing and was originally introduced by Jameton (1984), who described moral distress as "aris[ing] when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action" (p 6).

The Association's research study on COVID-19, caregiving, and the careers of Alberta teachers and school leaders found that "moral distress extended into educators' personal lives, especially when their occupational commitment infringed on their ability to meet care responsibilities at home" (ATA 2022a, 24).

Phase 2 of the Association's Compassion Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Educator Burnout study found that moral distress manifested in "a sense of helplessness, as the result of feeling untrained or unable to make a positive difference for students," which was "an additional symptom of compassion fatigue" (ATA 2021a, 20).

Finally, the Association's December 2023 pulse survey revealed that "the lack of support staff . . . and resources for students with exceptionalities is leading to a situation in which teachers are unable to provide the necessary attention and care to all students. This has created a dynamic of moral distress" (ATA 2024c, 8).

The relentless pace of public schools, compounded by scarce resources, has created a situation in which Alberta's teachers and school leaders are trying to fill the gaps but increasingly feel that they are not able to. As their moral distress grows, many are reassessing their decision to teach.

A Difficult Decision

The Association's research on exiting the teaching profession found that for many, the decision to quit teaching was not sudden; rather, it took many months or, for 36 per cent of the respondents, two years or more (ATA 2024b, 8). This, as well as the comments from teachers, indicates that the decision is deeply personal and emotional.

Summary

Association research identifies the conditions driving teachers to consider leaving the profession and explores the ethical and moral dimensions of the decision. Moral distress is creating untenable situations for many and driving the decision to leave teaching.

Conclusion

The findings of TALIS 2024 and Association research signal the challenges facing the teaching profession in Alberta.

Teacher attrition is not driven by a lack of professional commitment; rather, it results from sustained exposure to conditions of practice and systemic constraints that prevent teachers from fulfilling their professional responsibilities. Over time, repeated experiences of being unable to meet students' needs contribute to emotional exhaustion and moral distress and, eventually, lead to career exit.

Descriptive Theme D: Classroom Complexity, Conflict and Relational Strain Are Daily Pressure Points

The COVID-19 global pandemic, which was declared in 2020, caused significant disruption across Canada. To curb the spread of the virus, Canadians practised social distancing, masking and handwashing. Moreover, many people worked from home, and schools and daycares were closed.

When schools were closed, students learned through virtual sessions and learning packages prepared by teachers.

A Government of Alberta (2021) review of child and youth well-being during this time found that the pandemic adversely affected students' mental well-being and that learning gaps had emerged as the result of school closures. Further, parents noted that their children struggled with changing back and forth between online and in-person learning and that the pandemic had negatively affected parents' own well-being.

Since 2020, the workload of Alberta's teachers and school leaders has been compounded by the significant migration to Alberta (both interprovincial and international) and government policy decisions, including the rushed implementation of new curricula, a new funding formula and the implementation of a mandatory testing regime in elementary schools.

The classroom is the site where teachers experience these broader systemic pressures most directly.

TALIS 2024

The TALIS 2024 data sheds light on how systemic factors translate into daily practice in the classroom, particularly in terms of how teachers divide their time and energy over the course of a day.

School Composition

Alberta schools have changed since TALIS 2018.

TALIS 2024 asked participants to identify the composition of the schools in which they worked. Table 1 shows the change in Alberta school composition from 2018 to 2024.

TABLE 1. Change in Alberta School Composition, 2018–24

	Percentage of Alberta teachers teaching in schools with the stated composition		Increase from 2018 (percentage points)*
	2018	2024	
More than 10% of students are non-native speakers	50%	63%	13
More than 10% of students have special education needs	46%	67%	21
More than 30% of students come from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes	11%	23%	12
More than 10% of students are immigrants or with migrant backgrounds	45%	59%	14
At least 1% of students are refugees	46%	68%	22

Source: Data from TALIS 2024 database, Table 1.26.

*Statistically significant increases are bolded.

Since 2018, there have been statistically significant increases to the percentage of teachers working in schools with students with special education needs and schools with students who are refugees.

In addition, while not statistically significant, the percentage of teachers working in schools with more than 30 per cent of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes has doubled since

2018. Poverty is an important indicator for whether students succeed in school. As Ferguson, Bovaird and Mueller (2007, 703) note, “The negative effects of poverty on all levels of school success have been widely demonstrated and accepted.”

These changes to school composition in Alberta have undoubtedly had an impact on classroom complexity and student needs.

Teachers’ Self-Efficacy and Fulfillment of Lesson Aims

TALIS 2024 asked teachers about their self-efficacy in several areas (Table 1.21).

Overall, teachers in Alberta reported high levels of efficacy in their work, despite working in increasingly complex classrooms. At least 75 per cent indicated that they could do the following a lot or quite a bit:

- Help students believe in their ability to learn and the value of learning
- Create good questions for students
- Express classroom expectations
- Control disruptive behaviour
- Help every student progress
- Calm students down
- Use a variety of assessment and instructional strategies

Alberta teachers reported lower levels of efficacy in the areas of motivating students who show low interest in schoolwork (58 per cent) and reducing achievement gaps among students (55 per cent).

In addition to efficacy, TALIS 2024 surveyed teachers on their fulfillment of lesson aims (Table 2.1).

Overall, Alberta’s teachers reported high fulfillment of lesson aims, including the ability to present content, engage students, provide feedback, adapt content and provide students with opportunities to practise what they had learned.

However, they reported less success in helping students regulate their emotions and in managing classroom behaviour.

Alberta teachers’ fulfillment of lesson aims showed no statistically significant differences across experience levels, except in the category of managing student behaviour, where there was a difference

of 10 percentage points between teachers with less than five years of experience and those with more than 10 years of experience (Table 2.15). In that case, teachers with less experience reported higher fulfillment in terms of managing student behaviour.

However, overall, younger teachers and less experienced teachers reported significantly lower self-efficacy than older and more-experienced teachers (Table 1.22). This suggests the need for ongoing mentorship and support for younger and less experienced teachers. However, more-experienced teachers may need targeted support for managing student behaviours.

Time Spent on Classroom Management

Although TALIS 2024 found that Alberta teachers had high levels of self-efficacy and fulfillment of lesson aims, even in increasingly complex classrooms, teachers reported spending more time on managing student behaviour compared with TALIS 2018.

In TALIS 2024, Alberta teachers reported spending 20 per cent of class time managing behaviour, which is higher than the OECD average of 16 per cent. Furthermore, compared with TALIS 2018, the share of time spent on classroom management increased by 7 percentage points (well above the OECD average increase of 2 percentage points) and time spent on actual teaching (instructional time) dropped by 8 percentage points (Table 3.37).

Aggression in Schools

Finally, with the exception of vandalism and theft, Alberta teachers reported much higher levels of threats to school safety compared with the OECD averages (Table 3.38). For example, 36 per cent of Alberta teachers reported daily or weekly incidents of intimidation or bullying among students on school grounds, whereas the OECD average was 19 per cent.

This reported lack of respect among students and toward school staff is deeply concerning and indicates the need for a focus on student mental health and well-being, as well as the mental health and well-being of teachers and other school staff.

Summary

The TALIS 2024 data for Alberta illustrates increasing complexity in Alberta's schools and classrooms. When this picture is considered alongside funding cutbacks and growing class sizes, it is unsurprising that teachers in Alberta have reported the highest levels of stress in the world.

Association Research

Association research has tracked how class size has evolved since 2020, as well as how complexity manifests in Alberta classrooms. Further, it has investigated rising aggression in Alberta schools and the needed supports.

Class Size and Complexity

The Association's December 2023 pulse survey (ATA 2024c) looked at class size, student complexity and supports for students.

In the survey, 61 per cent of teachers reported that their class sizes had increased since the previous school year, and 30 per cent reported no change (p 31). Only 9 per cent indicated that their class sizes had decreased.

The findings for school leaders were similar, with only 4 per cent indicating that class sizes in their school had decreased and 68 per cent reporting that class sizes had increased (p 32).

In addition, 39 per cent of teachers reported that their largest class size was 30 or more students (p 33), with the largest class sizes being in the primary grades (Grades 4–6), high school science and junior high English language arts (p 35).

Complicating large classrooms is the complexity of the students in those classrooms. The survey found that “a significant majority of teachers and school leaders (nine in ten) reported an increase in the complexity and diversity of student needs [that] school year” (p 1). The areas of greatest complexity identified by teachers were socioemotional (83 per cent), behavioural (78 per cent) and cognitive (63 per cent) (p 45).

Finally, 57 per cent of teachers and school leaders indicated that support for students with exceptionalities had decreased since the previous school year (p 47).

Aggression in Schools

The Association's December 2023 pulse survey (ATA 2024c) also explored aggression (bullying and violence) in schools and classrooms.

The survey asked teachers and school leaders whether they had experienced aggression since the beginning of the school year, and 52 per cent of teachers and 73 per cent of school leaders reported that they had (p 11).

Respondents reported that the most common forms of aggression were verbal and gestural, most aggression came from students (75 per cent) or parents or guardians (11 per cent), and most of the aggressive incidents (95 per cent) occurred in person (p 11).

These findings indicate that teachers and school leaders are operating in complex relational environments characterized by heightened emotional intensity, behavioural volatility and conflict-mediation demands.

Finally, respondents noted that aggression in schools had increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (p 12) and that polarization in their communities was affecting their ability to teach about certain topics (such as gender identity, race, the pandemic and climate change).

Summary

Association research shows that growing class sizes are a concern for teachers and school leaders.

In addition, classroom complexity is increasing. Teachers and school leaders identify the top three areas of complexity as socioemotional, behavioural and cognitive. Concern about complexity is consistent across the province, whether teachers are at schools in rural, suburban or urban settings.

Finally, aggression is emerging as a top concern of teachers and school leaders. Much work needs to be done to address effective policy mechanisms, professional development and resource allocation to manage incidents of aggression.

Conclusion

The TALIS 2024 data and Association research paint a picture of the deep complexity in Alberta classrooms and the lack of supports for managing those challenges. Complexity, conflict and relational strain are daily pressure points in the classroom, which is the site where systemic issues play out daily. As discussed in previous descriptive themes, conditions of practice are deeply interconnected with teacher stress and well-being and with intentions to leave the teaching profession.

Descriptive Theme E: Policy Churn Adds Load

In addition to COVID-19, the increasing number of students and the change to the funding of public schools, significant policy changes imposed by the Alberta government have had an impact on teachers and school leaders. These include the rapid implementation of new curricula and the imposition of mandatory standardized testing.

Alberta's teachers and school leaders have also been managing changes related to the evolving use of technology, including digital tools, AI and Alberta's cellphone ban in schools.

TALIS 2024

On a systemwide level across countries, TALIS 2024 did not find a consistent link between a lack of resources and teacher stress. It did find that “stress is more strongly associated with the experience of constant, unsupported change—particularly when teachers feel overwhelmed by frequent initiatives or are asked to implement reforms without adequate support” (OECD 2025a, 104).

Change Management

For Alberta teachers, the stress of keeping up with changing requirements from the government, school authorities and schools increased by 13 percentage points since TALIS 2018—a large and statistically significant jump (Table 3.17). Overall, in TALIS 2024, 41 per cent of Alberta teachers indicated that keeping up with requirements was a source of stress that occurred quite a bit or a lot.

Further, “although policy reform is often linked to the availability of resources, TALIS 2024 data show that reported stress is more consistently associated with the experience of constant, unsupported change than with a general lack of human resources” (OECD 2025a, 131).

In Alberta, after accounting for teacher and school characteristics, teachers were 2.2 times more likely to report having too much marking as a source of stress if they had also reported change fatigue associated with the indicator “I am asked to implement change initiatives without the necessary resources” (Table 3.57).

TALIS 2024 also probed into teachers' perspectives on change management at work. Teachers were presented with statements such as “Too many change initiatives are introduced at this school” and “I am asked to implement change initiatives without the necessary resources” (Table 3.54). As shown in Table 2, Alberta teachers' agreement or strong agreement with each statement was at least 5 percentage points above the OECD average, indicating a strong sense of change fatigue on the part of Alberta teachers.

TABLE 2. Alberta Teachers' Perspectives on Change Management

	Percentage of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement	
	Alberta	OECD average
Too many change initiatives are introduced at this school.	36%	31%
I am tired of all the changes in this school.	31%	21%
We are asked to change too many things in this school.	31%	23%
It feels like we are always being asked to change something around here.	39%	26%
I would like to see a period of stability before we change anything else in this school.	53%	44%
I am asked to implement change initiatives without the necessary resources.	43%	31%

Source: Data from TALIS 2024 database, Table 3.54.

Change fatigue may reflect an emerging risk for teachers and school leaders. A cumulative burden is associated with continuous policy adaptation, particularly if the policy is not well considered or not connected to pedagogical concerns and teacher expertise.

Evolving Use of Technology

Digital Resources and Tools

New to TALIS 2024 were questions about digital resources and tools, including AI. Teachers were asked about their beliefs, practices and perceptions with regard to digital resources and tools. The results reveal teachers' mixed experiences.

First, teachers were asked about the impact of digital resources and tools on students (Table 1.48). Many Alberta teachers agreed or strongly agreed that digital resources and tools

- distracted students from learning (68 per cent),
- limited the amount of face-to-face communication between students (66 per cent),
- had a negative impact on student well-being when used frequently (55 per cent) and
- led to students submitting Internet content as their own work (75 per cent).

These findings suggest that digital resources and tools have the potential to disrupt relationships in the classroom and may hold risks for student well-being and cognition over time.

TALIS 2024 also asked teachers how frequently they used digital resources and tools to perform specific tasks (Table 1.49). They reported using digital resources and tools frequently or always for the following activities:

- Handling the logistics of teaching (74 per cent)
- Presenting information through direct instruction (70 per cent)
- Assessing student learning (44 per cent)
- Replacing printed materials (43 per cent)
- Supporting collaboration between students (41 per cent)

TALIS 2024 found that Alberta teachers use AI as a tool for their work more readily than their OECD counterparts: 61 per cent of Alberta teachers reported having used AI, compared with the OECD average of 36 per cent (Table 1.59).

Alberta teachers reported that their main uses of AI were as follows (Table 1.60):

- Generating lesson materials (71 per cent)
- Summarizing topics (64 per cent)
- Generating comments for student feedback and communication with parents (53 per cent)
- Adjusting lessons to meet students' learning needs (52 per cent)

This data indicates that most teachers in Alberta are not using AI with students directly or for assessing student work.

Teachers were asked about the benefits of AI in writing lesson plans, adapting lesson materials, supporting students with specific needs and automating administrative tasks (Table 1.61). Most Alberta teachers agreed that AI could help in those areas. The agreement rate for each indicator ranged from 54 per cent to 67 per cent—which aligns with the percentage of teachers who indicated that they had used AI in their practice.

When asked about the challenges related to the use of AI in education, Alberta teachers indicated concerns about plagiarism (81 per cent) and the amplification and replication of false information (76 per cent) (Table 1.62).

TALIS 2024 also explored the barriers to using AI in education: lack of infrastructure, lack of knowledge and skills, teachers' beliefs about the use of AI, overwhelm related to integrating new technology, and school policy preventing the use of AI. The most significant barriers Alberta teachers identified were a lack of training in AI (67 per cent) and feeling too overwhelmed to adopt new technologies into their practice (43 per cent) (Table 1.63).

The impact of AI on the work lives of teachers is only beginning to be understood in the research and by policy-makers. As the TALIS 2024 report (OECD 2025a, 58) notes, "The release of OpenAI's ChatGPT in late 2022 accelerated the everyday use of AI in many parts of society. Although AI is playing a larger role in people's lives, the short- and long-term influence of AI on education remains uncertain."

The TALIS 2024 data shows that digital resources and tools, including AI, are complicating the work lives of teachers, bringing with them advantages and disadvantages. Significant work remains to be done to ensure that AI and other digital resources and tools are used ethically and equitably in education.

Summary

TALIS 2024 examined how change (including technological change) is being managed by school systems internationally.

The data for Alberta indicates that teachers perceive that they are currently experiencing too much change.

Nevertheless, Alberta teachers have shown themselves to be adaptable, using digital resources and tools and AI in ways that help them prepare to work with students and communicate with parents.

Association Research

While the TALIS 2024 data is extremely helpful in terms of understanding Alberta teachers' perceptions of the changes they are experiencing at work, Association research addresses the impact of specific changes, including curriculum change, new mandatory standardized testing regimes and the evolving use of technology as part of teachers' work.

Curriculum Change

After being elected in 2019, Alberta's UCP government scrapped the draft curriculum that had resulted from the work of previous governments. In August 2020, the government issued a ministerial order on student learning to set the direction for new curriculum in Alberta (Alberta Education 2020b), and in March 2021, it brought forward a draft K–6 curriculum.

The intention was to fully implement the new curriculum across all grades, but after the public outcry about the content and pacing of the curriculum (French 2021), the government delayed implementation so that parts of the curriculum could be re-evaluated and reworked. Even with this delay, teachers and school leaders rushed to adapt to the new curriculum in the absence of well-developed resources and professional development.

As part of its response to the curriculum rollout, the Association conducted a professional curriculum analysis and critique (ATA 2021c), with feedback from over 6,500 teachers and school leaders. The Association also included questions about the new curriculum in its January 2025 pulse survey (ATA 2025).

The professional curriculum analysis and critique revealed that teachers and school leaders were very concerned about the quality of the draft curriculum. For example, 94 per cent of the respondents disagreed that the draft curriculum was developmentally appropriate and reflected high academic standards (ATA 2021c, 12). Further, when asked whether the curriculum was age-appropriate and logically sequenced within and between grades, 95 per cent disagreed (p 10).

One social studies teacher expressed confusion about why Alberta, a well-respected world leader in education, had embarked on “an American type of curriculum, which is a teacher resource that needs to be followed instead of a group of learning outcomes that can be interpreted by trained professionals who know their students and classroom context” (p 37).

Of the 1,751 qualitative comments from teachers and school leaders about the draft curriculum, only 38 (2 per cent) were positive (p 75).

Ultimately, this research found that teachers and school leaders saw the draft K–6 curriculum as being Eurocentric, failing to advance multiple perspectives, and excluding important groups of people in Alberta (such as Indigenous Peoples and francophones), as well as being developmentally inappropriate and hastily written. They also noted that the rushed implementation schedule, without proper supports, would significantly increase the intensity of teachers’ work lives.

The professional curriculum analysis and critique called for a moratorium on the rollout of the K–6 draft curriculum, as well as any further development of the Grades 7–9 and Grades 10–12 curricula, until the teaching profession’s substantive concerns could be addressed.

In early 2025, the Association conducted a pulse survey on literacy and numeracy screeners, classroom conditions, the cellphone ban, and AI in Alberta’s K–12 schools (ATA 2025). This survey included a section on the rollout of the new curriculum.

The responses revealed “a range of pressing concerns” (p 28) about the implementation of the new curriculum. Teachers and school leaders shared that the rollout was not well resourced and that rolling out multiple curricula at once had led to significant increases in teacher workload and stress—all of which caused them to wonder how sustainable this work would be over time.

Further, the concerns expressed in the professional curriculum analysis and critique had been confirmed. Teachers remained worried about the content and the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum, as well as the lack of consultation with teachers during its formation.

Finally, teachers and school leaders noted that the curriculum rollout was occurring against a backdrop of increasing class sizes and complexity and decreased supports for complex needs in the classroom. The following comments reveal their distress:

Large class sizes, complexities on the rise with students, high ELL, then ADD on NEW curriculum . . . something has got to give . . . it might be our mental health. (p 30)

We were just thrown to the wolves with no support, which has lowered the quality of teaching. (p 29)

Why are teachers not given adequate feedback opportunity that is actually heard and utilized? We are begging to be involved and [are] ignored at every turn. (p 29)

These comments demonstrate the deep commitment of Alberta’s teaching profession to providing quality teaching and learning opportunities for students, as well as the moral distress caused by the actions of the Alberta government.

New Standardized Testing Requirements

For many decades, Alberta has administered standardized tests known as provincial achievement tests or student learning assessments to students in Grades 3, 6 and 9 and diploma exams to students in Grade 12. These tests are typically administered once or twice per year to ensure on a systemwide basis that students and teachers are meeting the curricular goals set out by the government, as well as to identify areas for improvement. The Grade 12 diploma exams also serve as exit exams and are used for the purposes of postsecondary entrance.

Since being elected in 2019, Alberta’s UCP government has placed a heavy emphasis on standardized testing. As Milne (2024) wrote, starting in fall 2024, “students could be subjected to provincial testing up to 32 times before they leave elementary school. The previous total was 10, which translates to an increase of over 200 per cent in tests.”

In the 2022/23 school year, the government introduced mandatory numeracy and literacy screening for Grades 1–3. Screening in kindergarten commenced in 2025. The government plans to expand the screening into Grades 4 and 5 in the 2026/27 school year.

For Grades 1–3, the screenings must be conducted at least twice per school year (fall and winter), with the rationale that students who are struggling will be identified early and provided with support. However, this rationale is questionable, given that the Association's December 2023 pulse survey revealed that

about half (53 per cent) of teachers reported having requested specialized assessments (such as speech therapy, occupational therapy or psycho-educational evaluations) for their students [that] school year. However, more than half (56 per cent) of teachers anticipate[d] that their requests [would] not be fulfilled by the end of the school year, thus rendering them ineffective. (ATA 2024c, 1)

The Association also surveyed teachers and school leaders about their experiences with standardized diagnostic assessment tools (SDATs) and other forms of standardized assessment (ATA 2024d). Given the immediacy of the implementation of SDATs in Division I, this research narrowed its focus to consider the unique experience of teachers and school leaders in K–3 settings.

The responses revealed the following:

- Teachers do not need the assessments in order to determine which students are struggling.
- The timing of the assessments (at the beginning of the school year) is highly disruptive to teachers' efforts to establish classroom routines and good relationships with students.
- Teachers do not make use of the results of the assessments.
- The assessments cause mental and emotional distress for both students and teachers.

The survey found that SDATs required significant time and resources to prepare, administer and report on and that “the time that was spent attending to the SDAT tasks was taken away from instructional time [and] was considered to be . . . time lost” (p 52).

The survey also found that teachers did not have access to consistent supports in terms of administering the assessments or recording and using the results.

Further, the responses revealed the impact of the assessments on students: “This was described to be mostly negative in nature, where the self-esteem and anxiety of students were directly impacted by being required to take SDATs” (p 56).

The research concluded that “the impact that the mandated SDATs are having on teachers and teaching is more detrimental than beneficial” (p 58).

The Association’s January 2025 pulse survey (ATA 2025) asked questions about the government-mandated literacy and numeracy screening. The results triangulate with the results of the SDAT survey (ATA 2024d) and provide more information about the impact of standardized assessments in classrooms and schools across the province.

Most of the elementary teacher respondents had deep concerns about the literacy and numeracy screening and its impact on students: “Three out of four (73 per cent) of the 1,400+ elementary-only teacher respondents report[ed] that literacy and numeracy assessments contribute[d] significantly to student anxiety and stress” (ATA 2025, 1), and 71 per cent felt that the screeners were “misaligned with students’ developmental readiness” (p 1).

In addition, the responses demonstrated how the screenings have added to teacher workload, with “77 per cent citing insufficient time for data entry, 70 per cent reporting a lack of substitute teacher support and 49 per cent noting inadequate training. Additionally, 79 per cent state[d] that the early timing of these screeners negatively affects relationship-building and classroom routines” (p 2).

Finally, respondents commented that the screenings negatively affected students’ emotional well-being, with themes including anxiety and distress, disproportionate impacts on vulnerable students, developmentally inappropriate testing, observable stress-related behaviours, strain on teacher–student relationships, stressful timing, and limited assessment value (pp 6–7). These comments indicate teachers’ deep moral distress about the impact of screenings on children.

These findings demonstrate that government policy mandates affect not only teacher workload but also the ethical and relational dimensions of teaching.

The pulse survey also investigated the impact of standardized testing in other grade levels. Those findings mirror the concerns of elementary teachers. For example, when asked if standardized tests contributed to student mental health concerns, 64 per cent agreed (p 21).

Teachers were also skeptical about standardized tests, with only 31 per cent indicating support for the use of standardized tests to evaluate student progress (p 23) and 59 per cent disagreeing that standardized tests were designed to be fair and equitable for all students (p 24).

Finally, when asked whether they thought the Alberta government consulted sufficiently with teachers on the design of standardized assessments, 82 per cent disagreed (p 22).

Evolving Use of Technology

Cellphone Ban

In September 2024, the Alberta government, following advice and policy from the Association, implemented a cellphone ban in K–12 classrooms.

The Association's January 2025 pulse survey (ATA 2025) asked teachers and school leaders about the impact of the ban.

Overall, respondents had a positive view of the cellphone ban and its effects. Most (74 per cent) reported a decline in classroom disturbances, and many (57 per cent) noted that the ban had enhanced students' academic performance (p 2). In addition, 66 per cent believed that the ban had improved students' mental well-being (p 2).

Though implementing the ban initially placed stress on teachers and school leaders, the ban ultimately appears to have been a good policy decision in terms of improving the classroom environment in Alberta schools.

Use of AI

The Association's December 2023 (ATA 2024c) and January 2025 (ATA 2025) pulse surveys looked at the number of teachers and school leaders who had used AI (professionally or personally) in the past six months.

In 2023, 55 per cent reported that they had used AI (ATA 2024c, 2), but that had risen to 78 per cent by 2025 (ATA 2025, 64). Taken with TALIS 2024, which found that 61 per cent of Alberta teachers had used AI (Table 1.59), these results would suggest that Alberta teachers' AI use has been steadily increasing over recent years.

The January 2025 pulse survey (ATA 2025, 68) revealed the top five ways Alberta teachers and school leaders used AI:

- Writing and editing support (61 per cent)
- Lesson planning (57 per cent)
- Customized learning resource creation (46 per cent)
- Administrative tasks (35 per cent)
- Language translation and support (29 per cent)

This aligns with the TALIS 2024 data (Table 1.60) in suggesting that most Alberta teachers are not using AI directly with students.

The January 2025 pulse survey expanded on teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of the challenges and benefits of AI use in education. Five themes emerged (pp 74–75):

- Students' misuse of and over-reliance on AI
- The need for teaching students the proper and ethical use of AI
- The impact of AI on ELL students and students who struggle, as the use of AI may mask their difficulties
- The role of teachers in using AI in the classroom, including teacher training in AI
- The potential of AI as a tool for innovation

Summary

Association research has found that curriculum change and mandatory screening in the early grades, both imposed by the Alberta government without consultation with the teaching profession, have resulted in moral distress and intensified workloads for teachers.

The government's introduction of the cellphone ban has led to positive outcomes; however, that ban was informed by Association policy.

In terms of teachers' use of AI, the Association data mirrors the TALIS 2024 results.

Conclusion

In both TALIS 2024 and Association research, policy imposed without input from the teaching profession, particularly in the areas of curriculum and assessment, emerges as a significant structural driver of workload intensification and moral distress among Alberta teachers and school leaders.

Association research reinforces the TALIS 2024 findings on change fatigue, documenting how curriculum reform and mandatory student assessments have increased teachers' workload while constraining their professional autonomy. Teachers have reported that policy mandates require extensive additional planning, administrative work and instructional adjustments, without any reduction to their existing responsibilities. These additional expectations intensify teachers' workload and reduce their capacity to meet students' diverse learning needs.

Critically, Association research demonstrates that governmental policy mandates have generated moral distress by placing teachers in situations in which required practices conflict with their professional judgment regarding student well-being.

However, when the government implements policy that mirrors Association policy and considers the professional voice of teachers and school leaders, the change can yield good results. This was the case with the cellphone ban. Where a gap in policy exists, such as with the use of AI in education, the government would be wise to collaborate with the teaching profession. An AI policy created with the input of teachers and school leaders would balance concerns about the ethical and safe use of AI and about equitable access with the goal of realizing the potential for efficient and effective use of this powerful technology.



Across the five descriptive themes, several cross-cutting patterns emerge when the findings from TALIS 2024 are considered alongside Association research.

First, relational strength within schools remains a notable and enduring asset. Teachers consistently report high levels of empathy, strong reliance on colleagues and generally positive in-school relationships. These relational dynamics function as critical protective factors, sustaining teachers' professional commitment and buffering against some of the challenges embedded in teaching in Alberta.

At the same time, structural strain is intensifying in Alberta's public education system. Since TALIS 2018, Alberta teachers' reported workloads, classroom-management demands and sources of stress have increased. In fact, Alberta stands out internationally for the proportion of teachers reporting that they experience a lot of stress, underscoring the cumulative weight of their current working conditions.

In this context, change fatigue has become measurable and significant. Repeated and often under-resourced initiatives—particularly in the areas of curriculum and assessment—are consistently associated with heightened stress and perceptions of instability across the profession.

The Association's qualitative research has demonstrated that moral distress is a key pathway to attrition. When structural constraints prevent teachers from meeting professional standards or fulfilling their ethical commitments to students, the resulting dissonance contributes to their emotional exhaustion and, in some cases, their decision to leave the profession.

Finally, equity considerations provide a lens for considering the experiences of teachers and school leaders. Gendered care burdens and role expectations, as well as the distinct experiences of Indigenous teachers, indicate that system pressures are not distributed evenly. These patterns point to the need for differentiated and responsive supports that recognize how professional strain is experienced across diverse groups within the profession.

From this synthesis, the analytical themes discussed in the next section were derived.

Analytical Themes

The following analytical themes interpret the broader structural implications of the descriptive themes for teacher and school leader well-being, the sustainability of the teaching workforce, and the resilience of the public education system.

Analytical Theme 1: Structural Conditions Are Producing Systemic Professional Strain

The findings of TALIS 2024 and Association research show that the professional strain teachers and school leaders are under is not a function of their individual traits or their strengths and weaknesses. Rather, it is a systemic problem.

The research tracks how systemic and structural conditions—including large class sizes, complexity, long work hours, under-resourcing and care work—collide to create untenable and unsustainable conditions. The consequences are predictable: teachers' and school leaders' capacity is overextended in unhealthy ways.

The work of teaching has expanded into relational care responsibilities, such as facilitating socioemotional learning, providing trauma support and managing complex behaviour, without the necessary time, staffing, support or training being provided. The TALIS 2024 data reveals that teachers in Alberta experience the highest occupational stress and have extremely long workweeks. The Association's research further describes the impacts on teachers, including moral distress, burnout, and compassion fatigue or compassion stress.

Ultimately, these factors create risk for the sustainability of the teaching profession, both in terms of attracting qualified teachers and retaining those teachers. With the Association's member opinion survey (unpublished) finding that nearly one-third of teachers plan to retire in the next five years, to leave Alberta to teach elsewhere or to leave the teaching profession entirely, the recommendation that structural conditions be improved in significant and meaningful ways becomes urgent.

Analytical Theme 2: The Professional Contract Between Educators and the System Is Fracturing

The results from TALIS 2024 and Association research illustrate the rupture between educators and the system, particularly the Alberta government.

The public education system works best when teachers and school leaders are trusted in using their professional judgment to carry out the important work of helping students thrive and

succeed. Association research has noted the widening gap between professional responsibility and professional authority. For example, the government's introduction of a new curriculum and standardized testing without any feedback from the teaching profession has put teachers in untenable positions. They are forced to carry out the government's directives, resulting in ethical stress and moral distress.

TALIS 2024 tracked the change fatigue associated with the implementation of new initiatives. Teachers in Alberta reported feeling overwhelmed as the result of changes that were imposed but not well supported by the government or school boards.

The lack of responsiveness from policy-makers in addressing teachers' and school leaders' concerns serves only to deepen the fracture between the profession and the system. Both TALIS 2024 and Association research highlight that trust between colleagues in schools is strong but that teachers and school leaders do not feel valued by the government or society.

These findings suggest that the sustainability of the teaching profession hinges on governance that is relational and collaborative. Meaningful teacher participation must be involved in determining and implementing changes in Alberta's public education system.

Analytical Theme 3: Relational Professional Identity Functions as the Primary Protective and Stabilizing Force

Alberta's *Teaching Quality Standard* and *Leadership Quality Standard* emphasize safe and caring relationships. The TALIS 2024 findings and Association research confirm that relationships are at the heart of the work of teaching and school leadership.

Relational professional identity remains the strongest stabilizing force in the teaching profession. Teachers' and school leaders' commitment to students, collegial solidarity and moral purpose sustain them even as structural pressures intensify. Association research confirms that when they have positive relationships, teachers and school leaders experience more hopefulness and joy at work.

However, as shown by TALIS 2024 and Association research, when teachers feel that society and policy-makers do not value them, that has a deleterious effect. Association research also reveals that a lack of relational support contributes to compassion fatigue and burnout.

Positive relationships create collegial belonging, which in turn helps teachers and school leaders better support students and families in the educational journey.

Conclusion

TALIS 2024 and Association research converge on a clear and urgent finding: the work of teaching and school leadership in Alberta has intensified structurally, and the sustainability of the profession is increasingly at risk.

Across independent data sources, teachers report rising workloads, elevated occupational stress, expanding classroom complexity and growing change fatigue. Alberta teachers now report the highest levels of stress among participating TALIS jurisdictions, and Association research documents widespread burnout symptoms, compassion fatigue and moral distress across career stages.

These patterns are consistent and cumulative. Distress is no longer episodic or individual. Rather, it is embedded in systemic and structural conditions.

Moreover, evidence suggests that the professional contract between teachers and school leaders and the broader system is fraying. While collegial relationships and school-level leadership remain strong, teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of being valued by society and the government have declined sharply. Job satisfaction has also decreased—particularly with respect to salary and conditions of practice—and intentions to leave the profession are high, especially among early-career teachers.

Teacher attrition is not driven by diminished commitment; rather, it reflects teachers' and school leaders' repeated experiences of being unable to meet students' needs as the result of systemic constraints. Thus, moral distress emerges as a key pathway to attrition.

Yet the research also reveals a powerful stabilizing force: relational professional identity. Teachers and school leaders continue to demonstrate deep care for students, strong collegial support and sustained hope rooted in daily relationships. These relational capacities function as protective factors.

Nevertheless, teachers' and school leaders' emotional labour and ethical commitment cannot indefinitely compensate for structural strain. Care work remains foundational to public education, but it is largely invisible in workload considerations and policy design.

The implications are clear. Sustaining Alberta's teaching profession will require structural alignment, not simply individual resilience. Stable and sufficient funding, supports for inclusion and classroom

complexity, mentorship for early-career and second-career teachers, coherent change management, and public affirmation of professional expertise are essential. Without these in place, teachers' and school leaders' work intensification, moral distress and attrition risk will continue to grow.

Alberta benefits from a committed and comparatively young teaching workforce. Whether this strength endures will depend on deliberate policy choices that recognize teaching as relational, ethical and emotionally complex professional work. The analysis presented in this report signals both warning and possibility: sustainability is achievable—but only if structural conditions are brought into alignment with professional expectations.

Appendix A: Summaries of Association Research

Compassion Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Educator Burnout Study

Phase 1 report (ATA 2020b)
Phase 2 report (ATA 2021a)
Executive summary (ATA 2021b)
Comparative analysis of the survey data (ATA 2024a)

Objective

To understand the impact of emotional labour on education workers (including teachers, educational assistants, school administrators and support staff) in Alberta

Sample and Instruments

- Three online surveys: June 2020 (2,061 completed), January 2021 (1,105 completed), January 2021 (798 completed, randomly stratified draw)
- Individual semi-structured interviews with 53 education workers (mostly teachers and school leaders)

Conclusions

Teachers and school leaders provide crisis and trauma care regularly and without training. Additionally, there is evidence of significant mental and emotional distress across education roles. Comprehensive intervention is required in order to improve the situation.

Professional Curriculum Analysis and Critique of Alberta Education's 2021 Draft K–6 Curriculum

(ATA 2021c)

Objective

To convey to Alberta's ministry of education the teaching profession's expert opinions on and advice for the draft K–6 curriculum

Sample and Instruments

- Written submissions from specialist councils
- Discussion recorded during a curriculum circle of 120 teachers
- Online survey open to all Alberta teachers (6,028 respondents)

Conclusions

The draft K–6 curriculum is fundamentally flawed and does not align with either educational research or the ministry's own published curriculum design processes.

COVID-19, Caregiving and Careers of Alberta Teachers and School Leaders

(ATA 2022a)

Objective

To understand the lived experiences of caregiving during COVID-19 and the impact on the careers of teachers and school leaders who identify as women, as well as to identify potential supports

Sample and Instruments

- Five virtual focus groups with 29 teachers and school leaders
- Ten semi-structured interviews with system and school leaders

Conclusions

The uncertainty and constant changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic created significant professional demands for teachers and school leaders who identify as women, in addition to their caregiving responsibilities at home. Evidence of significant mental, emotional and moral distress was recorded. A positive finding was that as online options for professional development expanded during the pandemic, women developed higher career aspirations.

Honouring the Voices of Indigenous Teachers and School Leaders in Alberta School Communities

(ATA 2022b)

Objective

To examine the experiences of Indigenous teachers and school leaders in the school system

Sample and Instruments

- Online survey of 77 Indigenous teachers and school leaders
- Three virtual focus groups (13 participants in total)

Conclusions

Indigenous teachers and school leaders bring passion and dedication to their roles, yet achieving true belonging demands systemic change, strong mentorship and full recognition of Indigenous Knowledge.

Hope: Resilience and Recovery

(ATA 2023)

Objective

To identify sources of and threats to hope for teachers and school leaders and make recommendations for supports

Samples and Instruments

- Online survey with 561 participants
- Five virtual focus groups with 10 participants in total

Conclusions

Alberta teachers and school leaders exhibit strong reservoirs of hope, indicating that schools often foster hopeful orientations. However, limited institutional support may undermine the sustainability of this hope.

Exiting the Teaching Profession in Alberta

(ATA 2024b)

Objective

To report on the emotional and professional factors influencing teacher attrition

Sample and Instruments

- Online survey of 65 teachers who had indicated that they planned to leave or had already left teaching in Alberta
- Follow-up interviews with 12 participants, based on a matrix of geographical location and teaching experience

Conclusions

Teachers leaving the profession in Alberta identified work intensification, lack of inclusion supports, moral distress and conflict with parents as key reasons for their decision.

Reporting on Class Size and Complexity, Aggression, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Alberta's K–12 Schools

(ATA 2024c)

Objective

To survey teachers and school leaders on class size and complexity, aggression in schools, and AI use in education

Sample and Instrument

- Online survey, using randomly stratified and snowball sampling, with 2,148 teachers and school leaders

Conclusions

Post-pandemic classrooms are larger, and student needs are more complex. Teachers face heightened aggression and student learning challenges, creating an urgent demand for additional supports and resources. While about half of Alberta teachers were already using AI in 2023, its ethical application requires careful consideration.

Standardized Diagnostic Assessment Tools

(ATA 2024d)

Objective

To study the implementation of mandatory SDATs in Alberta and their effectiveness, as well as to identify which tests schools are using

Sample and Instruments

- Online survey with 416 responses
- Focus group with three participants

Conclusions

Overall, SDATs are low-value assessments that infringe upon teachers' professional judgment and interfere with classroom time. They do not reveal any new insights teachers can use to help learners, and they do not result in additional supports being provided for struggling students.

Literacy and Numeracy Screeners, Classroom Conditions, Cellphone Bans and AI in Alberta's K–12 Schools

(ATA 2025)

Objective

To explore the impact of government-mandated literacy and numeracy screenings and the cellphone ban, as well as to determine how AI is being integrated into education

Sample and Instrument

- Online survey from a random stratified sample of 2,833 teachers and school leaders

Conclusions

SDATs, particularly in the younger grades, cause significant distress and have limited value. The cellphone ban has reduced classroom disruptions while supporting student mental health. Teachers' AI use has increased since 2023, though concerns about equity and ethics persist.

Appendix B: Line-by-Line Coding Outputs (Stage 1)

Emotional and Moral Experience

- Feeling emotionally exhausted
- Carrying students' trauma
- Compassion fatigue is widespread
- Burnout described as inevitable outcome
- Emotional labour is constant and invisible
- Pressure to appear calm and supportive
- Inability to meet student needs causes distress
- Feeling morally compromised by policy requirements
- Guilt when unable to provide adequate support
- Professional values in conflict with system demands
- Loss of emotional energy over time

Workload and Complexity

- Workload described as unsustainable
- Increasing class size and complexity
- More students with diverse and complex needs
- Insufficient time to complete core responsibilities
- Excessive administrative tasks
- Reporting requirements increasing
- Assessment workload expanding
- Lack of time for preparation and planning
- Work extending into evenings and weekends
- Work intensification accelerating over time

Professional Agency and System Trust

- Teachers feel unheard in policy decisions
- Curriculum imposed without consultation
- Professional autonomy reduced
- Decisions made by those outside classrooms
- Teacher expertise not respected
- Declining trust in government
- Lack of influence over working conditions
- Teaching increasingly controlled externally
- Misalignment between policy and classroom reality

Relational and Professional Identity

- Commitment to students remains strong
- Relationships are at the core of teaching
- Collegial relationships sustain educators
- Belonging to a professional community provides strength
- Moral purpose remains despite adversity
- Teaching seen as meaningful and socially important
- Identity rooted in care and service
- Emotional connection to the profession persists

Exit, Attrition and Sustainability

- Teachers considering leaving the profession
- Early-career teachers uncertain about staying
- Experienced teachers exiting prematurely
- Workload as the primary reason for leaving
- Inability to sustain the current pace long-term
- Profession described as increasingly unsustainable
- Recruitment and retention concerns emerging
- Profession losing experienced educators
- Attrition linked to systemic conditions

Equity and Care Burden

- Women carrying disproportionate emotional labour
- Indigenous teachers experiencing additional cultural responsibilities
- Care work expected but unsupported
- Emotional work not recognized formally
- Care expectations intensifying post-pandemic

Hope, Resilience and Protective Factors

- Relationships with students sustain educators
- Collegial support mitigates burnout
- Hope emerges through collective solidarity
- Professional community provides resilience
- Meaningful work remains motivating
- Support from colleagues protects well-being

Appendix C: Descriptive Theme Indicators (Stage 2)

Descriptive Theme A: Care Work Is Core Work

Summary

Teaching in Alberta is fundamentally relational and emotionally intensive.

Teachers and school leaders routinely provide emotional regulation, trauma support and relational care as part of their daily work. This care work is both professionally normative and structurally required, yet it often remains unrecognized, unsupported and unevenly distributed.

Emotional labour functions as an essential mechanism that enables learning, well-being and school stability; however, its cumulative and sustained nature creates increased vulnerability to compassion fatigue, burnout and psychological distress.

Care work extends beyond instructional responsibilities to include crisis intervention; emotional co-regulation; and relational mediation between students, parents and institutions. This dimension of teachers' work is intensified by growing student complexity, reduced external supports and broader societal stressors.

Patterns indicate that teachers and school leaders who are Indigenous or who identify as women often experience disproportionate emotional labour burdens.

This theme captures the foundational reality that care work is not ancillary to teaching. Rather, it is core professional work and a central organizing feature of the profession.

Observable Indicators

- Emotional labour and relational regulation
- High levels of teacher empathy, emotional awareness and relational engagement
- Requirement to regulate and suppress personal emotions while maintaining professional composure
- Frequent provision of emotional support to students experiencing trauma, distress or crisis
- Teachers and school leaders acting as emotional stabilizers in school communities
- Trauma and crisis care responsibilities
- Routine involvement in supporting students experiencing mental health challenges, family disruption and trauma

- Routine involvement in supporting colleagues experiencing mental or emotional distress
- Lack of formal preparation or training for providing trauma-informed emotional support
- Emotional spillover effects that have an impact on teacher and school leader well-being
- Care work as a professional norm
- Strong professional expectations to foster belonging, safety and emotional well-being
- High levels of educator identification with relational aspects of teaching
- Care work integrated into daily instructional and non-instructional responsibilities
- Differential distribution of care burdens
- Higher emotional labour expectations for women at work
- Intersection between women's caregiving roles at work and caregiving responsibilities at home
- Additional relational and cultural labour performed by Indigenous teachers and school leaders
- Emotional labour as both protective and erosive
- Strong relational connections serving as sources of hope and professional meaning
- Emotional labour contributing to compassion fatigue, burnout and emotional exhaustion

Descriptive Theme B: Distress Becomes Structural

Summary

Psychological distress among teachers and school leaders in Alberta reflects structural features of the work environment rather than individual coping limitations. Stress emerges as a predictable outcome of sustained workload intensification, expanding professional responsibilities, policy instability and insufficient systemic supports.

Distress among teachers and school leaders is no longer episodic or situational but, rather, occupational and systemic. Teachers report persistently high stress levels, long work hours and impaired work–life integration. Structural conditions—including class size, administrative burden, behavioural demands and resource constraints—create cumulative strain that erodes professional well-being over time.

Distress manifests across career stages but shows distinct patterns. Early-career teachers report emotional exhaustion and overload, while experienced teachers report cognitive fatigue and decision fatigue. These findings indicate that distress evolves across the career trajectory, reinforcing its structural and longitudinal nature.

Observable Indicators

- Workload intensity and time pressure
- High average weekly work hours (exceeding international averages)
- Significant administrative, planning and assessment workload outside instructional hours
- Limited time for recovery, reflection or professional collaboration
- Symptoms of psychological and physiological distress
- High rates of exhaustion, sleep disruption, concentration problems and emotional fatigue
- Reports of burnout, compassion fatigue and reduced well-being
- Persistent work-related stress interfering with personal life and recovery
- Structural drivers of distress
- Expanding student needs but no proportional increases in supports
- Increased behaviour-management demands
- Insufficient staffing, specialist access and classroom supports
- Policy change and implementation demands without adequate resources
- Occupational normalization of distress
- Teachers and school leaders viewing stress as an inherent and unavoidable feature of teaching
- Increasing prevalence of burnout symptoms across experience levels
- System-level patterns indicating widespread distress across the profession

Descriptive Theme C: Work Intensification and Moral Distress Are Key Pathways to Attrition

Summary

Work intensification and moral distress function as central mechanisms driving teachers' and school leaders' decisions to leave the profession. Attrition is not driven primarily by loss of professional commitment; rather, it is the result of structural barriers that prevent teachers and school leaders from meeting professional and ethical expectations.

Moral distress arises when teachers and school leaders are unable to provide the level of care, instruction or support they believe students require. This creates an ethical dissonance between professional values and institutional conditions. Over time, this dissonance contributes to emotional exhaustion, professional disengagement and career reconsideration.

Attrition emerges as a gradual and cumulative process shaped by repeated exposure to unsustainable working conditions rather than being triggered by discrete events.

Observable Indicators

- Intentions to leave the profession
- Increased number of teachers reporting that they plan to leave teaching within five years
- Higher attrition intentions among early- and mid-career teachers and school leaders
- Declining job satisfaction
- Moral distress and ethical strain
- Teachers and school leaders reporting their inability to meet students' needs because of systemic constraints
- Feelings of helplessness, frustration and ethical conflict
- Perception of compromised instructional quality due to structural limitations
- Work intensification
- Expansion of professional responsibilities without increased time or support
- Increased behaviour-management demands
- Growing administrative and compliance workload
- Professional sustainability concerns
- Perceptions that teaching is becoming less sustainable as a long-term career
- Increasing emotional withdrawal and psychological disengagement
- Career reconsideration linked to working conditions rather than professional identity

Descriptive Theme D: Classroom Complexity, Conflict and Relational Strain Are Daily Pressure Points

Summary

Increasing classroom complexity, behaviour-management demands and relational conflict are the most immediate and visible manifestations of structural strain in Alberta schools. Teachers and school leaders operate on an increasingly complex relational front line where student needs, behavioural challenges and social tensions intersect.

Classrooms include higher proportions of students with diverse learning needs, behavioural challenges, language needs and socioemotional vulnerabilities. This increases instructional complexity while simultaneously increasing relational and behaviour-management demands.

Relational conflict—including student aggression, parent conflict and broader societal polarization—has increased, further intensifying the emotional and relational demands placed on teachers and school leaders.

This theme acknowledges the classroom as the primary site where structural pressures are experienced most directly.

Observable Indicators

- Increasing classroom complexity
- Higher proportions of students with special education needs
- Increased socioemotional and behavioural needs among students
- Increased linguistic and cultural diversity
- Behavioural and relational demands
- Increased time spent managing student behaviour
- Increased reports of student aggression, intimidation and conflict
- Increased parent conflict and confrontational interactions
- Reduced instructional capacity
- Reduced instructional time due to behaviour-management demands
- Increased emotional regulation demands

- Difficulty meeting diverse student needs with existing resources
- Relational strain and emotional load
- Increased emotional fatigue related to conflict management
- Increased relational mediation between students, families and systems
- Increased emotional labour required to maintain classroom stability

Descriptive Theme E: Policy Churn Adds Load

Summary

Frequent and rapid policy changes—including curriculum reforms, assessment mandates and the evolution of the use of technology—function as significant drivers of workload intensification and professional strain.

Policy changes often occur without adequate time, consultation or implementation supports, requiring teachers and school leaders to absorb additional responsibilities.

Policy churn contributes to change fatigue, professional destabilization and increased workload. Teachers and school leaders must continuously adapt their instructional practices, assessment strategies and administrative processes while maintaining their existing responsibilities.

Policy instability also contributes to declining professional voice and professional autonomy, reinforcing perceptions of reduced professional agency.

Observable Indicators

- Increased implementation workload
- Additional time required for curriculum implementation and adaptation
- Increased administrative and reporting requirements related to assessment mandates
- Increased professional learning demands without corresponding time allocation
- Change fatigue and professional destabilization
- Teachers and school leaders reporting exhaustion associated with continuous policy change

- Perception of insufficient time to adapt to new initiatives
- Reduced sense of professional stability and predictability
- Reduced professional agency
- Perception of limited teacher input into policy decisions
- Reduced professional autonomy in instructional decision-making
- Increased compliance-driven work requirements
- Technological and assessment demands
- Increased workload associated with standardized assessments
- Increased cognitive and emotional demands associated with technological integration
- Increased workload associated with navigating AI and digital tools

Appendix D: Development of Analytical Themes (Stage 3)

Analytical Theme 1: Structural Conditions Are Producing Systemic Professional Strain

This theme integrates the following:

- Work intensification
- Emotional labour
- Moral distress
- Attrition risk

Interpretation

Professional strain is not the result of individual weakness but, rather, the predictable outcome of systemic structural conditions. Increasing workload, complexity and emotional demands are overwhelming Alberta teachers' and school leaders' capacity to sustain their professional roles.

Attrition emerges as a systemic outcome rather than an individual decision.

Analytical Theme 2: The Professional Contract Between Educators and the System Is Fracturing

This theme integrates the following:

- Loss of agency
- Policy misalignment
- Declining trust
- Professional devaluation

Interpretation

Alberta teachers and school leaders are experiencing a widening gap between professional responsibility and professional authority. While they remain responsible for student outcomes, they report diminishing influence over the conditions necessary for fulfilling that responsibility.

This represents a weakening of the professional contract between educators and the system.

Analytical Theme 3: Relational Professional Identity Functions as the Primary Protective and Stabilizing Force

This theme integrates the following:

- Professional identity rooted in care
- Collegial belonging
- Hope and resilience
- Commitment to students

Interpretation

Relational professional identity remains the strongest stabilizing force in the teaching profession. Commitment to students, collegial solidarity and moral purpose sustain teachers and school leaders even as structural pressures intensify.

This relational foundation explains both the continued commitment and the emotional vulnerability of teachers and school leaders in Alberta.

Appendix E: Final Integrated Thematic Structure

Stage 1: Line-by-Line Codes

47+ inductive codes

Stage 2: Descriptive Themes

- Care work is core work.
- Distress becomes structural.
- Work intensification and moral distress are key pathways to attrition.
- Classroom complexity, conflict and relational strain are daily pressure points.
- Policy churn adds load.

Stage 3: Analytical Themes

- Structural conditions are producing systemic professional strain.
- The professional contract between educators and the system is fracturing.
- Relational professional identity functions as the primary protective and stabilizing force.

Notes

1. Association research is available at <https://teachers.ab.ca/professional-development/education-research>.
2. For the purposes of this report, all numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number.
3. The TALIS 2024 tables cited throughout this report are available at www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/10/results-from-talis-2024_28fbd1d/full-report/list-of-tables-available-online_d5b208db.html.
4. “Net Migration,” Government of Alberta, accessed January 11, 2025, <https://economicdashboard.alberta.ca/dashboard/net-migration/>.
5. “Student Population Statistics,” Government of Alberta, archived January 9, 2025, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250109182723/www.alberta.ca/student-population-statistics>.
6. For more on HEARTcare, see <https://heartcareeducators.ca>.

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