



CASS

College of
Alberta School
Superintendents



Continuing
Education
Program

LEARNING LAB

*Addressing Classroom Complexity at the
System Level: A Focus on Challenging
Student Behaviours*





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Overview

- Learning Labs are designed to facilitate active learning, collaboration, and practical application of knowledge as it relates to system education leadership.
- Learning Labs are designed to be worked through independently or collaboratively. Learning Lab sessions will be offered at CASS Conferences, but the resources are also designed for use by individuals or teams outside of conference sessions.

Connection to Research

- Learning Labs are used in various educational settings, including schools, universities, professional development programs, and corporate training, to enhance learning outcomes and provide a dynamic and immersive learning experience.
- Each Learning Lab includes relevant research related to the topic of the lab.

Application

- Stories of practice case studies demonstrate the application of concepts within a school authority.
- Practical application and reflective exercises help solidify understanding of the material and allow participants to apply their learnings to their own context.
- Learning Lab topics can be applied to a variety of school authority contexts.

Learning

Lab

Study

- Each Learning Lab allows participants to deepen their understanding of a specific topic and reflect on related case studies from practice.
- Interactive and hands-on elements keep participants actively engaged in their learning process.
- The focus on real-world application aids in developing practical skills that can be directly applied in professional or personal contexts.

Synthesis

- Stories of practice case studies are accompanied by synthesis questions designed to allow participants to synthesize their learning and consider applications to their own context or professional growth as a system education leader.
- When Learning Labs are done in a collaborative setting, the sharing of diverse ideas and experiences can contribute to system education leaders' learning.

Introduction

- The purpose of this Learning Lab is to inform and strengthen excellence in system education leaders' professional practice as it relates to addressing classroom complexity with a focus on challenging student behaviours within their school authority.
- Participants will explore system education leadership strategies to address challenging student behaviours and classroom complexity to foster student success, continuous improvement, and ultimately lead to optimum learning for all students.
- This Learning Lab has been designed to align with the following Professional Practice Standards (Alberta Education, 2023a, 2023b):



Learning Outcomes

Participants in this Learning Lab will accomplish the following:

- learn strategies from stories of practice shared by system education leaders about addressing classroom complexity and challenging student behaviours in their school authorities,
- understand current research about addressing classroom complexity and challenging student behaviours in relation to professional practice, and
- reflect upon and apply Learning Lab content to their local context.

Guiding Questions

- What strategies can system education leaders implement to address classroom complexity and challenging student behaviours at the system level?
- What are the successes and challenges faced by system education leaders in addressing classroom complexity and challenging student behaviours, and how can these be leveraged to achieve optimum learning for all students?

CEP Credits

- For information on credit allocation for the completion of this Learning Lab, please refer to the [Accreditation Requirements](#) document on the CASS CEP website.

Acknowledgements

This Learning Lab was made possible by the generous support and cooperation of system education leaders who shared their insights and experiences about system education leadership and the complex work of addressing challenging student behaviours at the system level. Their willingness to contribute their stories and expertise has been invaluable in developing this learning opportunity.

- Nicola Golby – Associate Superintendent, Student Services, Red Deer Public Schools
- Rhonda Schachterle – Director of Student Services, Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools
- Dr. Rob McGarva – Assistant Superintendent, Student Services, Pembina Hills School Division

Alberta Education provided conditional grant funding that supported the development of this Learning Lab.

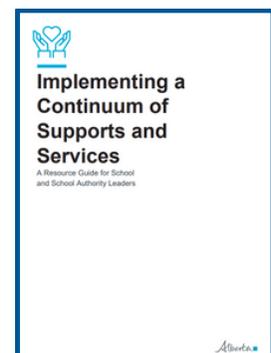


Connection to Research

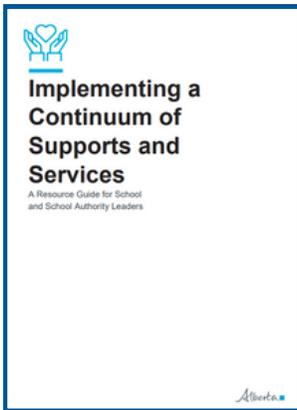
Classroom complexity is a current and relevant topic in education today. Disruptions to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the increasing diversity of needs that teachers across Alberta are seeing in their classrooms. The impetus for system education leaders to address classroom complexity is pressing. System education leaders' understanding of how to lead an inclusive education system and how to provide a continuum of supports and services to address the needs of all learners are key components of any systematic approach to addressing classroom complexity (College of Alberta School Superintendents [CASS], 2024b).

Provincial Policies and Legislation – Inclusive Education

- Section 33(1)(e) of the [Education Act](#) (Education Act, 2012) requires school boards to “provide a continuum of supports and services that are consistent with the principles of inclusive education” (p. 47).
- Alberta Education’s (2024a) [Inclusive Education Policy](#) states: *“School authorities must ensure that all children and students (Kindergarten to Grade 12), regardless of race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation, or any other factor(s), have access to meaningful and relevant learning experiences that include appropriate instructional supports.”*
- Alberta Education (2024a) outlines [six principles](#) that are foundational to the inclusive education system in Alberta:
 - Anticipate, value and support diversity and learner differences
 - High expectations for all learners
 - Understand learners’ strengths and needs
 - Remove barriers within learning environments
 - Build capacity
 - Collaborate for success
- The Alberta Education (2022) resource [Implementing a Continuum of Supports and Services: A Resource Guide for School and School Authority Leaders](#) supports system education leaders in effectively implementing robust continuums of support to meet the needs of all learners within their school authority.



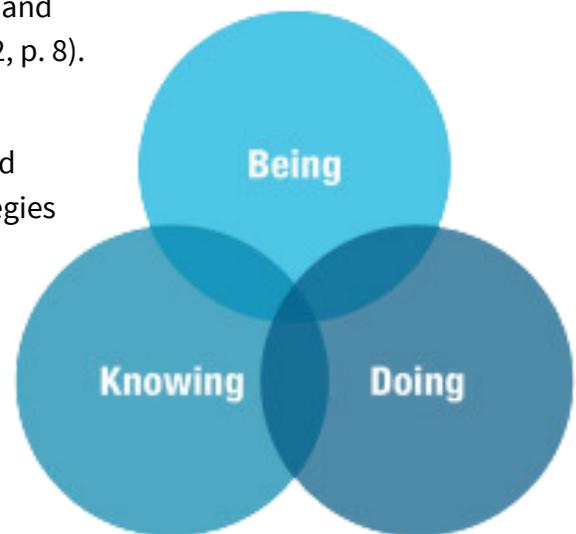
Connection to Research



Implementing a Continuum of Supports and Services: A Resource Guide for School and School Authority Leaders

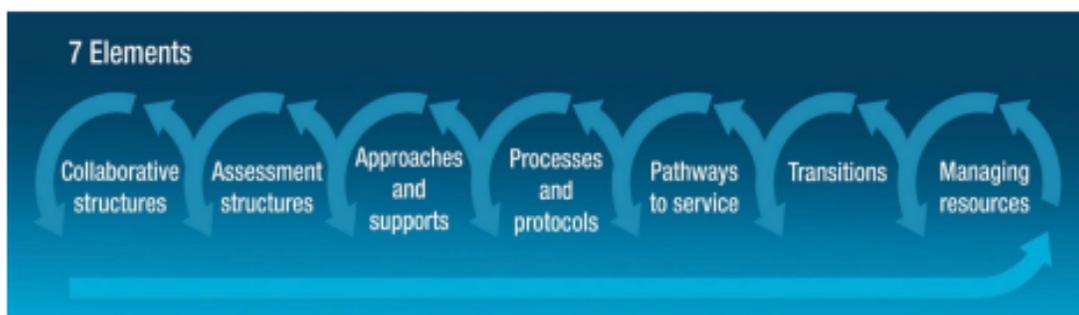
- This Alberta Education (2022) guide is intended to support school leaders and system education leaders with the implementation of continuums of supports and services within their school authorities.
- The resource is grounded in a *being-knowing-doing* approach, which “moves inclusive values and beliefs into action by supporting change at the three levels of belief, intellect and behaviour” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 8).

- The following seven elements of a continuum of supports and services are outlined in detail, including resources and strategies to support the implementation of each element:
 - Collaborative structures
 - Assessment structures
 - Approaches and supports
 - Processes and protocols
 - Pathways to service
 - Transitions
 - Managing resources



(Alberta Education, 2022, p. 8)

- When planning a systematic approach to addressing challenging student behaviours, system education leaders should reflect on the elements within a continuum of supports and services “with an iterative lens ... [to] ensure a flexible and dynamic continuum of supports and services responsive to their learner’s needs” (p. 13).

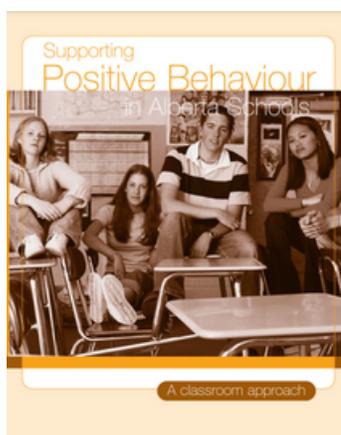


(Alberta Education, 2022, p. 13)

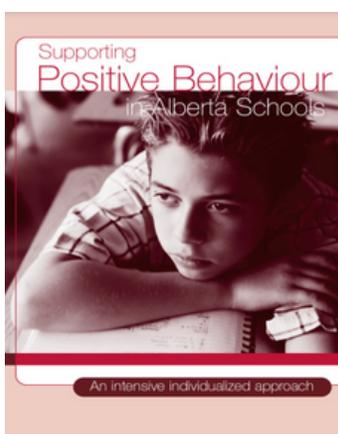
Connection to Research

Provincial Policies and Legislation - Challenging Student Behaviours

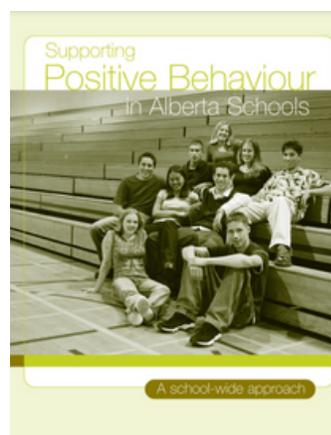
- Alberta Education (2024b) emphasizes a [positive behaviour supports](#) approach to “promote positive social and communication skills, while reducing and preventing problem behaviours.” The positive behaviours supports approach is grounded in these foundational ideas:
 - Proactively changing the learning environment and how adults respond to behaviour can help students be more successful.
 - There is a reason behind most challenging behaviour, such as communication or meeting an unmet need, and it is helpful to identify and understand the root causes in order to provide the most appropriate supports.
 - All learners should be treated with compassion and respect regardless of their behaviour.
 - Positive responses to problem behaviour will be more effective than coercion and punishment. (Alberta Education, 2024b).
- When addressing challenging student behaviour, school authorities are bound to comply with the guidelines and requirements outlined in the following documents:
 - [Standards for Seclusion and Physical Restraint in Alberta Schools](#) (Alberta Education, 2019b)
 - [Guidelines for Time-out in Alberta Schools](#) (Alberta Education, 2019a)
- Both of these guiding documents emphasize a school- and system-wide positive behaviour supports approach, indicating that “schools that have a positive school-wide culture promote positive behaviour in children/students, which can reduce occurrences of challenging behaviours that negatively affect teaching and learning” (Alberta Education, 2019a, 2019b, p. 4).



(Alberta Education, 2008a)

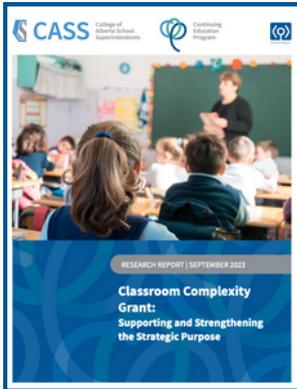


(Alberta Education, 2008b)



(Alberta Education, 2008c)

Connection to Research



Classroom Complexity Grant: Supporting and Strengthening the Strategic Purpose

- This CASS (2023) report includes a review of literature related to addressing classroom complexity. It also includes collated results and recommendations from a survey of superintendents (or designates).
- Across the 56 school authorities represented in the survey responses, increasing needs were noted in the areas of student behaviour, social/emotional skills, mental health, complex physical/medical needs, students with diagnosis and/or code, trauma background, and school readiness (p. 18).
- Student behaviour needs were the second-highest factor impacting classroom complexity as identified by survey respondents (p. 19).
- When asked which systemic strategies were being implemented to address classroom complexity, respondents overwhelmingly listed strategies related to building the professional capacity of their staff in areas including positive behaviour supports, executive functioning, and intervention strategies (p. 21).
- The overall recommendations (pp. 29–30) to address classroom complexity within an inclusive education system in this study include the following:
 - building professional capacity in the areas of inclusive pedagogy, planning for diversity, and leadership for an inclusive education system;
 - providing supports for complex students, which includes students with complex behavioural and social-emotional needs; and
 - enhancing mental health supports in schools and communities.

Connection to Research

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

- This CASS (2024a) report includes an environmental scan that “provides macro-level information from across Canada about provincial approaches to addressing classroom complexity” (p. 4). It also includes a literature review that “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” (p. 4).
- “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” (p. 15).



Reporting on Class Size and Complexity, Aggression, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Alberta's K-12 Schools (Fall 2023)

- In a survey of teachers and school leaders by the Alberta Teachers Association (2024), “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 the student body is 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 recommended these actions: “Reduce class sizes, enhance supports and resources, and strengthen teacher support systems” (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).

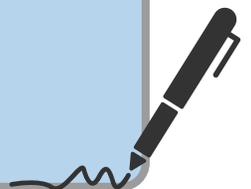
Connection to Research



Use these self-reflective questions to consider the connection between the research and your local context.

Questions to Consider:

- What are your school authority's policies and procedures related to inclusive education?
- What policies and procedures does your school authority have in place to address challenging student behaviours?
- What impact do your policies or procedures about inclusion and challenging student behaviours have on system education leadership practices within your school authority?
- Reflecting on the *being-knowing-doing* approach to inclusive education, what are your strengths and stretches as a system education leader?
- How robust is your school authority's continuum of supports and services?



Story of Practice Case Study

CTR – Context

- Christ The Redeemer Catholic Schools (CTR) is a school division serving approximately 10,000 students in 17 schools operating in the central and southern Alberta communities of Brooks, Canmore, Drumheller, High River, Okotoks, Oyen, and Strathmore. It includes 15 traditional schools, three outreach schools, and a distance education school.



Mission

As an evangelizing school division, in partnership with the family, we will deliver an authentic Catholic learning experience by creating a foundation of faith and knowledge in a warm, caring environment to guide all students to appreciate the goodness of all creation and to meet the challenges of life with hope and confidence.

Vision

The truth of Christ and knowledge of God's creation will be experienced by and manifested in the students, staff, parents, and supporters of our Catholic school community.

School Authority Priorities

Catholic Faith

- CTR will continue to infuse faith in all it does to teach students that every individual is created in the image of God.

Academic Excellence

- CTR schools have high academic results and will continue to seek ways to better improve student learning across all curriculums.

Healthy Schools

- CTR creates healthy schools that focus on intellectual, mental, social, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being for staff and students.

Contextual Trends

- An increase in dysregulated students in general classroom settings
- Educational assistants feeling ill-equipped to address student dysregulation
- Lack of access to resources/services in local communities

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR – Application

ARC Framework and Facilitators

- CTR introduced the Attachment, Regulation, Competency (ARC) Framework and facilitators throughout the school authority to address student dysregulation.
- Targeted and purposeful training coordinated by a centralized team has been provided for staff in the areas of trauma-informed practices, brain science, regulation, executive functioning, attachment, restorative practices, etc.
- Each area of the ARC Framework can be broken down into skills and building blocks:

Attachment

- Caregiver affect management
- Attunement
- Effective response

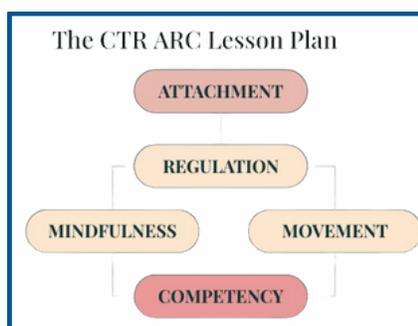
Regulation

- Identification
- Modulation

Competency

- Relational connection
- Executive functions
- Self-development and identity

- The primary goal was to establish a foundational understanding and cultivate compassion among individuals who may not have extensive knowledge of mental health or regulation.
- The underlying belief was that through education, CTR could foster a mindset of curiosity and compassion, with the idea that students would benefit most from an environment focused on safety.
- Shared resources and lesson plans were developed to ensure a consistent implementation across the school authority.
- The ARC Framework is facilitated by educational assistants, connection workers, and family school liaison workers.

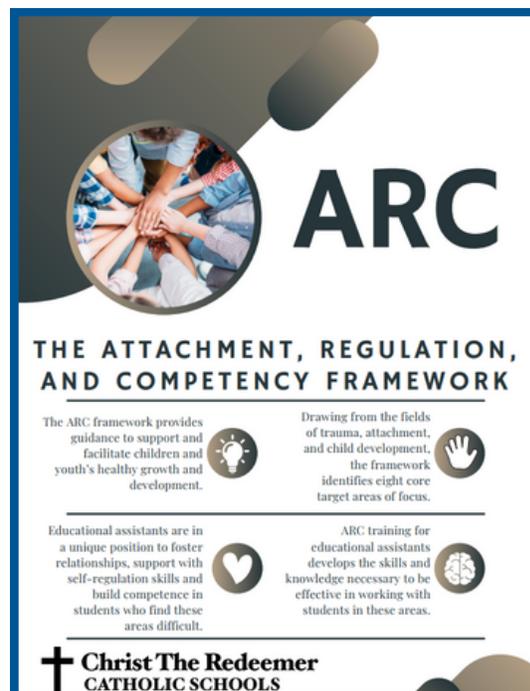


Story of Practice Case Study

CTR – Study



- Through a systematic and consistent implementation of the ARC philosophy and framework, CTR is seeing decreases in discipline issues and shifts in staff mindset and school cultures.
- Interventions and supports for students are having positive impacts on students' ability to remain in class and self-regulate. Students are more readily available for learning.
- Staff capacity and knowledge about regulation and attachment is increasing.
- This story of practice case study highlights a plethora of strategies and resources that can support school authorities who also want to address student dysregulation. It also highlights the importance of a clear vision, systematic implementation, and support from system education leaders.



(Christ The Redeemer Catholic School Division, 2021)



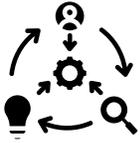
(Christ The Redeemer Catholic School Division, 2023)

Additional Resources

- Baudry, D. (2021). *Should I or shouldn't I? What would others think?* (Revised edition for teens). Social Thinking.
- Biegel, G. M. (2016). *Be mindful card deck for teens*. PESI Publishing.
- Blaustein, M. E., & Kinniburgh, K. M. (2019). *Treating traumatic stress in children and adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, self-regulation, and competency*. The Guilford Press.
- Canadian Consortium on Child and Youth Trauma. (2024). [Homepage]. <https://www.traumaconsortium.com/en/>
- Harper, J. C. (2016). *Yoga and mindfulness practices for children card deck*. PESI Publishing.
- Kuypers, L. (2023). *Zones of regulation*. Social Thinking. <https://zonesofregulation.com/>

Story of Practice Case Study

CTR – Synthesis



- How are you building the professional capacity of leaders, teachers, and support staff in your school authority so they are equipped to address student dysregulation?
- How are you building the self-regulation and self-management skills of your students?
- How can you shift the resources you have within your school authority to support student regulation in your classrooms?
- How can you build a shared understanding of regulation and attachment throughout your school authority?



Story of Practice Case Study

RDPS – Context



- Red Deer Public Schools (RDPS) serves over 11,000 students in 23 schools within the city of Red Deer.

MISSION

Striving for excellence by inspiring learning and nurturing hope in every student.

VISION

A culture of respect, inclusion, caring and excellence, where every student succeeds.

- The division’s highest priority is the success of every child in school.
- In relation to supporting students, RDPS outlines the following priority area:
“To continue meeting the needs of students, we will endeavour to provide timely intervention and differentiated supports. To address the diverse needs across the Division, supports and funding will be provided to targeted schools. Further, the Division will build on the success of the Learning Support Teams to continue to build the capacity of staff to meet the needs of diverse learners.”

Contextual Trends and Emerging Needs

- Number of students with severe codes nearly doubled from 2017-2018 to 2023-2024
- Need to build capacity in staff to respond to student dysregulation and an increase in mental health symptoms
- Need for supports in each school to carry out the work of the central team
- Need for a shift in mindset from being frustrated with challenging student behaviours to a recognition of the need for regulation

Story of Practice Case Study

RDPS – Application

Behaviour Support Team

- A centralized Behaviour Support Team was created that includes
 - a certificated teacher with expertise in addressing complex student behaviours
 - a psychiatric nurse
 - a master's-level social worker
- The team was deployed throughout the school authority to support school teams by
 - providing strategies
 - co-planning
 - responding to crisis situations
 - connecting students and families to community mental health and other specialized supports



- [Red Deer Public Schools rolls out Student Support Rooms for second year](#)
- [Student Support Rooms making positive difference, says Red Deer Public Schools](#)

Student Support Rooms

- Student Support Rooms were created in all of the grades K-8 schools throughout RDPS.
- These rooms are staffed with a certificated teacher who receives training and support from the Behaviour Support Team. This training is grounded in the Neurosequential Model of Education work of Dr. Bruce Perry.
- Student Support Rooms provide a place for students to
 - regulate
 - take a break
 - connect with a caring adult
 - release big emotions in a safe space
- The goals for the Student Support Rooms are to
 - increase students' ability to learn by giving them the skills to regulate their bodies
 - provide opportunities for connection and relationship-building
 - build staff capacity to respond to challenging student behaviours

Story of Practice Case Study

RDPS – Study

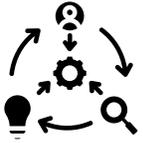


- As a result of the implementation of the centralized Behaviour Support Team and Student Support Rooms, RDPS is seeing the following trends emerge:
 - Student attendance has improved.
 - Students are learning to regulate their emotions and have a safe and appropriate space to go when they need more regulation than can be provided in their classroom.
 - Teachers have a clear pathway to access support.
 - The Behaviour Support Team is building capacity with teachers to support mental health and regulation.
 - Student Support Room teachers are also building capacity with students and staff.
 - School staff report a sense of calm in their schools.
 - Mindsets are shifting from frustration with challenging student behaviours to an understanding of the need for regulation.
- This story of practice case study highlights the importance of a collective vision and approach in response to local data, the allocation of resources in a purposeful way to support this vision, and the commitment of system education leaders to intervening to support students with challenging behaviours and mental health concerns.



Story of Practice Case Study

RDPS – Synthesis



- What resources can staff in your division access when they are struggling to support a student with challenging behaviours? Are there barriers to accessing this support? How might you address these barriers?
- How are you balancing universal, targeted, and specialized strategies to address challenging student behaviours in your school authority?
- The complexity of students is increasing. How are you building capacity in staff in parallel?
- What system education leader practices or behaviours are necessary to address challenging student behaviours and ensure optimum learning for all students?



Story of Practice Case Study

PHSD – Context

- Pembina Hills School Division (PHSD) serves 3,600 students in 16 community schools, including two Hutterite colony schools and two outreach schools.
- PHSD meets the learning needs of 550 full-time and 10,000 part-time school-aged students and adult students from within and beyond the division's borders through the online Vista Virtual School.



We will ensure the delivery of an excellent education to our students so they become ethical and responsible members of society.

Division Priorities

Student-Staff Relationships

Positive relationships between students and staff are the foundation upon which we build students' resilience, confidence and mental well-being.

Literacy and Numeracy

Literacy and Numeracy are critical for Student Achievement in all areas of the curriculum.

Support for Staff

A collaborative environment enables staff to teach a diverse student population through purposeful inclusion and supports the implementation of effective practices.

Contextual Trends and Emerging Needs

- Multiple forms of data collection related to severe incidents involving student behaviours
- Inconsistent communication about severe student incidents
- A need to be efficient in deploying support and communicating with district-level staff

Story of Practice Case Study

PHSD – Application

Critical Incident Reporting Process

- PHSD implemented a centralized and streamlined structure and process for reporting and responding to critical incidents involving student behaviour or aggression.
- A common reporting tool ensured that the appropriate school and district personnel were being informed.
 - [Pembina Hills Severe Incident Reporting Form](#)
- Automated emails flow upon receipt of the critical incident form and the process requires at least one member of the school team to acknowledge receipt of the report.

Critical Incident Debriefing Process

- PHSD developed and implemented a research-based debriefing process and protocol.
- Training was provided to staff at the school and district level on the debriefing protocol.
- Participant and facilitator guides are used to ensure the protocol is consistently implemented.
 - [Pembina Hills Severe Incident Debriefing Guide](#)
- School teams can ask for district support with initial debriefs and when more severe incidents occur.



SUPPORT

Story of Practice Case Study

PHSD – Study



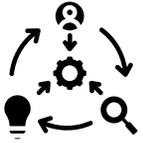
- This story of practice case study emphasizes the importance of effective relationships and instructional leadership and highlights strategies for monitoring and responding to severe student behaviours.
- Reflections about debriefing:
 - People want to problem-solve, but emotion must be dealt with first.
 - It is important to emphasize that the process is voluntary.
 - An important focus is the question, “What could **we** do differently?”
 - It can be challenging to find the time for debriefs in addition to considering the timing of these (not too soon or too late).
- Continued learning and next steps:
 - Make sure the process is happening and being followed.
 - Ensure that Inclusive Education Lead Teachers are included in the debrief when they are involved.
 - Carry-out post-debriefing follow-up.
 - Consider the possibilities for including students in the debriefing process in an appropriate and meaningful way.

Additional Resources

- [Pembina Hills Reference List](#)
 - Contains further references related to challenging student behaviours, critical incident debriefing, and system education leadership
- [Pembina Hills Severe Incident Debriefing Guide](#)
- [Pembina Hills Severe Incident Reporting Form](#)
- [SIVA Training](#)

Story of Practice Case Study

PHSD – Synthesis



- How are staff in your school authority debriefing violent or challenging situations so that they are supported in their own mental health?
- How are you supporting staff with planning forward after these challenging situations?
- What proactive strategies are in place within your school authority to prevent critical incidents involving challenging student behaviour or aggression?
- How effective is the communication between school teams and senior leadership regarding these critical incidents?
- What supports do your senior leadership and central office teams provide to school teams following critical incidents?



Pulling It All Together



Use the following questions to connect your learning to your own context and your role as a system education leader.

Being

- What are your school authority's values and beliefs regarding inclusion and challenging student behaviours?
 - How do these values and beliefs translate into actions within your school authority?
 - How do these values and beliefs align with your own personal values and beliefs?
- How are you demonstrating the value of *being* inclusive in your leadership practice?

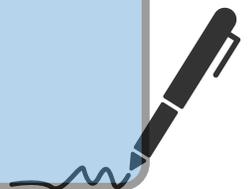
Pulling It All Together



Use the following questions to connect your learning to your own context and your role as a system education leader.

Knowing and Doing

- As a system education leader, how familiar are you with the implementation of a continuum of supports and services within your school authority?
- How does your school authority's continuum of supports and services address challenging student behaviours? How effective is your continuum of supports and services in addressing challenging student behaviours? How do you measure or track this effectiveness?
- What are the current and most pressing challenges related to challenging student behaviour in your school authority? How do you know? How will you address these challenges?
- What are you currently doing in your school authority to build professional capacity to address challenging student behaviours?



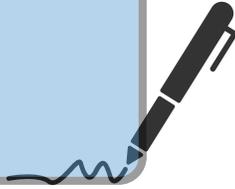
Pulling It All Together



Use the following questions to connect your learning to your own context and your role as a system education leader.

Reflections and Key Takeaways

- What are your most important takeaways from this Learning Lab? How will these takeaways impact your learning and practice?
- What would you share with a colleague about this Learning Lab experience?
- What ideas, strategies, or resources do you want to explore further?
- What are you curious about within your own context related to addressing challenging student behaviours at the system level?
- What is one action you will commit to as a result of participating in this Learning Lab?



Notes



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Notes



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References

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