

Chapter 22

Education – Monitoring Kindergarten Students' Readiness to Learn in the Primary Grades

1.0 MAIN POINTS

In 2014, Saskatchewan's education sector established an early learning goal associated with Kindergarten students' readiness to learn. The Ministry of Education is responsible for monitoring the achievement of this goal and helping school divisions work towards its achievement.

By June 2020, the sector aims to have 90% of students exiting Kindergarten ready to learn in the primary grades (i.e., Grades 1 to 3). As of June 2017, teachers determined, using a Ministry-facilitated Early Years Evaluation assessment tool, that about 80% of them were ready.

Other than the following areas, the Ministry had effective processes to monitor improving the percentage of Kindergarten students scoring within the appropriate Early Years Evaluation range. To improve its monitoring processes, the Ministry needs to:

- Analyze data to identify those school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting Kindergarten. Having better analysis would help school divisions and the Ministry determine and understand the reasons for Kindergarten students not being ready to learn, and provide information critical to developing effective Kindergarten environments and programs.
- Co-ordinate its analysis of action plans of school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal. Knowing whether those divisions have adequate plans is key to addressing reasons for lower than desired student performance, and avoiding delays in putting appropriate actions in place.
- Actively monitor the Kindergarten programs delivered by school divisions and take specific actions to assist school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting Kindergarten. Monitoring whether school divisions take sufficient actions and sharing best practices will help the Ministry know if divisions deliver effective Kindergarten programs. Focusing the Ministry's efforts on school divisions struggling to improve Kindergarten students' readiness to learn will help improve the chances of future students in those divisions being ready to learn in the primary grades.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ministry is responsible for all matters relating to early learning, elementary, and secondary education. The Ministry is to lead and co-ordinate all areas, including developing goals, objectives, and educational planning for the present and future growth and development of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 educational system.



The Education Act, 1995 makes the Ministry responsible for overseeing school divisions. The Ministry carries out this responsibility by working with the 28 locally elected boards of education and appointed directors of education, and by reviewing and approving school divisions' objectives and programs.

This chapter sets out the results of our audit of the Ministry's processes to monitor improving the percentage of Kindergarten students scoring within the appropriate Early Years Evaluation range to meet the sector goal of 90% by 2020. At September 30, 2016, 13,700 Kindergarten students were in Saskatchewan's provincially funded education system (September 30, 2015: 13,800).¹

2.1 Importance of Early Learning

Research shows that quality education early in life leads to better health, education, and employment outcomes later in life, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.² During the first six years of a child's life, a child develops the basic skills, knowledge, and abilities that the child will build on throughout life.³ Students who learn more in Kindergarten are more likely to attend post-secondary school, earn more, and save for retirement.⁴

In 2014, the Ministry and school divisions established a sector-wide strategic plan called the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP).⁵ The ESSP includes a goal of having 90% of Kindergarten students within the appropriate Early Years Evaluation (EYE) range by June 2020 (early learning goal).

The EYE is a skill-based assessment tool the Ministry has adopted for use in Saskatchewan. Industry designed this tool to help teachers assess the skills of young children in five domains related to readiness to learn at school and to read.⁶ See **Figure 1** for details. Students scoring in the appropriate EYE range mean they are ready to learn and should experience success in subsequent grades.

Figure 1 – Five Domains of Early Years Evaluation

The EYE's five domains are:

- Awareness of self and environment
- Social skills, behaviour, and approaches to learning
- Cognitive skills
- Language and communication
- Physical development

Source: www.earlyyearsassessment.com/images/site_docs/early%20years%20evaluation_implementation%20guide_vf_310320_11.pdf. (1 March 2017).

¹ Adapted from the Ministry of Education's enrolment reports for 2015 and 2016.

² Auditor General New South Wales, *Early childhood education: Department of Education*, (2016), p. 6.

³ Ministry of Education, *Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016-2020*, p. 3.

⁴ David Leonhardt, *The New York Times: The Case for \$320,000 Kindergarten Teachers*, (2010).

⁵ The Ministry and school divisions formed a Provincial Leadership Team to establish the ESSP. The team is composed of employees from the Ministry, each school division, and representatives from the First Nations' school system.

⁶ Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families, *Review of the Early Years Evaluation – Teacher Assessment*, (2011), pp. 2-3.

Cabinet approves the Ministry's public plan.⁷ Each school division's board of education approves its division's strategic plan.

The ESSP requires the Ministry and each school division to develop an action plan for achieving their goals. This is to include actions for increasing the percentage of students exiting Kindergarten ready to learn in the primary grades.

The Ministry and school divisions are each responsible for achieving their plans. In addition, the Ministry is responsible for monitoring achievement of the ESSP goals and helping school divisions work towards achieving those goals. The Ministry has made its Early Years Branch responsible for monitoring the early learning goal.

In 2016-17, 80% of about 14,000 Kindergarten students exiting Kindergarten scored within the appropriate range of the five domains as measured by the EYE⁸ (2015-16: 80%).⁹

Assessing students early in Kindergarten helps identify those who may be in need of professional services such as speech pathologists or additional school supports. The longer student needs go undiagnosed and unsupported, the more difficult it is for students to catch up with their peers.¹⁰

Effective monitoring processes help the Ministry identify and assist school divisions in addressing challenges and barriers to Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades. Without effective processes to monitor EYE scores of Kindergarten students, the Ministry risks placing students at greater risk of not achieving their academic, financial, and social potential.

3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

We concluded that for the 12-month period ended April 30, 2017, the Ministry of Education had, except in the following areas, effective processes to monitor improving the percentage of Kindergarten students scoring within the appropriate Early Years Evaluation range to meet the sector goal of 90% by 2020. The Ministry needs to:

- **Analyze data to identify those school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting Kindergarten and take specific actions to assist those school divisions**
- **Co-ordinate its analysis of action plans of school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal**
- **Actively monitor the Kindergarten programs delivered by school divisions**

⁷ <http://finance.gov.sk.ca/Plansfor2017-18>. (21 July 2017).

⁸ Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Education.

⁹ The Learning Bar, *Early Years Evaluation Annual Report Saskatchewan Ministry of Education 2015-2016 Summary*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Understanding the Early Years Regina, *Measuring Early Childhood Development in Regina*, (2009).

**Figure 2—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach****Audit Objective:**

The objective of this audit was to assess, for the 12-month period ended April 30, 2017, the effectiveness of the Ministry of Education's processes to monitor improving the percentage of Kindergarten students scoring within the appropriate Early Years Evaluation range to meet the sector goal of 90% by 2020.

Audit Criteria:

Processes to:

1. Assess progress towards achieving provincial scoring targets
 - 1.1 Require school divisions to periodically report results
 - 1.2 Analyze school division results to identify opportunities and barriers
 - 1.3 Adjust plans in response to identified opportunities and barriers
2. Support school divisions in improving Kindergarten students' readiness to learn
 - 2.1 Support school divisions' achievement of provincial scoring targets (e.g., guidance, resources, tools)
 - 2.2 Manage risks to timely completion of key actions
 - 2.3 Facilitate co-ordination with key non-education partners as needed

Audit Approach:

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance* (CSAE 3001). 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 above criteria.

We examined the Ministry's criteria, policies, and procedures that relate to monitoring Kindergarten students' EYE scores. We analyzed EYE data and assessed the Ministry's related processes and reports. We interviewed Ministry staff and staff at selected school divisions.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we describe our key findings and recommendations related to the audit criteria in **Figure 2**. Unless otherwise noted, references to the Ministry refer to activities of the Early Years Branch of the Ministry of Education.

4.1 Kindergarten Students' Readiness to Learn in the Primary Grades Assessed Using Consistent Tool

School divisions assess all Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades using the same externally developed assessment tool—the Early Years Evaluation—Teachers Assessment. Each school division submitted the EYE data twice a year as and when expected.

Since 2012, the Ministry, through a contract with an external service provider, makes the assessment tool and related IT system available to all 28 provincially funded school divisions along with interested qualified independent schools (i.e., schools owned or operated by a person or an organization other than the government). In addition, the external service provider makes training resources available and provides support to teachers using the assessment tool and related IT system.

The Ministry has a protocol document for its staff and school division staff that outlines the frequency of administering EYE assessments, and which students should be assessed. In addition, it sets out submission deadlines for when teachers must enter the results of their evaluations. The Provincial Leadership Team communicates EYE assessment expectations to school divisions through meetings and reports. Each school division establishes an EYE co-ordinator.

Using this common assessment tool, teachers evaluate students' readiness to learn in the primary grades by observing students over time. The assessment indicates each student's developmental levels as either appropriate development (tier one), experiencing some difficulty (tier two), or experiencing significant difficulty (tier three) for each of the five domains described in **Figure 1**. Teachers enter assigned scores online into the IT system.

Teachers, at the Ministry's request, assess Kindergarten students using the EYE in the fall (i.e., within four to six weeks after the beginning of the school year) and in the spring.

In the fall, school division teachers use the assessment tool to assess all Kindergarten students, including children with intensive needs and children who are learning English as an additional language. In the spring, teachers reassess students whose fall EYE scores were in tiers two or three (i.e., those experiencing some or significant difficulty).

We found that the Ministry, its external service provider, and assigned school division EYE co-ordinators actively monitor when teachers complete the entry of Kindergarten student scores into the IT system. The Ministry also sends out reminders to school divisions about the submission deadlines.

On a weekly basis around the submission deadlines, the external service provider monitors the entry of each school's Kindergarten student scores, and notifies the Ministry of issues, if any. The Ministry follows up with EYE co-ordinators at school divisions to ensure the divisions submit the assessment of each Kindergarten student by the submission deadline.

We found that for spring and fall 2016, each of the school divisions had submitted scores for the required students for all of their schools within the submission deadlines.

The IT system automatically compiles the scores of students. It makes student scores and other related data available electronically in a way that can be readily sorted (e.g., by division, by school, by tier) and compared to the early learning goal of 90%. The Ministry has access to all of the data, and each school division has access to scores and related data for students within its division. School divisions include summarized EYE data for their own students within their annual reports.

4.2 Analysis of Kindergarten Student Scores and Related Data Limited

The Ministry does limited analysis of the Kindergarten student EYE scores and related data to identify those school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal.

The Ministry and its external service provider generate reports from the IT system that present the data in the EYE system in various ways (e.g., student scores provincially, by tier, by school division, by school). School divisions can also create reports directly from the IT system for their own students' EYE scores. These reports include various data about Kindergarten students, including:

- Gender
- Age



- Socio-economic status
- First Nations, Métis, or Inuit status
- Location (i.e., school division, school)

While there is a large amount of data available in the IT system and the Ministry has sorted the data in various ways, we found the Ministry performed limited analysis to identify those school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal. Our analysis of the EYE data for Kindergarten students for 2015-16 found that, of the provincial students who were not ready to learn in the primary grades (i.e., students with spring EYE scores in tier two or three), almost two-thirds resided in eight school divisions—both urban and rural.

We did not see evidence that the Ministry placed more attention on these eight divisions even though their success could have the greatest impact on achievement of the ESSP's early learning goal of having 90% of students being ready to learn in the primary grades upon exiting Kindergarten by June 2020. For example, we did not see that the Ministry worked on determining the root causes for the lower than desired performance of Kindergarten students in these divisions, or that it gave the action plans of these divisions more attention, working with them as necessary. Such activities are key to making sure timely actions related to early years learning programs are taken to address identified root causes.

Better analysis of data related to the development of Kindergarten students would assist the Ministry in identifying the school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal and the possible root causes (e.g., common characteristics between those school divisions identified). Not having robust analysis increases the risk that the school divisions and the Ministry do not determine or understand the reasons for Kindergarten students not being ready to learn in the primary grades.

1. We recommend that the Ministry of Education more thoroughly analyze data related to the development of students to identify those school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting Kindergarten.

While the Ministry can improve its identification of risks to students' readiness to learn in the primary grades, we found it identified some risks to achieving the ESSP early learning goal. Some risks include poor student attendance and teachers having minimal training in early childhood learning. It documented these within its action plan and highlights from its bi-annual meetings with school divisions' early years representatives.

In addition, we found that the Ministry has designed some steps to mitigate these risks or address them in its action plan (e.g., expand professional development options for Kindergarten teachers). However, at April 2017, it was too early to determine whether the risk mitigation strategies were working.

4.3 Better Co-ordination of Reviews of Action Plans Needed

The Ministry does not co-ordinate its review of school division action plans to ensure staff reviewing them have sufficient knowledge to assess whether the plans contain adequate actions to increase Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades.

The Ministry reviews and adjusts its plan for achieving the early learning goal based on the Provincial Leadership Team's action plan. As previously noted in **Section 2.1**, each year, school divisions provide the Ministry with their action plans for achieving the ESSP goals including the early learning goal. The Ministry's Strategic Policy and Planning Branch reviews each school division's plan for alignment with ESSP outcomes. While this Branch reviews whether school divisions have planned actions towards the ESSP's outcomes, it does not assess the adequacy of those identified actions. In addition, staff in the Early Years Branch, those who have the knowledge required to determine whether the plans contain adequate actions to increase Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades, are not involved in this review.

In addition, as previously noted in **Section 4.2**, we found that the Ministry did not focus on the adequacy of plans of school divisions with higher proportions of students struggling to learn to determine whether the planned actions will address identified root causes (e.g., lack of student transportation to school programs, poor oral communication skills of children).

Not assessing the adequacy of plans of school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal, and not using Ministry staff with the subject matter knowledge to do those assessments, increases the risk that neither the school division nor Ministry will understand or address the reasons for the lower than desired performance of Kindergarten students. This could delay putting appropriate actions in place, resulting in future students not being ready to learn in the primary grades upon exiting Kindergarten.

2. We recommend that the Ministry of Education co-ordinate its analysis of action plans of school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal to assist them in increasing the number of students who are ready to learn in the primary grades upon exiting Kindergarten.

4.4 Active Monitoring of Kindergarten Programs Needed

The Ministry does not actively monitor Kindergarten programs.

We found the Ministry does a reasonable job monitoring Pre-Kindergarten programs with a view to increasing student readiness to learn. Every second year, the Ministry reviews a Pre-Kindergarten quality improvement plan and report from each school division. The quality improvement plan includes information about the school division's Pre-Kindergarten environment (e.g., indoor or outdoor), focus of the learning program, child development, family engagement, supporting staff, professional learning, and the selection process for allowing students into Pre-Kindergarten. The school divisions also record their planned strategies and actions for Pre-Kindergarten for the next two years.



The Ministry meets with each school division to discuss these plans and reports and to provide additional resources and supports based on the school division's needs.

For the five school division Pre-Kindergarten quality improvement plans and reports we reviewed, the Ministry met with each of the divisions to discuss their plans, actions, and possible adjustments to the plans.

Contrary to how it monitors school divisions' Pre-Kindergarten programs, we found that the Ministry does not actively monitor Kindergarten programs delivered by school divisions. It does not require school divisions to submit quality improvement plans for Kindergarten.

Without complete information about school divisions' Kindergarten environment and programs, the Ministry cannot evaluate whether school divisions are taking sufficient action to improve Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades. In addition, it does not enable the Ministry to identify and share best practices related to Kindergarten programs.

3. We recommend that the Ministry of Education actively monitor the Kindergarten programs delivered by school divisions.

4.5 Guidance Provided but Not Specifically Directed to At-Risk School Divisions

The Ministry provides guidance to all school divisions regarding responding to EYE data, but does not take specific action for school divisions whose students are at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting Kindergarten.

The Ministry provides readily available guidance and tools (e.g., strategies for teaching and engaging families in learning) to school divisions to support early learning. It provides this guidance to school divisions online, through email, and in person. It also offers various early learning professional development options to school division staff, such as online courses, virtual site tours, in-person site tours, and in-person courses.

During its bi-annual meetings with school divisions' early years representatives, the Ministry provides information on topics to respond to the EYE student scores. The Ministry also developed Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016-2020 (released in May 2016) to help address the education sector's needs.

The officials we interviewed at two school divisions expressed their appreciation of the work of the Early Years Branch. However, these officials also expressed concerns about the large quantity of guidance provided by the Ministry. They indicated school division staff and teachers find it difficult to identify which aspects of the guidance are the core resources. To address this, the Ministry, in collaboration with the Provincial Leadership Team, is drafting a document to clarify best practices. It expected to issue this document in September 2017. Our review of the draft best practices document found it addresses the concerns raised.

The Ministry also funds various programs and initiatives to help young children. For example, in 2016-17 it provided \$18.8 million to school divisions, regional health

authorities, and community organizations for KidsFirst¹¹ and Early Childhood Intervention Programs.¹² However, the Ministry does not collect data about how these programs contribute towards achievement of the ESSP early learning goal and whether there is an opportunity to leverage these programs in advancing early learning.

In addition, while the Ministry provides school divisions with many supports to assist with early learning, the Ministry does not take specific actions to assist the school divisions whose students are at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting Kindergarten (as noted in **Section 4.2**). Actively assisting school divisions struggling to improve Kindergarten students' readiness to learn would reduce the risk of future students not being ready to learn in the primary grades upon exiting Kindergarten.

4. **We recommend that the Ministry of Education take specific actions to assist those school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting Kindergarten.**

4.6 Co-ordination with Non-Education Partners

The Ministry effectively co-ordinates the education sector's involvement with non-education partners to support young children.

The Ministry is part of a Senior Inter-Ministry Steering Committee that has an Early Years Working Group. This Group is comprised of representatives from the Ministry of Education, and non-education provincial Ministries (i.e., Government Relations, Justice, Health, and Social Services). The Group meets about five times each year. We found that it collaborated on how each ministry can support early years learning.

The Ministry, through its Invitational Shared Services Initiative,¹³ provides annual funding of \$150,000 towards partnerships between school divisions and First Nations education organizations to improve educational outcomes. Under this initiative, partnerships must focus on supports addressing the targets identified in the ESSP.

We found that none of the Invitational Shared Services Initiative partnerships had plans related to early years during 2016-17. Whereas, in 2015-16, two of them had plans related to early years programming (e.g., administering the EYE assessment, professional development, providing for a speech language pathologist and literacy tutor). For each partnership, the school division and the First Nations education organization determine their areas of focus.

Some of the education sector's other non-education partners include family centres,¹⁴ public health services, childcare centres, and Early Childhood Intervention Programs.

¹¹ KidsFirst is a voluntary program that helps families in vulnerable situations. The program enhances parenting knowledge, provides support, and builds on family strengths.

¹² Early Childhood Intervention Programs support families of children ages 0-6 who experience developmental delays or are at risk of delays.

¹³ Invitational Shared Services Initiative partnerships form part of the Government's ongoing commitment to improving educational outcomes for First Nations and Métis students, as outlined in both the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth* and the ESSP. These partnerships bring together the provincial education system and First Nations education organizations to provide students and teachers living on-reserve with the same supports available in provincial schools.

¹⁴ Family centres are located in Regina, Sandy Bay, and Yorkton.



The Ministry provides school divisions with the ability to determine which non-education partners they use. The Ministry provides information about relevant activities of various non-education partners at its bi-annual meetings with school divisions' early years representatives. In addition, the Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016-2020 contains information about its investment in non-education partners to address the health and wellness of young children (e.g., children's therapy services, services for children with autism, early childhood immunizations, targeted fetal alcohol syndrome prevention programs).

5.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

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