

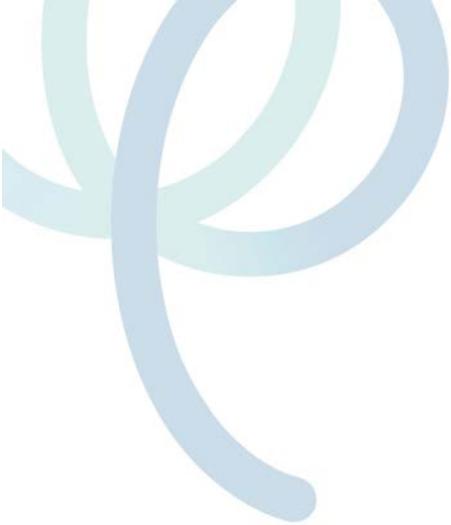


RESEARCH REPORT | JUNE 2024

Addressing Classroom Complexity at the System Level: Environmental Scan and Review of Literature

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1. Introduction

This research was made possible through Alberta Education conditional grant funding to provide current, relevant, and research-based information that supports system education leaders in their work to address the complexity of the classroom. The environmental scan provides macro-level information from across Canada about provincial approaches to addressing classroom complexity. This information and the related resources set Alberta within the national context and provide considerations for Alberta’s system education leaders as they tackle the issues related to increasing complexity in classrooms. The review of literature will further support system education leaders in leading inclusive education systems and implementing continuums of supports and services to meet the needs of all learners.

1.1. Connection to CASS Act

“The College of Alberta School Superintendents is a legislatively empowered professional body that builds the capacity of system education leaders to ensure optimal learning for all students in the public K – 12 education system” (College of Alberta School Superintendents, 2024b). This research report supports CASS with its purpose and mandate as a legislated professional organization. The CASS Act, Section 5 (College of Alberta School Superintendents Act, 2021) outlines the specific objective associated with this work:

(b) to improve the teaching profession and leadership of the education system by

(ii) carrying out research and publishing materials designed to maintain and improve the competence of members.

2. Environmental Scan

The term classroom complexity has been increasingly used to describe the complex and diverse needs that exist in classrooms, with recent teacher job action and contract negotiations occurring across several Canadian provinces. In order to position Alberta within the national context, this environmental scan highlights provincial approaches to addressing classroom complexity across Canada. This section presents an overview of information gathered from reviews of the provincial collective agreements, ministry documents, funding guidelines, and teachers’ association materials across Canadian provinces. All references to collective agreements, ministry resources, funding guidelines, etc., are current as of the time of writing this report in June 2024.

2.1. Canadian Provinces

British Columbia

The landscape of inclusive education has shifted in British Columbia over the past 10-15 years, with shifts in policy, curriculum, services, processes and structures (BCTF, 2020). The B.C. Ministry of Education and Child Care (2023a) has a vision to “provide inclusive and responsive learning environments that recognize the value of diversity and provide equity of access, opportunity and outcome for all students including students with disabilities and diverse abilities.” They offer a plethora of support for inclusive education, including ministerial orders, policies, programs and guidelines, templates, and supportive resources for leaders and teachers in the education system to effectively implement inclusive education (B.C. Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2023a). Funding to address supports for students with special needs is provided to school boards as part of the basic allocation. Additional Special Needs funds are allocated beyond the basic allocation and based on students meeting the special needs criteria outlined by the ministry (B.C. Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2023b).

Teachers throughout British Columbia still “broadly share the view that inclusive education in B.C. is in a state of crisis ...[with] the complexity of student needs [having] increased at the same time as supports to meaningfully address these needs have decreased” (BCTF, 2020). As a result, current language in the Provincial Collective Agreement between the B.C. Public School Employers’ Association (BCPSEA) and the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCPSEA & BCTF, 2022) addresses working conditions, including class size limits of 20 students in kindergarten and 22 students in grades 1-3 (p. 28). The provincial [Letter of Understanding No. 12](#) includes staffing ratios for counsellors, learning assistance teachers, special education resource teachers, and English as a second language teachers. In addition, about a third of local collective agreements throughout British Columbia include language about class composition and inclusion (BCTF, 2020).

Saskatchewan

The Ministry of Education in the province of Saskatchewan defines inclusive education as “providing equitable treatment and appropriate, high quality education to all students [that] encompasses a blend of philosophical beliefs, practices and processes to create flexible support systems and learning environments based on students’ strengths, abilities, interests and needs” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 4). They provide a variety of resources, tools, policies, procedures, and templates to support the

implementations of inclusive education throughout their provincial education system (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.). Supports for Learning funding is allocated to school boards to support staffing and other costs associated with supporting all students in an inclusive environment (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 20).

At the time of writing this literature review, Saskatchewan teachers were involved in job action. One of their primary issues for negotiation was classroom complexity. According to the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (Hiltz, 2024), "teachers have seen ineffective committees to address classroom size and complexity and are looking for more concrete solutions to these critical problems." Though the previous collective agreement in Saskatchewan also did not include language related to classroom complexity, this was a critical point for any new agreements that might be reached.

As of May 23, 2024, "details of the tentative Provincial Collective Bargaining Agreement between the Teachers' Bargaining Committee and Government-Trustee Bargaining Committee" (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2024a) were made available. The tentative agreement included stipulations directly related to addressing classroom complexity such as the implementation of an accountability framework, the allocation of additional funds, the creations of a Minister's Task Force to review the issue and provide recommendations, and the establishment of a policy table on violence-free classrooms (Classroom Complexity Section). As of May 30, 2024, Saskatchewan teachers voted against this tentative agreement, sending parties back to the negotiating table (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2024b).

Manitoba

The Manitoba Department of Education and Early Learning (n.d.a) defines inclusion as "a way of thinking and acting that allows every individual to feel accepted, valued, and safe." They offer a variety of resources, tools, templates, and policies to support the implementation of inclusive education systems throughout the province. Funds allocated to school divisions through the Student Services and Special Needs grants support staffing and resources for students with specialized needs (Manitoba Department of Education and Early Learning, n.d.b, pp. 5 & 11).

The Manitoba Teachers' Society (2023) advocates for school districts to consider class composition when determining class size. They define class composition as "the diversity of student abilities including behavioural needs, mental or physical disabilities, giftedness, and English as an additional language."

Ontario

“Ontario’s education system, at all levels, must respect diversity, promote inclusive education, and work towards identifying and eliminating barriers to equal treatment in education that limit the ability of students to learn, grow, and contribute to society” (Government of Ontario, n.d.). The Ministry of Education offers a variety of resources, policies, tools, and strategies for teachers and school leaders to implement inclusive education systems.

The Memorandum of Settlement between the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario and the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association (2023) includes the Support for Students Fund, which provides funds to English-language public school boards to support the creation of “teacher positions to address supports for student self-regulation, behaviour, and/or other social-emotional needs, special education supports, English Language Learner supports, Indigenous student supports, as well as mental health and well-being initiatives” (p. 3). Letter of Agreement 8 requires school boards to “consider a number of factors when making class lists, including workload related to students with Individual Education Plans” (p. 27). Letter of Agreement 9 asks that the recommendations from the Support for Students Committee be widely shared and that an additional committee be organized to compile best practices (p. 28). Finally, Letter of Agreement 12 addresses issues related to violence prevention within the classroom (p. 31).

The newly revised core education funding in Ontario includes a special education fund to support “positive outcomes for students with special education needs” (Davis & Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024, p. 3).

Quebec

The provincial collective agreement between the Management Negotiating Committee for English-language School Boards (CPNCA) and the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT) includes provisions concerning students with special needs as well as formulas for calculating the maximum and average number of students in a group with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning difficulties (CPNCA & QPAT, 2022). Funding is provided to support the composition of classes and the addition of teachers and specialized services to support students with needs (p. 295).

New Brunswick

The Government of New Brunswick’s (2013) Department of Education and Early Childhood Development defines inclusive education as:

The pairing of philosophy and pedagogical practices that allows each student to feel respected, confident and safe so he or she can participate

with peers in the common learning environment and learn and develop to his or her full potential. It is based on a system of values and beliefs centered on the best interest of the student, which promotes social cohesion, belonging, active participation in learning, a complete school experience, and positive interactions with peers and others in the school community. (p. 2)

This department offers supports for inclusion including personnel, resources, programming, and policies. The teachers’ collective agreement in New Brunswick includes class size maximums differentiated by grade level as well as consideration for the inclusion of students with special needs (Finance and Treasury Board & New Brunswick Teachers’ Federation, 2023, p. 11).

Prince Edward Island

In Prince Edward Island, the Memorandum of Agreement between the Education Negotiating Agency and the Prince Edward Island Teachers’ Federation (2019) includes a class composition letter of understanding that requires the province to set up a committee and dedicate funding to address teacher and student issues related to class composition. The Education Act in PEI requires education authorities to provide a “welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and a sense of belonging” (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2024a, p. 16) as well as a “continuum of specialized supports and services to students that is consistent with the principles of inclusive education” (p. 16).

The Department of Education and Early Years provides funding for special education needs and specialized services for students with autism or those who are blind and visually impaired. In addition, student well-being teams are in place to support students throughout the island’s schools (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2024b).

Nova Scotia

The provincial collective agreement in Nova Scotia contains a section about class climate, including a process for teachers to file a report if they feel their classroom climate is not conducive to allowing them to carry out their duties as a teacher (Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development and Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union, 2020, pp. 68-69). The government’s Inclusive Education Policy (2020) is a robust document outlining their “commitment to ensuring a high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student” (p. 1). The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development provides a variety of resources, tools, policies, directive, and support strategies for ensuring that inclusion is implemented throughout their schools.

Newfoundland and Labrador

The Department of Education in Newfoundland and Labrador recognizes that inclusive education is a philosophy and they outline several criteria related to this philosophy, including “the right of all students to attend school with the peers, and to receive appropriate and quality programming; a continuum of supports and services in the most appropriate setting respecting the diversity of the child” (Government of Nova Scotia, n.d.)

Clause 29.07 of the provincial collective agreement requires school boards to implement policies and procedures for dealing with incidents of violent and abusive behaviour from students or parents (His Majesty the King in Right of Newfoundland and Labrador et al., 2024, p. 24). This agreement also includes a general statement about class sizes, but does not specify limits.

Summary

Overall, the provinces are addressing classroom complexity issues with inclusive education policies, procedures, and supports. Professional resources and learning opportunities are prevalent across the provinces, and these are designed to build the professional capacity of teachers and school leaders as they implement inclusive education systems.

Many provincial collective agreements include class size stipulations; and some include language about class composition. Funding structures generally include funds to address issues such as class size and composition, students with specialized needs, and support resources and personnel, etc.

A values-based philosophy of inclusive education that celebrates and respects diversity, honours and acknowledges the needs of every student, and requires schools to be safe and caring places that welcome all students is common across Canadian provinces. It is clear that the most prevalent approach to addressing classroom complexity is to focus on creating and maintaining inclusive education systems where continuums of supports and services are available to support the range of student needs that exists in Canadian classrooms.

2.2. Alberta

Classroom complexity is a current and relevant issue of concern in Alberta’s education system. According to the Alberta Teachers’ Association (2024) survey of teachers and school leaders throughout Alberta, “nine in ten teachers and school leaders (a significant majority) reported that the complexity and diversity of student needs in their classrooms and schools have increased in the 2023/24 school year compared with 2022/23” (p. 6). Teachers

indicated that the greatest levels of complexity they are seeing occur in the areas of social-emotional needs, behavioural needs, and cognitive needs (p. 6). Class sizes are larger and more diverse, and students have a “range of economic backgrounds, varying levels of English-language proficiency and ... special education needs” (p. 7).

When asked to provide recommendations to address the challenges that come from increasing class size and complexity, the teachers and school leaders surveyed recommended these actions: “reduce class sizes, enhance supports and resources, and strengthen teacher support systems” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2024, p. 10). They advocated for human resources to support inclusion and reduce class sizes, as well as professional development resources and opportunities to support teachers (p. 10).

Provincial Policy

Section 33 (1)(e) of the Education Act (Government of Alberta, 2023) requires school boards to “provide a continuum of supports and services that are consistent with the principles of inclusive education” (p.47). Inclusive education, as defined by Alberta Education (2024b), is “a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance and promotes a sense of belonging for all learners.” Alberta Education (2024b) identified six principles as foundational to achieving an inclusive education system:

- Anticipate, value and support diversity and learner differences,
- Have high expectations for all learners,
- Understand learners’ strengths and needs,
- Remove barriers within learning environments,
- Build capacity, and
- Collaborate for success.

Competency #4 in the Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2023c) requires teachers to “establish inclusive learning environments” (p. 6) and outlines indicators of such. Both the Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2023a) and the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2023b) reference “inclusive environments in which diversity is respected” (p. 1). System education leaders are therefore compelled by their professional practice standards to support inclusive learning environments throughout their school authorities.

Provincial Funding

The Ministry of Education’s Funding Manual (Alberta Education, 2024a) lists several grants designed to support students’ needs, including:

- The Specialized Learning Support (SLS) Grant “to provide a continuum of supports and services to children/students in an inclusive learning environment” (p. 49). This grant includes allocations for multi-disciplinary support, jurisdiction composition and student wellness programming (pp. 49-50).
- The English as an Additional Language (EAL) Grant is “provided to school jurisdictions for children/students who require and receive additional support in the English language” (p. 51).
- The Refugee Student Grant is allocated “to provide additional language, social and emotional supports to refugee students” (p. 53).
- The Program Unit Funding (PUF) Grant is provided to support “children with a severe disability or severe language delay” (p. 54) who are enrolled in ECS programs.

These grants go beyond the base instructional grant allocated to school authorities on a per-student basis, and their allocated amounts are adjusted annually dependent on the overall provincial budget picture. The education budget in Alberta has increased over the past several years from about \$7,956 million in the 2020-2021 school year to about \$9,252 million in the 2024-2025 school year (Alberta Government, n.d.).

Classroom Complexity Grant

In 2022, the Ministry of Education in Alberta introduced the Classroom Complexity Grant to extend the funding provided to school authorities. This grant is intended to “address classroom complexity by adding more classroom support staff ...by providing more training opportunities for staff and/or by hiring specialists such as counsellors, psychologists, interpreters and more teachers” (Alberta Education, 2024a, p. 62). Expenditures within this grant are divided between “front-line support ...(at least 80 percent) and training (20 per cent)” (p. 62).

In a [survey](#) of superintendents (or designates) conducted by the College of Alberta School Superintendents (2023) in June and July 2023, respondents indicated they would be spending their Classroom Complexity grant for the 2023-2024 school year on additional FTE and hours for educational assistants, additional specialist positions, training for staff, and additional teacher FTE (p. 23). Recommendations to address classroom complexity offered in this same CASS report included growing professional capacity, ensuring equitable access

to supports for complex students, enhancing mental health programs and supports, and supporting continued collaboration (pp. 29-30).

3. Review of Literature

This review provides an overview of the literature related to leadership for inclusive education systems as well as building professional capacity throughout the system with a focus on the Alberta context. Additional relevant literature has been reviewed in the CASS (2023) report [*Classroom Complexity Grant: Supporting and Strengthening the Strategic Purpose*](#).

3.1. Leadership for Inclusive Education Systems

Schools and classrooms are becoming increasingly complex and diverse and, as a result, “inclusion is increasingly seen as a key challenge for educational leaders” (Kugelmass, 2003, p. 4). Given the challenges with leading an inclusive education system, focusing on building the capacity of system education leaders will pay dividends as “research literature suggests that effective leadership practices seem to be the single most important factor that can make a positive difference in all that happens in schools and especially in inclusive schools” (Lingam et al., 2015, p. 7). Transforming schools to become inclusive and responsive to the needs of all learners “requires considerable courage and flexibility on the part of the school leaders” (Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

School and system education leaders who are responsible for leading inclusive education systems should consider “a holistic approach known as *being-knowing-doing*” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 8). Such an approach “moves inclusive values and beliefs into action by supporting change at the three levels of belief, intellect and behaviour” (p. 8). Applying the *being-knowing-doing* approach to one’s own position and school authority context will set system education leaders up to be able to effectively implement and lead truly inclusive education systems.

3.1.1. Being

In Alberta, system education leaders are required to adhere to Alberta Education’s vision for inclusion and ensure that the principles of inclusive education outlined in that vision “guide and inform value-based and learner-centred decisions related to policies, practices and actions at every level” (Alberta Education, 2024b). Within their school authority, system education leaders must espouse a clear vision of an inclusive education system that “consider[s] all students when designing and implementing initiatives”

(Barrett, 2016, p. 24). Both the Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2023a) and the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2023b) include foundational statements that “the success of all members of the school community requires inclusive environments in which diversity is respected and members of the school community are welcomed, cared for, respected, and safe” (p. 1). System education leaders must therefore value and believe in the philosophy of inclusion and lead in such a way that supports and enhances inclusive education throughout their schools.

“*Being* underlies how our personal character, identity and beliefs are authentically immersed in our day-to-day interactions” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 9). In order to effectively lead an inclusive education system, system education leaders must “come to firmly believe that all students have the potential to learn and thrive and commit to grounding all decisions in that belief” (Portilla et al., 2021, p.3). They recognize that “inclusion is not just something you do, but also a feeling that is created; a feeling where everyone belongs, feels supported and believes they contribute to the community in a meaningful way” (McConnel & Andrews, 2016, p. 17). To achieve truly inclusive education systems, leaders may need to examine their own beliefs and assumptions about students and students’ learning (Portilla et al., 2021, p. 4). This examination should involve vulnerable and honest reflective practice on the part of system education leaders as they unpack their own values and beliefs about inclusion and consider how these impact their decisions and actions.

When the philosophy of inclusion is challenged within an education system, it is often due to a conflict of values and beliefs. “Beliefs and attitudes about inclusion are highly varied within the education community and consequently highly influential as to whether or not inclusion is successful in classrooms and schools” (Wilkins & Nietfield, 2004, as cited in McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013, pp. 201-202). Donohoo et al. (2018) emphasize that collective teacher efficacy, with an effect size of 1.57, is the top factor that influences student achievement. They go on to explain that, “[w]hen educators share a sense of collective efficacy, school cultures tend to be characterized by beliefs that reflect high expectations for student success” (Cultural beliefs section, para 1). The impact of the belief systems of the adults and leaders within the education system is undeniable as beliefs and values drive behaviour and actions.

System education leaders must “recognize *being* as foundational to a strong continuum of supports and services, and ensure it permeates the entire educational organization and system” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 10). Realizing the vision of an inclusive education system “requires a shared set of

assumptions and beliefs amongst policy-makers and senior staff at the national, district and school level that value differences, believe in collaboration, and are committed to offering educational opportunities to all students” (Ainscow, 2020, p. 13). The concept of being inclusive should permeate all aspects of system education leaders’ practice in order to “create the conditions where each learner belongs and has the opportunity to experience the richness diversity brings” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 10).

3.1.2. Knowing and Doing

Grounded in a strong philosophy of inclusive education and a personal moral imperative around *being* inclusive, system education leaders are then compelled to implement and maintain inclusive education systems. This involves the development and implementation of robust continuums of supports and services within their school authorities, which “requires professional expertise and knowledge about inclusive education” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 11). System education leaders have unique backgrounds and experiences and may have varied understandings of the practice of inclusive education and the implementation of a continuum of supports and services. This may require further reflective practice on the part of system education leaders as they identify potential gaps in their own knowledge and understanding of inclusive practices and seek to enhance their skills.

Reflecting on the changing landscape of educational leadership, Fullan (2020) suggested “that new leadership must be conceived in terms of four components: experts in context, joint determination of solutions, a culture of accountability, and becoming system players” (p. 142). For system education leaders to be experts in the context of an inclusive education system, they should be familiar with evidence-based inclusive practices, including “using accommodations and modifications to support student learning; adapting the general education curriculum; providing appropriate supports that are individualized to student needs; utilizing collaborative teaming practices; effective building leadership; and, strong family involvement” (Ottley et al., 2023). Clearly the requirements to be an effective leader in an inclusive system are “many and diverse” (Turner-Cmuchal & Óskarsdóttir, 2020, p. 7), and system education leaders must be able to recognize when they need support and further professional learning and growth.

Howley and Telfer (2020) offered “four key domains of an inclusive instructional leadership framework [which are] (a) prioritizing the improvement of teaching and learning; (b) building capacity through support and accountability; (c) sustaining an open and collaborative culture; and (d) promoting systemwide learning”. Alberta Education (2022) emphasized that

In an inclusive environment, leaders ensure approaches such as Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, formative assessment and positive behaviour supports are strongly embedded universally in each classroom. As there is not a separate pedagogy for inclusion, effective universal instructional approaches also benefit learners who require more targeted or individualized supports. (p. 16)

Effective instructional leadership within an inclusive education system must therefore prioritize effective and high-quality instruction that accounts for the students' needs and complexities within each classroom. Leaders must be equipped to support teachers with planning, differentiated instruction, and assessment practices to meet those varied student needs.

As “the expertise required to successfully lead [an inclusive] school can hardly be found within one person” (Turner-Cmuchal & Óskarsdóttir, 2020, p. 7), leaders must be willing and open to collaboration and distributed leadership. Lunde (2020) emphasized that, “given the effectiveness of collaboration between educators, administrators must know that properly supporting children with exceptionalities involves a team” (p. 54). The range of complexities in today's classrooms requires expertise in such a wide variety of areas that system education leaders must capitalize on the knowledge that exists within their teams, organizations, and communities lest students' needs go unmet.

Implementing robust continuums of supports and services is a foundational systematic strategy to address the complexity of student needs across a school authority. A continuum of supports that is “an intentionally-designed set of actions, strategies, supports and services designed to maximize the academic success, well-being and sense of belonging of each learner” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 11) will support universal, targeted, and individualized approaches to instruction and intervention and will therefore be “flexible and responsive to learner needs” (p. 11). Continuums of supports should be unique to each school authority, and system education leaders should regularly revisit and reflect upon the effectiveness of their continuums, making adjustments as required. System education “leaders should be able to analyse their own contexts, identify local barriers and facilitators, plan an appropriate development process and provide leadership for inclusive practices and effective strategies for equity in education” (UNESCO, 2017, as cited in Cerna et al., 2021, p. 37).

Supporting the complexity that exists in today's classrooms requires skilled leadership at every level of the education system. System education leaders, in particular, must model a philosophy of *being* inclusive and demonstrate the knowledge and skills required to effectively lead an inclusive

education system and implement a continuum of supports and services in order to ensure “optimum learning for all students” (Alberta Education, 2023b, p. 2).

4. Conclusion

Addressing classroom complexity has no single or easy solution. Canadian provinces are using a variety of approaches to address this issue, from policy and collective agreement statements to resources, personnel, and professional learning. In Alberta, a variety of funds exist within the education funding model to support student diversity. Resources and policies to support leaders in addressing complexity within their school authority abound. System education leaders are therefore called to rise to the challenge of leading truly inclusive education systems. The “holistic approach known as *being-knowing-doing*” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 8) provides a framework for every aspect of leadership within an inclusive education system. Building the professional capacity of system education leaders to lead inclusive education systems is a high-leverage strategy that will help leaders address the complexities that exist in classrooms throughout the province of Alberta. This approach requires a commitment from every level of the education system. System education leaders must commit to their own reflective practice and continuous growth as leaders of an inclusive education systems. As Wright (2022) posited, “the path forward requires higher-level educational leaders to provide support capable of building a solid research-based foundation of inclusive education pedagogy, knowledge, and practice for school-based educational leaders to have sufficient skills and understanding to assist teachers” (p. 30). Let us therefore commit to building a truly effective and inclusive education system in Alberta.

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