

Chapter 18

Education—Increasing Grade 12 Graduation Rates

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By January 2019, the Ministry of Education made progress in improving its processes to increase Grade 12 graduation rates. The Ministry developed processes to identify and communicate key strategies to strengthen student achievement and increase Grade 12 graduation rates. It also identified critical risks to student graduation and analyzed data to monitor the impact that risks had on graduation rates.

The Ministry continued to work on assessing school divisions' plans to improve graduation rates. It collected graduation-rate improvement plans from all school divisions and planned to assess these plans during the 2018-19 school year. When the Ministry reviews these plans, it can determine whether the divisions have appropriate strategies to address the risks to student graduation.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The Ministry is responsible for providing leadership and direction to the Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 education sector. The Ministry promotes higher student achievement and well-being for Saskatchewan children and youth, and improved literacy skills for all, as a foundation of the province's social and economic growth.¹

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.

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 Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP).^{2,3} One of the goals included in the ESSP is that by June 30, 2020, Saskatchewan will achieve an 85% three-year graduation rate and a 90% five-year graduation rate.⁴ The Provincial Leadership Team formed a Graduation Rates Leadership Team in 2016-17 to examine on-time graduation rates, start conversations, and share information amongst school divisions to identify possible solutions to help increase the provincial graduation rate.⁵

¹ *Ministry of Education Plan for 2018-19*, p. 3.

² The Provincial Leadership Team is made up of the Deputy Minister of Education, the Ministry's Assistant Deputy Ministers, the Director of Education from each of the 28 school divisions, and representatives from the First Nations' school system.

³ The Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) is a multi-year strategic plan focused on specific outcomes and achieving goals set out in the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth: Vision 2020 and Beyond*.

⁴ *Ministry of Education Plan for 2018-19*, p. 8.

⁵ www.saskgraduates.ca/about/about-us (2 February 2019).



Figure 1 illustrates the three-year, five-year, and eventual graduation rates of Saskatchewan students completing Grade 12 from June 2011 to June 2018. 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 graduating within three years was 75.6% (FNMI: 31.5%) and the overall graduation rate for students graduating within five years was 81.4% (FNMI: 47.1%).⁶ As **Figure 1** shows, the overall three-year graduation rate remained relatively flat since 2004-05, whereas the FNMI graduation rate increased by over 41%.

Figure 1 – Trend for Completion of Grade 12

| Completing Grade 12 | Three-year (within three years) ^A | | | Five-year (within five years) ^A | | | Eventual (more than five years) ^A | | |
|---------------------|--|----------|-------------------|--|----------|-------------------|--|----------|-------------------|
| | All | Non-FNMI | FNMI ^B | All | Non-FNMI | FNMI ^B | All | Non-FNMI | FNMI ^B |
| 2004-05 (baseline) | 75.6 | | 31.5 | 81.4 | | 47.1 | | | |
| June 2011 | 72.7 | 81.8 | 32.9 | 81.3 | 87.9 | 48.5 | 84.8 | 89.0 | 60.3 |
| June 2012 | 73.7 | 82.9 | 35.9 | 81.2 | 88.0 | 49.7 | 85.6 | 89.1 | 63.0 |
| June 2013 | 74.8 | 83.9 | 37.4 | 80.1 | 87.0 | 50.0 | 84.7 | 88.8 | 62.8 |
| June 2014 | 74.7 | 83.4 | 40.3 | 81.4 | 88.1 | 54.2 | 85.6 | 90.2 | 63.1 |
| June 2015 | 75.2 | 84.3 | 40.1 | 82.5 | 89.2 | 55.9 | 85.7 | 90.5 | 63.5 |
| June 2016 | 75.6 | 84.6 | 41.9 | 83.3 | 89.5 | 59.6 | 84.5 | 89.5 | 63.4 |
| June 2017 | 76.5 | 85.4 | 43.2 | 84.0 | 90.4 | 59.8 | 85.3 | 90.4 | 64.8 |
| June 2018 | 77.4 | 86.5 | 44.5 | 84.4 | 91.1 | 59.4 | 85.8 | 90.9 | 65.4 |

Source: *Ministry of Education 2017-18 Annual Report*, p. 18, and information provided by the Ministry of Education. This is the most recent data available to January 31, 2019.

^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). Eventual graduation rates are calculated as the percentage of students who complete Grade 12 at any time after starting Grade 10 (and include those who graduate within three to five years).

^B FNMI students are those who choose to self-identify as First Nations (Registered/Treaty/Status Indian, Non-Status Indian), Métis, or Inuit/Inuk.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

Our *2012 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 2 assessed the Ministry's processes to increase Grade 12 graduation rates above 2004-05 baselines. It included ten recommendations. The Ministry had implemented five of the ten recommendations by February 28, 2017.⁷

This chapter describes our third follow-up of the Ministry's actions on the five remaining recommendations we first made in 2012.

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

⁶ *2014 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 19, *Education – Grade 12 Graduation Rates*, (2014), p. 164.

⁷ Previous follow-ups of the Ministry's actions on recommendations were reported in our *2014 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 19 and *2017 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 20.

Ministry's progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Ministry management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To perform this follow-up audit, we examined documentation of risks limiting student graduation, along with strategies to mitigate those risks. We reviewed the Ministry's process to collect and assess school divisions' graduation-rate improvement plans and reports it used to monitor improved graduation rates. We also interviewed relevant Ministry officials.

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 January 31, 2019, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

3.1 Strategies Identified and Risks Analyzed

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, p. 38, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – 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, p. 40, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Implemented

The Ministry developed processes to identify key strategies to strengthen student achievement and increase Grade 12 graduation rates. The Ministry communicated these strategies to school divisions.

Since our 2017 follow-up audit, we found the Ministry supported various education sector initiatives enabling staff from the Ministry and school divisions to discuss and exchange ideas for improving graduation rates. These initiatives included symposiums addressing graduation rates and student attendance, as well as a website dedicated to sharing promising practices for improving graduation rates.⁸ The website includes resources for teachers, students, and schools for initiatives such as the My Student First Classroom initiative, which supports student engagement.

⁸ The Graduation Rates Leadership Team maintains a website (www.saskgraduates.ca/about/about-us) to share the results of graduation rate research and promising practices to help build supports for school divisions and First Nations education authorities.



We found the Ministry communicated information relevant to student graduation, as necessary, in bi-weekly bulletins to school divisions across the province. These bulletins included information about new initiatives (e.g., dual credit course offerings, summer school, special project credits), and student requirements (i.e., graduation and post-graduation plans) that could improve graduation rates.⁹

Key effective strategies provide school divisions with a means to improve graduation rates by focusing on factors with the most impact on student success.

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, p. 42, Recommendation 8; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Intent of Recommendation Implemented

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, p. 42, Recommendation 9; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Intent of Recommendation Implemented

The Ministry identified critical risks to student graduation and analyzed data to monitor the impact risks had on graduation rates.

We found the Ministry identified risks to graduation rates through its various interactions with school divisions, such as feedback it received from graduation rate symposiums, surveys, and meetings with directors of education. The Ministry also obtained information about risks to graduation from its review of school divisions' ESSP action plans.¹⁰

Some of the key risks limiting student achievement identified by the Ministry included:

- Student mental health
- Student readiness for learning
- Supports for FNMI students
- Student engagement and attendance
- Increasing demands for student services (e.g., intensive needs, English as an Additional Language programming)

The Ministry analyzed student data and graduation rates to monitor improvements in student achievement and the impact that risks had on graduation rates. We found the Ministry prepared various student data reports—some of which clearly illustrated the

⁹ Dual credit course offerings support student credit attainment by providing students with opportunities to earn high school credits and post-secondary credits at the same time in the same course. Special project credits support student engagement and credit attainment by offering alternate paths to graduation more focused on workplace training.

¹⁰ As part of the ESSP, each school division creates its own action plan that aligns with the provincial outcomes set out in the ESSP.

correlation between specific risks (e.g., attendance, transiency), and their impact on student achievement.

The Ministry communicated with school divisions at the 2018 graduation rates symposium regarding the use of data analysis to identify key effective strategies to improve graduation rates. For example, the Ministry directed school divisions toward the monitoring of student engagement, credit attainment, or attendance—areas identified by the Ministry as being key factors contributing to student graduation.

For a sample of three school divisions, we found the Ministry provided data reports to the divisions on a monthly basis, along with other information relevant to graduation rates (e.g., reports indicating the percentage of students on track to graduate throughout the year). The Ministry also provided these divisions with reports detailing information about their annual graduation rates (e.g., trends, required yearly increase in graduation rates to achieve the 2020 target in the ESSP).

Analysis of the data surrounding the risks limiting student achievement enables school divisions to focus their efforts on the risks that will provide the most impact to their students' achievement.

3.2 Plans Collected But Not Assessed

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, p. 40, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 14, 2015)

Status – Partially Implemented

At January 2019, the Ministry collected graduation rate improvement plans from all school divisions but had not begun assessing the plans.

The Ministry collected recent plans from all school divisions and developed draft criteria to assess the plans. The Ministry expected to finalize its draft criteria and plans to begin assessing the school divisions' plans before the end of the 2018-19 school year.

The Ministry's review of school divisions' graduation rate improvement plans will help in determining whether the divisions have appropriate strategies to address the risks to student graduation.

Until the Ministry reviews the school divisions' plans, it will not know whether the divisions have appropriate strategies to address the risks to student graduation.

