

Following up curriculum evaluation reports

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Introduction

Our Office worked with the Department to identify areas where ineffective action could limit the Department's ability to carry out its mandate. One of the areas we identified is *ensuring the provincial curriculum reflects the knowledge and skills that people need*. In this section, we report on an area related to this key risk—how the Department responds to evaluations of its curriculum.

The Department is responsible for the overall quality of the Saskatchewan's Kindergarten to Grade 12 System. It is also responsible for developing and maintaining the provincial curriculum. The provincial curriculum provides guidance on what students are to learn and when. The Department works with school divisions to implement the curriculum. That means that the Department and school divisions work together to help educators use the curriculum to assist students in achieving the goals of education.

Evaluating curriculum implementation

One way the Department gathers information about the extent to which the curriculum is implemented in the schools is through formal evaluations. These evaluations collect key information on the use of the curriculum. They provide information about classroom and school practices. They help identify supports and barriers to using the curriculum. The Department uses these evaluations to guide decisions about revising the curriculum and promoting the use of the curriculum in all schools.¹

The Department has conducted the following curriculum evaluations:

- ◆ Science, Grades 1-5 (published in 1994);
- ◆ Health, Grades 7-9 (1996);
- ◆ Social Studies, Grades 7-9 (1996);
- ◆ Arts Education, Grades 1-9 (1998);
- ◆ English Language Arts, Grades 1-5 (1999); and
- ◆ Math, Grades 1-12 (in progress for 2003).

¹ Saskatchewan Education, *Arts Education Grades 1-9 Curriculum Evaluation Report*, p. iv.

The Department recognizes that the input and support of its partners is critical to the successful implementation of the curriculum. During the evaluation process and prior to publication of the evaluation reports, the Department brings together representatives of its partners to consider and agree on proposed recommendations. See Exhibit 1 for a list of the Department's partners.

Exhibit 1

Education partners involved in considering curriculum evaluation reports:

- ◆ Department of Learning;
- ◆ Gabriel Dumont Institute;
- ◆ League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents;
- ◆ Saskatchewan Association of School Councils;
- ◆ Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce;
- ◆ Saskatchewan Indian Federated College;
- ◆ Saskatchewan School Trustees Association;
- ◆ Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation;
- ◆ University of Regina; and
- ◆ University of Saskatchewan.

The Department publishes its evaluation reports and distributes them to its partners. Most reports are available on the Internet at www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/k/pecs/ae/pub.html.

The completed curriculum evaluation reports listed above contain approximately 125 recommendations that respond to concerns described in the reports. These recommendations vary considerably. Some recommendations are general in nature, while others are specific. Some recommendations are directed at the Department, while others are directed at other participants in the education system, such as principals, teachers, and school divisions.

Most of the recommendations fit into four main themes:

1. Curriculum revision (e.g., align objectives, revise curriculum guide, shorten curriculum);

2. Training and professional development for teachers;
3. Instructional methods (e.g., ideas teachers can use in the classroom); and
4. Supports and resources (e.g., provide adequate funding; assign resource persons; provide instructional materials).

It is important that the Department and its partners follow up on the recommendations in the curriculum evaluation reports. The curriculum evaluations provide key information about how educators use the curriculum. The recommendations propose steps that the Department and its partners should take to improve the use of the curriculum. By responding to the concerns and taking action on the recommendations, the Department and its partners will improve the curriculum and how it is used.

The Department's role in following up on recommendations includes deciding on priorities, taking actions itself, and coordinating the actions of partners. In addition, the Department's role includes monitoring and reporting progress on recommendations.

Audit objective and criteria

The objective of our audit was to assess whether the Department adequately follows up on recommendations in curriculum evaluation reports.

To adequately follow up on the recommendations in curriculum evaluation reports, the Department needs to regularly:

- ◆ assess the continued relevance of recommendations;
- ◆ coordinate partner response to recommendations;
- ◆ monitor action taken in response to recommendations; and
- ◆ report progress on recommendations.

The criteria are listed in more detail in Exhibit 2. The Department agreed with these criteria.

To carry out the audit, we focused on the Department's processes to follow up on the recommendations contained in three curriculum

evaluation reports from the publication date of each report to June 2002. The three reports are:

- ◆ Science, Grades 1-5 (1994);
- ◆ Arts Education, Grades 1-9 (1998); and
- ◆ English Language Arts, Grades 1-5 (1999).

We examined follow-up activities as reflected in planning and decision documents, committees' terms of reference, minutes, reports, and job descriptions. We also interviewed key officials of the Department.

We followed *The Standards for Assurance Engagements* established by The Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Exhibit 2

Detailed audit criteria

To adequately follow up on the recommendations in curriculum evaluation reports, the Department needs to regularly:

- ◆ assess the continued relevance of recommendations
 - consider the time period during which recommendations remain useful
 - assess the usefulness of implementing recommendations
 - evaluate cost-effectiveness of implementing recommendations
- ◆ coordinate partners' responses to recommendations
 - confirm responsibility for action
 - identify and remove barriers to action
 - agree on recommendations that will not be implemented
- ◆ monitor action taken in response to recommendations
 - obtain reports of action taken (what, when)
 - obtain partners' plans for further action (what, when)
 - evaluate adequacy of actions and plans (assess progress)
- ◆ report progress on recommendations
 - list status of recommendations
 - summarize actions taken
 - describe impact of actions taken
 - recommend plans for further action or evaluation

Audit conclusion and recommendation

The Department uses three main systems to follow up on recommendations made in curriculum evaluation reports. These systems guide the Department's collaboration and consultation with its partners.

The first system is the Department's committee structure. The Department makes extensive use of committees that involve the Department's partners. The committees advise the Department in its curriculum and evaluation activities. The Department restructured its committees in the fall of 2002 and continues to work closely with its partners.

The second system involves Department employees who are responsible for liaison with educators and administrators—the Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction. The Department employs these experienced educators to liaise with educators and administrators in school divisions.

The third system is the curriculum renewal process. This is also a collaborative process (see our discussion in the 2001 Spring Report, Chapter 4B). The Department works with its partners to maintain the relevance of the curriculum.

The Department follows up on curriculum evaluation recommendations through many activities that take place within these three systems. However, this follow-up is at a general level, and relates to the main themes arising out of the recommendations. The Department does not have processes to monitor and report progress on specific recommendations. Because of this, some recommendations may not receive sufficient attention.

We conclude that the Department adequately followed up on recommendations in curriculum evaluation reports except that its monitoring of action and reporting of progress did not extend to specific recommendations.

- 1. We recommend that the Department establish processes to monitor action taken and report progress achieved in relation to specific curriculum evaluation recommendations.**

Key findings by criteria

In this section, we set out our expectations (in italics) for each of the criteria, together with our key findings.

Assessing continued relevance

Our expectation was that the Department would regularly assess whether recommendations continued to be relevant. It would assess the usefulness of acting on recommendations and the time period during which recommendations remained useful. It would also consider the cost-effectiveness of acting on recommendations.

The Department assesses the continued relevance of curriculum evaluation recommendations through the work of its employees (primarily the Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction). The Regional Superintendents consider the time period that recommendations remain useful. They assess which recommendations relate to the Department's current priorities and are achievable within available resources.

The Department also assesses the continued relevance of recommendations within its system for renewing the curriculum. The Department assembles teams to advise on changes to areas within each curriculum. These teams include the Department's partners. The teams consider whether the recommendations that relate to the area they are revising continue to be relevant.

The Department considers the most cost-effective way of acting on recommendations. The Department consults with its partners regarding alternatives. For example, the Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction consider the costs and benefits of recommendations each year in the context of Department priorities. They help decide, in consultation with partners, what action on recommendations is most useful and affordable.

Coordinating partners' responses

Our expectation was that the Department would regularly work with its partners to coordinate the partners' response to recommendations in

curriculum evaluation reports. It would do this by confirming which partners would be needed to complete action on recommendations. In addition, it would identify barriers to action on recommendations, and would take steps to manage or remove those barriers. Also, the Department would agree with its partners on recommendations that would not be implemented.

The curriculum evaluation reports usually assign responsibility for action on specific recommendations. The Department uses regular contact with its partners to confirm continued partner responsibility. This contact is primarily through the committees that oversee curriculum and evaluation activities. It also takes place through the work and documents of the Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction, who are responsible for liaison with specific partners.

In addition, the Department develops action plans for its own areas of responsibility. In committee meetings, the Department and its partners share their action plans with each other.

Through regular contact with its partners, the Department actively identifies and removes barriers to action on recommendations. For example, through the committee system, the Department and its partners consistently meet to consider barriers to action and to plan ways to overcome those barriers. The Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction also work with partners to help address barriers. The processes that the Department follows to renew the curriculum also require the Department to work with partners to remove barriers.

As part of its curriculum renewal processes, the Department considers whether recommendations should be implemented. In addition, the Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction work with partners to consider the appropriate time for action.

Monitoring action taken

Our expectation was that the Department would regularly monitor action taken in response to curriculum evaluation recommendations through reports from partners. It would also obtain partners' plans for future action. In addition, it would evaluate whether the actions taken on

recommendations were adequate to resolve the concerns described in the evaluation reports.

The Department regularly obtains reports from partners on action taken in response to the main areas or themes arising from the recommendations. It does this through its regular committee meetings with partners. In addition, the Department's Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction obtain information through their own meetings with the administrators of school divisions.

The Department also obtains its partners' plans for further action relevant to the main themes of the recommendations. The Department and its partners exchange planning documents. The Department obtains plans for action through meetings at committees and at various other levels. The Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction also obtain information about planned action through meetings and site visits. The Department uses the information it receives to assess progress related to the themes of the recommendations.

Through these activities, the Department monitors action taken in response to recommendations. However, it does so at a general level. The reports and information that the Department obtains relate to the main themes arising out of the recommendations, rather than to specific recommendations. By not monitoring action on specific recommendations, important recommendations may not receive sufficient attention. Consequently, the Department and its partners may miss the opportunity to resolve the concerns that gave rise to the recommendations.

Reporting progress

Our expectation was that the Department would regularly report progress achieved on curriculum evaluation recommendations. It would list the status of recommendations to allow the Department and its partners to identify which recommendations were outstanding. It would summarize actions taken and describe the impact of the actions taken. In addition, the Department's report on progress would include recommended plans for further action or evaluations.

The Department regularly reports on actions taken relevant to the themes arising out of the recommendations. It shares information with its partners using the systems that it has set up for collaborating and consulting with its partners. These systems include its committee structure and the work of the Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction. However as with their monitoring, the Department's communications are not at the level of the specific recommendations.

The Department describes the impact of actions taken through documents that are shared with its partners and with the public. For example, the "Curriculum Update" of the Regional Superintendents of Curriculum and Instruction, and the Department's *Education Indicators Reports* provide information about the impact of actions relevant to the main themes of the recommendations. The *Education Indicator Reports* are issued to the public about every two years.

Finally, the Department communicates plans for further action or evaluations. The Department shares its formal action plans with its partners and consistently uses its committee system to consult with partners regarding plans for further action.

The Department regularly reports progress relevant to the general themes arising out of the recommendations, but it does not report progress at the level of specific recommendations. The Department does not have processes to list the status of individual recommendations.

Moreover, we found that the Department has not explicitly assigned the task of tracking and reporting action on recommendations. The Department should do so. It should track and report the status of individual recommendations (in addition to the larger themes arising out of the recommendations). This will assist the Department's partners and the public to understand what action has been taken on curriculum recommendations and what remains outstanding. This will also help the Department ensure that all key recommendations are acted upon.

By taking action on the recommendations, the Department and its partners improve the curriculum and improve how the curriculum is used. This helps ensure that the curriculum is doing what it is intended to do—assist students to achieve the goals of education.

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