

Chapter 31

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

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Education improved its processes to monitor Kindergarten students' readiness to learn and it plans for further work.

By September 2019, the Ministry analyzed Kindergarten Early Years Evaluation data to identify school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in Kindergarten. While the Ministry identified seven school divisions whose students are most at risk, it had yet to take specific actions to assist these school divisions. The Ministry expects to do so during 2019–20.

The Ministry also actively monitored Kindergarten programs delivered by school divisions such as periodically meeting with and surveying school divisions' officials. While the Ministry co-ordinated its review of school divisions' Early Years Action Plans, it had yet to provide school divisions with feedback from its reviews. It expects to do so during 2019–20.

Taking specific actions to assist identified school divisions and providing all divisions with feedback on Early Years Action Plans will reduce the risk of future students not being ready to learn in the primary grades upon exiting Kindergarten.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

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.¹ During the earliest years of life, a child develops the basic skills, knowledge, and abilities upon which all further learning is built.² Ensuring children receive a quality education early in life not only reduces the risk of poverty, but also improves school readiness, and overall health and wellness. Moreover, it reduces employment and education gaps for First Nations and Métis people, as well as improves graduation rates and lifelong success for all citizens.³

The Ministry is responsible for all matters relating to early learning, elementary, and secondary education. The Ministry leads and co-ordinates all areas, including developing goals and objectives, and educational planning for the present and future growth and development of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 educational system.⁴ It works with the 27 locally elected Boards of Education and appointed Directors of Education.

¹ Auditor General New South Wales, *Early Childhood Education: Department of Education*, (2016), p. 6.

² Ministry of Education, *Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016–2020*, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ *The Education Act, 1995*, also makes the Ministry responsible for overseeing school divisions.



In 2014, the Ministry and school divisions set a goal supporting the educational development of children aged zero to six such that by June 2020, 90% of students exiting Kindergarten demonstrate a readiness to learn in the primary grades.⁵ Students scoring in the appropriate Early Years Evaluation (EYE) range demonstrate learning readiness and should experience success in subsequent grades.⁶

In 2018–19, 80% of almost 14,000 Kindergarten students exiting Kindergarten scored within the appropriate EYE ranges in each of the five domains (2017–18: 80%).⁷ See **Figure 1** for details. The results for this measure remained flat since the Ministry began measuring Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in 2014–15.

Figure 1—Five Domains of Early Years Evaluation (EYE)

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.earlyyearevaluation.com/index.php/en/products/eye-ta. (28 August 2019).

Assessing students early in Kindergarten helps identify those who may be in need of professional services such as speech pathology or additional school supports. Students experience more difficulty in catching up with their peers the longer their needs go undiagnosed and unsupported.⁸

Without effective processes to monitor the aggregate EYE scores of Kindergarten students, the Ministry risks placing students at greater risk of not achieving their academic, financial, and social potential.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up of management's actions on the four recommendations we made in our *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 22, about the Ministry's processes to monitor Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades. We concluded that for the 12-month period ended April 30, 2017, the Ministry of Education had, other than the matters reflected in those four recommendations, 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.

⁵ Ministry of Education Plan for 2019–20, p. 3.

⁶ The Ministry adopted a skill-based assessment tool, the Early Years Evaluation (EYE), designed to help teachers assess the skills of Kindergarten children in five domains related to readiness to learn. Kindergarten teachers across the province administer the EYE assessment to all students at Kindergarten entry, and again at Kindergarten exit for those students who scored outside the appropriate EYE range.

⁷ Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Education.

⁸ UHEY Regina Research Update, September 2009, *Understanding the Early Years Regina*, Measuring Early Childhood Development in Regina. www.reginakids.ca/rsu_docs/uey-regina_edi-results-sept200953738.pdf (23 September 2019).

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. The Ministry's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To perform this follow-up audit, we reviewed data analysis conducted by the Ministry, tested the Ministry's assessment of school divisions' Early Years Action Plans, and reviewed evidence of supports the Ministry provided to school divisions. We also interviewed relevant Ministry staff.

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 September 6, 2019, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

3.1 School Divisions Most at Risk Identified

We recommended 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. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 138, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry analyzed Kindergarten EYE data to identify those school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in Kindergarten.

Starting in 2018–19, the Ministry's Early Years Branch began analyzing the EYE data at Kindergarten entry to understand which schools' students show the most vulnerability and highest risk of experiencing skill development difficulties. The Ministry's analysis identifies three key areas:

- **Schools of Opportunity:** the 50 schools with the largest number of students scoring outside the appropriate EYE range at Kindergarten entry.
- **Top Vulnerable Schools:** the 50 schools with largest percentage of students scoring outside the appropriate EYE range at Kindergarten entry.
- **High Count, High Rate Schools:** a combination of the two data-sets described above. In addition to having large numbers of students scoring outside the appropriate EYE range, these schools' students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in Kindergarten. Students entering Kindergarten in these schools are among the most likely to display difficulties with developmental tasks.



In addition to the analysis described above, we found the Ministry also analyzed the effectiveness of school divisions' and schools' abilities to improve EYE scores over the course of the 2017–18 school year (i.e., from Kindergarten entry to exit). The Ministry's analysis of effectiveness for the 2018–19 school year was incomplete, but in progress at the time of our audit.

Better data analysis related to the development of Kindergarten students helps the Ministry identify those school divisions whose students are most at risk and provides insight into where the Ministry should focus its resources.

3.2 Ministry Reviewing School Divisions' Action Plans, But Not Providing Feedback

We recommended 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.

(2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 139, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status—Partially Implemented

The Ministry's Early Years Branch assessed school divisions' Early Years Action Plans, but has yet to establish a process to provide school divisions with feedback based on its analysis of these action plans.

In 2018–19, the Ministry's Early Years Branch established suitable criteria for assessing school divisions' Early Years Action Plans. We found these criteria included school divisions' use of established early years guidance and the *Help Them Tell My Story* program, actions to engage families in their children's education, and inclusion of professional development for early years teachers.⁹

Although the Ministry did not require school divisions to submit Early Years Action Plans in 2018–19, it received plans from 22 of 27 school divisions. The Ministry expects to require all school divisions to submit Early Years Action Plans in 2019–20.

Our review of the Branch's assessment of four school divisions' Early Years Action Plans found the Branch completed its assessments using the established criteria. The Branch completed these reviews in April 2019. However, we found the Ministry has yet to provide school divisions with feedback on identified areas of improvement. The Ministry expects to provide feedback to school divisions in 2019–20.

Until the Ministry assesses all school divisions' Early Years Action Plans and provides divisions with feedback regarding the adequacy of their plans, there will be further delay in putting appropriate actions in place—resulting in future students potentially not being ready to learn in the primary grades.

⁹ The *Help Me Tell My Story* program is a holistic and interactive tool used by teachers to measure students' oral language development.

3.3 Kindergarten Programs Actively Monitored

We recommended the Ministry of Education actively monitor the Kindergarten programs delivered by school divisions. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 140, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry actively monitored Kindergarten programs delivered by school divisions.

Since our 2017 audit, we found the Ministry established a process to conduct biennial Kindergarten surveys of schools divisions. The surveys provide the Ministry with information about the Kindergarten practices used by school divisions, such as teacher education levels, classroom and programming information, assessment tools, and the successes or challenges school divisions' experience.

The Ministry conducted its first survey in 2017 and shared the results at its November 2017 Early Years biannual meeting. The Ministry invites all school divisions to attend the meetings typically held in November and May each year. The Ministry completed the survey again in 2019 with the results expected in September 2019.

Also, starting in 2017, we found the Ministry established biennial meetings with individual school divisions. These meetings assist the Ministry with obtaining a more detailed understanding of each school division's Kindergarten programs.

The Ministry held its most recent biennial meetings with seven school divisions in fall 2018. We tested a sample of two school divisions' biennial meetings and found the Ministry discussed, and reviewed, information specific to the school divisions' Kindergarten programs with the divisions' officials.

In addition, as described in **Section 3.2**, the Ministry's Early Years Branch reviews school divisions' Early Years Action Plans—doing so also assists the Ministry in monitoring school divisions' Kindergarten programs.

By obtaining a better understanding of school divisions' Kindergarten programs, the Ministry is better able to evaluate whether school divisions take sufficient action to improve Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades. It also helps the Ministry identify and share best practices related to Kindergarten programs.

3.4 Ministry Has Yet to Take Specific Actions to Assist School Divisions Most at Risk

We recommended 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.

(2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 141, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status—Partially Implemented



The Ministry takes actions to assist all school divisions with preparing Kindergarten students to learn in the primary grades, but it has yet to take specific actions to assist the school divisions whose students are most at risk.

As described in **Section 3.1**, the Ministry identified specific school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in Kindergarten. We found the Ministry shared its data analysis with each of the seven school divisions experiencing the largest numbers and percentages of students entering Kindergarten outside of the appropriate EYE range.

However, the Ministry has yet to take specific actions to assist these seven specific school divisions. The Ministry expects to visit these school divisions in fall 2019 to consult and discuss options toward improving their Kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades.

While the Ministry had yet to take specific actions to assist school divisions whose students are most at risk, we found the Ministry took several actions benefitting all school divisions in the province, such as:

- Drafting a list of possible actions supporting students' readiness to learn in the primary grades (e.g., actions related to student attendance, curriculum, and responding to EYE results)
- Creating forums to share best practices and effective strategies (e.g., biannual meetings)
- Providing information about professional development opportunities for early years' teachers and facilitating professional learning opportunities (e.g., site visits at select Kindergarten programs that follow quality practices, workshops for Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers)
- Developing the *Supports for Kindergarten* publication that sets out resources available for Kindergarten education (e.g., student assessments, First Nations/Métis/Inuit Education, Fransaskois Kindergarten, French Immersion, Play-Based Learning, etc.)

Actively assisting those school divisions identified as struggling to improve Kindergarten students' readiness to learn can help the Ministry identify possible root causes for the lower than desired performance of Kindergarten students in these divisions. Obtaining a better understanding of root causes would assist the Ministry in focussing the support it provides to these school divisions thereby reducing the risk of future students not being ready to learn in the primary grades.