

# Maintaining a relevant core curriculum

# 4B

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>99</b>
Maintaining a relevant core curriculum.....	99
<b>Audit objective and criteria</b> .....	<b>101</b>
<b>Audit conclusion and recommendation</b> .....	<b>101</b>
<b>Key findings (by criteria)</b> .....	<b>102</b>
Determine essential learning outcomes for required areas of study .....	102
Determine gaps in capability of education system to achieve essential learning outcomes .....	103
Revitalize the required areas of study to achieve essential learning outcomes .....	105
Manage risks associated .....	106
Clearly communicate expectations .....	107
<b>Detailed audit criteria</b> .....	<b>109</b>
<b>Glossary</b> .....	<b>110</b>
<b>Selected references</b> .....	<b>111</b>

This page left blank intentionally.

## Introduction

In 1998, our Office worked with the Department of Education to identify areas where ineffective action could limit the Department's ability to successfully carry out its mandate. One of these risk areas relates to the ability of the Department to maintain a relevant provincial curriculum that reflects the knowledge and skills that people need.

*The Education Act, 1995* makes the Department responsible for the overall quality of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K to 12) education system in Saskatchewan. The Department, in consultation with its key stakeholders, develops and maintains the provincial curriculum. It then works with teachers, administrators, and locally-elected school boards to deliver the curriculum.

In this part, we report our conclusion, recommendation, and key findings arising from our audit of the Department of Education's processes to maintain the relevance of the required areas of study within the K to 12 core curriculum.

## Maintaining a relevant core curriculum

The public expects the education system to ensure that young people are prepared for the workplace as well as for life-long learning. The public also expects the education system to teach students to become informed citizens who participate in society.

The provincial core curriculum provides guidance on what students are to learn and when they are to learn it. The core curriculum includes various components and initiatives intended to support all students in their achievement of the Goals of Education.

All provincially-funded schools must use the provincial core curriculum whether they are public, separate, francophone, or historical independent schools. Some private schools and some home-based educators also use the provincial core curriculum to guide their educational practice. In addition, many First Nations' band schools use the core curriculum to ensure that students will meet the requirements for graduation in Saskatchewan.

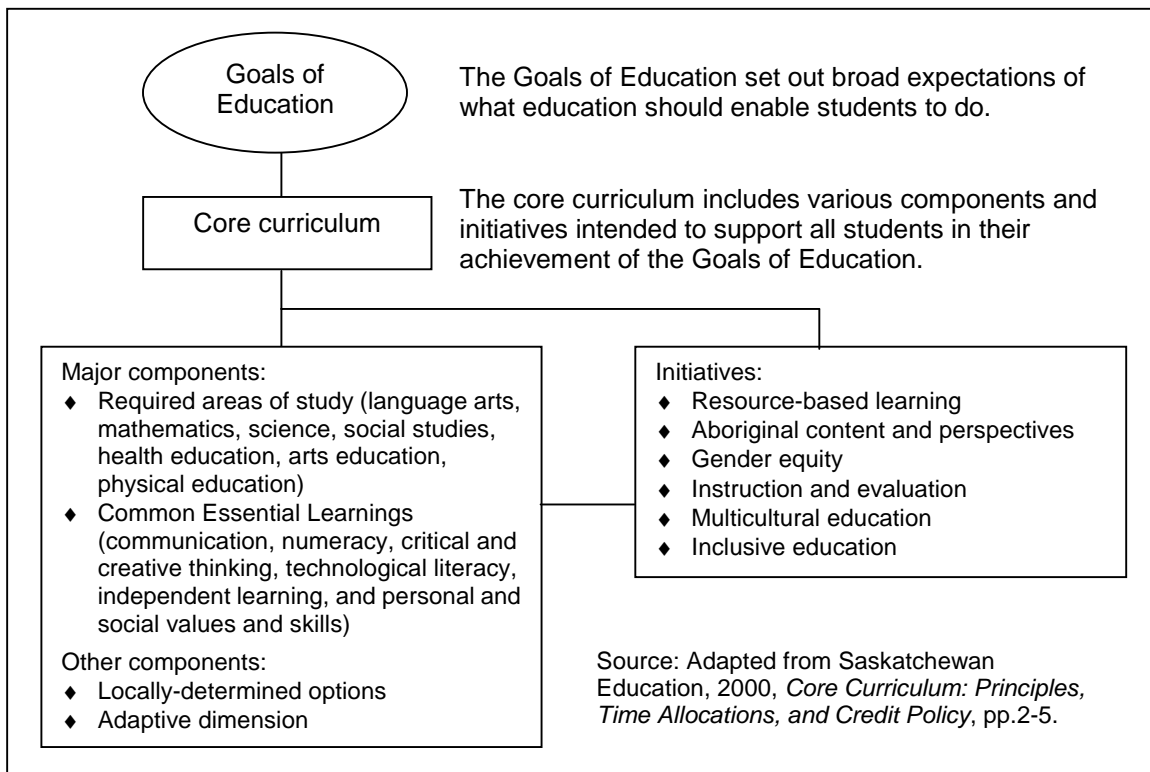
## Chapter 4B – Maintaining a relevant core curriculum

Maintaining the core curriculum is critical to students' future success. Maintenance includes supporting, monitoring, and revitalizing the core curriculum. Maintaining the core curriculum helps ensure it remains relevant and is capable of accommodating change. Discoveries within a subject area can make existing ideas or materials obsolete. Also, educators (i.e., teachers and other educational professionals) may develop an improved understanding of how subjects are learned and should be taught.

Societal changes can also necessitate changes in the core curriculum. In Saskatchewan, the number of agricultural and industrial jobs continues to decline, while service sector jobs increase. The population continues to shift from rural to urban areas. Saskatchewan's young Aboriginal population is growing rapidly. These demographic changes can influence the public's expectations for the core curriculum.

The Department has set out a framework that guides how it develops and maintains the core curriculum. The framework is described in a number of Department documents. These are available on the Internet at <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/evergrn.html>. Exhibit 1 outlines this framework.

**Exhibit 1 – Framework for maintaining the core curriculum**



## Audit objective and criteria

The objective of our audit was to assess whether the Department has adequate processes to maintain the relevance of the required areas of study within the K to 12 core curriculum. We examined processes that the Department used to maintain the core curriculum during the time period April 1999 to January 2001.

This audit focused on the Department's processes, rather than results or outputs. We did not assess the content of the core curriculum or examine the extent to which schools use the core curriculum. Nor did we design the audit to determine whether the Department's processes were adequate for all of its purposes.

To carry out the audit, we examined the Department's processes as indicated in policies, directives, manuals, position descriptions, plans, decision documents, minutes, reports, and other tools for communication. Also, we interviewed key officials of the Department and key stakeholder representatives.

During all phases of this audit, we followed *The Standards for Assurance Engagements* of The Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA). The CICA established these standards to guide the work of auditors.

To determine whether the Department's processes were adequate, we used the criteria listed at the end of this part. We based our criteria on international literature, the reports of other auditors, and the advice of a recognized expert in this field. The Department agreed with these criteria. We also described the criteria for this audit in Chapter 3 of our 2000 Fall Report – Volume 3, pages 175-179.

Our audit criteria are interrelated and are not intended to describe a linear process. For example, we expected the Department to communicate with key stakeholders throughout all of its curriculum maintenance processes.

## Audit conclusion and recommendation

We found the Department of Education had adequate processes from April 1999 to January 2001 to maintain the relevance of the required

areas of study within the K to 12 core curriculum, except we were unable to determine if the Department used information about resources when it maintained the core curriculum.

We expected the Department to have processes to assess the impact of changes to curriculum on resources needed to make the transition to the revised curriculum as well as to deliver the revised curriculum on an ongoing basis. We did not find sufficient evidence that the Department integrated information about resources into its curriculum maintenance processes.

- 1. We recommend that the Department improve how it documents its use of information about resources in its curriculum maintenance processes.**

## **Key findings (by criteria)**

Our audit found evidence of strong performance in many of the areas we examined. In this section, we set out our expectations (in italics) for each of the criteria listed at the end of this part, together with our key findings.

### **Determine essential learning outcomes for required areas of study**

*To maintain the relevance of its core curriculum, we expected the Department to set out what knowledge and skills students should develop through their education (i.e., essential learning outcomes). We expected the Department to align these outcomes with the Goals of Education and its related principles, as well as with long-term trends and education agreements (e.g., agreements with other provinces to collaborate in curriculum development). The Department should confirm with its key stakeholders that the outcomes it promotes for its students are relevant.*

The Department has adequate processes to determine essential learning outcomes (outcomes) for each required area of study.

We found that Department staff are knowledgeable about the Goals of Education and its related principles. The Department's culture supports the Goals of Education and its staff regard the Goals of Education as relevant to their work in maintaining the core curriculum.

The Department designs the curriculum for each required area of study so that it is aligned with the Goals of Education and its related principles. For example, the Department ensures that outcomes for mathematics reflect not only numeracy, but also the other common essential learnings such as communication and technological literacy.

The Department also aligns outcomes with long-term trends and with education agreements. The Department does this by expecting its staff to maintain familiarity with trends and with education agreements.

We found that the Department's processes include confirming the relevance of outcomes with key stakeholders. The Department invites educators to participate in committees that review the draft curriculum for each required area of study. These committees offer extensive feedback and suggestions for changes. The Department also uses field tests to gather advice on outcomes from educators. Educators have a professional responsibility to remain current in the profession.

The Department primarily confirms outcomes with educators. Other key stakeholders are less involved, but do play a role. For example, during evaluations of the core curriculum, committees of key stakeholders set specific expectations based on outcomes. The results of these evaluations influence subsequent curriculum maintenance by the Department.

### **Determine gaps in capability of education system to achieve essential learning outcomes**

*We expected the Department of Education to assess the results of evaluations and use this information to identify gaps in the ability of the education system to help students achieve essential learning outcomes. We expected the Department to determine the resources that the education system will require and consider the resources that the system could potentially access. The Department should set priorities to address gaps. We expected the Department to confirm areas for curriculum change with its key stakeholders.*

The Department has adequate processes to identify gaps in the capability of the education system to achieve essential learning outcomes (outcomes), except that we did not find sufficient evidence that the

## Chapter 4B – Maintaining a relevant core curriculum

Department used information about resources when it maintained the core curriculum. This information is important to ensure the education system can afford to deliver the core curriculum expected.

The Department evaluates the use of the core curriculum and the extent of student learning. The results of these evaluations guide the timing and the nature of the Department's maintenance activities.

The education system requires resources to deliver the core curriculum. These resources include the following components: teacher-student contact, teacher development, teacher supports (e.g., support staff), facilities/space, equipment, and resource materials. We expected the Department to have processes to assess the impact of changes to curriculum on resources needed to make the transition to the revised curriculum as well as to deliver the revised curriculum on an ongoing basis.

The Department has processes in place to gather information about the resources needed to make the transition to the revised curriculum, as well as to deliver the revised curriculum on a continuing basis. The Department also has processes to gather information about whether the education system will be able to access sufficient resources. However, the Department, in its curriculum maintenance activities, has limited documentation of the analysis and use of this information. As a result, we did not find sufficient evidence that the Department integrated this information about resources into its curriculum maintenance processes.

We found that the Department has adequate processes to identify priorities for curriculum changes. The Department sets priorities according to: when the curriculum was originally developed, the length of time since last maintenance, feedback from educators, results from national and provincial assessments, input the Department solicits from researchers in various disciplines, and input from Department staff who are in close contact with teachers and school boards.

The Department confirms the areas slated for curriculum change with its key stakeholders. The Department meets with key stakeholders to consult about priorities. The Department also advises stakeholders of priorities through announcements by the Minister and senior Department officials,



publication of plans on the Department's website, and in bulletins to educators.

## **Revitalize the required areas of study to achieve essential learning outcomes**

*To maintain the relevance of the core curriculum, we expected the Department to guide both the quality and timing of maintenance activities. The Department's processes should include steps to estimate the resources required to implement necessary changes to the core curriculum. We expected the Department to field test the revised curriculum for each required area of study before implementation. We expected the Department to follow-up by assessing implementation of the revised curriculum.*

The Department has adequate processes to revitalize the required areas of study in the core curriculum to achieve essential learning outcomes (outcomes).

The Department uses a variety of mechanisms to guide the quality of curriculum maintenance. The Department has processes to attract qualified staff to maintain the core curriculum. It provides the staff with professional development to assist them in developing and maintaining expertise.

The Department uses committees to review the revised curriculum for each required area of study. The Department draws on individuals from within the Department and invites key stakeholders from outside the Department to participate in these committees. Senior Department staff participate in these committees and also separately review each revised curriculum. The Department has created and uses policies and manuals to assist its maintenance work.

The Department guides the timing of curriculum maintenance by setting and keeping an up-to-date schedule for maintenance. This schedule is provided to a committee of key stakeholders, and is provided to the public in the Department's annual reports and on the Department's website. It is also provided to educators in a bulletin.

The Department has processes to estimate the resources required to make necessary changes to the curriculum for each required area of study (e.g., department staff resources). The Department also estimates the resources needed to educate teachers about the changes (e.g., training days). We found that close communication with teachers assists the Department in remaining sensitive to resource demands.

The Department told us that it designs the curriculum in a way to provide flexibility in the curriculum for each required area of study. The Department expects the school boards to adjust the delivery of the curriculum to address the needs of the students within each classroom. This flexibility allows school boards some options when determining how they will deliver the curriculum (e.g., extent of use of specialized teachers, extent of use of videos, computer programs, or handouts). These choices impact the resources necessary to deliver the curriculum.

The Department has processes to field test the draft curriculum for almost every required area of study prior to final approval. Input from field tests is used to make further changes.

As noted earlier, the Department carries out formal curriculum evaluations. The results of these evaluations are used to maintain the core curriculum. As well, the Department assigns staff to maintain close contact with teachers and school boards. These staff gather information on implementation for the Department.

## **Manage risks associated**

*We expected the Department to identify risks that could interfere with its ability to maintain the core curriculum. We expected the Department to confirm risks with key stakeholders and to work with stakeholders to identify options for managing risks. The Department should take steps to manage significant risks to reduce them to an acceptable level.*

The Department has adequate processes to manage risks associated with maintaining the core curriculum.

The Department's strategic plan (*Department of Education Strategic Plan, 2000-01 to 2003-04*) specifically identifies risks and actions related to curriculum development and maintenance. The Department updates its

understanding of risks surrounding curriculum by consulting with its key stakeholders and by assessing the results of its curriculum evaluations.

The Department also uses committees involving key stakeholders to discuss strategies for managing curriculum-related risks. In some cases, committees identify specific options for managing risks.

We found that Department staff are empowered to take action to manage curriculum-related risks. For example, the Department's move to an “evergreen” curriculum (i.e., a curriculum that is continuously evolving) is an approach to manage the risk that the core curriculum will not be current. Another example is the Department's use of consultation processes (primarily with educators) to manage the risk that the curriculum for a required area of study will not be appropriate for the students for whom it is intended.

## **Clearly communicate expectations**

*We expected the Department to provide stakeholders with timely notice of key decisions. It should explain to stakeholders the changes made to the core curriculum and the implications of those changes. The Department should use communication processes to promote acceptance of the updated core curriculum and to foster its implementation.*

The Department clearly communicates its expectations about the core curriculum to stakeholders.

We found the Department uses a variety of methods to provide stakeholders with notice of key decisions regarding curriculum maintenance. The Department uses verbal communication, including meetings with stakeholders, presentations, workshops, and continuing education for educators. The Department also uses print and electronic methods of communication, including policy documents, bulletins for teachers and administrators, an extensive website, and support materials for continuing education.

The Department uses these methods of communication to explain the changes that it makes to curriculum and the implications of those changes. Participants on committees that involve stakeholders relay information to their own organizations or communities. Bulletins directed

## Chapter 4B – Maintaining a relevant core curriculum

at teachers and administrators explain changes and how they affect stakeholders. Materials created to support continuing education by the Department also explain what is expected in each curriculum.

The above practices promote the acceptance and implementation of changes to the core curriculum. Other Department processes also promote acceptance and implementation. For example, delivering the curriculum electronically involves less cost for school boards. The Department has also developed website discussion areas to promote interaction among teachers. The Department also typically invites the teachers involved in field tests to become teacher leaders. These teacher leaders conduct workshops and act as mentors for other teachers throughout the province.

## Detailed audit criteria

### Criteria to maintain the relevance of required areas of study within the K to 12 core curriculum

The Department of Education should have processes to:

1. Determine essential learning outcomes for required areas of study
  - ◆ align expected student learning outcomes with Goals of Education and related principles
  - ◆ align expected student learning outcomes with long-term trends and current education agreements
  - ◆ confirm relevance of essential learning outcomes with key stakeholders
2. Determine gaps in capability of education system to achieve essential learning outcomes
  - ◆ assess results of evaluations and follow-up work
  - ◆ determine access to resources of education system
  - ◆ identify priorities for change
  - ◆ confirm areas for curriculum change
3. Revitalize the required areas of study in the core curriculum to achieve essential learning outcomes
  - ◆ guide the quality of curriculum maintenance
  - ◆ guide the timing of curriculum maintenance
  - ◆ estimate the resources required to implement necessary changes
  - ◆ field test the updated curriculum before implementation
  - ◆ follow-up to assess implementation of updated curriculum
4. Manage risks associated with maintaining core curriculum
  - ◆ update understanding of significant risks
  - ◆ work with stakeholders to identify options for managing risks
  - ◆ take action to manage significant risks to an acceptable level
5. Clearly communicate expectations about core curriculum to stakeholders
  - ◆ provide stakeholders with timely notice of key decisions
  - ◆ explain to stakeholders the changes made and their impact
  - ◆ promote acceptance and implementation of updated core curriculum

## Glossary

**Common essential learnings** – six interrelated areas containing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities important for learning in all subjects. The areas are: communication, numeracy, critical and creative thinking, technological literacy, independent learning, and personal and social values and skills.

Source: Saskatchewan Education, 2000, *Core Curriculum: Principles, Time Allocations, and Credit Policy*, p.3.

**Core curriculum** – the components and initiatives that are designed to support all students in their achievement of the Goals of Education.

Source: Saskatchewan Education, 1999, *Actualization of Core Curriculum*, p.2.

**Curriculum maintenance** – supporting, monitoring and revitalizing the existing courses of study and related materials.

Source: Saskatchewan Education, 1999, *Actualization of Core Curriculum*, p.1.

**Education system** – the organizations and resources involved in the development and operation of elementary and secondary education. This includes the Department of Education, key stakeholders and learning resource suppliers (e.g., textbook publishers).

**Essential learning outcomes** – the knowledge and skills that the Department intends students to develop through their education.

**Goals of Education** – include expectations related to development of basic academic skills, personal and spiritual growth, interpersonal skills, decision-making, life-long learning, and being a responsible member of society.

Source: Saskatchewan Education, 1984, *Directions: The Final Report*, pp. 26-27.

**Key stakeholders** – students, parents, teachers, school boards and the community.

**Required areas of study** – seven required areas, each with unique knowledge, skills and values essential for all students. The seven required areas of study are: language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health education, arts education and physical education.

Source: Saskatchewan Education, 2000, *Core Curriculum: Principles, Time Allocations, and Credit Policy*, p.3.

## Selected references

- Canada. Council of Ministers. (October 1997). *CMEC's Pan-Canadian Science Project*. <http://www.cmec.ca/science/>.
- Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. (1996). *Education at a glance: Analysis*. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Cheek, D.W. & Kohut, S. (Ed.). (1992). *Social studies curriculum resource handbook: A practical guide for K-12 social studies curriculum*. Millwood, New York: Kraus International.
- Fullan, M.G. (1998). Education reform: Are we on the right track? *Education Canada*, 38(3), pp. 4-7.
- Fullan, M.G. & Stiegelbauer, S. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York: Columbia University Teachers College.
- Guthrie, J.W. (1996). Evolving political economies and the implications for educational evaluation. In *Evaluating and reforming education systems*. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Hanushek, E.A., Kain, J.F. & Rivkin, S.G. (1998). *Teachers, schools and academic achievement*. Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Kallen, D. (1996). New educational paradigms and new education policies. In *Evaluating and reforming education systems*. Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Minister's Advisory Committee on Curriculum and Instruction Review. (1984). *Directions: Final report*. Regina: Department of Education.
- Mortimore, P., Sammons, P., Stoll, L., Lewis, D. & Ecob, R. (1988). Understanding effectiveness. In *School Matters*. University of California Press. pp. 248-262.

## Chapter 4B – Maintaining a relevant core curriculum

Postman, N. (1995). The Law of Diversity. Chapter 8 in *The end of education: Redefining the value of school*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Saskatchewan Education. (2000). *Core curriculum: Principles, time allocations, and credit policy*. Regina: Author.

Saskatchewan Education. (1999). *Actualization of core curriculum*. Regina: Author.

Saskatchewan Education. (1997). *Core curriculum: An information bulletin for administrators*. Regina: Author.

Saskatchewan Education. (1994). *Curriculum evaluation in Saskatchewan*. Regina: Author.