Chapter 20
Education—Increasing Grade 12 Graduation Rates

1.0   MAIN POINTS

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

By February 28, 2017, the Ministry made good progress on recommendations we made in 2012 regarding increasing Grade 12 graduation rates. It had implemented five of the ten recommendations, partially implemented four recommendations, and had not implemented one recommendation. The Ministry, collaboratively with school divisions, continues to work on implementing the Education Sector Strategic Plan, including the identification of strategies to improve graduation rates. While the Ministry had not assessed the effectiveness of school division strategies to improve graduation rates, it is actively working on completing its assessment of school division action plans.

2.0   INTRODUCTION

As reflected by its two goals related to Grade 12 graduation, the education of young people is a priority for the Government:

❯   To lead the country in Grade 12 graduation rates by 2020[1]

❯   To reduce the difference in graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by 50% by 2020[2]

Our *2012 Report – Volume 1,* Chapter 2 concluded that the Ministry did not have effective processes to increase Grade 12 graduation rates above the 2004-05 baselines and included ten recommendations. By January 31, 2014,[3] as reported in our *2014 Report – Volume 1,* Chapter 19, the Ministry had partially implemented three of those ten recommendations. This chapter describes our second follow up of management's actions on these recommendations.

For the purposes of this follow-up, school divisions include public schools, separate schools (i.e., Catholic), and the conseil scolaire (French language schools).[4]

To conduct this review engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance*. To evaluate the Ministry's progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. The Ministry's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

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[1] Government of Saskatchewan, *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth, Vision 2020 and Beyond* (2012), p. 5.
[2] Ibid., p. 4.
[3] This was the date of our last follow-up.
[4] *The Education Act, 1995* defines school divisions as public and separate school boards only.

We examined processes surrounding the Education Sector Strategic Plan, including establishment of measures and targets. We reviewed action plans and reports supporting improved graduation rates. We also interviewed Ministry officials as necessary.

2.1 Status of Graduation Rates

Graduating from Grade 12 is an important personal goal with broad societal implications. On a personal level, students who do not complete Grade 12 have fewer work opportunities, less income, and ultimately poorer health. Over the long term, Grade 12 graduation rates affect the size of the skilled workforce and the provincial economy.

Figure 1 illustrates the three-year, five-year, and eventual graduation rates of Saskatchewan students completing Grade 12 from June 2011 to June 2016. It shows the difference in graduation rates for students who have identified themselves as First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students (FNMI) as compared to all students.

In the 2004-05 school year (the baseline school year), the overall graduation rate for students graduated within three years was 75.6% (FNMI: 31.5%) and the overall graduation rate for students graduated within five years was 81.4% (FNMI: 47.1%).[5] As **Figure 1** shows, the overall three-year graduation rate remained flat since 2004-05, whereas the FNMI graduation rate increased by almost 33%.

Figure 1—Trends for Persistence to Complete Grade 12[A]

Completing Grade 12	Three-year (within three years)			Five-year (within five years)			Eight-year (within eight years)		
	All	Non-FNMI	FNMI[B]	All	Non-FNMI	FNMI[B]	All	Non-FNMI	FNMI[B]
June 2011	72.7	81.8	32.9	81.3	87.9	48.5	82.9	87.7	54.4
June 2012	73.7	82.9	35.9	81.2	88.0	49.7	83.5	87.9	55.5
June 2013	74.8	83.9	37.4	80.1	87.0	50.0	82.4	87.4	54.9
June 2014	74.7	83.4	40.3	81.4	88.1	54.2	83.5	89.1	56.1
June 2015	75.2	84.3	40.1	82.5	89.2	55.9	83.7	89.4	57.7
June 2016	75.6	84.5	41.8	83.3	89.5	59.6	83.2	88.7	59.7

Source: *Ministry of Education 2015-16 Annual Report*, p. 14, and information provided by the Ministry of Education.
FMNI – First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students.
* This is the most current data available at February 28, 2017.
[A]Three-year graduation rates are calculated as the percentage of students who complete Grade 12 within three years of starting Grade 10. Five-year graduation rates are calculated as the percentage of students who complete Grade 12 within five years of starting Grade 10 (and include those who graduate within three years). Eight-year graduation rates are calculated as the percentage of students who complete Grade 12 at any time after starting Grade 10 (and include those who graduated within three to five years). Eight-year graduation rates shown in the table are for the cohorts of students who have had at least eight years to graduate from the start of Grade 10.
[B] FNMI students are those who choose to self-identify as First Nation (Registered/Treaty/Status Indian, Non-Status Indian), Métis, or Inuit/Inuk, and may include FNMI students who choose not to self-identify.
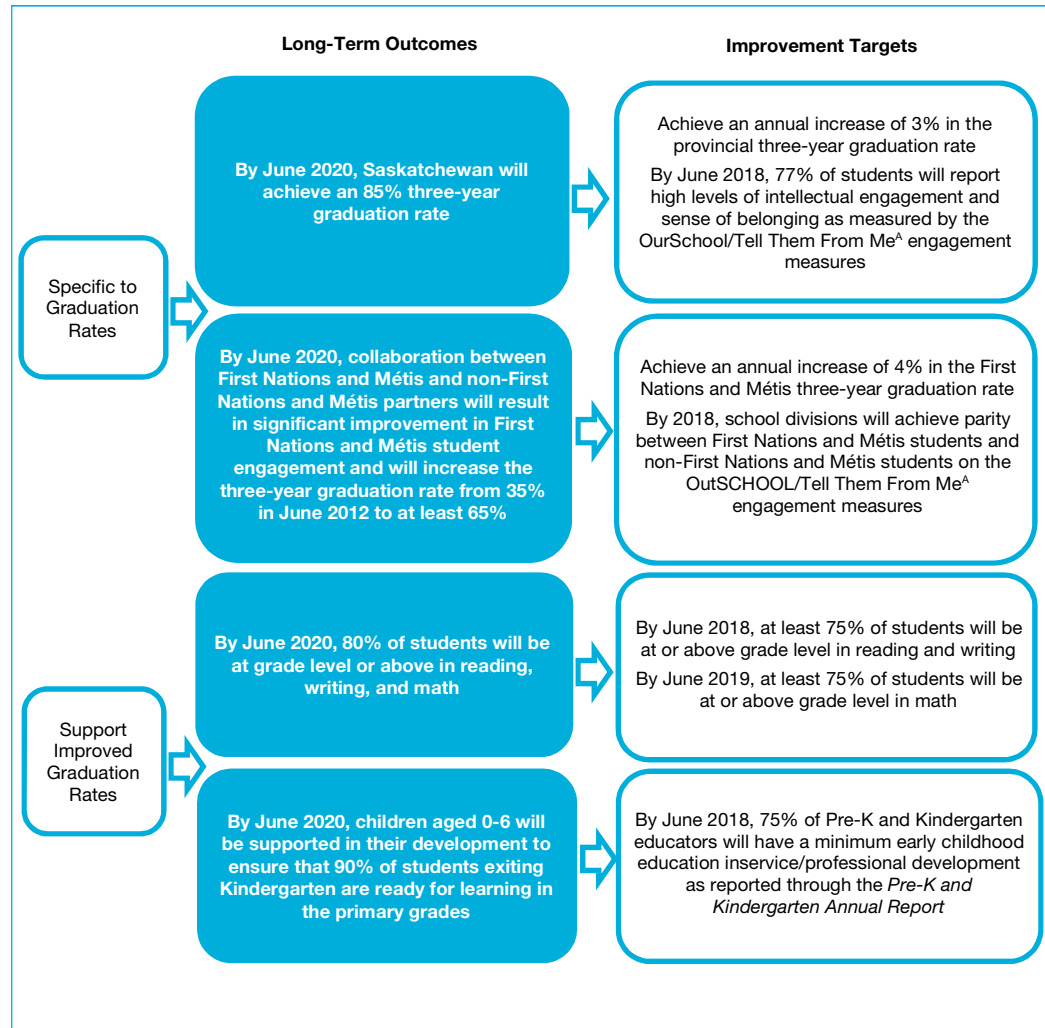
2.2 Sector Approach to Improving Graduation Rates

In 2013, the Ministry of Education and school divisions formed the Provincial Leadership Team to lead and co-ordinate the development and implementation of the Education

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[5] Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, *2014 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 19, *Education – Grade 12 Graduation Rates*, (2014), p. 164.

Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP).[6] The ESSP includes five long-term outcomes. **Figure 2** illustrates those ESSP outcomes specific to graduation rates, as well as those supporting improvements in graduation rates.

Figure 2—Education Sector Strategic Plan Long-Term Outcomes and Improvement Targets

Long-Term Outcomes	Improvement Targets
Specific to Graduation Rates	
By June 2020, Saskatchewan will achieve an 85% three-year graduation rate	Achieve an annual increase of 3% in the provincial three-year graduation rate. By June 2018, 77% of students will report high levels of intellectual engagement and sense of belonging as measured by the OurSchool/Tell Them From Me[A] engagement measures
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 student engagement and will increase the three-year graduation rate from 35% in June 2012 to at least 65%	Achieve an annual increase of 4% in the First Nations and Métis three-year graduation rate. By 2018, school divisions will achieve parity between First Nations and Métis students and non-First Nations and Métis students on the OutSCHOOL/Tell Them From Me[A] engagement measures
Support Improved Graduation Rates	
By June 2020, 80% of students will be at grade level or above in reading, writing, and math	By June 2018, at least 75% of students will be at or above grade level in reading and writing. By June 2019, at least 75% of students will be at or above grade level in math
By June 2020, children aged 0-6 will be supported in their development to ensure that 90% of students exiting Kindergarten are ready for learning in the primary grades	By June 2018, 75% of Pre-K and Kindergarten educators will have a minimum early childhood education inservice/professional development as reported through the *Pre-K and Kindergarten Annual Report*

Source: Adapted from *Ministry of Education Plan for 2016-17* and ESSP Cycle 2 Extended documents.
[A] The Ministry and school divisions obtain the OurSCHOOL/Tell Them From Me engagement measures from a survey designed to collect information on students' sense of belonging, intellectual engagement, and positive relationships (i.e., measures of student engagement).

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at February 28, 2017, and the Ministry's actions up to that date. We found that the Ministry implemented five recommendations, was in the process of implementing four recommendations, and did not make any progress on one recommendation.

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[6] The ESSP is a multi-year strategic plan focused on specific outcomes and achieving goals set in the Saskatchewan Plan for Growth, Vision 2020 and Beyond.

3.1 ESSP Establishes Targets and Sets Focus on Graduation Rates

We recommended that the Ministry of Education use its legislated authority to direct school divisions toward improved Grade 12 graduation rates. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Education set short and long-term targets for increasing Grade 12 graduation rates. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Education clearly state what should be measured and how it should be measured to assess student progress/achievements that significantly contribute to successful Grade 12 graduation. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Implemented

In 2014-15, the Ministry and school divisions agreed to participate in developing and executing the ESSP, including requiring school divisions to develop division-level action plans supporting the achievement of the ESSP outcomes.

The Provincial Leadership Team provided school divisions with templates for preparing their action plans. The templates require school divisions to identify root causes related to poor graduation rates, actions to address the root causes, and identification of risks to completing the actions.

As set out in **Figure 2**, the Provincial Leadership Team established:

❯ Measures contributing to successful graduation, including having students achieve grade level or above in reading, writing, and math, and improving Kindergarten students' readiness to learn before entering the primary grades

❯ Long-term outcomes and improvement (i.e., short-term) targets for the specific measures

We found that the Provincial Leadership Team also established other metrics that school divisions could use when measuring progress towards the ESSP's long-term outcomes. Examples of other measures include student attendance, the number of credits obtained by Grade 10 students, or the increase in the number of Grade 9 students with a graduation plan.

The ESSP long-term outcomes include different expectations for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) students and other students. As a result, the Provincial Leadership Team analyzed each school division's graduation rates and established target graduation rates for each division, based on the proportion of FNMI students in each division. This results in each school division having a different graduation rate target to contribute to the overall provincial long-term outcome (i.e., three-year graduation rate of 85%).

3.2 Sector Starting to Identify and Communicate Strategies

We recommended that the Ministry of Education identify practical, key strategies that have proven effective in Saskatchewan and other jurisdictions to strengthen student achievement and increase Grade 12 graduation rates. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Education direct school divisions to use key effective strategies (once identified by the Ministry) that have proven practical for overcoming the most significant risks of school divisions affecting student achievement and for increasing Grade 12 graduation rates. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

Since our 2014 follow-up, the Ministry and the Provincial Leadership Team established processes to identify and communicate key strategies to improve graduation rates.

In 2016-17, the Provincial Leadership Team created a *Focus on Improving Graduation Rates Priority Plan*. As part of this plan, the Provincial Leadership Team held a graduation rates symposium in September 2016. It used the symposium to provide the education sector with opportunities to discuss and share strategies to improve on-time graduation (i.e., within three years of students entering Grade 10).

Also, the Provincial Leadership Team created a Graduation Rates Leadership Team with a goal of identifying possible solutions to help increase the provincial graduation rate. This Team prepared a guide that set out challenges to on-time graduation, along with some best practices to address those challenges (based on academic research).

At February 2017, the Team continued to work towards identifying further strategies and established a website[7] to begin sharing information with the education sector.

In 2014-15, the Provincial Leadership Team developed a *Following Their Voices Priority Plan*. The focus of this plan is to implement the Following Their Voices initiative—an initiative that strives to increase the educational achievement and participation of First

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[7] www.saskgraduates.com (15 March 2017).

Nations and Métis students by focusing on enhancing relationships between students and teachers, and creating safe, well-managed learning environments for students. During 2016-17, the Provincial Leadership Team implemented the initiative at 12 schools located across the province.

3.3 Process to Review Action Plans Established but Not Complete

We recommended that the Ministry of Education review each school division's Continuous Improvement Plan and assess its planned use of key effective strategies before approving the school division's budget for the related school year. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Education require school divisions to report critical risks limiting student achievement and that the Ministry analyze provincial progress in reducing critical risks. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015).

Status – Partially Implemented

At February 2017, the Ministry had an established process to review school division action plans—these plans replaced the prior Continuous Improvement Plans. However, it has not fully implemented its process.

The Ministry developed criteria to assess alignment of the school division action plans with the outcomes identified in the ESSP. The Ministry was formally tracking the completion of its assessments.

While the Ministry reviewed only half of the six school division action plans we tested, the Ministry was in the midst of reviewing the actions plans it received. It expected to complete its assessment of the school divisions' 2015-16 and 2016-17 action plans by June 2017.

Of the six school division action plans we reviewed, one school division did not identify risks and mitigation strategies in their plan as the Ministry's template expected. The Ministry had not yet reviewed this school division's action plan.

With respect to analyzing progress in reducing critical risks, we found that the Ministry reviewed changes in factors that influence graduation rates and gave school divisions data to evaluate changes such as improvements in attendance and credit attainment.

However, as the Ministry had not completed its review of school division action plans at February 2017, it did not know if all divisions reported root causes, actions, and risks to completing actions as the Ministry expected.

As described in **Section 3.2**, the Provincial Leadership Team began communicating to school divisions about strategies to improve graduation rates. At February 2017, the Ministry had not determined how to communicate the assessment results to school divisions to foster better alignment of school division action plans with ESSP outcomes.

3.4   School Division Results Reviewed and Reported

We recommended that the Ministry of Education review each school division's Continuous Improvement Report and assess if it is achieving its planned outcomes. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Intention of Recommendation Implemented

We recommended that the Ministry of Education publicly report the major reasons for differences in the graduation rates of all school divisions and schools. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Implemented

Since the spring of 2013, the Ministry stopped using the Continuous Improvement Report.[8] Instead, the Ministry and school divisions use the annual reports of school divisions as the primary tool to assess progress over the preceding year.

The Ministry gave school divisions a template to help ensure annual reports contained key information about progress. The template requires school division annual reports to show how the divisions' goals align with the ESSP outcomes—including outcomes specific to graduation rates. In addition, their annual reports must describe actions taken to achieve outcomes and associated results (e.g., on-time graduation rates, students reading at grade level), and include an analysis of results.

For six school division annual reports we tested, we found that the Ministry reviewed each annual report for alignment with the ESSP and adherence to the Ministry's template. Also, as described in **Section 3.1**, the Ministry analyzed each school division's graduation rates to establish the required school division targets necessary to achieve the overall provincial long-term outcome.

In addition, we found that each of the six school divisions' annual reports included reporting on actions taken to improve graduation rates, along with current gradation rates and analysis.

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[8] The Continuous Improvement Report was a report submitted by school divisions to the Ministry that presented evidence of progress in meeting expected outcomes and that provided direction for subsequent plans.

3.5 Effectiveness of Strategies Not Analyzed

We recommended that the Ministry of Education analyze and report whether school divisions use key effective strategies that could influence Grade 12 graduation rates. (2012 Report – Volume 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Not Implemented

While the Ministry reviews school division annual reports, it does not analyze the effectiveness of any particular school division actions or strategies. The Ministry acknowledged that using the ESSP could serve as a way to perform such an analysis.