Chapter 5
Education—Evaluating the Early Learning Intensive Support Program

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Ministry of Education commits about a third of its $13 million in annual federal funding for early years towards addressing the inclusivity of preschool-aged children experiencing disabilities. The Ministry addresses inclusivity through various pilot programs—one key program is its Early Learning Intensive Support Program. Since 2018, the Ministry has made this Program available in existing prekindergarten programs within selected school divisions. This Program is designed to help preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports to receive a good start on early learning and development.

While the Ministry has established a good foundation for future evaluations of its delivery of the Program, it needs to make a number of improvements in order to know whether the Program sufficiently supports the children. It needs to:

➤ Collect key data for determining whether children in the Program receive sufficient supports to enable them to learn and develop.

   The collection of key information, such as data about a participating child's progress and transition into kindergarten, can assist the Ministry in determining whether the Program provides children with sufficient support in their early learning and development.

➤ Regularly collect information about school divisions' actions to address the challenges identified in reviews of whether the Program was operating as expected.

   By ensuring school divisions appropriately address identified challenges (e.g., availability of specialized professional supports), the Ministry can improve the Program's ability to meet the early learning and development needs of children participating in the Program. Doing so can help improve the children's ability to be successful in school and life.

Effective processes to evaluate the Early Learning Intensive Support Program assists the Ministry in determining whether the Program helps preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports obtain a good start on their learning and development. Systematic and ongoing evaluation also enables the Ministry to identify early adjustments key to improving the Program, such as availability of training materials or funding for educational assistants.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports the results of our audit of the processes the Ministry of Education used to evaluate whether the Early Learning Intensive Support Program helps children requiring intensive supports receive a good start on early learning and development.

2.1 Legislative Responsibility for Early Learning

The Education Act, 1995 assigns responsibility for all matters relating to early learning, elementary, and secondary education to the Ministry of Education—this includes prekindergarten.[1] Prekindergarten is an early childhood education program (non-mandatory) available in some schools for children that are three and four years old.

The Ministry provides leadership and direction to the prekindergarten to grade 12 education sectors. It supports the sectors through funding, governance and accountability, with a focus on improving student achievement.[2]

The Act makes the Ministry responsible for overseeing school divisions. To fulfill this responsibility, the Ministry works with elected boards of education and appointed directors of education, and approves school divisions' budgets annually.[3]

The Act also assigns responsibility for providing educational services for students with disabilities (students with intensive needs) to the school divisions.[4]

2.2 Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement

In March 2018, the Ministry of Education entered into the *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* (in effect from April 1, 2017 to March 31, 2020) with the Federal Government. In June 2020, the Ministry signed a one-year extension of the Agreement to March 31, 2021.[5]

As shown in **Figure 1**, under the Agreement, the Federal Government agrees to provide Saskatchewan with funding of up to about $13 million per year over the term of the Agreement. The Ministry agrees to use this funding to further build its early learning and child care system by addressing local, regional, and system priorities with an impact on families more in need. It plans to achieve this by increasing the quality, accessibility, flexibility, and inclusivity in early learning and child care.[6]

Figure 1—Financial Provisions of Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement

Fiscal Year	Amount Allocated to Saskatchewan (in millions)
2017–18	$ 13.85
2018–19	$ 13.84
2019–20	$ 13.84
2020–21	$ 13.58

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Education and set out within the *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning Child Care Agreement*, p. 5.

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[1] *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 3(1) and 3(1.1).
[2] *Ministry of Education Plan for 2020–21*, p.3.
[3] *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 280.
[4] Ibid., s. 178.
[5] Under section 3.2.1 of the Agreement, the Federal Government commits to providing funding no less than the annual funding allocation of the existing Agreement, until 2027–28. The Federal Government will provide the funding for future years upon renewal of the Agreement.
[6] *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*, p. 2.

Also, under the Agreement, the Ministry agrees to commit about a third of the federal funding towards addressing the inclusivity of children experiencing disabilities. It expects to achieve this through various pilot programs for preschool-aged children experiencing disabilities.[7,8]

2.3 Early Learning Intensive Support Program

In 2018, the Ministry of Education established, and has since been piloting, its Early Learning Intensive Support Program at selected school divisions. It established this Program using funding from the *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement.*

The Early Learning Intensive Support Program is Saskatchewan's largest pilot program for preschool-aged children experiencing disabilities.[9]

The Ministry makes the Program available to children with intensive needs who require a significant level of support to participate in an early learning program in selected school divisions. The Program is for children experiencing significant delays in development and may include children diagnosed with autism, cognitive delays, physical challenges, auditory issues, or significant behavioral issues.[10] The Program provides opportunities for children to engage in inclusive learning with other children of the same age.[11]

Under the Program, these children attend an existing prekindergarten program that receives additional supports (e.g., educational assistants, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists) to help meet their needs.[12,13]

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, since the Program's inception in 2018, the Ministry has gradually expanded the number of school divisions (and in turn, number of child spaces available) that access funding for this Program from 4 to 23 of the 27 divisions, and from 120 to 242 spaces.[14]

Figure 2—Saskatchewan Ministry Spending on Early Learning Intensive Needs Program from 2017–18 to 2020–21

Fiscal Year	Amount (in millions)	# of School Divisions with Access to Program Funding	Cumulative Number of Spaces in Existing Prekindergarten Programs Designated for Children Requiring Intensive Supports
2017–18	$ 0.70	4	120
2018–19	$ 1.94	13	166

[7] *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*, p. 25.
[8] The Ministry's four priority areas of investment under the Agreement are: increased access to programs for families, inclusivity of children experiencing disabilities, quality focused initiatives, and Francophone minority language inclusion.
[9] According to the *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2019–20 Report*, the Ministry also established two other pilot programs to address the inclusivity of children experiencing disabilities. The Children Communicating, Connecting and in the Community Pilot provides access to early learning intervention for children who are deaf and hard of hearing. The Rural and Northern Inclusive Early Learning Pilot offers four-year old children experiencing disability and who live in communities with limited group-based early learning opportunities, access to part-time early learning in a licensed preschool child care space.
[10] *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*, p. 36.
[11] *Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot—Information for Families Brochure* (pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/106058/106058-ELIS_Family_Brochure.pdf) (28 October 2020).
[12] Prekindergarten in Saskatchewan is an early childhood education program targeting vulnerable three- and four-year old children. Prekindergarten focuses on fostering social development, nurturing educational growth, and promoting language development.
[13] *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2019–20 Report*, p. 11.
[14] www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2019/october/31/early-learning-support-program (06 November 2020).

Fiscal Year	Amount (in millions)		# of School Divisions with Access to Program Funding	Cumulative Number of Spaces in Existing Prekindergarten Programs Designated for Children Requiring Intensive Supports
2019–20	$	3.03	23	242
2020–21	$	3.03	23	242

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Education records, Orders in Council, and the *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2019–20 Report*, p. 11.

The Ministry more than achieved its inclusivity target by adding 343 preschool aged spaces for children experiencing disability by March 31, 2020 through the Early Learning Intensive Support Program (242 spaces in school divisions) and two other programs (101 spaces in licensed child care or non-profit organizations).[15, 16, 17, 18]

The Ministry assigns responsibility for the Early Learning Intensive Support Program to its Early Learning Unit within the Early Years Branch. This Unit is comprised of seven full-time equivalent positions. It works with selected school divisions on the delivery of the Program.

2.4   Importance of Early Learning

Effective processes to evaluate the Early Learning Intensive Support Program can assist the Ministry in determining whether the Program helps children requiring intensive supports obtain a good start on their learning and development.

There is much research highlighting the importance of early learning on children's growth:

➢ A child's early years, from the prenatal stage to age eight, has the potential to define their future.[19] Quality education early in life leads to better health, education, and employment outcomes later in life, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[20]

➢ Promoting inclusion of children with disabilities allows typical children to become more understanding of, and develop positive attitudes toward, children with diverse abilities.[21] Including children in the existing classroom environment fosters gains that are visible during preschool and benefit the child through their lives. Exposure to inclusion from a young age can positively influence all children's behaviour and skills.[22]

➢ A strong start to education with the necessary supports provides students with the opportunity to develop skills needed to be successful in school and life. As learning is a cumulative process, difficulties early on can have a lasting effect throughout a student's education.[23] Providing early learning opportunities to children experiencing disabilities helps them to achieve academic success and develop skills that will help them as

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[15] *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2019–20 Report*, p. 14.

[16] The spaces at March 31, 2020 reflect all inclusivity programs the Ministry implemented in response to the *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*.

[17] *Ministry of Education Annual Report 2019–20*, p. 12.

[18] The Ministry established the inclusivity target of serving at least 280 preschool-aged children experiencing disability annually by March 2021 as part of the Agreement signed in June 2020. *Canada–Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*, p. 28.

[19] *Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016–2020*, p. 3. www.pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/89572/89572-Early-Years-Plan-Final-2016-2020.pdf (14 April 2021).

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

[21] William R. Henninger, IV and Sarika S. Gupta, *How Do Children Benefit from Inclusion?* (2014), p. 51.

[22] Ibid., p. 35.

[23] www.sac-oac.ca/sac-work/early-identification-intervention (15 March 2021).

adults—doing so will assist them in achieving their goals, reaching their potential, and living the lives they choose.[24]

The Saskatchewan Disability Strategy highlights that there are approximately 1,300 children aged zero to four with disabilities.[25] Early intervention can improve educational outcomes for students experiencing disability.[26] Research indicates the academic achievement of the majority of students with a disability can be the same as their peers, when given access to the same content with specially-designed instruction, supports, and accommodations.[27]

Given education's importance to society, the Ministry's spending on programs is often subject to scrutiny from legislators and the public. Effective program evaluation can help the Ministry demonstrate whether the funding it provides for the Early Learning Intensive Support Program is delivering its intended results. Program evaluation also enables the Ministry to identify adjustments to improve the Program, such as further supports to assist school divisions in delivery of the Program.

3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

We concluded that the Ministry of Education had effective processes, except in the following areas, for the period ended December 31, 2020, to evaluate whether the Early Learning Intensive Support Program helps preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports receive a good start on early learning and development. The Ministry has established a good foundation for future evaluations of its delivery of the Program. However, the Ministry needs to:

➤ **Collect sufficient data (e.g., about children's progress and transition into kindergarten) to enable determination of whether children in the Program receive sufficient supports to enable them to learn and develop**

➤ **Regularly collect information about school divisions' actions to address the challenges identified in reviews of the Program to help ensure children participating in the Program receive a good start on their early learning and development**

Figure 3—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach

> **Audit Objective:** The objective of this audit is to assess the effectiveness of the processes the Ministry of Education used, for the period ended December 31, 2020, to evaluate whether the Early Learning Intensive Support Program helps children requiring intensive supports receive a good start on early learning and development.
>
> **Audit Criteria:**
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> Processes to:
>
> 1. **Plan for Evaluation**
>   - Set measurable and attainable desired outcomes for the program

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[24] *The Saskatchewan Disability Strategy—People Before Systems: Transforming the Experience of Disability in Saskatchewan* (June 2015), p. 33. www.pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/82320/82320-People-Before-Systems-Disability-Strategy.pdf (14 April 2021).
[25] Ibid., p. 53.
[26] www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/whyActEarly.html (15 March 2021).
[27] www.nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/Martha_Thurlow-Meeting_the_Needs_of_Special_Education_Students.pdf (15 March 2021).

- Decide what key information to collect (types, extent, frequency, sources) to enable informed decisions
- Select methods to collect required information (e.g., surveys, interviews, analysis of existing data)
- Determine resources (skills, tools) necessary to collect and analyze information

2. **Collect reliable and valid information**
   - Collect information as planned
   - Adjust plan as necessary

3. **Report results of analysis of information to key stakeholders**
   - Use information to evaluate achievement of desired outcomes
   - Identify risks associated with implementation of program (where the program is not having the intend impact and consider the risks/root cause)
   - Recommend adjustments in response to evaluation results
   - Communicate evaluation results to stakeholders (e.g., senior management, Federal Government, school divisions, parents)

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 of Education's processes, we used the above 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 plans, policies, agreements, and procedures relating to evaluating the Early Learning Intensive Needs Program. We interviewed Ministry staff responsible for the evaluation process. We reviewed the evaluations for a sample of school divisions and the Ministry's processes to develop associated action plans. In addition, we used an independent consultant with subject matter expertise in the area to help us identify good practice and assess the Ministry's processes.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Program Objectives and Expectations Clearly Defined

The Ministry of Education clearly defined the objectives of the Early Learning Intensive Support Program, along with its expectations of participating school divisions.

To administer the Program, the Ministry enters into service agreements with each of the participating school divisions each school year.[28] For example, for the 2020–21 school year it has signed service agreements with each of the 23 school divisions that receive program funding.

We found the Program service agreements follow a sufficiently robust standard template. The template clearly sets out the objectives of the Program (see **Figure 4**), the expectations of the participating school division (see **Figure 4**), and the Ministry's contributions toward the school division's program. The number of Program spaces may vary between each school division. For example, for the 2019–20 school year, Regina School Division No. 4 agreed to provide program spaces for 36 children, while Prairie Valley School Division No. 208 agreed to provide spaces for 8 children.[29]

Our review of objectives and expectations in the service agreements found they:

➢ Were clear, practical, and attainable

➢ Aligned with the Ministry's commitments, described in **Section 2.2**, set out in the early learning Agreement with Federal Government

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[28] A school year runs from September to June each year.
[29] School divisions may offer program spaces at differing child to support staff ratios (i.e., one, two or three children to one support staff), School divisions that offer a lower child to support staff ratio will not achieve the full number of program spaces allocated in their service agreements with the Ministry.

➢ Appropriately described the intended impact of the Program

➢ Provided participating school divisions with an understanding of the Program and their associated responsibilities

Figure 4—Objectives and Expectations within Early Learning Intensive Support Service Agreements Between the Ministry of Education and Participating School Divisions

Objectives of the Early Learning Intensive Support Program:

1. Provide access to early learning opportunities for preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports
2. Maintain the integrity of the prekindergarten program (i.e., for <u>all</u> children)
3. Help young children receive a good start on their learning and development

Expectations of School Divisions Participating in the Program:

1. Provide a specified number of children (unique for each school division) access to attend an existing prekindergarten program
2. Provide an average of two additional spaces in the identified prekindergarten programs (though number may range from one to three based on a number of factors, such as the unique needs and circumstances of the children, the class, and the facility)
3. Provide an additional staff member (Educational Assistant) in the prekindergarten classroom as support
4. Provide an inclusive high-quality learning experience for three-and four-year old children consistent with Saskatchewan's prekindergarten expectations and guidelines (four-year-old children are to be prioritized)[A]
5. Monitor and assess the children's development using appropriate tools and practices
6. Facilitate the creation of a collaborative team to identify each child's strengths and needs, develop plans, coordinate and implement interventions and supports, and to provide each other with support—the team may include family members, educators, supporting professionals, educational assistants, human service agencies and community organizations
7. Develop an Inclusion and Intervention Plan (IIP) with the collaborative team for each child in the Program that identifies individual goals, required interventions and supports and transition plans—families are expected to participate and be engaged in the development of their child's IIP[B]
8. Develop a transition plan, within the IIP, to support the process of transitioning children into kindergarten
9. Ensure the safety, wellbeing, holistic development and learning of all children in the program—additional safety measures and instruction may be required based on a child's individual needs and should be identified in the IIP
10. Ensure the availability for professional support for consultation to the kindergarten team on behalf of the needs of the children—professional support is not intended to replace individual therapy that children can access outside of the educational environment
11. Provide support to educators to build capacity and confidence in providing inclusive early learning opportunities
12. Discuss, collaborate and report required information to the Ministry to ensure the Program meets expectations regarding reporting requirements, quality and mandate—this may include visits to the Program
13. Participate in an evaluation and review with the Ministry to examine the pilot, make recommendations, and distribute Program surveys (i.e., teachers, professional support staff, and parents) as needed

Source: Adapted from the Ministry's Early Learning Intensive Support service agreements with participating school divisions.
[A] The Ministry sets out its expectations and guidelines for prekindergarten in its *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* available at pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/82946/82946-ELPG_Complete_document.pdf (15 March 2021).
[B] An Inclusion and Intervention Plan is a document developed and implemented by a collaborative team (e.g., teachers, professional support staff, and parents) that sets out student outcomes, focusing on the key areas of development that will have the most impact on student success during the current school year.

Establishing service agreements for each school year provides the Ministry with flexibility to consider and adjust how it allocates funding related to the Program. As shown in **Figure 2**, since the inception of the pilot in 2018, it has increased the number of school divisions with access to program funding and the number of spaces available.

Establishing clear program expectations increases the likelihood of the Ministry and participating school divisions helping children requiring intensive supports obtain a good start on their learning and development.

4.2 Clear Review Plan Established But Missed Collecting Key Information

The Ministry of Education had a clear and well designed plan to review and evaluate the Early Learning Intensive Support Program, but it did not plan to collect sufficient data in two key areas.

In May 2019, the Ministry's Early Years Branch established a plan (i.e., the Program Review Project Plan) to guide the Ministry's collection and analysis of information about whether the Program is operating as intended, and to collect baseline data for use in future evaluations. Collecting baseline data early in a program is consistent with good practice.

We found the Ministry has a staff member with expertise in program evaluation within the Branch's Sector Planning and Evaluation Unit. This staff member assisted the Branch's Early Learning Unit with the design of the review plan, as well as collection and analysis of information.

In our review of the 2019 Program Review Project Plan, we found the Ministry:

➢ Clearly established the purpose of the review—to examine the program implementation process, as well as outcomes measured through program implementation (e.g., impact on participating children/families, provision of specialized professional supports and related training delivered, parent engagement) to make decisions about possible mid-course adjustments and further program expansion.

➢ Identified the key stakeholders for the review (i.e., Ministry, school divisions, parents).

➢ Set out four outcomes for the Program, including:

- **Individual child progress** (e.g., Program supports are beneficial to children, children are supported to develop friendships and play with other children)

- **Impact on the classroom** (e.g., integrity of the general prekindergarten class is maintained through implementation of the Program, early learning teams are able to balance the needs of all children in the prekindergarten classroom)

- **Parent/guardian engagement** (e.g., parents are involved in the development of their child's Inclusion and Intervention Plan)

- **Fluid transitions to school** (e.g., sufficient planning and effort go into supporting a smooth transition for children from prekindergarten to kindergarten).[30]

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[30] We found the four outcomes within the evaluation plan aligned with objectives two and three of the Program (i.e., maintaining the integrity of the prekindergarten program, helping young children receive a good start), as set out in the school division service agreements (see **Figure 4**). The first objective of the Program set out in the service agreements (i.e., access early learning opportunities for preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports) is addressed by the Ministry's access target set out in the Agreement with the Federal Government. This target is described in **Section 2.3**.

➢ Appropriately developed a logic model to help inform its review plan.[31] The Ministry based the logic model on good practice research. The model sets out strategies and activities (e.g., school division provision of specialized professional supports, such as speech-language pathologists or occupational therapists, to participating prekindergarten classrooms) designed to help with achieving Program objectives.

➢ Established the frequency and format of information collection, including

- Annual surveys of key stakeholders which included parents, prekindergarten teachers/associates/educational assistants, and Program-specific educational assistants,

- Annual interviews with participating school division officials (e.g., superintendents of education, special education co-ordinators)

- Receipt of biannual reports from school divisions (fall and spring) providing information related to the expectations of school divisions as set out in their service agreements

➢ Included a review matrix that set out questions to ask, and possible indicators of success (e.g., levels of specialized professional support made available to classrooms, perceptions of prekindergarten teachers about the levels of support) for the strategies and actions the Ministry established in the logic model.

While the questions were relevant for assessing the Program's implementation in relation to the Program outcomes, they were not designed to collect sufficient information about two of the four outcomes—individual child progress and fluid transitions to school.

- **Individual child progress**—the questions collected limited information about individual children's progress and the questions collected information primarily from the perspective of parents.

    Good practice suggests information from the perspective of the child, and the relationships they build (e.g., with other children, teachers, educational assistants) are important to consider when evaluating children's progress.

- **Fluid transitions to school**—the survey included only one question about the children's transitions to kindergarten.

    Good practice suggests obtaining the perspective of kindergarten teachers, who may be able to provide valuable insight about transition to kindergarten for children participating in the Program.

We observed information contained within Inclusion and Intervention Plans are relevant to the two outcomes above. As noted in **Figure 4** (expectations #7 and #8), as part of the service agreement, the Ministry expects participating school divisions to develop an Inclusion and Intervention Plan (which includes development of a transition plan) for each child involved in the Program.[32]

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[31] A logic model is a graphic depiction presenting the shared relationships among the resources, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact for a program. It depicts the relationship between a program's activities and its intended effects.
[32] A transition plan supports the process of transitioning children into kindergarten. A child's Inclusion and Intervention Plan should include a transition plan.

Inclusion and Intervention Plans are critical to a child's success and their transition to kindergarten. Collaborative teams use these plans to establish outcomes for key areas of development that have the most impact on a child's success and set out the plan for a child's smooth transition to kindergarten.

We considered analyzing data associated with participating children's Inclusion and Intervention Plans; this was not possible due to limitations with the Ministry's IT system and the nature of the plans (e.g., some are paper-based). As such, the Ministry is unable to conduct similar analysis. Ministry officials indicated they are considering how to improve the IT system to enable analysis of data for children in the Program.

Without collecting sufficient information the Ministry is unable to determine whether children with intensive needs participating in the Program receive sufficient support to learn and develop.

1. **We recommend the Ministry of Education periodically collect sufficient data to enable future assessments of all expected outcomes relating to the Early Learning Intensive Support Program.**

The Ministry indicated it plans to carry out reviews annually. It plans to use a similar approach as the 2019 Program Review; that is, focus on whether the Program is operating as intended. It also expects future reviews will include comparing results to baseline data collected in the 2019 Program Review. See **Section 4.3** for the pandemic's impact on the Ministry's Program review.

The Ministry could adapt these future reviews to identify areas of focus (e.g., improving perceptions of leadership support, training, and availability of professional supports such as speech-language pathologists) based on previous survey results.

The Ministry used its service agreements with participating school divisions to clearly communicate its intentions to review the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. We also observed agendas and meeting notes from conference calls between the Ministry and school division officials in May 2019 showing discussions about the Ministry's plans for the evaluation.

4.3 Other than Inclusion and Intervention Plans, Information Generally Collected as Planned

The Ministry of Education collected information about the Early Learning Intensive Support Program as planned until onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted its collection of key information about children participating in the Program.

In response to COVID-19, the Ministry deferred its next review of the Program (initially planned for spring 2020).[33] It did not want to over-burden schools and teachers with information requests while they were conducting remote learning during the pandemic. Instead, the Ministry requested school divisions to report on their use of 2019–20 Program funding, and gave them guidance about prioritization of unused funding (e.g., prioritization

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[33] The Ministry plans to use an approach similar to its 2019 evaluation (i.e., surveys and associated interviews), and focus on whether the Program is operating as intended.

of speech-language pathology and occupational therapy services for children). Ministry officials explained they plan to undertake the next Program review in May 2021, and began meeting to discuss their plans in March 2021.

In addition, because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school closures, the Ministry did not request sufficient information about the completion of Inclusion and Intervention Plans for children participating in the Program after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2019, consistent with its Program Review Plan, the Early Years Branch administered the Ministry's first survey for the four school divisions included in the Program pilot.[34] The Ministry used an online survey tool to collect information from parents, prekindergarten teachers, associates, and educational assistants. It augmented the survey by interviewing officials (e.g., superintendents, Program supervisors) from participating divisions.

We found the results of the survey and associated interviews gave the Ministry sufficient information such as the promotion of inclusive practices within the schools, the level of professional supports (e.g., use of speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist and educational assistants) in classrooms, and the availability of relevant training opportunities for educators. For example, the survey results highlighted educators' dissatisfaction with the availability of specialized professional supports to classroom staff. The survey results also highlighted educators' concerns about the ability to attend training about inclusive education.[35] We found the survey results along with the interviews give the Ministry sufficient baseline data on two of the four outcomes set out in the 2019 Program Review.

In addition, starting in 2019, the Ministry began collecting biannual reports (fall and spring) from participating school divisions. It asks each division to submit these reports using its template. The template requests information related to the expectations of school divisions as set out in the service agreements (see **Figure 4**). For example, it collects high-level and summary information about the number of children enrolled in the Program, the types and number of professional supports made available to children in the Program, and whether they had completed Inclusion and Intervention Plans for the children participating in their programs.

For the two divisions we tested that participated in 2019, the Ministry administered the 2019 survey and associated interviews with school division officials consistent with its 2019 Program Review Project Plan.[36] For each of four school divisions tested, the Ministry appropriately received biannual reports from these four school divisions when and as expected.

Our review of the interview notes and biannual reports for the school divisions tested found the Ministry collected sufficient information about the divisions' fulfillment of the expectations set out in the service agreements, in all but one area.

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[34] The four school divisions included in the Program pilot were Regina School Division No. 4, Regina Roman Catholic Separate School Division No. 81, Saskatoon School Division No. 13, and St. Paul's Roman Catholic Separate School Division No. 20.
[35] Inclusive education is about ensuring access to quality education for all students by effectively meeting their diverse needs in a way that is responsive, accepting, respectful and supportive. Students participate in the education program in a common learning environment with support to diminish and remove barriers and obstacles that may lead to exclusion. inclusiveeducation.ca/about/what-is-ie/ (23 March 2021).
[36] The other two school divisions we tested joined the Early Learning Intensive Support Program after 2019.

We found following the March 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry did not specifically request information about the completion and implementation of a critical document—Inclusion and Intervention Plans for children in the Program. As we describe in **Section 4.2**, these Plans are critical to a child's success and their transition to kindergarten.

We found the Ministry collected some information about participating school divisions' use of Inclusion and Intervention Plans, for children participating in the Program, from school divisions' biannual Program reports. However, the Ministry did not collect information specific to the school divisions' implementation of the plans (e.g., whether the plans are working as intended, whether the plans are useful, effectiveness of collaborative teams).[37]

Because the Ministry did not collect specific information about the Inclusion and Intervention Plans, it does not know whether the plans are working as intended, and are useful. Having an appropriate Inclusion and Intervention Plan for each child was especially important in 2020 because of the government's closure of schools in response to the pandemic in March 2020.

If children did not have appropriate plans in place, there is an increased risk that four-year-olds from the program may not have experienced a successful transition to kindergarten in fall 2020. The Program resumed when schools opened in the fall of 2020. See **Recommendation 1** about collecting sufficient data to determine whether children in the Program are sufficiently supported to progress in learning and development.

4.4 Analysis of Results of 2019 Review Shared and Responsibilities to Address Challenges Assigned

The Ministry appropriately communicated the results of its 2019 Early Learning Intensive Support Program Review, and clearly assigned responsibilities to address identified challenges.

The Ministry summarized the results of the 2019 Program Review on an overall basis, and for each of the four school divisions participating at the time of the Review.

We found to analyze the results of the 2019 Early Learning Intensive Supports Survey, the Ministry:

➢ Established reasonable thresholds (i.e., little/no concern, some concern, high concern) to assist in evaluating the survey results.

➢ Appropriately considered survey response rates and the associated impact on the survey results (i.e., margin of error).[38]

Its analysis identified eight challenges associated with the Program. These included areas such as a lack of school division support for inclusive education, lack of support for teachers

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[37] The Ministry requested participating school divisions to indicate in their biannual Program reports whether they had completed Inclusion and Intervention Plans for the children participating in their programs.

[38] A higher response rate for a survey reduces the margin of error associated with survey responses. Good practice indicates an acceptable margin of error falls between four percent and eight percent. For the 2019 Program survey, the margin of error for prekindergarten teachers/associates/education assistants was within this range (i.e., between five and eight percent). The Ministry acknowledged the margin of error for Program-specific educational assistants (i.e., 11 percent) and parents (i.e., 13 percent) were outside of the acceptable margin of error.

to attend training to enhance related skills, and lack of specialized professional supports available to classroom staff for a sufficient amount of time.

The Ministry shared the results of its analysis with school divisions within a reasonable period. It gave each of the four school divisions that were part of the Program the results of its analysis of the survey and interviews in fall 2019.

For two divisions we tested that participated in the 2019 Program Review, we observed emails from staff within the Early Years Branch communicating the survey results to relevant school division staff (e.g., supervisor of intensive needs, coordinator of special education program). We found the content of these emails to be appropriate for the needs of the school divisions (i.e.., survey results specific to their division, guidance about interpreting their survey results).

In addition, we observed emails illustrating the Ministry's internal communication of the survey results between senior management within the Early Years Branch and the Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for early years. We found the content of these communications to be appropriate for senior management's purposes (i.e., overall survey results, action plans to address challenges identified).

In fall 2019, the Ministry individually met with officials (i.e., superintendents, staff with knowledge of the divisions' Program) from the four participating school divisions to discuss their results. The Ministry explained that during these meetings, staff from the Early Years Branch and the school division officials considered root causes associated with the eight challenges identified in the survey results, along with relevant actions to address the associated challenges.

In October 2019, following its meetings with school divisions, we found the Ministry documented these actions within an overall survey results report. The actions included items such as improved coordination of specialized professional supports, and basic skill requirements for educational assistants. For example, one school division expressed its plans to implement basic qualifications for educational assistants and a Program orientation to help support the training of Program-specific educational assistants.

Our review of the actions found:

➤ The school divisions were primarily responsible for carrying out the identified actions. We found this to be reasonable, as the school divisions are directly involved in the operation of the Program.

➤ The Ministry was responsible for developing a training plan to support the early learning sector regarding inclusionary practices and supporting children with intensive needs. We found this to be reasonable, as it provides consistent training opportunities for all educators.

➤ Two of the four school divisions did not identify actions in the 2019–20 school year for two of the challenges identified—in relation to maintaining the integrity of prekindergarten (i.e., minimizing the Program's impact on the class as a whole), and the level of relevant training for Program-specific educational assistants.

Appropriate assignment of responsibility for actions helps the Ministry and school divisions ensure actions are carried out and children participating in the program receive the

supports they need. See **Recommendation 2** about the need for the Ministry to regularly collect information about school divisions' actions to address the challenges identified in Program reviews.

4.5   Actions Taken to Support Inclusion in Early Learning Sector

Since fall 2019, the Ministry has taken various actions in relation to the development of inclusion training for the education sector.

We found the Ministry:

➢ Developed, in 2019, instructional videos for prekindergarten teachers about incorporating inclusive practices in the classroom (e.g., using a problem-solving approach, focusing on children's strengths rather than their challenges or deficits). The Ministry makes the instructional videos available online.[39]

➢ Provided classrooms with inclusive reading materials (e.g., books promoting inclusion of all children).

➢ Held an inclusion conference in June 2019 for staff directly supporting children in the early years sector. Conference participants included staff from schools along with individuals from licenced child care centres and licensed family child care homes—such as directors, supervisors, early childhood educators, assistants, and enhanced accessibility workers. The conference included topics such as the evolution and benefits of inclusion in the early years, and the exploration of strategies for fostering relationship-based inclusion.

➢ Gave participating school divisions references to online resources (e.g., tools for educators working with children with intensive needs) about inclusive education.

In addition, Ministry staff explained they planned to create additional instructional materials (e.g., how to set up a classroom for autistic children) by fall 2021.

The Ministry's development of inclusion training for the education sector helps educators develop relevant skills and build their confidence in addressing the needs of children in the Program.

4.6   No Information Collected on Division-related Actions to Address Challenges to Providing Early Learning Support

The Ministry of Education does not formally collect information about actions that participating school divisions plan to take to address challenges with the Early Learning Intensive Support Program identified in 2019.

As described in **Section 4.4**, the Ministry identified eight challenges associated with the Program and met with school division officials in fall 2019 to identify actions to address these challenges.

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[39] www.edonline.sk.ca/webapps/blackboard/content/listContent.jsp?course_id=_3934_1&content_id=_386159_1 (23 March 2021).

We found the Ministry does not monitor whether the four school divisions identified specific actions for each of the challenges relevant to their specific division, and carried out those actions. In addition, the Ministry did not require them to clearly establish timelines for their actions.

As a result, the Ministry does not know whether school divisions are taking actions to address the challenges identified in the 2019 Program Review. As previously noted, as of December 2020, the Ministry continues to pilot the Program.

Not addressing challenges identified in program reviews increases the risk of the Program not meeting the learning and development needs of children with intensive needs. This in turn may result in the pilot Program not being successful in increasing children's success in school and life.

> **2. We recommend the Ministry of Education regularly collect information about school divisions' actions to address the challenges identified in reviews of the Early Learning Intensive Support Program.**

4.7 Appropriate Information Considered when Increasing Program Participation

The Ministry of Education evaluates relevant factors when considering whether to increase the number of school divisions and selecting divisions to participate in the Early Learning Intensive Support Program.

In December 2019, the Ministry completed an evaluation of Program spaces to inform its decisions about expanding the Program in 2020 to additional school divisions. The Ministry considered relevant factors (i.e., the number of Program spaces as a percentage of kindergarten enrolments, *Early Years Evaluation* scores).[40] In addition, the Ministry asked all school divisions with Ministry-funded prekindergarten programs to submit requests for additional program spaces, using a standard form.[41] This form requested data to support their requests (e.g., the results from standardized developmental assessments like *Development Domains*, the *Early Years Evaluation*, or *Ages & Stages Questionnaires*).[42,43]

We found the data collected reasonable and relevant to informing decisions about expanding the Program to more school divisions.

Our review found the Ministry's 2020 decision to increase program participation consistent with information collected. For example, school divisions with more kindergarten students whose 2019–20 *Early Years Evaluation* (EYE) scores were less than the overall provincial EYE scores appropriately had a higher ratio of Program spaces to kindergarten

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[40] The *Early Years Evaluation* is a skill-based assessment tool the Ministry 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. Students scoring in the appropriate EYE range mean they are ready to learn and should experience success in subsequent grades

[41] Except for Conseil des Écoles Fransaskoises No. 310, all Saskatchewan school divisions have Ministry-funded Prekindergarten programs.

[42] *Development Domains* is an assessment involving review of the 4 domains of learning: Social Emotional; Physical; Intellectual; and Spiritual. Children's essential learning experiences in one domain influence their development in each of the other domains.

[43] *Ages & Stages Questionnaires* (ASQ) provide reliable, accurate developmental and social-emotional screening for children between birth and age six. Drawing on parents' expert knowledge, ASQ has been specifically designed to pinpoint developmental progress and catch delays in young children—paving the way for meaningful next steps in learning, intervention, or monitoring.

enrolments. Conversely, school divisions with kindergarten students whose EYE scores were proportionately higher than the overall provincial average had, on average, fewer spaces. Overall, the Ministry allocated about half of the Program spaces to the four school divisions in Regina and Saskatoon—this allocation is in alignment with these divisions' proportion of provincial kindergarten enrolments (i.e., about 46 percent).

By considering relevant information when making Program expansion decisions, the Ministry increases the likelihood of providing access to the Program where it is most needed.

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