

Chapter 9

Education—Putting into Operation the Education Sector-Wide Strategic Plan

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Education (Ministry) is responsible for providing leadership and direction to the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 (PreK-12) education sector. This includes providing leadership and coordination for the preparation of goals, objectives, and educational planning for the present and future growth and development of the educational system.

In 2013, the Ministry began to work more closely with its education partners, including the 28 provincial school divisions, to carry out strategic planning. This work resulted in a sector-wide strategic plan for the PreK-12 education sector, called the *Education Sector Strategic Plan* (ESSP). The Ministry intends to use the ESSP to help coordinate and focus the sector's efforts to achieve by June 2020 the ESSP's five long-term outcomes related to student achievement and operational efficiencies. If the Ministry does not have effective processes to put the ESSP into action, it is at greater risk of failing to achieve the ESSP's planned outcomes, along with the associated social and economic benefits.

For the 12-month period ended January 31, 2015, we found that the Ministry had effective processes to put into operation the sector-wide strategic plan for the PreK-12 provincial education sector, except it needs to:

- › Review school division action plans supporting achievement of outcomes to coordinate actions across the sector
- › Establish a sector deadline for completing action plans supporting achievement of outcomes

We make two recommendations to assist the Ministry in improving its processes to put the ESSP into operation.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry's mandate is to provide leadership and direction to the early learning and child care, Kindergarten through Grade 12 education, literacy, and library sectors. The Ministry supports these sectors through funding, governance, and accountability, with a focus on improving student achievement.¹

In 2013, the Ministry made significant changes to its traditional strategic planning processes. Changes included working more closely with a wide range of education partners, including the 28 provincial school divisions, and using a new strategic planning and management methodology. The result is a sector-wide strategic plan for the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 education (PreK-12) sector, called the *Education Sector Strategic Plan* (ESSP). The Ministry expects that the ESSP "will bring coherence

¹ Ministry of Education, *2013-14 Annual Report*, p. 3.



and alignment to the priorities of the Government, the Ministry, the sector, and the classroom.”²

This chapter sets out the results of our audit to assess the effectiveness of the Ministry’s processes to put into operation the sector-wide strategic plan for the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 provincial education sector.

2.1 Key Responsibilities Assigned by Law

Section 3 of *The Education Act, 1995 (Act)* assigns the Ministry responsibility for all matters related to early learning, elementary, and secondary education. The Ministry is expected to provide leadership and coordination in all areas, including the preparation of goals, objectives, and educational planning for the present and future growth and development of the educational system.

The Act makes the Ministry responsible for overseeing school divisions, by working through the elected boards of education (boards) and the directors of education appointed by the boards. One way the Ministry seeks to carry out its responsibility is through the review and approval of school divisions’ objectives and programs (Act s.278).

2.2 Overview of Education Sector Strategic Plan

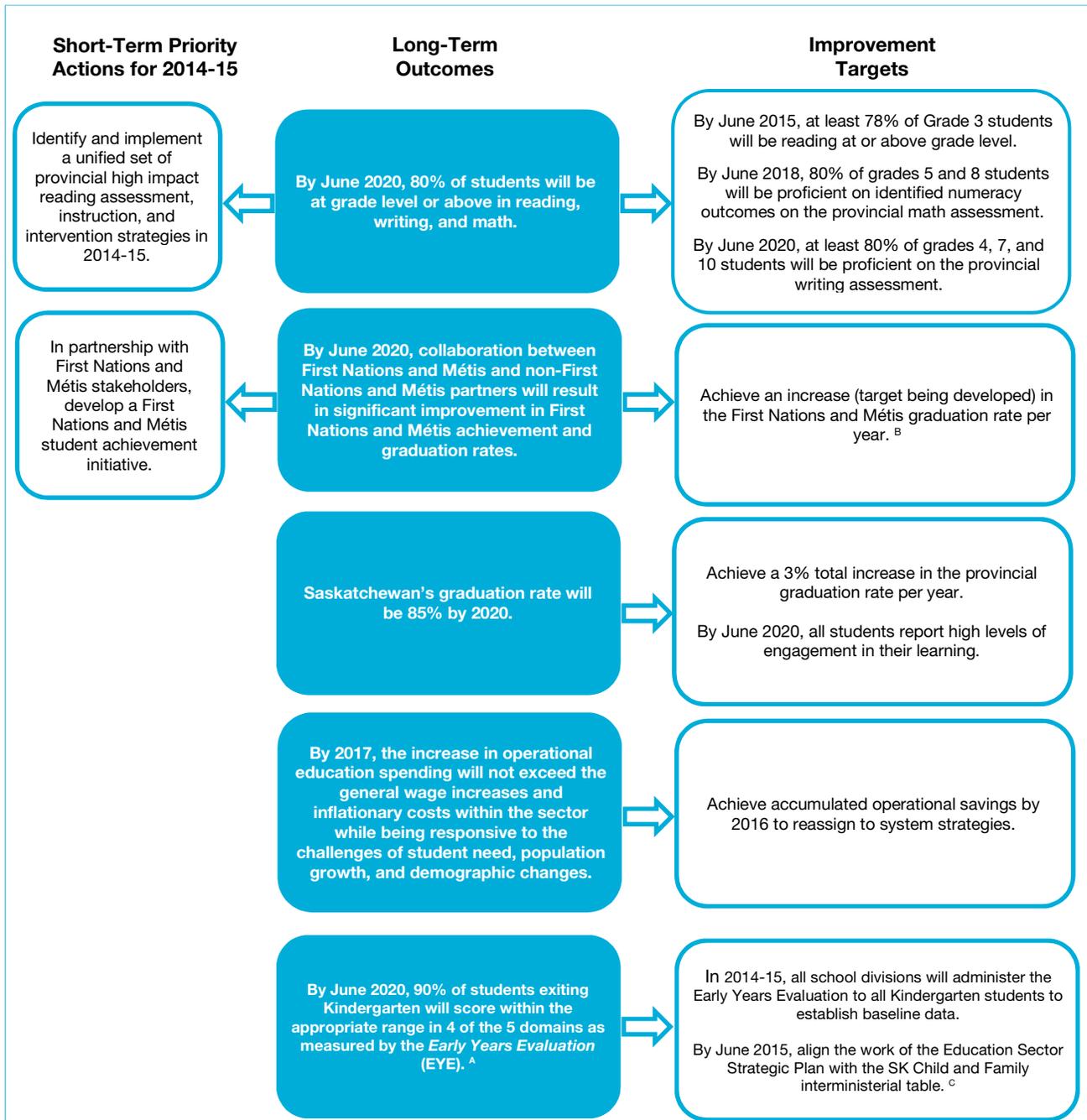
In 2013, the Ministry and school divisions formed the Provincial Leadership Team (PLT) to lead and coordinate the development and implementation of the ESSP. The PLT uses a collaborative approach. It is made up of the Deputy Minister of Education, the Ministry’s three Assistant Deputy Ministers, the Director of Education from each of the 28 school divisions, and representatives from the First Nations’ school system. The PLT, along with other staff from the Ministry and school divisions, participated in the development of the ESSP.³ Cabinet and all 28 boards of education approved the ESSP in the spring of 2014. **Figure 1** illustrates the five long-term outcomes within the ESSP that the sector plans to achieve by June 2020.

The Ministry and school divisions have agreed to each develop their own strategic plan, as well as more detailed action plans, that support achievement of the long-term outcomes set out in the ESSP. The Ministry and school divisions have also agreed to monitor achievement of their respective plans, and publicly report their respective results through their annual reports. The Ministry is also responsible for monitoring achievement of the ESSP, which it plans to do collaboratively through the PLT, and publicly report the sector-wide results through its annual report.

² Ministry of Education, *Plan for 2014-15*, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Figure 1 – Education Sector Strategic Plan Long-Term Outcomes



Source: Adapted from *Ministry of Education, Plan for 2014-15*.

^A *The Early Years Evaluation* assesses five domains of early learning closely associated with children's readiness to learn at school: Awareness of Self and Environment, Social Skills and Approaches to Learning, Cognitive Skills, Language Skills and Communication, and Physical Development.

^B As of January 31, 2015, this target was under development.

^C The interministerial table is part of the Saskatchewan Child and Family Agenda, an interministry initiative. It is tasked with responsibility for ensuring the ministries of Government Relations; Education; Health; Social Services; Justice including Corrections and Policing; and Parks, Culture and Sport work together to improve the lives of Saskatchewan children and their families.

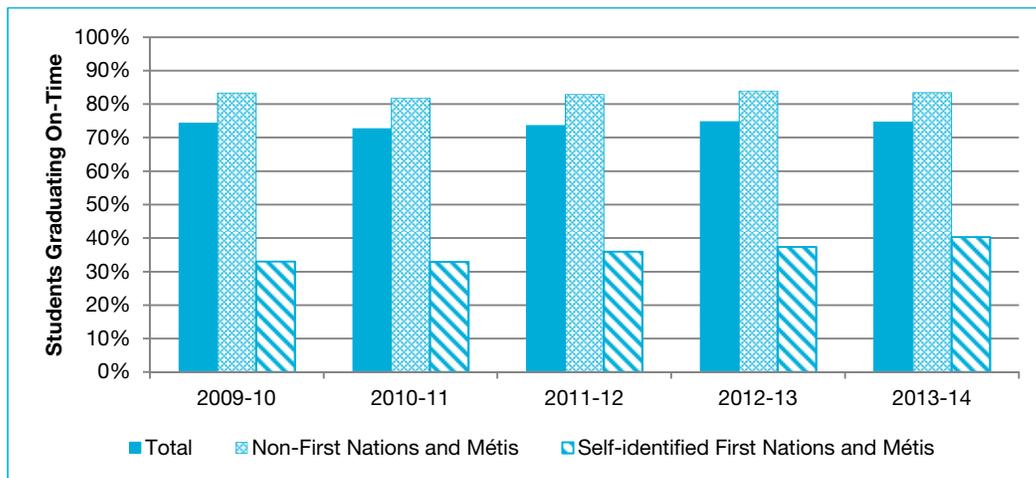


2.3 Significance of Sector-Wide Coordination

Education significantly impacts society and the economy. Youth who graduate from high school are at an advantage in terms of personal and economic success.⁴ For example, a 2011 Gabriel Dumont Institute study found that lifetime earnings could significantly increase for a student who completed high school or its equivalency.⁵ These increased earnings could improve the life of that individual and their family, and also contribute positively to the economy. In addition to the financial gains, education also could result in social benefits (e.g., health, safety, civic involvement).⁶ Students who do not obtain satisfactory marks in school or who do not graduate from Grade 12 often have difficulty furthering their education or finding suitable employment, putting them at a disadvantage financially and socially.

Figure 1 identifies improvement targets the provincial education sector is striving to accomplish with regards to the graduation rate of Saskatchewan students. As **Figure 2** shows, while the percentage of self-identified First Nations and Métis students graduating on-time⁷ has improved over the last five years, the province’s total on-time graduation rate has remained relatively the same. Significant improvement across the province is necessary to achieve the 85% student graduation rate target by 2020 as identified within the ESSP.

Figure 2—Saskatchewan On-Time⁸ Graduation Rates: 2009-10 to 2013-14 by Graduation Year



Source: Ministry of Education.

As **Figure 3** illustrates, Saskatchewan Grade 8 students lag behind in science, math, and reading as compared to other students across the country based on a recently-released comparison of 2013 student test scores across Canada by the Council of Ministers of Education (Canada). These subjects are critical to the overall success of students. A wide range of factors impact student achievement (e.g., purposeful

⁴ Ministry of Education, *Plan for 2014-15*, p. 12.

⁵ Howe, Eric (2011), *Mishchet aen Kishkayhtamihk nawut ki wiichihntonaan: Bridging the Aboriginal education gap in Saskatchewan*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, p. 6-7.

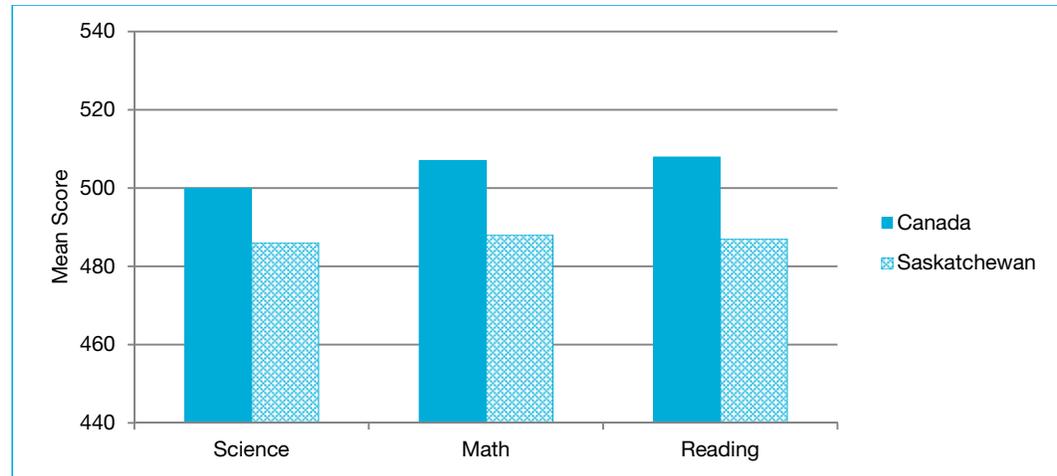
⁶ OECD (2013), *Education Indicators in Focus – 2013/01 (January)*. [www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202013--N%C2%B010%20\(eng\)--v9%20FINAL%20bis.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202013--N%C2%B010%20(eng)--v9%20FINAL%20bis.pdf) (7 February 2015).

⁷ The Ministry of Education calculates on-time graduation rates as the percentage of students who complete Grade 12 within three years of starting Grade 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

teaching, adequate time for learning, cognitive ability, family income, health problems, frequent moves, absence from school).⁹

Figure 3—Canada versus Saskatchewan: 2013 Mean Scores¹⁰ of Grade 8 Students in Science, Math, and Reading



Source: Council of Ministers of Education (Canada), *Report on the Pan-Canadian Assessment of Science, Reading, and Mathematics* (7 October 2014).

The Ministry, along with the sector, intends to use the ESSP to help coordinate and focus the sector's efforts to achieve the ESSP's long-term outcomes by 2020 as planned. Effectively coordinating plans to support achievement of these outcomes is necessary to prevent duplication of effort and to ensure that plans across the sector support one another. Effectively coordinating plans may also result in additional benefits, such as improved program consistency throughout the sector and reduced program disruptions for students moving between schools, positively impacting student achievement. If the Ministry does not have effective processes to put the ESSP into action, it is at greater risk of failing to achieve the ESSP's planned outcomes and associated social and financial benefits (e.g., health, safety, economic, personal income).

3.0 AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, CRITERIA, AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this audit was to assess whether, for the 12-month period ended January 31, 2015, the Ministry of Education had effective processes to put into operation the sector-wide strategic plan for the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 provincial education sector.

This audit focused on Ministry processes to put the ESSP into operation. We examined the Ministry's policies and procedures that relate to the sector-wide strategic plan. We interviewed Ministry and school division staff involved in putting the plan into operation. We examined minutes from PLT and Ministry executive meetings, guidance provided to school divisions, action plans supporting achievement of ESSP outcomes, documentation supporting decisions (e.g., targets, funding), and progress reports.

⁹ Ministry of Education (2010), *Provincial Panel on Student Achievement – Final Report*, p. 16.

¹⁰ A mean score is the average score, calculated by adding the scores of all the students and dividing by the number of students.



To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance*. To evaluate the Ministry’s processes, we used criteria based on our related work, reviews of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management. The Ministry’s management agreed with the criteria (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4—Audit Criteria

Effective processes to put into operation the sector-wide strategic plan for the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 provincial education sector includes processes to:
1. Lead alignment of Ministry and school division plans with the sector plan
1.1 Show leadership commitment to achieve outcomes
1.2 Provide guidance (e.g., policies, templates) for preparation of plans
1.3 Confirm action plans support achievement of outcomes
2. Make expectations clear
2.1 Confirm acceptance of responsibility and timelines for achievement of outcomes
2.2 Confirm targets for outcomes
2.3 Set processes for monitoring and reporting achievement of outcomes (e.g., policies, templates)
3. Support achievement of outcomes
3.1 Align resources (e.g., funding, staff, training) with expectations
3.2 Manage risks that could prevent achieving outcomes
3.3 Revise plans as necessary

The Ministry, with the sector, has made substantial progress during 2014-15, the ESSP’s first year of operation, to put the ESSP into operation.

We concluded that for the 12-month period ended January 31, 2015, the Ministry of Education had effective processes to put into operation the sector-wide strategic plan for the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 provincial education sector, except it needs to:

- › **Review school division action plans supporting achievement of outcomes to coordinate actions across the sector**
- › **Establish a sector deadline for completing action plans supporting achievement of outcomes**

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we describe our expectations (in italics), key findings, and recommendations related to the audit criteria in **Figure 4**.

4.1 Lead Alignment of Plans

4.1.1 Leadership Shows Commitment and Provides Guidance

We expected the Ministry and school divisions to demonstrate leadership commitment to achieve the outcomes within the ESSP, including communicating regularly with the PLT, Ministry, and school division staff, and taking into account feedback from those who are putting the ESSP into operation. We also expected the Ministry to provide guidance

(e.g., policies, templates) to its staff and the school divisions for preparing action plans at the separate levels to support the ESSP outcomes.

The creation of the ESSP took significant effort by the PLT, Ministry, and school divisions to develop a collaborative approach to planning and operating the provincial Prekindergarten to Grade 12 education system. The Ministry used various mechanisms that demonstrated its leadership commitment to the ESSP:

- › As we describe earlier in **Section 2.2**, the Ministry formed the PLT by bringing together senior leadership from across the education sector. While all PLT members worked towards achieving the ESSP long-term outcomes within their own organizations, members also took primary and secondary roles for leading initiatives related to the long-term outcomes at a provincial level. For example, one PLT member agreed to lead the provincial action plan supporting the long-term outcome that by June 2020, 90% of students exiting Kindergarten will score within the appropriate range in four of the five domains as measured by the Early Years Evaluation; three other PLT members agreed to provide assistance with this action plan. During our audit period, the PLT met many times to lead and coordinate the development and implementation of the ESSP.
- › The Ministry's senior leadership team discussed issues relevant to the ESSP at its monthly executive committee meetings. Various communications (e.g., emails, bulletins) from the Ministry's senior leadership team were sent to Ministry staff throughout the year to keep them informed of the ESSP process.
- › The Ministry accumulated feedback regarding the ESSP process from Ministry staff and staff from each school division. The Ministry summarized the feedback and provided it to the PLT for consideration. It made the feedback available to staff within the Ministry and school divisions on ESSP-specific web portals.

Also, the Planning and Reporting Unit within the Ministry facilitated the ESSP implementation process and prepared guidance for the Ministry and school divisions to guide their development of individual plans supporting the ESSP. Ministry guidance included various templates for preparing ESSP-specific documents (e.g., action plans, charts for reporting progress) and guides to help facilitate ESSP processes and discussions. The Ministry made the guidance available to staff within the Ministry and school divisions on the ESSP-specific web portals, which the Planning and Reporting Unit maintained throughout the year.

4.1.2 Oversight of Action Plans Throughout Sector Needed

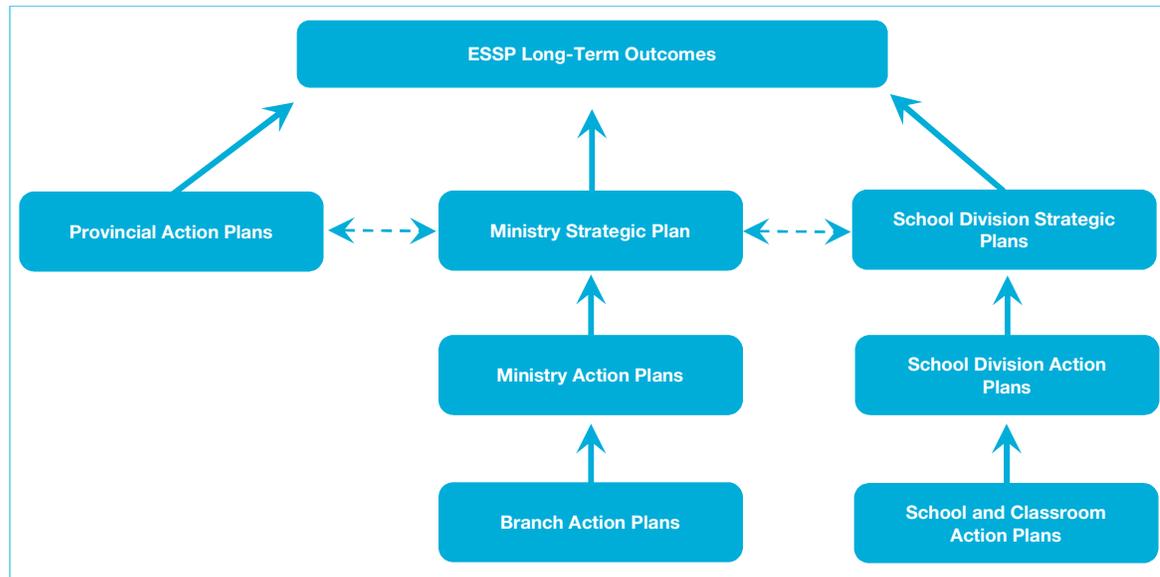
We expected the Ministry to confirm that action plans throughout the sector supported achievement of the outcomes within the ESSP. In order to do so, we expected the Ministry to assess alignment of the individual plans of the Ministry and school divisions with the ESSP. We also expected the Ministry to assess the capability of the various plans to achieve the ESSP planned outcomes.

Implementation of the ESSP required the creation of action plans at various levels in the sector. The PLT created the top-level provincial action plans. The Ministry had its own action plans, and each school division was expected to create its own as well. Eventually, implementation of the ESSP is expected to include school and classroom



action plans that align with provincial outcomes. Bringing the provincial priorities down through the various levels (i.e., provincial, Ministry, school divisions, schools, classrooms) is complex. **Figure 5** illustrates the organizational relationship between the various layers of planning required to support the ESSP.

Figure 5—Organizational Relationship of Plans Required to Support the ESSP



Source: Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan (February 2015).

The Ministry developed an action-plan template for documenting planned work to achieve the ESSP's planned outcomes. The template required supporting information such as root-cause analysis, desired future state, performance measures, specific actions and their due dates, resource requirements, and risk identification and reduction strategies. The Ministry shared its action-plan template with the sector to assist in creating plans at the various levels required.

The PLT used the action-plan template to create provincial action plans. These set out the work required within the sector to achieve the ESSP's various long-term outcomes and short-term priority actions. The plans aligned with the ESSP long-term outcomes.

The Ministry created detailed action plans using its action-plan template to support each of the five ESSP long-term outcomes. The Ministry's action plans showed clear alignment with the ESSP outcomes. It also reported the actions planned for 2014-15 by the sector, including the Ministry, as part of its annual plan (*Ministry of Education, Plan for 2014-15*).

The Ministry did not require school divisions to use its action-plan template during 2014-15 because the ESSP was approved in spring 2014 and some school divisions had already started 2014-15 planning using other processes. The Ministry advised us that it expects school divisions to use the action-plan template starting in 2015-16.

At January 2015, the Ministry did not have processes to review all action plans across the sector, including the school division action plans, to ensure alignment with the ESSP. The Ministry had not reviewed school division plans, nor did it have up-to-date knowledge of school divisions' progress in preparing their plans or what processes they

used to prepare their plans. Therefore, we directly obtained the individual plans from all 28 school divisions to assess the progress school divisions had made in developing their plans. We did not review plans at the school or Ministry branch level or below, given the early stages of ESSP implementation.

Overall, we found that most school divisions had started to develop action plans to support achievement of the ESSP planned outcomes. Most of these school divisions documented their action plans using the Ministry's action-plan template, but a few documented the plans using previous strategic planning processes. We found that as of January 2015:

- › 11 school divisions had developed formal action plans that aligned with all five ESSP long-term outcomes (although more detailed planning was ongoing because ESSP implementation is in the early stages).
- › 13 school divisions had developed formal action plans that aligned with some (i.e., two to four) of the five ESSP long-term outcomes, and were doing more detailed planning on the action plans developed.
- › 4 school divisions had not developed formal action plans that aligned with the ESSP long-term outcomes. Three of these school divisions were relatively small with 2014-15 enrolments of less than 2,000 students, while the fourth school division had 2014-15 enrolment of about 10,000 students.¹¹ The total school division 2014-15 enrolment was about 173,000, or an average of 6,000 students per division.

In addition to a few school divisions not creating action plans, later in **Section 4.2.1** we describe that the provincial, Ministry, and school division action plans were often incomplete. The Ministry did not establish a deadline to complete the plans. Staff within the Ministry and school divisions informed us that the PLT expected to set a deadline for plans to be completed across the sector during 2015-16. It is important that these plans are completed in a timely fashion given that the sector expects to achieve the long-term outcomes by 2020 – only five years away.

As the Ministry had not reviewed the school division plans, it did not know if the various plans collectively were capable of achieving the ESSP's planned outcomes. Such an assessment could identify changes that are needed to the plans to reduce redundancies, address gaps, or manage risks.

As described in **Figure 6**, effective coordination among the various plans created by the sector is necessary to help ensure the plans are working cohesively towards achievement of the ESSP outcomes.

Figure 6—Example of Interrelation Between Action Plans at Different Levels Within the Sector

The Education Sector Strategic Plan includes a long-term outcome that, by June 2020, 80% of students will be at grade level or above in reading, writing, and math. The Provincial Leadership Team (PLT) created a provincial action plan to achieve this outcome. As there are three different subjects within this outcome, the provincial action plan considers what needs to be done for each of the three subjects (e.g., develop instructional practices, provide training, complete student assessments). The provincial action plan sets out the timeframe to complete the work, with work starting first for reading, followed by math, and then writing. The PLT set an improvement target that by June 2015, at least 78% of Grade 3 students will be reading at or above grade level.

¹¹ Ministry of Education, *Provincial K-12 Student Enrolment Summary*.



The sector chose to make the development of an instructional framework for reading a priority for 2014-15, so PLT created a short-term priority action plan to develop provincial high-impact reading assessment, instruction, and intervention strategies in 2014-15. The sector drafted an instructional framework for reading that it expects to implement during 2015-16.

Certain school divisions created action plans at the school division level to support this outcome as well. For example, one school division created an action plan for the outcome that included professional development for teachers and alignment of the school division's instructional framework with the provincial framework being developed. The division also created a separate action plan to support the provincial short-term priority related to reading. Another school division created a combined action plan for the outcome and short-term priority action, including developing literacy coaches, creating reading kits to support reading, improving library resources to support reading targets, and distributing the provincial instructional framework.

Given the level of planning completed within the sector, it is not clear how the sector will have time to carry out the actions required to achieve the short-term target of June 2015 for reading. It is also not clear how the Ministry and school divisions are coordinating their plans to work together towards the provincial action plan. For example, it is not clear if the provincial action plan expects each school division to create an instructional framework for reading that aligns with the provincial framework, or to simply adopt and roll out the provincial framework. Also, it is not clear if provincial professional development opportunities will be provided for teachers, or if school divisions will manage development opportunities. Also, school divisions may develop various tools to support reading without processes to inform them if another school division has already developed such or similar tools. Effective coordination of the action plans can help prevent duplication of effort and ensure that the action plans support one another.

Source: Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan (February 2015).

Coordination is also important given that the outcomes of the ESSP are all interrelated. Four of the five outcomes could be seen as ultimately contributing to improvement of graduation rates, an indicator that students have acquired the educational knowledge and skills they require as they move into post-secondary education or the workforce. That is, two of the outcomes are about improving graduation rates, and two are about improving achievement of core subjects considered critical to graduate. Each outcome requires different actions, yet the results of those actions could impact the other outcomes.

The Ministry is ultimately responsible for leading educational planning in the sector. The Ministry's role as the ESSP facilitator places it in an ideal position to lead the analysis of the interrelationships between the various outcomes and assist with coordinating action plans across the sector. However, the Ministry was not reviewing the action plans prepared by school divisions. As a result, there is increased risk of duplication of effort within the sector and that actions across the sector may not be coordinated to effectively support achievement of the outcomes by 2020.

- 1. We recommend that the Ministry of Education, to coordinate plans across the sector, review school division action plans supporting achievement of the outcomes identified within the sector-wide strategic plan for the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 education sector.**

4.2 Make Expectations Clear

4.2.1 Completion of Action Plans Needed

We expected the Ministry to confirm acceptance of responsibility and timelines for achievement of the outcomes identified within the ESSP with school divisions. Representatives who accepted responsibility for achievement of outcomes would have

appropriate authority to carry out the necessary actions. The timelines to achieve outcomes would be supported by research or other analysis.

The Ministry's action-plan template required documentation of:

- › Individual(s) responsible for leading the action plan
- › Individual(s) responsible for the specific actions detailed within the plan (e.g., develop alternate pathways to graduation, develop instructional framework for reading, professional development for teachers)
- › Timelines for completion of specific actions
- › Resource requirements for specific actions (e.g., human resources, funding)
- › Risks that could prevent or delay completion of the plan (e.g., shortage of funding, addressing diversity of student needs, capacity of school division staff)
- › Strategies to reduce identified risks

We reviewed provincial action plans, Ministry action plans, and action plans for selected school divisions. We found that the action plans documented the individual(s) responsible for leading each action plan. These individuals appeared to have appropriate authority (e.g., Assistant Deputy Ministers, Directors of Education, Executive Directors, Directors), as well as knowledge and expertise in the relevant subject matter. However, we found that provincial, Ministry, and school division plans were often incomplete (e.g., missing responsibilities, timelines, resource requirements, risks, or risk reduction strategies for specific actions). Although it is reasonable that not all details would be determined within the first year of a six-year plan, we found details were missing for certain actions with deadlines in the current or upcoming year.

As described earlier in **Section 4.1.2**, at January 31, 2015, the PLT had not yet established a deadline for when the plans must be completed. Lack of a deadline increases the risk that the PLT, Ministry, and school divisions may not prepare complete action plans on a timely basis. Incomplete action plans make it difficult to monitor progress and take timely corrective action as necessary to meet stated targets. Documented plans also help ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities, creating stronger accountability for the achievement of actions and outcomes.

- 2. We recommend that the Ministry of Education establish a deadline for completing action plans supporting achievement of the outcomes identified within the sector-wide strategic plan for the Prekindergarten through Grade 12 education sector.**

4.2.2 Reasonableness of Targets Not Supported

We expected the Ministry to confirm the targets for the outcomes identified within the ESSP, including determining whether the targets were precise, measurable, and challenging but achievable. We also expected the Ministry to establish performance measures that were relevant, reliable, comparable, and understandable.

As illustrated earlier in **Figure 1**, the PLT set out long-term outcomes (i.e., long-term targets) as well as improvement targets to assess achievement of the ESSP. We found that the targets related to relevant, clearly defined (i.e., precise and measurable) numeric



or description measures. The Ministry set calculation methodologies that documented how to measure actual performance to help ensure the performance information was reliable, comparable, and understandable.

While the PLT developed the ESSP, it also considered central government direction when setting outcomes and targets. We found that outcomes in the ESSP tied to the direction set out by the Government in the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth – Vision 2020 and Beyond* as shown in **Figure 7**.

Figure 7 – Comparison of Government Goals to ESSP Long-Term Outcomes

Government Direction	ESSP Long-Term Outcome	2013-14 Actual Results (Baseline)
Reduce the difference in graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by 50% by 2020.	By June 2020, collaboration between First Nations and Métis and non- First Nations and Métis partners will result in significant improvement in First Nations and Métis achievement and graduation rates.	First Nations and Métis graduation rate of 40.3%. Non-First Nations and Métis graduation rate of 83.4%.
Lead the country in Grade 12 graduation rates by 2020 (the highest provincial graduation rate in the country is about 82%).	Saskatchewan’s graduation rate will be 85% by 2020.	Saskatchewan graduation rate of 74.7%.
To increase student achievement, increase the number of Grade 3 students reading at “grade level” by 20% by 2015.	By June 2020, 80% of students will be at grade level or above in reading, writing, and math.	Reading: Grade 1 = 65.8% Grade 2 = 69.8% Grade 3 = 69.9% No baseline for writing and math as measures are still in development.
Ensure the programs and services delivered by government are being delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible and are aligned to the government’s priorities. Require school boards to demonstrate financial efficiencies such as joint supply purchasing, shared back office services, Lean initiatives and workforce adjustment targets that can be directed towards supporting front-line services.	By 2017, the increase in operational education spending will not exceed the general wage increases and inflationary costs within the sector while being responsive to the challenges of student need, population growth, and demographic changes.	No baseline for operational education spending as measures are still in development.
Expand Prekindergarten programs with an emphasis on improved support for children at-risk, in addition to increasing early learning and childcare spaces in Saskatchewan.	By June 2020, 90% of students exiting Kindergarten will score within the appropriate range in 4 of the 5 domains as measured by the Early Years Evaluation (EYE).	81.8% of students exiting Kindergarten.

Source: Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan (February 2015) based on information from Government of Saskatchewan, *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth – Vision 2020 and Beyond* (March 2014), *Ministry of Education, Plan for 2014-15* (March 2014), and Ministry of Education.

While performance measures were established to help assess achievement of the outcomes identified within the ESSP, given the 2013-14 results, some of the related targets appear ambitious. For example, the ESSP includes an outcome that Saskatchewan’s graduation rate will be 85% by 2020. As illustrated earlier in **Figure 2**, the province’s graduation rate has been fairly stable over the past five years, at about 75%. To realize a 10% increase in graduation rates within the next five years will require significant improvements across the sector.

The Ministry did not keep documentation of research or other work supporting how the targets established in the ESSP were determined. As such, the Ministry was not able to

show that its long-term outcomes or improvement targets (as described earlier in **Figure 1**) are achievable. Achievable targets, including those that are challenging, can help generate public support for plans, assist in further motivating staff to fulfill achievement of the targets, and furnish an appropriate gauge of performance.

Earlier in **Section 4.1.2**, we describe that ESSP outcomes relate to increasing graduation rates. In our *2014 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 19, we reported the results of our follow up of our audit of the Ministry’s processes to increase graduation rates above the 2004-05 baselines.¹² We reported that the Ministry had not yet identified and analyzed the reasons for changes in graduation rates, nor identified the most effective education strategies that could influence student achievement and Grade 12 graduation rates. While the Ministry had set some targets for increasing graduation rates, it still had work to do. We continued our recommendation that the Ministry set short- and long-term targets for increasing Grade 12 graduation rates.

4.2.3 Monitoring and Reporting Processes Developed

We expected the Ministry to establish processes for monitoring and reporting the achievement of outcomes identified in the ESSP. Such processes would set the frequency and format for monitoring and reporting, as well as the processes to gather, analyze, and report results.

The Ministry and school divisions use computer systems to help gather and analyze the data required for reporting progress. Most of the data used for reporting is maintained in the Ministry’s Student Data System (SDS). SDS is the Ministry’s primary database for the education sector and contains various information about students and schools within the Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system. For example, SDS contains information such as student demographics and student marks for grades 10 through 12. The Ministry is also beginning to use SDS to collect reading-level data for students in grades one through three.

According to its September 2014 terms of reference, the PLT expects to meet three times each year (in approximately September, December, and April) to monitor progress towards action plans and outcomes. The PLT met many times after it approved the ESSP in spring 2014; two of these meetings were for the purposes of monitoring progress, with the third monitoring meeting expected to occur in April 2015.

As described earlier in **Section 4.1.1**, the Ministry provided the sector with various templates for monitoring and preparing reporting information (e.g., action plans, charts for reporting progress, etc.), as well as guides to help facilitate meetings to discuss progress towards plans. PLT members responsible for the various provincial action plans use this guidance to analyze results to date and report on progress.

We found the PLT’s reports included data charts showing trends compared to targets and corrective action plans for outcomes that were not progressing as expected (e.g., extending the date for the First Nations and Métis student achievement initiative field test to allow sufficient preparation time). However, given the relationships between the provincial and Ministry/school division plans, as shown earlier in **Figure 5**, and that

¹² In our *2012 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 2, we found that the Ministry did not have effective processes to increase the Grade 12 graduation rate above the 2004-05 baseline rate and we made 10 recommendations. We followed up on the status of the 10 recommendations in our *2014 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 19, and found that, at January 31, 2014, the Ministry had partially implemented three of the recommendations and not implemented seven recommendations.



school division plans are incomplete, the PLT and the Ministry could not fully monitor progress towards the outcomes.

We observed that the Ministry followed the guidance at its monthly meetings to discuss progress towards the Ministry's action plans. The Ministry provided training to school divisions on this guidance. We saw that certain school division reports used this guidance. As described earlier in **Section 4.1.2**, at January 31, 2015, school divisions were using various processes to plan and had not completed their plans, so use of the guidance varied. Given that this was the first year of the ESSP implementation, it is reasonable for reporting practices to evolve as the sector learned to work with the new methodology.

Because the ESSP was first introduced in 2014, the Ministry had not, by January 2015, provided a year-end progress update for the ESSP outcomes. It expects to report publicly on these outcomes in the summer of 2015 in the Ministry's 2014-15 annual report.

4.3 Support Achievement of Outcomes

4.3.1 Align Resources with Expectations

We expected the Ministry to appropriately align resources (e.g., funding, staff, training) to assist with achievement of the ESSP outcomes. We expected the Ministry to designate staff to support school divisions throughout the ESSP process, provide training to support focus on the ESSP outcomes, and approve funding to support the cost of action plans.

As described earlier in **Section 4.1.1**, the Ministry has designated its Planning and Reporting Unit as the facilitator of the ESSP process. The Planning and Reporting Unit provides guidance and support to the school divisions throughout the process by providing template materials and maintaining the ESSP-specific web portals. School divisions can contact the Planning and Reporting Unit for assistance or with questions regarding the ESSP. Also, the Ministry held various ESSP training events for staff within the Ministry and the sector (e.g., school divisions, First Nations and Métis organizations, Saskatchewan Association of School Board Officials, etc.).

In October 2014, the Ministry also assigned additional staff supports to assist the sector. As shown earlier in **Figure 1**, the ESSP included two short-term priority actions that were deemed to be areas of focus for 2014-15. The Ministry established a Priority Action Team (PAT) made up of key staff from throughout the Ministry with specific skills and knowledge to support achievement of those actions. The PAT worked directly with PLT members, who were responsible for the actions, and with supporting staff at the school divisions and the Ministry. Because the Ministry expects to set new short-term priority actions approximately annually, it expects the work of the PAT to change each year to align with those actions.

The Ministry also used the PLT forum to convey its expectations surrounding the use of financial resources for the ESSP. The Ministry did not make adjustments to its PreK-12 Funding Distribution Model as a result of the ESSP and is not planning to provide significant incremental funding to school divisions for implementation of the ESSP. The

Ministry provides school divisions with annual operating grants totalling about \$1.2 billion¹³ each year and expects school divisions to allocate their operating funding as necessary to accomplish the outcomes of the ESSP. We also note that the Ministry has provided funding of about \$1 million to support two specific actions or programs related to the ESSP.

The action-plan template requires consideration and documentation of resource requirements. As described earlier in **Section 4.2.1**, we found instances where the consideration and documentation of resource requirements within action plans were incomplete. As described earlier in **Section 4.1.2**, we found that the Ministry did not review school division plans including resource requirements. In our *2014 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 19, we reported that without a timely review of school divisions' plans, the Ministry will not know if school divisions plan to spend public money on student education as intended (e.g., actions to achieve the ESSP).

4.3.2 Complete Risk Identification and Mitigation Needed

We expected the Ministry to manage risks that prevent achieving the outcomes identified within the ESSP. Risk management involves identifying risk, as well as using strategies or actions to mitigate the risks to an acceptable level.

In initially developing the ESSP, the Ministry completed an environmental scan that included a general risk assessment. The Ministry is to update this risk assessment each year as part of the annual planning cycle for the ESSP. The Ministry action-plan template also requires the identification and documentation of risks that could interfere with carrying out detailed actions, and the development of strategies to reduce the identified risks to an acceptable level. We found risk identification and mitigation strategies within Ministry and school division action plans we reviewed were incomplete in nearly all cases. The Ministry did not require all school divisions to use the template in 2014-15, but plans to start requiring this in 2015-16.

Effective risk management processes can help to increase the likelihood of meeting targeted outcomes, including staying within planned resources. As described earlier in **Section 4.2.1**, we recommend that the Ministry establish a sector deadline for completing action plans, which includes documenting risks and the strategies to reduce them.

4.3.3 Plans Revised As Necessary

We expected the Ministry to have processes to revise the ESSP as necessary (e.g., based on performance results). We expected the Ministry to have processes to communicate changes made to the ESSP to its stakeholders (e.g., school divisions, public).

The sector plans to update the ESSP annually by March. At January 31, 2015, the sector had started its annual planning cycle to review and update the ESSP. As described earlier in **Section 4.2.3**, the PLT met twice between the approval of the ESSP in spring 2014 and January 31, 2015 to monitor progress towards the ESSP outcomes, including consideration of revisions needed to the ESSP. The Ministry reviewed its performance

¹³ *Government of Saskatchewan – 2014-15 Estimates*, p. 46.



results supporting the ESSP during the year (e.g., Ministry monthly progress meetings), which provided another opportunity to consider revisions. The Ministry expects to communicate any subsequent changes PLT approves to the outcomes or targets within the ESSP to stakeholders through the Ministry's strategic plan and annual report that are issued for each fiscal year. No such changes occurred by January 31, 2015.

While information contained within the ESSP had not been revised as of January 2015, action plans supporting the ESSP were revised in 2014-15. When ESSP outcomes are not progressing as expected, the individuals responsible for the related action plan(s) are required to create a corrective action plan that explains why the outcome is not progressing as expected along with suggested revisions to realign activity to achieve the outcome. We observed several corrective action plans documenting how the Ministry and the sector were revising their action plans on an ongoing basis based on their analysis of results.

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