CASS — College of Alberta School Superintendents

LEARNING GUIDE

Proactive Strategies for Managing Aggressive Student Behaviour: Supporting Alberta System Education Leaders in Building Safe, Caring, and Inclusive Environments

Part 2: Evidence-Based Strategies for De-Escalation and Intervention

November 26, 2025
Featuring Stories of Practice from Medicine Hat Public School Division and Wolf Creek Public Schools

The goal of a CASS Learning Guide is to apply research, deepen understanding, and enhance professional practice within the Alberta context. With a focus on optimum learning for all students, a Learning Guide provides an opportunity to enhance system leader knowledge, resulting in quality school leadership and teaching throughout Alberta.

Summary

The webinar "Evidence-Based Strategies for De-Escalation and Intervention" is the second in a three-part series called *Proactive Strategies for Managing Aggressive Student Behaviour: Supporting Alberta System Education Leaders in Building Safe, Caring, and Inclusive Environments.* Designed specifically for system education leaders, this session focused on applying evidence-based de-escalation and intervention strategies and clarifying the conditions required to support safe, dignified, and inclusive responses to aggressive behaviour in schools.

Cody Edwards, Associate Superintendent, Learning and Student Supports; **Carla Carrier**, Director of Learning and Partnerships; **Rachel Lesko**, ALT Teacher Consultant; and **Jennifer Hay**, ALT Teacher Consultant
Medicine Hat Public School Division (4:56)

Medicine Hat Public School Division (serving approximately 6,800 students across 17 schools) shared its journey in developing a division-level **Alternative Learning Team (ALT)** to respond to increasing complexity in elementary settings while strengthening school-based capacity. Launched in 2017–18 and refined over time, the team was built as a "push-in" support: a trusted partner who steps into classrooms, creates space for reflection, and walks alongside staff as they problem-solve in real time.

Anchored in the division's universal goals (optimal learning environments, impactful instruction and engaged learning cultures, inclusive thinking and action, and a culture of wellness), the model reinforced a core stance: Sustainable change comes from coaching, not rescuing. Working in short cycles (often about 2 weeks), the team established shared goals, gathered observations and data, and used structured feedback and progress monitoring to guide decisions. Support was offered along a continuum of consultation, collaboration, and intensive coaching so that schools could access the right level of support for their context. When the work focused on individual students, parental consent and an ecological lens ensured that planning reflected the full learning environment.

The ALT coaching process began with a programming team meeting to clarify goals, moved into observation and data collection, and then shifted into the modelling and implementation of strategies. This was followed by a deliberate phase-out that transferred ownership to school staff. Predictable frameworks and shared language, drawn from the **Acting Out Cycle** and the **Supporting Individuals Through Valued Attachments (SIVA)** approach, helped teams identify triggers, intervene earlier, and debrief effectively. The work stayed grounded in the belief that "kids do well if they can" (Greene, 2008, p. 11). The process gave special attention to lagging skills, brain development, and the impact of developmental trauma.

Division data illustrated the reach and impact of the model. In one year there were 33 referrals, support for 90 staff, work across 14 schools, and 12 professional learning opportunities. Key lessons emphasized shared responsibility, internal capacity building, flexibility, and stronger alignment between instructional coaching and social-emotional or behavioural supports to increase coherence across the system.

This story of practice reinforces that complex student needs are best addressed through embedded, short-cycle coaching models that build trust quickly, use shared language and data-driven routines, and intentionally transfer ownership back to school teams, while aligning instructional, behavioural, and wellness supports within flexible structures that strengthen staff confidence and sustain improvement.

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Irene Donaldson
Director, Education Services
Wolf Creek Public Schools
(**38:28**)

Wolf Creek Public Schools (serving approximately 7,500 students across 30 schools within a large and mostly rural division) shared its approach to strengthening de-escalation and intervention capacities in contexts where central office leaders cannot be present. Recognizing that distance, response time, and isolation can heighten risk, the division prioritized coherence, preparedness, and shared responsibility across schools.

A cornerstone of this work has been the division-wide implementation of **SIVA** as a common framework for understanding behaviour and responding safely and consistently. Rather than limiting training to staff supporting specific students, Wolf Creek decided to train all school-based staff, including teachers, educational assistants, administrative assistants, bus drivers, social workers, school resource officers, and administrators. This whole-system strategy built consistency across roles and settings, reduced reliance on individual expertise, and eliminated "islands of skill." Over several years, the division invested in internal training capacity, phased in implementation strategically, and embedded refreshers to keep learning current while "Wolf Creekifying" materials for a local context.
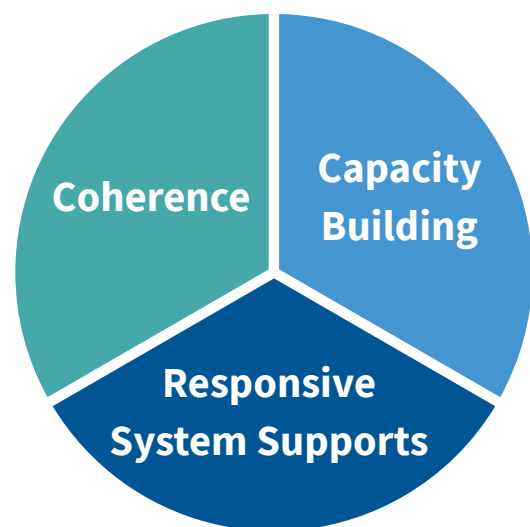
Alongside universal prevention, Wolf Creek developed an **Education Services On-Site** support model for highly complex incidents. When an escalation occurred, central office leaders coordinated a short-term, in-person presence to reduce anxiety, support administrators and staff, and provide real-time coaching. The support remained intentionally structured: Leadership aligned messaging in advance, maintained brief shared documentation to ensure continuity, and clarified roles so school administrators remained the trusted leads with students. Central office staff entered as partners offering guidance, reflection, and visible support rather than taking operational control.

The division also strengthened proactive leadership development through administrator inclusion cohorts and residency models, creating space for skill development, legislative understanding, and reflective problem-solving before crises occurred. These structures deepened relationships and increased administrator confidence in navigating complexity.

This story of practice highlights how system education leaders can strengthen de-escalation and intervention capacity by investing in universal training, shared language, and flexible support structures that extend beyond individual incidents. By aligning preventative frameworks with responsive, on-site coaching, Wolf Creek has built a coherent system that reduces isolation, supports staff well-being, and upholds safety, dignity, and inclusion across geographically dispersed school communities.

Taken together, these stories of practice show that effective de-escalation and intervention depend on **coherence** (shared language, common frameworks, predictable routines), **capacity building** (coaching models that transfer skill and confidence back to schools), and **responsive system supports** (flexible, relationship-based leadership presence when risk is high). For system education leaders, the learning points to the value of investing in structures that prepare all staff to respond safely and consistently, while aligning instructional, behavioural, and wellness supports so that schools experience an integrated system of care.

Research to Practice
Questions for reflection and dialogue within your local context

- How consistent are de-escalation and intervention practices across schools and roles in our system? Where do islands of skill still exist that may limit staff confidence or student safety?

- In what ways do our current supports (e.g., coaching models, professional learning, and specialist services) build lasting capacity within school teams rather than rely on central expertise to step in and take over?

- What structures, relationships, and communication processes are in place to ensure that system leaders can provide timely, aligned, and visible support to schools during and following complex behavioural incidents, particularly in geographically dispersed contexts?

- What proactive structures, partnerships, or processes might enhance our school authority's approach to supporting students with complex behavioural needs?

- In what ways might adopting a lagging skills perspective when supporting students with complex behaviour foster growth among staff and students across your school authority?

- What steps can we take to ensure a consistent understanding of behaviours and universal or targeted supports for all school-based staff in your district?

- What ideas from these stories of practice could be adapted or scaled within our school authority?

Additional Supports for System Education Leader Capacity

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Education Act, Statutes of Alberta, 2025, Chapter E-0.3. https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/1266.cfm?page=E00P3.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779846450

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