

Chapter 23

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

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By August 2021, the Ministry of Education improved its processes to monitor kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades.

The Ministry established a process in spring 2021 to analyze the Early Years action plans of school divisions with students at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades. Ministry staff provided these school divisions with guidance for developing the plans and provided feedback to school division officials based on the Ministry's assessment.

In addition, the Ministry established a plan to meet with those school divisions whose students are most at risk each fall and spring to discuss their action plans, and it also distributed activity cards outlining play-based learning activities to seven school divisions with a targeted prekindergarten program to share with families.

By providing guidance, feedback, and resources to those school divisions whose kindergarten students are most at risk of not being ready to learn, the Ministry increases the likelihood of more students being ready to learn in the primary grades.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

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

The Ministry of Education is responsible for providing leadership and direction to the prekindergarten through Grade 12 education sector. It promotes student success and well-being for Saskatchewan children and youth, as well as family literacy as a foundation for the province's social and economic growth.⁴

In 2013, the Ministry of Education, school divisions, and participating First Nations Education Authorities formed the Provincial Leadership Team to lead and coordinate the

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

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

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ministry of Education Plan for 2021–22*, p. 3.



development and implementation of the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP).⁵ The ESSP included a goal supporting the educational development of children aged zero to six such that by June 2020, 90% of students exiting kindergarten are ready to learn in the primary grades.⁶ Students scoring in the appropriate Early Years Evaluation (EYE) range demonstrate learning readiness and should experience success in subsequent grades.

The EYE assessment tool provides the Ministry with a good understanding of young children's development when they first enter school with a particular focus on reading readiness skills. As a learning assessment tool used universally in provincial kindergarten programs, the EYE provides an important tool for educators and school divisions to help guide planning and practice in classrooms, and at school and division levels.⁷ In 2020–21, 78.7% of students exiting kindergarten scored within the appropriate EYE range.^{8,9} The results for this measure remained flat since the Ministry began measuring kindergarten students' readiness to learn in 2014–15 (i.e., 79.2%).

Assessing students early in kindergarten helps identify those who may be in need of professional services such as speech pathology or additional school supports. Students experience more difficulty in catching up with their peers the longer their needs go undiagnosed and unsupported.¹⁰

Without effective processes to monitor kindergarten students' readiness to learn in the primary grades, the Ministry risks placing students at greater risk of not achieving their academic, financial and social potential.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our second follow-up audit of management's actions on the recommendations we first made in 2017.¹¹

Our *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 22, concluded that for the 12-month period ended April 30, 2017, the Ministry of Education had, other than the matters reflected in our four recommendations, effective processes to monitor improving the percentage of kindergarten students scoring within the appropriate Early Years Evaluation range to meet the sector goal of 90% by 2020. By September 2019, the Ministry implemented two of four recommendations.¹²

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

⁵ The Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) is a multi-year strategic plan focused on specific outcomes and achieving goals set out in the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth: Vision 2020 and Beyond*.

⁶ *Ministry of Education 2020–21 Annual Report*, p. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸ Adapted from information provided by the Ministry of Education. As a result of COVID-19, the 2020–21 EYE assessments did not include all kindergarten students due to difficulties in appropriately assessing students learning from home or in eLearning contexts. In addition, overall kindergarten enrolment for 2020–21 was lower than expected. In a typical year prior to COVID-19, the Ministry estimates 85% of kindergarten-eligible children in the province were included in EYE assessments. In 2020–21 though, with fewer kindergarten-eligible children enrolled in school and a larger proportion of students learning outside of classrooms, the Ministry estimates that 70% of kindergarten-eligible children in the province participated in EYE assessments.

⁹ Due to school closures in response to COVID-19, schools did not conduct EYE re-assessments in spring 2020. As such, there are no comparative EYE results for students exiting kindergarten in 2019–20.

¹⁰ Understanding the Early Years Regina, September 2009, *UEY Regina Research Update: Measuring Early Childhood Development in Regina*. www.reginakids.ca/rsu_docs/uey-regina_edi-results-sept200953738.pdf (18 August 2021).

¹¹ *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 22, pp. 133–142.

¹² *2019 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 31, pp. 259–264.

from the original audit. The Ministry's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To perform this follow-up audit, we interviewed relevant Ministry officials and reviewed the Ministry's process to assess school divisions' Early Years action plans.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at August 18, 2021, and the Ministry's actions up to that date.

3.1 Ministry Taking Action to Assist School Divisions With Students Most at Risk of Not Being Ready to Learn in the Primary Grades

We recommended the Ministry of Education coordinate its analysis of action plans of school divisions at risk of not achieving the early learning goal to assist them in increasing the number of students who are ready to learn in the primary grades upon exiting kindergarten. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 139, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status—Implemented

We recommended the Ministry of Education take specific actions to assist those school divisions whose students are most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten. (2017 Report – Volume 2, p. 141, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 12, 2018)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Education established a process to analyze the Early Years action plans of school divisions with students at risk of not achieving the early learning goal. In addition, the Ministry took specific actions to assist those school divisions whose students were most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten.

The Ministry analyzed data from fall 2020 Early Years Evaluation (EYE) results to identify 29 High Count High Rate (HCHR) schools within 15 school divisions across the province. HCHR schools have both a large number of students scoring outside the appropriate EYE range, as well as students among the most objectively vulnerable (i.e., most likely to experience difficulty with developmental tasks). Consistent with our 2019 follow-up audit, the Ministry identifies HCHR schools each year using the fall EYE results.

In spring 2021, the Ministry required those school divisions with HCHR schools to submit an Early Years action plan in response to the EYE data results for these schools. The Ministry gave these school divisions a plan template and a 'considerations' document providing guidance for developing their action plans. We found the guidance provided by the Ministry to be reasonable, as it set out various elements relevant to improving students'



readiness to learn (e.g., program delivery, family engagement) along with examples for suggested actions that schools may undertake.

Upon receipt of the Early Years action plans from these school divisions, analysts from the Ministry's Early Learning Unit evaluated the plans to identify gaps or other issues to discuss with the specific school divisions. For a sample of five HCHR schools, we found a Ministry analyst reviewed the associated Early Years action plan and provided feedback (e.g., through discussions or email) to school division officials. We found the analysts' review of the action plans considered whether school divisions placed focus on specific areas, such as fostering relationships with families, teachers' experience level, student attendance, lack of prekindergarten programming, or possible COVID-19 pandemic impacts.

In addition to providing identified school divisions with guidance for their Early Years action plans, we found the Ministry also took the following actions to assist school divisions whose students were most at risk of not being ready to learn in the primary grades:

- Established a plan, in June 2021, to meet with those school divisions with HCHR schools each fall and spring to discuss their action plans.
- Distributed activity cards, in August 2020, to seven school divisions with HCHR schools with targeted prekindergarten programs. These activity cards include play-based activities families can use with children and offer examples of skills children need (e.g., listening to others, sorting items by size/colour/shape, social skills, gross motor skills) as they reach developmental milestones. These activity cards provide families with ideas to improve their children's readiness to learn before entering kindergarten.

By providing guidance, feedback, and resources to those school divisions with HCHR schools, the Ministry increases the likelihood of more students being ready to learn in the primary grades.