

## Chapter 11

# Saskatoon School Division No. 13—Monitoring Success in Readyng Students for Learning in the Primary Grades When Exiting Kindergarten

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

Since 2014, the Saskatchewan education sector established an early learning goal associated with kindergarten students' readiness to learn. The sector recognizes success in readyng kindergarten students for learning prepares them for future academic success.

In 2018–19, 79 percent of kindergarten students in Saskatchewan publicly funded schools were assessed as at an appropriate level of development; the attainment of self-declared First Nations, Métis, and Inuit kindergarten was significantly lower at 56 percent. This is below the provincial goal of 90 percent of students exiting kindergarten being ready for learning in the primary grades.

Saskatoon School Division No. 13 is one of three divisions with more than 1,500 kindergarten students each year. The percentage of the readiness of its kindergarten students to learn is similar to the provincial average. While it has taken many positive steps and actions, Saskatoon Public needs to do more to monitor its success in readyng students for learning in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten.

Saskatoon Public needs written expectations about the minimum frequency of assessing kindergarten students using standard assessment tools in all key areas of learning and development, and where teachers use alternate assessment tools, confirm their suitability.

Kindergarten teachers did not always assess students at least twice a year using standard assessment or suitable tools. In addition, the Division could not explain why some kindergarten students did not participate in required reassessments. Frequent standard assessments provide teachers with essential data about a student's progress—data that enables identifying and making instructional and other changes to help a student succeed.

Saskatoon Public needs to give kindergarten teachers additional support for using key instructional practices. Teachers did not consistently use key instructional practices as expected. For example, they did not always include students identified as having problems in learning in their Sprint cycles.<sup>1</sup> Key instructional practices (like Sprint cycles) are used to improve student readiness in a focused way, particularly for those students identified as having problems in learning the subject matter (like numeracy, or word sounds). These are used in addition to normal classroom instruction.

Saskatoon Public needs to routinely analyze kindergarten assessment data to identify trends and common areas of struggle across all schools in the Division. Present data analysis is limited. Robust data analysis helps identify root causes at certain schools or division-wide gaps.

<sup>1</sup> Sprint cycles are short intensive-focused and repeated instruction for a small group of students (approximately six students) on a specific area of focus. See **Figure 7** for further information.



## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

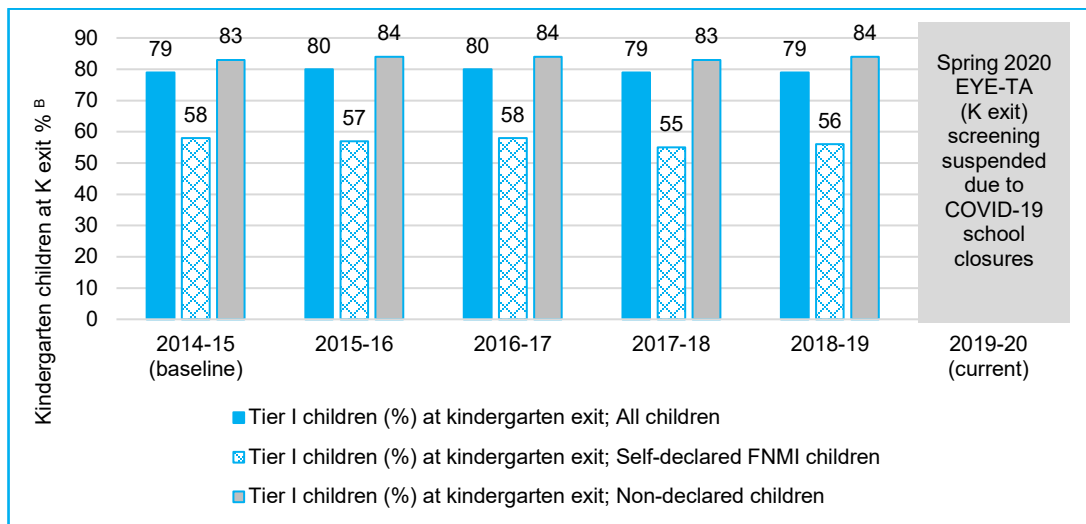
This chapter reports the results of our audit of Saskatoon Public’s processes to monitor its success in readying students for learning in the primary grades, when exiting kindergarten. Saskatoon Public is responsible for readying students for learning.<sup>2</sup>

In Saskatchewan, kindergarten programs are not mandatory. That is, the provincial government does not require school divisions to offer kindergarten programs, and where programs are offered, children are not required to attend. At January 2021, kindergarten is mandatory in three Canadian provinces.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2014, the Saskatchewan education sector has agreed to work towards achieving a desired outcome related to early learning readiness—by June 30, 2020, children up to six years old will be supported in their development to ensure that 90 percent of students exiting kindergarten are ready for learning in the primary grades (i.e., grades one to three).<sup>4,5</sup> At January 2021, the Ministry and school divisions continue to work towards this desired outcome.

As **Figure 1** shows, in 2018–19 for all Saskatchewan school divisions, 79 percent of kindergarten children were assessed as at an appropriate level of development (Tier I) with the percentage of the self-declared First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) kindergarten students at the appropriate level of development being significantly lower than the non-self declared kindergarten students at 56 percent.

**Figure 1—Saskatchewan (all divisions)—Early Years Evaluation from 2014 to 2020—Percent of Kindergarten Children Assessed at Appropriate Level of Development (Tier I)**



Source: The Ministry of Education, *Annual Report for 2019–20*, p. 30.

<sup>A</sup> Students who have voluntarily self-declared as First Nations, Non-Status Indian, Métis, Inuit (FNMI)

<sup>B</sup> K exit means at kindergarten exit

<sup>2</sup> *The Education Act, 1995*, s.85.

<sup>3</sup> Kindergarten is mandatory in British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island.

([globalnews.ca/news/4056554/kindergarten-is-optional-depending-on-where-you-live/](http://globalnews.ca/news/4056554/kindergarten-is-optional-depending-on-where-you-live/)) (3 March 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the Education Sector Strategic Plan, Cycle 4 (2019-20). *Ministry of Education, Plan for 2020–21*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Since the fall of 2013, the Ministry and school divisions have agreed to use a common method to measure student development for the purposes of reporting on achievement of the Education Sector Strategic Plan. The method is the Early Years Evaluation Tool-Teachers Assessment (EYE-TA).

## 2.1 Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13

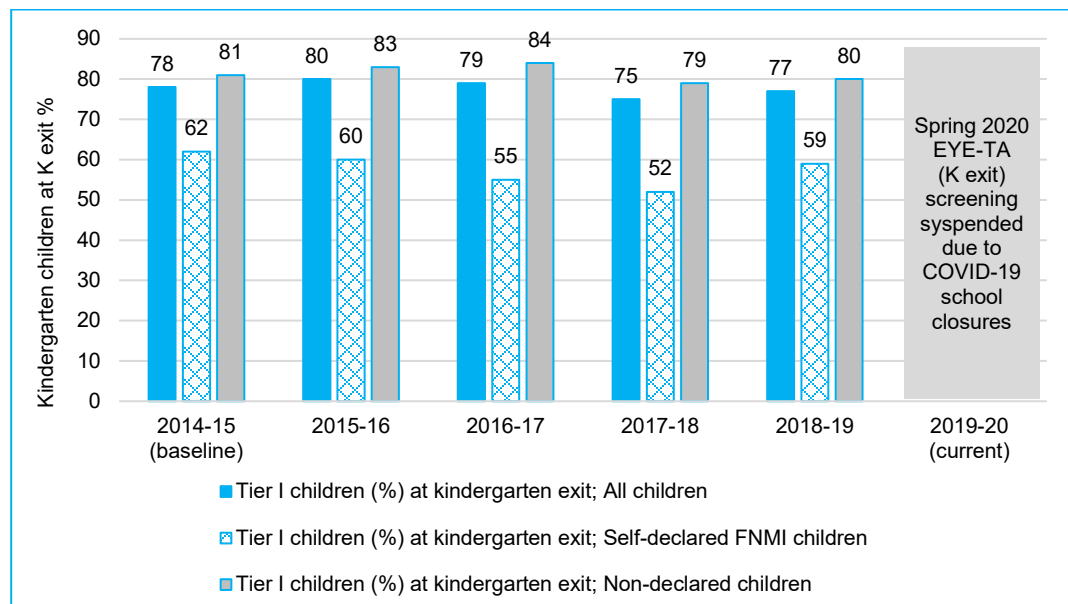
Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 is one of 27 school divisions operating in Saskatchewan. It educates over 26,000 students in Saskatoon and the Whitecap Dakota First Nation.

Saskatoon Public is one of three school divisions with more than 1,500 kindergarten students each year.<sup>6</sup> It typically has about 1,900 kindergarten students.<sup>7</sup> Saskatoon Public oversees 49 schools with kindergarten programs.<sup>8,9</sup> It employs kindergarten teachers in 58.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in these schools.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 2** shows, in 2018–19, the percent of all kindergarten students in Saskatoon Public being ready for learning in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten (at 77 percent) was slightly below the provincial average for all Saskatchewan kindergarten students (at 79 percent in **Figure 1**).

In common with the provincial pattern (see **Figure 1**), the percentage of children in Saskatoon Public assessed as at an appropriate level of development (Tier I) among the self-declared FNMI kindergarten students is significantly lower than the non self-declared kindergarten students. Fourteen percent of its kindergarten students are self-declared as FNMI.

**Figure 2—Saskatoon Public—Early Years Evaluation from 2014 to 2020—Percent of Kindergarten Children Assessed at Appropriate Level of Development (Tier I)**



Source: Saskatoon Public School Division #13, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, p. 30.

<sup>A</sup> Students who have voluntarily self-declared as First Nations, Non-Status Indian, Métis, Inuit (FNMI).

<sup>B</sup> K exit means at kindergarten exit.

<sup>6</sup> The other two divisions are Regina Public School Division No. 4, and St. Paul's Roman Catholic Separate School Division No. 20. At September 30, 2019, almost 40% of the total number of kindergarten students in the province were enrolled in Saskatoon Public, Regina Public, and St. Paul's. ([pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/114824/2019-20%252BProvincial%252BK-12%252BEnrolment%252BSummary.pdf](https://pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/114824/2019-20%252BProvincial%252BK-12%252BEnrolment%252BSummary.pdf)) (25 February 2021).

<sup>7</sup> The Board of Education of the Saskatoon Public School Division #13 of Saskatchewan, *2019–2020 Annual Report*, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Saskatoon Public also provides educational support programs to children before they enter kindergarten (e.g., early years and pre-kindergarten).

<sup>10</sup> Adapted from information provided by the Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13.



## 2.2 Early Years Learning Impact on Development

During the first six years of a child's life, a child develops the basic skills, knowledge, and abilities that they will build on throughout their lives.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

Children follow natural developmental progressions in learning. Curriculum research has revealed sequences of activities effective in guiding children through these levels of thinking. These sequences (developmental paths) are the basis for the learning trajectories.<sup>13</sup>

Learning trajectories can vary for different goal areas (e.g., literacy, numeracy, communication). Research shows when teachers understand how children develop, they are more effective in questioning, analyzing and providing activities that further children's development than teachers who are unaware of the development process. Consequently, effective teaching offers children a much richer and more successful learning experience in the primary grades.<sup>14</sup>

Assessing kindergarten students helps educators identify students who may be in need of professional services such as speech-language pathologists or additional school supports. Identifying issues early and intervening can help reduce the prevalence of academic challenges for children struggling in school. Also, using kindergarten student assessment information enables educators to take preventive approaches by allocating resources early and continuously, instead of waiting to respond after the student has experienced educational failure.<sup>15</sup>

Not having effective processes to monitor success in readying kindergarten students for learning in the primary grades places students at greater risk of not achieving their academic, financial, and social potential. Having effective processes to monitor success in readying kindergarten students for learning prepares them for future academic success.

## 3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

**We concluded, for the 18-month period ended June 30, 2020, Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 had effective processes, other than in the following areas, to monitor its success in readying students for learning in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten.**

**Saskatoon Public needs to:**

- **Give schools and teachers written expectations about the minimum frequency of assessing kindergarten students using standard assessment tools in all key areas of learning and development**

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Education, *Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016–2020*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Auditor General New South Wales, *Early Childhood Education: Department of Education*, (2016), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Learning and Teaching with Learning Trajectories, [learningtrajectories.org](http://learningtrajectories.org) (06 June 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Saskatoon Public School Division No. #13, *Annual Report 2019–2020*, p. 29.

- **Confirm the suitability of alternative tools that teachers used to assess key areas of a kindergarten student's readiness to learn**
- **Understand why kindergarten students did not participate in required reassessments of student learning and development**
- **Provide kindergarten teachers with additional training and guidance on consistent application of the Division's key instructional practices used to increase student readiness (Sprint cycles)**
- **Routinely analyze kindergarten assessment data to identify trends and common areas of struggle across all schools in the Division**

**Figure 3—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach**

**Audit Objective:**

To assess whether Saskatoon School Division No. 13 has effective processes, for the 18-month period ending June 30, 2020, to monitor its success in readying students for learning in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten.

**Audit Criteria:**

Processes to:

1. **Collect relevant data on kindergarten student development and learning**
  - Identify relevant information (e.g., attendance, language and communication, numeracy, social and emotional development, parent/guardian/community engagement) necessary to understand student readiness to learn
  - Set frequency to collect relevant information
  - Collect information in a consistent and comparable way
2. **Analyze data to identify developmental and learning trajectories for kindergarten students**
  - Identify barriers (e.g., social, emotional, physical) for understanding developmental and learning trajectories (e.g., for students, schools, programs)
  - Evaluate the success of tools used for evaluation and reporting (e.g., for students, schools, programs)
3. **Measure progress towards increasing the proportion of kindergarten students ready for learning**
  - Identify relevant criteria and key processes to evaluate readiness of students for learning in the early years
  - Determine progress for improving students learning readiness (e.g., school, program and school division)
4. **Adjust response to developmental and learning trajectories for kindergarten students**
  - Evaluate mechanisms affecting students' learning trajectories
  - Adjust processes as required

**Audit Approach:**

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate Saskatoon Public's processes, we used the above criteria based on related work, review of literature, and consultations with management. Saskatoon Public management agreed with the above criteria.

We examined Saskatoon Public's policies, and procedures relating to collecting, analyzing, and monitoring success in readying students in kindergarten. We used an expert to identify and assess Saskatoon Public's processes against good practice. We interviewed staff responsible for kindergarten. We examined relevant documentation (e.g., standard assessment templates, guidance, minutes, student information). We tested a sample of teachers and principals for consistency with Division guidance and expectations (e.g., strategies were put in place for students identified as experiencing some or significant difficulty).



## 4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Assessment Tools Collect Sufficient Information on Kindergarten Student Development and Learning

Saskatoon Public gives appropriate standard assessment tools and guidance to help schools and kindergarten teachers collect key information about the development and learning of individual kindergarten students. It clearly communicates these expectations to schools and kindergarten teachers.

As mandated by the Ministry of Education, Saskatoon Public collects relevant information on the five domains outlined in a common readiness screening tool called the Early Years Evaluation—Teachers Assessment (EYE-TA) discussed in **Section 5.0**.<sup>16</sup>

Along with this Ministry mandated tool, Saskatoon Public developed three standard assessment tools to collect additional relevant student information (see **Figure 4**).<sup>17</sup> Saskatoon Public management used experts in the field of education to develop early learning assessment tools designed which collect key information on where a student is relative to curricular targets, so as to inform teaching staff where to adjust instruction.<sup>18</sup> Saskatoon Public used these tools for kindergarten students.

**Figure 4—Standard Assessment Tools to Assess Key Areas of Student Development and Learning**

| Assessment Tool  | Core Assessment Areas   | Assessment Completion Dates   |
|--|---|---|
| Early Years Evaluation Tool<br>- Teacher Assessment (EYE-TA)   | Awareness of:<br>- Self and environment<br>- Social skills and approaches to learning<br>- Cognitive skills, language and communication<br>- Physical development | Fall and Spring<br>(Spring only for students that did not achieve mastery in the fall assessment) |
| Phonological Awareness Quick Screener (PAQS)<br>New in 2019–20 | A student's phonological awareness (e.g., identifying syllables, word sounds)   | January and May   |
| Alphabet Data  | A student's ability to recognize letter names and sounds  | October and May   |
| Mathematics Quick Screener                                     | A student's development in numeracy areas of the provincial curriculum  | No deadline communicated (teacher determined)   |

Source: Adapted from Saskatoon Public Schools records.

Saskatoon Public collects information about kindergarten students in the following key areas:

- Personal information (e.g., age, gender, first language information, whether self-declared as FNMI, daily attendance)
- Emergent literacy assessment (e.g., comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonics, phonological awareness)

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Education, *Plan for 2020–21*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Curricular targets are the desired knowledge and skills of students as set out in the curriculum. See Saskatchewan's kindergarten curriculum [www.edonline.sk.ca/webapps/moe-curriculum-BB5f208b6da4613/CurriculumDocument?id=405](http://www.edonline.sk.ca/webapps/moe-curriculum-BB5f208b6da4613/CurriculumDocument?id=405) (24 February 2021)

- Numeracy assessment (e.g., number recognition, counting, identifying patterns, subitizing)<sup>19</sup>
- Readiness to learn in five domains of early learning (i.e., awareness of self and environment, social skills and approaches to learning, cognitive skills, language and communication, and physical development)—see **Section 5.0** for further detail

In addition to information gathered through the assessment tools administered in a kindergarten classroom, Saskatoon Public leverages information from the involvement with students of speech-language pathologists, educational psychologists, and occupational therapists.

We found the assessment tools and the information they collect align with good practice. These tools collectively evaluate information about kindergarten students' core development areas (e.g., letters, sounds, numeracy, phonological awareness). They gather sufficient and relevant information in order to understand a student's readiness to learn.

Moreover, the use of the standard assessment tools to collect data on key developmental and learning areas of individual students provides Saskatoon Public with a solid basis to consistently determine the level of readiness of a student when exiting kindergarten.

## 4.2 Sufficient Guidance on Use of Standard Assessment Tools

Saskatoon Public provides schools with sufficient written guidance on how to use each standard assessment tool. In addition, it sets minimum expectations about teachers communicating student assessment results with parents.

Written guidance includes manuals, training, templates for the standard assessment tools, and an annual assessment calendar. In June each year, management provides schools with the assessment calendar for the upcoming year.

We found the guidance clearly sets out the Division's expectations on what assessment information to collect, and how to collect it.

We found the 2019–20 assessment calendar clearly sets out the expected frequency and timing of progress reports and parent-teacher-student conferences, and sharing of EYE-TA student results to parents. Typically, this occurs in November.

All five kindergarten teachers we interviewed showed awareness and a clear understanding of Saskatoon Public's expectations. Each of these teachers also noted that, in addition to the use of the standard assessment tools, they constantly collect student information through their daily interactions and observations.

Having clear and understandable guidance on the use of the standard assessment tools helps Saskatoon Public collect consistent and comparable information about students' learning and development across the Division.

<sup>19</sup> Subitizing is the ability to instantly recognize the number of items in a small set without counting – e.g., roll a dice and see four dots, and without counting, know it is a four.



### 4.3 Clear Guidance Given on Timing and Student Involvement in Almost All Standard Assessment Tools

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Saskatoon Public provides schools with clear guidance on timing, frequency and which students to involve in standard assessments through the assessment calendar.

Our review found the 2019–20 assessment calendar sets out the expected frequency for the use and timing of each tool (see **Figure 4**) other than for the Mathematics Quick Screener (numeracy). As explained in **Section 4.4**, the Division allows teachers to decide how often to assess the numeracy of their students.

The 2019–20 assessment calendar also sets out, by each assessment tool, which students to involve in assessment (e.g., all eligible students, only students who did not demonstrate mastery on previous assessment[s]).

Other than for assessing student numeracy, the 2019–20 calendar expects two assessment dates for each tool—one early in the school year to determine a student’s baseline and another later in the school year to measure the student’s progress. Having an assessment early in the school year and a second assessment later in the school year is consistent with good practice.

We also found kindergarten teachers complete assessments of their students as often as the school calendar requires. Each of the five kindergarten teachers we tested administered each of the required assessments in the 2019–20 school year, other than the second assessment of student phonological awareness and EYE-TA reassessment. These assessments were scheduled in May 2020 and April 2020, respectively. The teachers were unable to administer these second assessments because of school closures in March 2020. The Government directed school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, we found kindergarten teachers did not always document the date they administered numeracy, literacy, and phonological assessments. Three of the five teachers tested did not document the date on which they assessed kindergarten students for these three areas (six assessments in total). For two of those six undated assessments, the Division could not show us these assessments were done during the month set out in the calendar.

We noted that not all templates for the standard assessment tools (i.e., Alphabet Data—see **Figure 4**) have a place to document the assessment date; or teachers were not using the date placement as intended (e.g., teachers documented PAQS scores where the date was designed to be documented). A documented assessment date helps show teachers administer the assessment during the expected timeframe.

Having clear communication about the timing and frequency of required assessments helps ensure teachers collect sufficient information on individual student’s learning and development. Having sufficient and timely information helps teachers make timely adjustments to instruction and decisions for other strategies to improve student outcomes.



## 4.4 Formal Guidance on Expected Frequency of Use of Numeracy Assessment Tool Needed

Saskatoon Public does not clearly or formally communicate to schools and teachers the expected frequency for assessing the numeracy of kindergarten students.

Saskatoon Public gives teachers the authority to decide when and how often to assess students' numeracy. Saskatoon Public management noted it expects teachers to assess student numeracy at least twice a year—at the beginning of the school year to provide a baseline, and at least once again throughout the school year to assess student progress—consistent with good practice.

However, we found not all kindergarten teachers are aware of this expectation. Two of five kindergarten teachers tested assessed students numeracy only once during the 2019–20 school year instead of a minimum of twice.

We found Saskatoon Public had not communicated this expectation in writing.

Clear written communication helps reduce the risk of misunderstandings and ensures tasks are completed as and when expected. Clear communication on the timing and minimum frequency for assessments of students helps reduce the risk of teachers not collecting sufficient and complete information on student learning and development in key areas.

1. **We recommend Saskatoon School Division No. 13 give schools and teachers written expectations about the minimum frequency of assessing kindergarten students using standard assessment tools in all key areas of learning and development.**

## 4.5 Suitability Assessment of Alternative Assessment Tools Needed

Saskatoon Public does not determine whether alternative assessment tools collect sufficient and relevant information about a kindergarten student's learning and development in the area being assessed. It does not require teachers to vet the suitability of the alternative assessment tools they plan to use in assessing key areas of learning and development (e.g., literacy and numeracy).

To assess student literacy and numeracy, Saskatoon Public management gives teachers the option of using standard assessment tools (noted in **Figure 4**) or choosing alternative literacy and numeracy screening assessment tools. Teachers can develop these assessment tools, or select tools developed elsewhere.

We found some alternate assessment tools in use are not as robust in assessing kindergarten students as the Division's standard assessment tools (see **Figure 4**). For example, the alternative math assessment tools, used by two of the five kindergarten teachers we tested, were not as robust as the Division's standard math assessment tool (Mathematics Quick Screener). We found both alternate tools did not include several crucial curricular components (e.g., number recognition, identifying greater than/less than picture groups) and did not assess the full range of a students' numeracy.



Not confirming whether alternative assessment tools are sufficiently robust increases the risk of teachers not collecting sufficient information to identify all of a student's potential areas of struggle in the particular subject. Not having sufficiently robust information increases the risk teachers may not identify necessary adjustments to instruction, or pursue other strategies to improve student outcomes.

- 2. We recommend Saskatoon School Division No. 13 confirm alternative tools, used to assess key areas of a kindergarten student's readiness to learn, collect sufficient and relevant information.**

## 4.6 Documentation of Why Students Miss Reassessments Needed

Saskatoon Public does not always know why kindergarten students miss participating in standard reassessments. It does not expect teachers to document reasons for students not participating in these reassessments.

Saskatoon Public management expects teachers to reassess all eligible students using standard assessment tools to measure the students' progress in key areas. Eligible students are those students who do not demonstrate mastery in a previous assessment. Reassessment of those students gives teachers sufficient and objective information about student progress and overall readiness to learn, and helps teachers identify continued potential barriers to learning and development.

Our analysis identified 47 kindergarten students that did not participate in EYE-TA Spring reassessment in the 2018–19 school year.

We found Saskatoon public management did not have reasonable explanations for not reassessing 11 of the 47 students.<sup>20</sup> Our analysis found these 11 students were in class with good attendance during the 2019 spring reassessment period. We determined seven of the 11 students moved between schools either before or after the spring reassessment period, and four of the 11 students withdrew from the school after the 2019 spring reassessment period.<sup>21</sup>

Saskatoon Public management was uncertain as to why these 11 students were not reassessed. They noted when students change schools their cumulative student files, containing the fall and spring EYE-TA assessments, go with them to the new school. Teachers are expected to assess new students, if the EYE-TA assessment is not in the students' file.

Not having a process to know why teachers did not complete required reassessments of students who did not demonstrate mastery in a previous assessment increases the risk of overlooking students. In addition, it increases the risk of teachers not getting sufficient data about a student's progress to enable identifying and making instructional changes to help the student succeed.

<sup>20</sup> Although not specifically documented in a student cumulative file, the reasons for not reassessing 36 of the 47 students were reasonable (e.g., left school before or during 15-day reassessment period, poor attendance during 15-day reassessment period).

<sup>21</sup> Four students switched schools before 2019 spring reassessment period, and three students switched schools after 2019 spring reassessment period.

3. We recommend Saskatoon School Division No. 13 understand reasons for kindergarten students who did not participate in required reassessments of student learning and development.

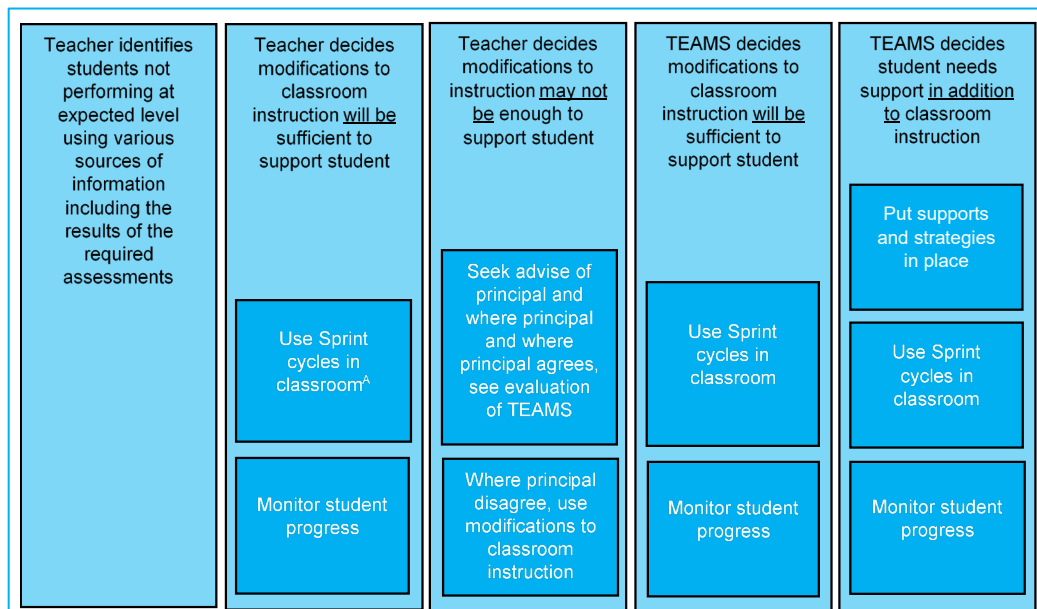
## 4.7 Consultation Process Used to Help Teachers Identify Students with Significant Learning Needs

Saskatoon Public consistently uses a consultative process to help teachers identify students with significant learning needs, and to identify strategies to help the student address those needs.

The identification of students with significant learning needs starts with the classroom teacher. Teachers rely on discussions with parents, student assessments, student observations and interactions in the classroom in this identification process.

As highlighted in **Figure 5**, Saskatoon Public has set up processes to assist teachers in this identification process. This includes consultation with the school principal, use of data teams, and the TEAMS approach.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 5—A Brief Description of a Teacher’s Consultation Process to Identify Students with Significant Learning Needs**



Source: Adapted from Saskatoon Public Schools records.  
<sup>^</sup> See **Figure 7** for a brief description of Sprint cycles.

Saskatoon Public recognizes it does not have sufficient resources to provide additional supports to every student with learning needs.

As described in **Figure 6**, Saskatoon Public requires each school to use a multi-discipline school-based group to help teachers identify students with significant barriers to learning and

<sup>22</sup> See **Figure 6** for a brief description of TEAMS approach. School data teams are comprised of the principal, vice-principal, resource teacher, and other selected teachers from the school. The role of Data Teams is to support teachers in the analysis of data from student assessments.



development, and develop supports and strategies to help the student overcome those barriers. Saskatoon Public calls these groups TEAMS. It uses a TEAMS approach to provide a consistent approach to screening students identified as potentially having learning needs. The TEAMS approach also helps determine which students should receive additional supports (e.g., educational assistant (EA), speech-language pathologist, physical or occupational therapist). See **Figure 6** for brief description of the TEAMS approach.

#### Figure 6—A Brief Description of TEAMS Approach

Saskatoon Public requires each school to establish a TEAMS. It expects school TEAMS to work with teachers to evaluate the needs of individual students, and put supports and strategies in place to overcome identified barriers to learning and development. It requires each TEAMS to be comprised of the school principal, vice-principal, guidance counsellor, resource teacher, education psychologist, and speech-language pathologist. This composition provides for a multi-discipline approach and broader consideration of a student's needs.

When a teacher identifies a student potentially having a significant barrier(s) to learning and development, they accumulate the relevant evidence and data in the student's file (e.g., teacher's observational notes, speech-language pathologist screener, results of standards assessment tools (numeracy, literacy, phonological awareness)). Then, teachers must discuss their specific concerns with their school principal, before seeking the advice and direction from TEAMS. Where the school principal agrees with a teacher's concerns, the teacher and principal request a school TEAMS review and consideration of the student file.

School TEAMS are to review the student file to determine the nature and extent of a student's needs, and what supports are required. For example, the needs of the students can range from educational assistants (EA) to additional time with speech-language pathologists, educational psychologists and occupational therapists.

Division management assigns speech-language pathologists to each of its schools. For the 2019–20 school year, the Division employed speech-language pathologists in 14.8 full-time equivalent positions, 391 EAs, and 10 educational psychologists to work in its 49 schools with a kindergarten program.

Source: Adapted from Saskatoon Public schools records and information provided by Saskatoon Public management.

We found Saskatoon Public gives school TEAMS and teachers sufficient written guidance about the TEAMS approach. We found it clearly sets out the role of the teacher in identifying students with potentially significant barriers to learning, and the role of the principal and TEAMS in assisting in evaluating the level of support a student may require, and strategies to obtain that support. We also found it expects TEAMS to use Ministry of Education tools to help TEAMS objectively evaluate the level of support a student needs, and help identify potential strategies to help a student.<sup>23</sup>

We also found Saskatoon Public provides written guidance to its speech and language pathologists. Formal guidance includes a Speech and Language Service Delivery Model and standard checklist to guide individual student evaluations to assess what is 'significant' communication barriers, which helps to identify which students to focus on.

Each of the seven schools with kindergarten programs we visited had a TEAMS in place. We found the composition of each school's TEAMS consistent with the Division's requirements. In addition, for the three schools we tested, we found each school TEAMS met regularly.

Using a broad-based consultative process helps the teacher better identify, and the school to evaluate, students with significant learning needs. When significant learning needs are identified, the school can identify strategies to help the student address those needs.

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Education tools include the *Inclusion and Intervention Plan* and *Elementary Student Impact Profile Rubric*. The Plan is designed for students whose needs require a significant level of support. The rubric is designed to evaluate a student and calculate a priority score. The priority score helps determine the level of support a student needs (e.g., full-time vs. part-time EA support).

## 4.8 Teachers Using TEAMS to Help Students with Significant Barriers to Learning and Development

Saskatoon Public schools with kindergarten programs are consistently using the TEAMS approach to identify and put supports and strategies in place to help students learn and develop.

Our analysis of 2019–20 EYE-TA assessment data from three schools with kindergarten programs identified 23 kindergarten students assessed as experiencing significant difficulty (Tier III) that were evaluated by, or part of, a school TEAMS approach. For these 23 kindergarten students tested, we found the related school TEAMS:

- Evaluated each of the 23 students, and put strategies in place to help the students achieve expected learning outcomes consistent with the TEAMS approach. For example, 14 of the 23 students received EA support during the 2019–20 school year. We found the related school TEAMS used, as expected, the Elementary Student Impact Profile Rubric to assess 12 of these 14 students to support the assignment of some support from an EA. We verified the two students without a completed Rubric received support of an EA through their full school day.
- Actively discussed, during school TEAM meetings, the progress of 21 of the 23 students throughout the 2019–20 school year, and adjusted student supports and strategies accordingly.
- For the two students not discussed during a TEAM meeting, the resource staff (e.g., EA, occupational therapist, physical therapist) assigned to work with the student monitored the progress.

Consistently evaluating needs of students with significant barriers to learning and development using a broad-based consultative process helps the teacher and the school to put strategies in place to work through these barriers and help the students' succeed.

## 4.9 Additional Guidance and Training Needed for Sprint Cycles

Kindergarten teachers are not always documenting their use of Sprint cycles—a key instructional practice used to increase the student readiness to the next level—consistent with Saskatoon Public's expectations.

**Sprint cycles** are short intensive-focused and repeated instruction for a small group of students (approximately six students) on a specific area of focus. See **Figure 7** for a brief description of a Sprint cycle.

**Figure 7—Three Key Phases of a Sprint Cycle**

A teaching Sprint consists of three phases:

1. **Plan:** use various sources of information about student's progress and achievement (including the results of student assessment data) to determine the area of focus (e.g., recognizing the letters in the student's name, counting backwards from 10), which students to include, and what topic to cover (e.g., literacy, numeracy, writing). Typically includes students who are close to achieving mastery for a curricular outcome.



2. **Sprint:** put selected students through short, manageable cycles of teaching in the classroom for the area of focus. Cycles usually occur over a three to five week period.
3. **Review:** analyze student results and progress, and repeat as necessary. Teachers typically complete Sprints three to five times during the school year.

Source: Adopted from Saskatoon Public materials.

As described in **Figure 7**, Saskatoon Public expects teachers to use Sprint cycles to adjust their normal classroom instruction on identified areas where students need improvement. It further expects teachers to document their planned and actual use of Sprint cycles. Teachers are to enter Sprint data into Saskatoon Public’s IT system called ACADEMUS.<sup>24</sup> Sprint data includes the topic (area of focus), which students participated, student progress and lessons learned by the teacher.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the school year, the principals are to approve Sprint cycles each teacher has used.<sup>26</sup>

We found Saskatoon Public provided teachers with periodic training on the use of Sprint cycles. For example, during October 2019, a Saskatoon Public professional development session trained the school administrators (principal, vice-principal) and teacher leaders on the use of Sprint cycles.<sup>27</sup> We found the training sufficiently outlined how to plan, perform and review the Sprint phases through discussions with colleagues, and also states the importance of using class assessment results for these decisions.

For the five kindergarten teachers and two principals tested, each used Sprint cycles in the 2019–20 school year, as Saskatoon Public expected, other than in the following areas.<sup>28</sup> For the 15 Sprint cycles tested, we found:

- For ten cycles, teachers did not document rationale for the topic chosen (e.g., literacy vs. numeracy).

Documenting the rationale for the Sprint topic allows the principal and teacher to monitor provision of appropriate support for readying students for learning.

- For one cycle, the teacher did not enter the Sprint data into ACADEMUS nor maintain supporting materials for the Sprint (e.g., results, reflections, participation).

Documenting the Sprint in the ACADEMUS system would allow the principal and teacher to monitor provision of appropriate support for readying students for learning.

- For one cycle, the Sprint included only three students when the classroom had other students with similar assessment results that could have benefitted from participation in the Sprint. For four cycles, the entire class participated in the Sprint cycle whereas, the remaining 11 of the 15 Sprints tested clearly selected students based on data-driven assessment results.

Not selecting students based on data driven assessment results or including all students that could benefit can result in ineffective use of teacher’s time and resources.

<sup>24</sup> ACADEMUS system is used to store Sprint cycle data, teacher professional learning plans and used to complete and store the Alphabet data assessment tool for individual students.

<sup>25</sup> Sprint cycle data stays at the school level.

<sup>26</sup> Principal approval is done as part of a teacher’s professional learning plan.

<sup>27</sup> Teacher leaders are teachers who have taken on leadership roles and additional professional responsibilities. ([www.edglossary.org/teacher-leader/](http://www.edglossary.org/teacher-leader/)) (3 March 2021).

<sup>28</sup> For a sample of five teachers and two principals, we tested all Sprint cycles completed during the 2019–20 year. They completed 15 Sprint cycles in total. For each Sprint cycle, we assessed whether the teacher determined the area of focus, and the selection of students to participate aligned with curricular objectives and student assessment results. We also assessed if teachers monitored student progress during the Sprint cycle, and if the school principal approved the Sprint plan and results.

Furthermore, we found principals did not always approve teachers' use of Sprint cycles as expected. One of the three principals tested did not approve four of the 22 Sprints tested at the end of the school year.<sup>29</sup> Principal oversight of Sprints would potentially improve consistency of teacher application and provide teachers with additional support in readying students for learning.

Instead of training teachers directly on the use of Sprint cycles, Saskatoon Public expects trained principals and teacher leaders share their learnings and guide teachers' use of Sprint cycles. Teachers can also receive guidance during meetings with kindergarten teachers at other schools, coordinated by the Division's Early Learning Coordinator.

Sprint cycles are a key strategy to drive adjustments to instruction and improve student outcomes. Consistent use of Sprint cycles can help ensure this strategy effectively helps students that are close to achieving curricular outcomes. Inadequate training and guidance for Sprint cycles increases the risk that the Sprints are not directed in the most efficient and effective way for the students and teachers.

- 4. We recommend Saskatoon School Division No. 13 provide kindergarten teachers with additional training and guidance on application of key instructional practice(s) used to increase student readiness.**

## 4.10 Majority of Students Received Sufficient Classroom Supports

While Saskatoon Public teachers provided kindergarten students with additional classroom supports when appropriate, students identified as experiencing difficulty were not always included in a related Sprint cycle.

Our analysis of 2019-20 EYE-TA assessment data from three schools with kindergarten programs identified 14 kindergarten students assessed as experiencing significant difficulty (Tier III) that were not evaluated by or as part of a school TEAMS approach (**Section 4.8**). We found:

- Three of these 14 students were receiving additional supports either outside the classroom (speech-language pathologist) or in the classroom (Sprint cycles).
- Six students showed satisfactory progress during the year from regular in class support.
- Three student had poor attendance that would hinder the teacher's ability to provide additional supports, therefore we found it reasonable teachers provided no additional supports.
- For the remaining two, we observed these students likely should have been included in a Sprint cycle (see **Recommendation 4** about additional training and guidance needed for teachers on use of Sprint cycles).

In addition, we did a second analysis of the sufficiency of learning supports provided to students categorised as experiencing some or significant difficulty under the colour system.

<sup>29</sup> We expanded our testing to include an additional seven Sprint cycles reviewed by the three Principals tested.



Saskatoon Public grade school teachers use a colour system to categorise a student's level of learning and development, and to help them decide appropriate instructional strategies for their classroom. (See **Figure 8** for a brief description of the colour grouping.)

**Figure 8—Colour Category Scores for Kindergarten Student Development and Learning**

Teachers categorise students into one of three colour scores based on their assessment of a student's development and learning. Teachers use this categorization to determine instructional strategies needed for their class.

- **Green** – appropriate development – no additional support needed above regular classroom instruction
- **Yellow** – experiencing some difficulty – may need additional strategies (e.g., Sprint cycles)
- **Red** – experiencing significant difficulty – may need additional resources/support (considered for TEAMS and/or Sprint cycles)

Source: Adopted from Saskatoon Public materials.

Our analysis of 82 kindergarten students from three different classrooms found teachers based their colour classification of students on the student's EYE-TA assessment results. We found 27 were categorised as green, 28 as yellow, and 27 as red.

Our analysis of the 55 kindergarten students that scored as either yellow or red in the 2019-20 school year found:

- Almost two-thirds (i.e., 36 students) received some form of support in the area in which they were experiencing difficulty. For example, they participated in Sprint cycles within the classroom and/or received other support outside of the regular classroom. Examples of support outside of the classroom included time with an EA, or speech-language pathologist.
- One student (scored as red) had poor attendance that would hinder the teacher's ability to provide additional supports, therefore we found it reasonable teachers provided no additional supports.
- One-third (i.e., 18 students—17 classified as yellow, and one classified as red), were able to progress through regular classroom instruction as the primary means to support their progression in learning and development.
  - For 11 students, classified as yellow, we found it reasonable that the students only received regular classroom instruction as individual assessment scores were close to meeting expectations.
  - For the remaining seven students, six met expectations in all kindergarten curricula areas based on our analysis of their progress reports as of March 2020. One student met expectations in all but three curricular areas (math and dance/music [beginning to meet] and health education [not met]) as of March 2020. This student may have benefited from the completion of the school year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic Saskatoon Public ended the school year in late March 2020, instead of the end of June 2020, as planned.

Categorizing students into colour group scores allows teachers to better identify students that need additional classroom strategies. Classroom strategies, like Sprint cycles, focus on specific ways to help students progress towards appropriate development.



## 4.11 School Administrators Actively Monitor Student Progress

Principals actively monitor the educational progress of kindergarten students, and share information with their peers at other schools in the Division.

Saskatoon Public stays informed on individual kindergarten student and class progress toward readiness for learning in the primary grades in a variety of ways.

For example, Saskatoon Public's early-learning coordinator (a staff member responsible for early learning, assessment, and technology) regularly meets with kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers across Saskatoon Public. The coordinator uses these meetings to support each teacher, and discuss instruction, tools, challenges, and lessons learned.

In addition, principals and teacher leaders from each school regularly attend leadership meetings to discuss feedback, training and other relevant topics noted in the schools.<sup>30</sup> Principals observe classrooms, approve Sprint cycles, and review teacher learning plans to assess teacher training gaps.<sup>31</sup>

Teachers and principals use information on student progress to identify potential instructional changes in the classroom or gaps in teacher training.

Each of the five kindergarten teachers we interviewed confirmed they regularly met with the early-learning coordinator and school administration periodically observe their classrooms during each school year.

Each of the three principals we interviewed from schools with kindergarten programs confirmed the Superintendent of Education visits their school on a regular basis, and discusses student/school progress with them. They also confirmed they attend and participate in the leadership meetings. In our review of the meeting agendas, three of the six leadership meetings held between September 2019 and March 2020 noted evidence of discussion of educational assistant allocations, supporting students with complex needs and help with analyzing school data. For example, leaders discussed how exploring the classroom environment, scheduling and relationships can support classrooms with complex needs.

Actively monitoring student progress and sharing information with peers, at the school administrator and teacher level, provides Saskatoon Public with better information to initiate appropriate changes. Changes to instruction and training needs further benefit students.

## 4.12 Division-Wide Analysis of Student Assessment Results Needed

While Saskatoon Public analyzes some student assessment data centrally, its assessment was not robust and did not consider key factors relevant to the learning and development of kindergarten students.

<sup>30</sup> Principal, vice principal, and consultant leaders (educational consultant, educational psychologist, occupational therapist) from each school attend regular leadership meetings to discuss leadership feedback, training and other relevant topics noted in the schools. Meeting agendas are maintained for these meetings.

<sup>31</sup> A learning plan is a teachers' comprehensive, customizable, multi-day plan for instruction and assessment.



During 2019–20, Saskatoon Public management analyzed student assessment results, however this analysis was limited to EYE-TA and attendance data. Their analysis of this data considered factors such as poor attendance, English as an additional language (EAL), and students with intensive needs.

However, the analysis did not consider other data that is available to Saskatoon Public (e.g., class sizes, participation in pre kindergarten, years of teacher experience, resource support allocations). These additional considerations would allow Saskatoon Public to complete a meaningful analysis of the root causes of low student assessment scores.

Without a robust analysis of student data, Saskatoon Public may not identify the root cause for issues at certain schools or Division-wide gaps. A thorough analysis of student data will also support decisions for how Saskatoon Public directs resources to its schools.

5. We recommend Saskatoon School Division No. 13 analyze kindergarten assessment data to identify trends and common areas of struggle across all schools in the Division.

## 5.0 MINISTRY-MANDATED COMMON READINESS SCREENING TOOL—EARLY YEARS EVALUATION-TEACHER ASSESSMENT

The Ministry and school divisions agreed to use a Ministry-supplied skills assessment IT tool—the Early Years Evaluation-Teachers Assessment at set minimum intervals starting the fall of 2013.<sup>A</sup>

Teachers are to assess kindergarten students in the fall, and reassess only those students experiencing some or significant difficulty (Tiers II and III) in the spring. Students assessed also includes children with intensive needs and children who are learning English as an additional language

This industry-designed tool helps teachers systematically assess the skills of young children in the following five domains of early learning associated with a child's readiness to learn at school.<sup>B</sup>

1. Awareness of self and environment
2. Social skills and approaches to learning
3. Cognitive skills
4. Language and communication
5. Physical development

The evaluation indicates each student's developmental level as either appropriate development (Tier I), experiencing some difficulty (Tier II), or experiencing significant difficulty (Tier III) for each of the above five domains. Results of the tool allow educators and school-based interdisciplinary teams to quickly identify students most likely to require extra support during the kindergarten year based on level of skill development in the five key domains. Using this evaluation tool at intervals allows teachers to evaluate students' readiness to learn in the primary grades over time.

<sup>A</sup> Ministry of Education, *Annual Report 2013–14*, p. 5.

<sup>B</sup> Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (2011). *Review of the Early Years Evaluation – Teacher Assessment*, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

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