

Chapter 8

Sun West School Division No. 207—Supporting Students' Completion of Grades 10 to 12 Distance Education Courses

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Sun West School Division No. 207 provides distance education courses to Grades 10–12 students through its Distance Learning Centre. Students of the Centre include both those who reside within and outside of Sun West's divisional boundaries. Some students (60% of students registered at the Centre) take only distance education courses, while others take some online courses to supplement their in-person classes at another school. For the 2020–21 school year, the Centre taught over 3,900 courses to more than 2,100 Grades 10–12 students.

Other than the following areas where improvements are required, at November 30, 2021, Sun West had effective processes to support students in completing Grades 10–12 distance education courses. Sun West needs to:

- Identify and engage students who are behind in their coursework by consistently using its student inactivity phasing process, to support successful course completion
- Implement a course development policy that includes frequency of course reviews and detailed processes for updating courses
- Establish course completion-rate targets for students learning solely at the Distance Learning Centre to complete their Grades 10–12 courses. The target that Sun West has is only addressing around 20% of the population of students enrolled in Sun West distance education courses.
- Analyze key information related to distance learning to identify trends, issues and improvements, and provide regular written reports to its Board
- Improve its IT system to help monitor the timeliness of grading coursework to identify those teachers who are critically behind in grading, which can ultimately reduce student engagement and successful course completion
- Assess the need for ongoing focused professional development—distance education teachers benefit from training specific to an online learning environment

Improving its processes to better support students in successfully completing Grades 10–12 distance education courses may help Sun West's students graduate from high school. Successful completion of high school helps prepare students for a post-secondary education and for entering the workforce.



2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines results from our audit of Sun West School Division No. 207's processes for supporting students to complete Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses for the period ending November 30, 2021.^{1,2}

Students include individuals enrolled to take a Grade 10–12 distance education course from within, or outside of, Sun West's divisional boundaries, or other enrolments (e.g., adult learners, correctional inmates).

Distance education is the delivery of instruction to students through online or print-based resources, where students are in a different location than the course teachers.³ Resources include both synchronous (e.g., real-time broadcasts) as well as asynchronous (e.g., on demand, pre-recorded) instructional resources.

2.1 Distance Education in Saskatchewan and in Sun West

The Education Act, 1995, assigns responsibility to Saskatchewan's Boards of Education (school boards) to provide educational courses to students residing within its school division.⁴

In 2021–22, 18 of the 27 provincial school divisions offered distance education courses to Saskatchewan students. The number of course registrations for Grades 10–12 distance education courses increased to over 26,000 course registrations in 2020–21 driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (see **Figure 1**).

Sun West is an entirely rural school division with no cities within its boundaries. It is located in west central Saskatchewan covering an area of 31,220 square kilometres.^{5,6} It has 42 schools including 18 Hutterite colony schools, and 24 others located in 19 different communities (e.g., Davidson, Kindersley, Biggar).⁷

Sun West has the highest proportion of Grades 10 to 12 distance-education course registrations compared to the other individual distance education schools in the province. As shown in **Figure 1**, from 2017 to 2021, Sun West averaged 26% of the total number of provincial distance-education course registrations. In Saskatchewan, between 2017 and 2019, there were 13,000 Grade 10–12 students on average registered in distance education courses, which doubled (i.e., over 26,000) in 2021.

¹ This audit did not assess processes used to support students with intensive needs. See *2018 Report–Volume 1*, Chapter 11, pp. 157–178, for our work on supporting students with intensive needs.

² This audit also did not assess the alignment of the online courses' content with Ministry of Education curriculum requirements.

³ At Sun West Distance Learning Centre, high school students mostly do online courses versus print-based learning, which is mostly used in primary grades or in unique circumstances for specific students.

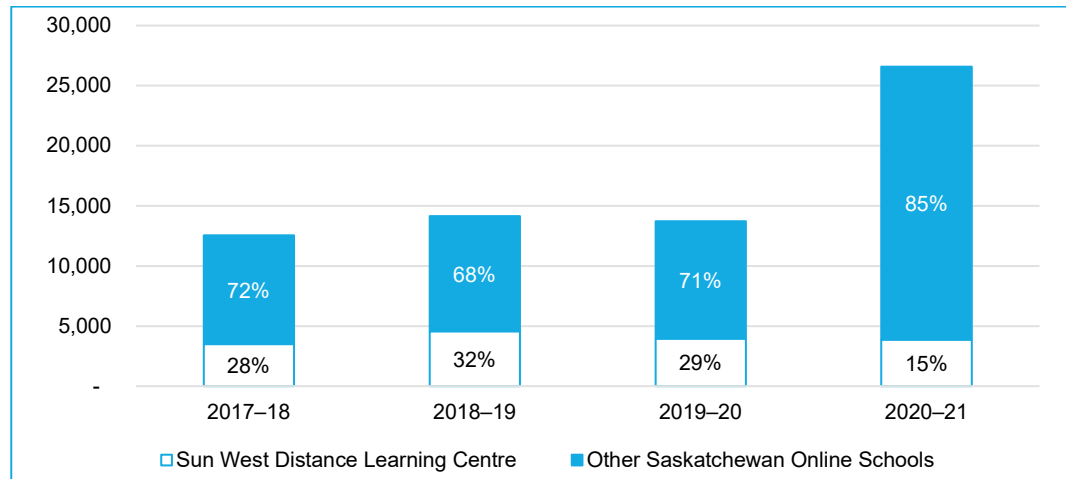
⁴ *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 85(1).

⁵ *Sun West School Division #207 2020–21 Annual Report*, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Figure 1—Saskatchewan School Divisions' Distance-Education Course Registrations for Grades 10–12



Source: Based on data received from the Ministry of Education on October 20, 2020, and February 1, 2022. Complete enrolment information for 2021–22 school year is not available.

Note: Other Saskatchewan Online Schools also includes registrations at regional colleges, independent and private schools in Saskatchewan.

Sun West offers a wide range of courses in all of its schools.⁸ This includes distance education through online learning.⁹ It uses online learning, through the Sun West Distance Learning Centre, to provide students with varying education options. Some students only attend the Distance Learning Centre, which means the students have no physical (i.e., bricks-and-mortar) school to attend.

It offers distance education for a full spectrum of kindergarten to Grade 12 courses. This includes all core and interest-based electives at the high-school level.¹⁰

The Sun West Distance Learning Centre is responsible for developing and delivering its distance education courses, and is an option for:¹¹

- Students under the age of 22 who want online credit, or to study online for various reasons; this option is free for students living within Sun West boundaries, and for a fee for those students living outside of Sun West boundaries
- Students enrolled in home-based education programs (no fee for students within Sun West boundaries)
- Inmates in correctional facilities through funding agreements with the Ministry of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety
- Adult students over age 22 (for a fee)

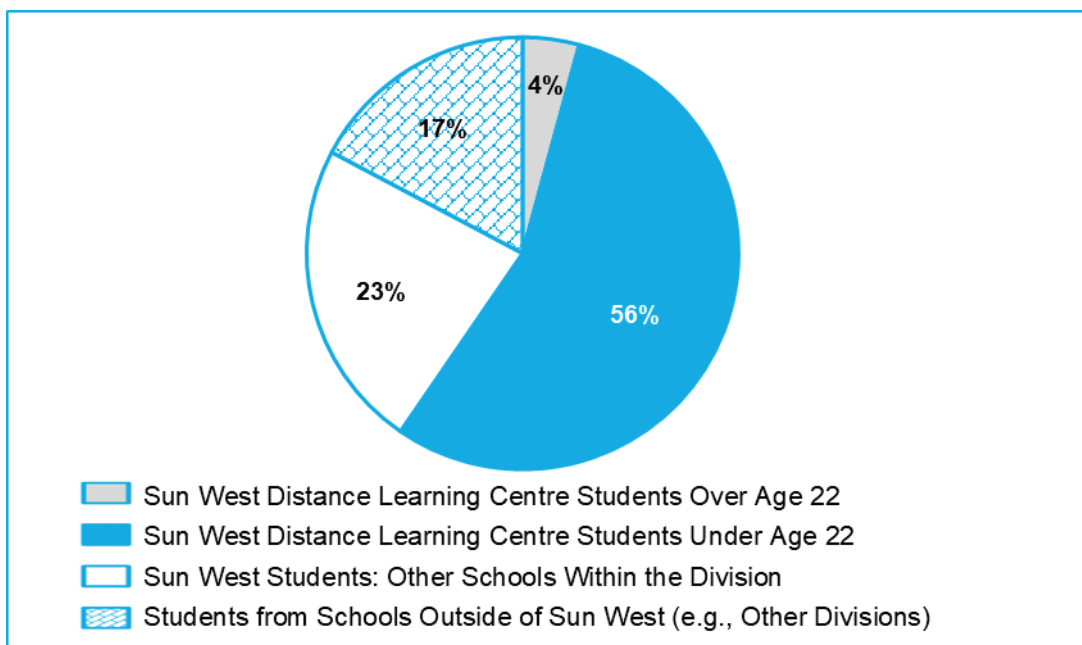
As shown in **Figure 2**, during the 2020–21 academic year, the majority of students (under age 22) who registered for Sun West's online courses reside within Sun West's boundaries (79%).

⁸ *Sun West School Division #207 2020–21 Annual Report*, p. 11.

⁹ The curriculum and course requirements for students enrolled in distance and traditional in-person education are the same.

¹⁰ www.sunwestdlc.ca/ (2 March 2022).

¹¹ Starting in the 2020–21 school year, Sun West entered into agreements with other school divisions to allow them to use its materials to deliver courses to their students. Sun West is not directly involved in delivering these courses to these students.

**Figure 2—Student Types Enrolled at the Sun West Distance Learning Centre in 2020–21**

Source: Adapted from information provided by Sun West (15 November 2021).

2.2 Importance of Distance Education

Saskatchewan's population (and student enrolment) is increasingly urbanized. From 2017 to 2022, the enrolment in Saskatoon and Regina's school divisions increased by almost 5% (3,924 students), whereas for the same period, the enrolment of the other school divisions remained flat (overall decrease of 13 students).¹²

Ongoing growth in student enrolment in urban school divisions may affect the ability of rural school divisions to maintain an adequate supply of skilled teaching staff, and justify offering certain courses when only a few students show interest in taking them at times. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in extended and intermittent school closures and/or student absences making in-person delivery of educational courses challenging, and in some cases, not feasible.

An increasing number of school divisions are turning to distance education to provide their students with a quality education.

High student engagement usually translates into better student outcomes, and distance education can make it more challenging for teachers to engage students.¹³ While face-to-face and distance education have many similar challenges, educators need to consider additional factors to increase student engagement and success in a distance education environment, such as:

- Teacher resources (e.g., technology required to instruct courses)

¹² Adapted from the Provincial K–12 Student Enrolment Summary. www.publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/77115 (11 March 2022).

¹³ Student engagement is the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, have a sense of belonging at school, participate in academic activities, strive to meet formal requirements of schooling, and make a serious personal investment in learning. Source: Willms, J.D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P., *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*, (2009), p. 7.

- Student preparedness such as their maturity and self-discipline (e.g., in self-directed learning), computer literacy, and time-management skills to keep pace with the course¹⁴

For example, educators may need to provide additional support or adjust their delivery methods where struggling students require more support than traditional students when they enroll in distance education courses as a 'last resort.'¹⁵ An example of this is a student who was expelled from their school and turned to distance education as a means to complete their education.

- Teacher preparedness such as their ability to use various online programs; knowledge of designing learning experiences, and online instruction methods; training and efficacy in the distance education environment (e.g., knowing how to engage students effectively online); and levels of classroom synergy (e.g., creating meaningful interaction)^{16, 17}

Not having effective processes to support distance education students increases the likelihood of students not completing courses, which in turn may adversely affect graduation rates. Students not successfully completing their high school education, or not developing essential skills to prepare them for a post-secondary education and the workforce, are at an increased risk of not being successful in life.

3.0 AUDIT CONCLUSION

Sun West School Division No. 207 had, other than the following areas, effective processes to support students to complete Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses for the period ending November 30, 2021.

Sun West needs to:

- **Identify and engage students who are behind in their coursework as expected**
- **Implement a course development policy that includes the frequency of course reviews and detailed processes for updating courses**
- **Establish course completion-rate targets for Distance Learning Centre-only students**
- **Conduct analysis on key information related to distance learning to identify trends, issues and improvements**
- **Regularly provide complete written reports outlining key distance learning information to its Board**
- **Assess the need for ongoing, focused professional development for teachers educating students in a distance education environment**

¹⁴ www.academia.edu/2311478/Barbour_M_K_and_Reeves_T_C_2009_The_reality_of_virtual_schools_A_review_of_the_literature_Computers_and_Education_52_2_402_416 (11 March 2022).

¹⁵ Adapted from www.uis.edu/ion/resources/tutorials/online-education-overview/strengths-and-weaknesses/ (11 March 2022).

¹⁶ Learning experience refers to any interaction, course, program, or other experience in which learning takes place

www.edglossary.org/learning-experience/ (11 March 2022).

¹⁷ Adapted from www.uis.edu/ion/resources/tutorials/online-education-overview/strengths-and-weaknesses/ (11 March 2022).

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

The objective of this audit was to assess whether Sun West School Division No. 207 had effective processes to support students to complete Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses for the period ending November 30, 2021.

This audit did not assess the alignment of the online courses' content with Ministry of Education curriculum requirements.

Audit Criteria:

Processes to:

1. Plan distance education courses based on student educational needs

- Collect information on educational needs of registered students (e.g., access limitations, barriers to learning, individual learning plans [e.g., graduation timeline, required courses])
- Allocate resources (e.g., teaching staff, training and support for teaching staff, educational tools) to support distance education students
- Align distance education course design and delivery plans with effective online learning practice (e.g., frequency/type of teacher-student contact, technological platforms and tools, student engagement, student assessment)

2. Deliver quality distance education courses to meet student needs

- Provide learning experience consistent with distance education course plans (design and delivery)
- Collect relevant data to analyze program and teacher supports (e.g., feedback, student participation, student achievement)
- Adjust supports as necessary

Audit Approach:

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate Sun West's processes, we used the above criteria based on reviews of literature including reports of other auditors and consultations with management. Sun West's management agreed with the above criteria.

We examined Sun West's policies and procedures and interviewed key staff supporting students completing distance education courses. We tested a sample of students to determine whether Sun West collected intake information from the students, communicated with the students throughout the courses, and maintained graduation plans. We also assessed Sun West's allocation of resources, training provided to teachers, and reports provided to the Board. We tested a sample of updated courses to assess course design. In addition, we used independent consultants with subject matter expertise in the area to help us identify good practice and assess Sun West's processes.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Policies and Plans Exist for Collecting Student Information

Sun West School Division No. 207 maintains up-to-date, clear, and understandable policies to guide collecting student information for distance education.

Sun West has sufficient policies to outline what application information to collect from prospective students seeking to register for distance education courses delivered through the Distance Learning Centre. Staff can access these policies online.

We tested Sun West's two distance-learning policies and found both policies up-to-date.¹⁸ Policy updates occurred in the last three years. Updating policies regularly is consistent with good practice (i.e., every three to five years), and policy content aligned with good practice for distance education.

¹⁸ Administrative Procedure 230: *Distance Learning* and Board Policy 18—*21st Century Competencies*.

Collecting relevant student information helps Sun West assess a student's ability to be successful in a distance education environment. It also identifies what additional supports to provide to the student. Some considerations at the admission stage include:

- Student's past aptitude in the subject area in either a traditional or distance learning environment
- Student's independent learning skills for the type of distance education considered
- When and where the student will work on the distance education course
- Availability of an on-site adult mentor
- Proof of Saskatchewan residency¹⁹

In addition, Sun West collects information from students about educational goals and the reasons students participate in distance education. For example, students playing a demanding sport may need extended periods away from school for training or events (e.g., junior hockey player, professional snowboarder).

In the 32 student files we tested, we found that Sun West collected consistent student information as set out in its policy. Sun West uses online student application forms to help ensure consistency and completeness of the information collected.

For students in Grades 10–12, Sun West documents students' educational goals in a graduation plan that tracks graduation requirements, course progress, and completion (credits earned toward graduation).²⁰ We found that all 30 student files we tested contained the required graduation plan.²¹ We also found Sun West invited parents or guardians to provide input into the plan. Maintaining a graduation plan for students is good practice because it helps ensure Grade 10–12 students stay on track to meet credit requirements for graduation, and prepare for their future (e.g., post-secondary education).

Having clearly written and up-to-date policies helps Sun West consistently and effectively communicate expected processes for collecting student information to staff. Requiring graduation plans to identify student goals assists teachers in supporting student success.

4.2 Course Design Policy Needed

Sun West School Division No. 207 has a process and methodology to design new online courses and update existing courses, but does not have a policy outlining the procedures for and frequency of course reviews.

Sun West develops new courses, and periodically updates existing courses, based on feedback from teachers and students, as well as curriculum changes.

¹⁹ Sun West does not provide online learning to students who reside outside of Saskatchewan.

²⁰ Sun West uses graduation plans to track key information for its students. Students who primarily attend a physical school, but also take some distance education classes at the Distance Learning Centre, do not have a graduation plan with the Distance Learning Centre because the majority of the student's credits would come from their home school, which would provide the student support to graduate from high school.

²¹ Not all students enrolled in distance education courses require a graduation plan. For example, adult students who are upgrading their marks to meet college admission requirements do not have a graduation plan maintained by Sun West.



Sun West uses a course design model when creating a new course. The model includes five phases of instructional design: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. This model is a robust model for building effective courses and aligns with good practice for instructional design.²²

Sun West updates existing courses usually based on necessity, which primarily comes about because of curriculum changes issued by the Ministry of Education.²³ Good practice suggests periodic reviews of course materials to allow for updates based on course feedback from teachers. We found there is no periodic review process for online courses by Sun West. According to management's tracking spreadsheets, Sun West last updated around 19 Grades 10–12 courses between four and 14 years ago. Teachers use online courses year after year.

To further guide course updates, Sun West collected teacher feedback in fall 2021. Survey questions included feedback on students' ability to get started on the course materials, remain on pace to complete the course on time, difficulty of course materials, and other overall comments.

We tested three Sun West courses updated during our audit period and found the updates occurred because of teacher feedback and curriculum updates. Overall, Sun West structured the updated courses well and designed them consistent with good practice.

Teachers and course design staff collaborate to create and update distance education courses. The design team saves documentation of meetings, plans, curriculum, and other relevant documents in their project management software.²⁴ We reviewed this documentation for one updated course and found key documents included minutes from the development-planning group's meeting and midpoint meeting, as well as course plan, outcome maps, and documentation of all discussions on the software's chat-board. Although this process is adequate, Sun West has no written policy that sets out course design methodology and review processes.

The lack of policy to guide course design methodology and regular course reviews increases the risk of course design inconsistencies and courses not being up-to-date, especially in the event of key staff turnover.

1. **We recommend Sun West School Division No. 207 implement a course development policy, including the frequency of course reviews for distance education.**

4.3 Supports for Distance Education Students Provided

Sun West School Division No. 207 utilizes supports to help students successfully complete distance education courses.

²² Sun West uses the ADDIE Model of Instructional Design educationaltechnology.net/the-addie-model-instructional-design/ (4 March 2022).

²³ In Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Education is responsible for curriculum design with school divisions implementing the mandated curriculum. The Ministry does not monitor or assess whether school divisions follow the curriculum (it expects school divisions to monitor themselves).

²⁴ Sun West's project management software allows collaboration and sharing among all members assigned to the team.

At November 2021, Sun West's Distance Learning Centre employed approximately 62 full time equivalent staff, with 31 directly involved in teaching Grades 10–12 courses. In 2020–21, the Distance Learning Centre had over 2,100 students registered in distance education courses. We found Sun West has appropriate mechanisms in place to determine and to provide supports for distance education students. These mechanisms include:

- **Teacher Allocations:** Sun West allocates teachers to online courses based on teaching workloads, and tracks other teacher responsibilities (e.g., other professional activity the teacher is responsible for within the school, such as designing a course or leading an asynchronous broadcast of a course) to ensure allocations are appropriate.

Sun West's initial allocations aim to balance utilization rates across all teaching staff. Sun West assigns between 200–240 students per teacher in a year, assuming the teacher is full time and has no other responsibilities.²⁵ If students register for a distance education course during the year, Sun West assigns the student to a teacher with a lower utilization rate. We tested a sample of five teachers and found teacher allocations were reasonable (teachers were 90–100% allocated). Sun West's process to assign and monitor teacher workloads aligns with good practice to ensure teachers have adequate availability to support students.

- **Access to Technology:** Sun West staff have access to appropriate technology (e.g., internet, laptops, IT platforms) to engage in distance education.

We observed all staff and students have access to the Distance Learning Centre's IT platforms, which allow them to engage in their courses, communicate, submit assignments, and receive feedback. Teachers also have access to items such as headsets for communicating with students verbally or for use in video conferencing.

Students registered for distance education courses must provide their own technology (e.g., computer and an internet connection).

- **Student Orientation:** We confirmed Sun West provides a live orientation for high school students to outline expectations and orient students for the online learning environment. Several members of Sun West present during the orientation to provide information on their services, and to welcome students to the distance education community. Sun West also posts the video online so students can refer to it if they were unable to attend live.
- **Course Outline and Expectations:** Sun West has written communication provided at the beginning of each course to outline expectations and assessments. We found for all 30 students we tested, teachers clearly communicated course expectations to the student at the beginning of the course.

We also reviewed three online courses and found the course design for each included a topic on assessment and evaluation at the start of the course. This provides students with information on the course outline, as well as a breakdown of the weighting of grades. This resource is available in students' online course materials.

²⁵ The number of students assigned varies by the type of class—teachers have fewer students for classes such as English language arts and more students for classes such as math.



- **Ongoing Communication with Students:** We found in our testing of 30 student files that teachers reached out to students to check-in, provide guidance, answer questions, and discuss progress in the course. Examples of common emails we saw included teachers notifying students about what they should be working on for the week, and what coursework the student should have completed at the time of the communication. Teachers communicated with students through email and phone calls. Parents or guardians also have access to student information through the IT platform.

We found that teachers provide adequate communication to students and parents throughout courses. Consistent communication between the teacher and student promotes engagement in the student's education, and can result in increased course completion rates.

Appropriately allocating resources supports student success by making sure they have access to what they need.

4.4 Better Monitoring Needed as to Whether Assignments Marked Timely

Sun West School Division No. 207 has set out expectations for teachers to respond to students, which includes marking assignments and exams, and getting grades to students within three to five business days. Teachers and administrative staff monitor marking of ongoing coursework; however, Sun West's overall monitoring system for assignment marking has flaws that reduces its effectiveness.

Sun West's IT system is supposed to provide teachers and administrative staff with the ability to monitor teachers' marking workloads by viewing the assignments waiting to be marked. We reviewed a report of outstanding assignments at January 7, 2022 and the system indicated there were over 1,000 outstanding assignments that students submitted between September 1, 2021 and December 17, 2021.²⁶ However, this number is likely much higher than actual because there are flaws in the IT system and its design that prevents accurate reporting on outstanding assignments. Flaws include:

- Assignments waiting to be marked in the system include items not included in student assessments or their related final grade for a course (e.g., practice quizzes for the student's benefit that a teacher will not mark but that the IT system tracks)
- The IT system adds an additional assignment for all students in a course when a teacher provides an additional assignment only for a specific individual student's needs. These additional items then appear as outstanding or waiting to be marked.
- The IT system does not allow for removal of irrelevant or superseded documents while students are active in the system. For example, at January 7, 2022, the system showed September 2016 (1,957 days) as the date for the oldest outstanding assignment. This is a system issue as this assignment is not outstanding.

²⁶ Winter break for students and teachers started on December 17, 2021; therefore, we did not include assignments submitted during this break in our assessment.

Sun West was aware of these issues, and plans to fix them during the summer to improve the IT system in the fall 2022.

The updates to the IT system will support accurate monitoring of teachers meeting the three-to-five day marking turnaround time.

Not having a system to effectively monitor timeliness of teachers returning marked assignments to students increases the risk that Sun West is unaware of teachers who are critically behind, and where students are not able to apply learning to future assignments. This ultimately can reduce student engagement and success in completing courses.

2. We recommend Sun West School Division No. 207 monitor the timeliness of teachers marking distance education coursework in accordance with its policy.

4.5 Student Inactivity Policy Not Consistently Followed

Sun West School Division No. 207 has a policy to identify and engage students falling behind in courses through an inactive student phasing process, but does not consistently follow its policy. The policy requires teachers to communicate with students falling behind.

If the student is not engaging and the teacher is concerned about their progress, the teacher initiates the phasing process (**Figure 4**).²⁷ Sun West relies on teachers' professional judgment to identify when to enter students into the phasing process, which is reasonable. For example, we saw one student that a teacher chose to keep in phase one based on their communications and the student's progress—this student successfully completed the class.

Figure 4—Inactive Student Phasing Process

Phase One: Staff communicate with students falling behind in coursework, encouraging them to develop and communicate a plan to catch up and ultimately complete the course. Students have one week to respond, or they will move to phase two.

Phase Two: Students lose access to online course materials, and now must submit a written plan online to the teacher to have access restored. Students have two weeks to submit this plan, or they will move to phase three.

Phase Three: Students are dropped from the course due to inactivity, the course will no longer appear online to the student.

Source: Adapted from Sun West's Operations Manual—*Student Inactive Process*.

Sun West staff send email notifications about the phasing process to students once a week indicating the details of the student's phase and advising them to contact their teacher immediately. These email notifications require the student to take accountability for their educational goals and to work with their teacher to develop a plan to complete the course.

We tested a sample of 25 students in the phasing process and found that 16 students received phasing notification emails as expected, but nine students did not receive these emails as expected. For the nine students who did not receive phasing notification emails, we found Sun West did not follow its established phasing policy for student inactivity. None of these nine students completed the course in the current semester.

²⁷ Sun West DLC Policy, *Student Inactive Process—2021/2022*. Sun West does not typically apply the phasing policy to students affiliated with another school, or over age 18.



Inconsistent application of its student inactivity policy increases the risk Sun West teachers may miss the opportunity to re-engage students to complete their courses.

3. **We recommend Sun West School Division No. 207 consistently apply its student inactivity policy to engage distance education students falling behind in courses.**

4.6 Teachers Receive Comprehensive Orientation, But Focused Training on Distance Education Requires Consideration

Sun West School Division No. 207 provides comprehensive orientation to new distance education teachers, as well as ongoing professional development to all teaching staff throughout the year. Good practice suggests distance education teachers take professional development specific to distance-education teaching methods to engage students effectively.

Sun West provides a comprehensive three-day orientation to new distance education teachers during their onboarding process. The orientation includes topics such as operating technology (e.g., software, video conferencing), understanding processes, and student assessment practices. We interviewed three new teachers at the Distance Learning Centre during 2021, and they all agreed the orientation provided relevant information on systems and processes for the distance-education teaching environment. New staff also had the opportunity to meet with and learn from experienced teachers instructing the same grade level or subjects. We found the new teacher orientation is comprehensive and aligns with good practice.

Teachers also participate in periodic professional development days. We assessed the content offered for two professional development days by reviewing the agendas and found Sun West provided teachers with numerous options to attend various training sessions with topics ranging from student achievement and engagement to curriculum. We found all topics relevant to the teaching environment, including for distance education. Sun West also collects teacher feedback via survey after the training to inform future professional development days.

Sun West's online teachers participate in about 16 days of professional development annually, which is consistent with good practice for in-class teachers. Some other jurisdictions in Canada (e.g., Nova Scotia, Ontario), provide an additional 20 hours of training specific to online teaching. It is good practice to provide online teachers with professional development specific to the online teaching environment (e.g., methods to engage students online).

Not assessing good practice for distance education teachers' professional development increases the likelihood teachers may not receive appropriate training to have the necessary tools to effectively engage and support students in the distance education environment.

4. **We recommend Sun West School Division No. 207 assess the need for ongoing focused professional development for teachers working in the distance education environment.**

4.7 Specific Targets, Analysis and Reporting of Key Distance Learning Information Needed

Sun West School Division No. 207 collects key information on student success; however, it does not have a specific course completion-rate target for its Distance Learning Centre students, and it does not analyze key trends. In addition, not only does Sun West not have a standardized Board reporting mechanism, but the reports also lack analysis.

Sun West's target for successful completion of distance education courses for certain students (Sun West students that attend other schools within the Division) is 90%.²⁸ Sun West has not set targets for other groups of distance education students. Putting performance targets in place can be an important way of tracking progress in achieving success.

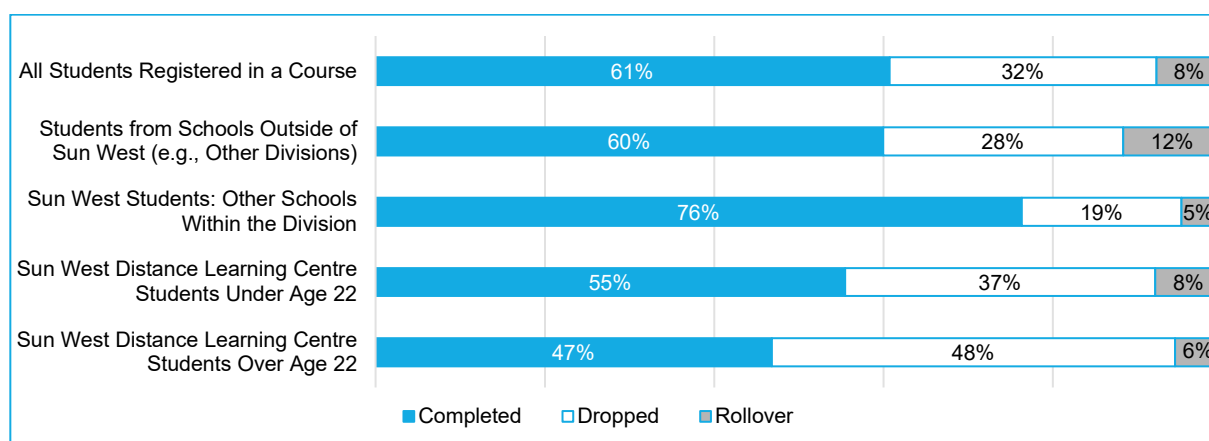
As shown in **Figure 2**, 60% of students who register for distance education courses are students solely of the Distance Learning Centre (i.e., they attend no physical school, therefore, they only receive online teacher support). This group of students represent the largest portion of Sun West's distance education students and yet Sun West does not have a course completion rate that it is striving to achieve for this set of students.

Not having a target completion rate for the majority of its distance education students increases the risk that Sun West is not appropriately assessing its students' successes and challenges, and taking related actions to provide support to those students.

5. We recommend Sun West School Division No. 207 establish target course completion rates for its students who solely attend the Distance Learning Centre.

As shown in **Figure 5**, Sun West is not meeting its 90% target for Sun West students that attend other schools within the Division (76% completion rate), and the completion rate for other groups of students ranged from 47% to 60%. For 2020–21, all students registered in online courses through Sun West were successful in completing courses 61% of the time.

Figure 5—2020–21 School Year Distance Education Course Completion Rates



Source: Based on data from Sun West. Dropped indicates incomplete.

*Note: percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

²⁸ Sun West DLC 2019–2022 Strategic Plan, p. 5.



We found that Sun West appropriately collects information on:

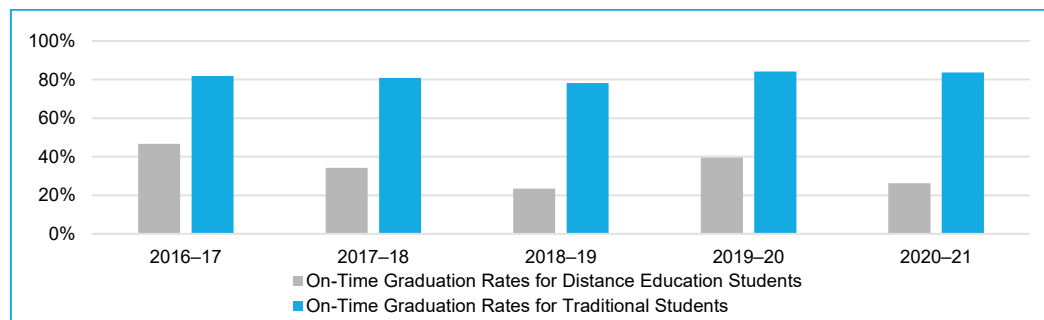
- Distance education course completion rates
- Rollover rates (i.e., students who did not complete their course in semester one roll the course over to semester two)
- Course drop rates (i.e., incomplete courses)

Sun West does not conduct analysis on the above information to determine trends or possible systemic issues (e.g., course design, certain courses with low completion rates).

Course completion rates directly influence graduation rates, as students need a certain number of credits to complete high school. Sun West's divisional goal was that by June 2021, 90% of Sun West's face-to-face students and 60% of its distance education students will graduate within three years of starting Grade 10.²⁹

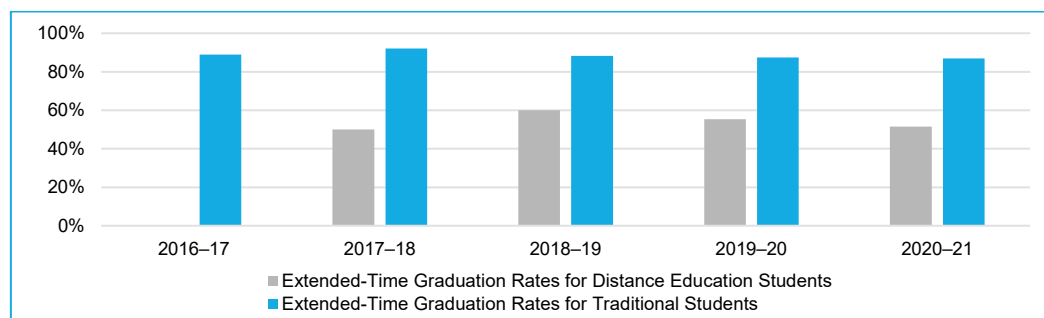
As shown in **Figure 6** and **Figure 7**, the on-time and extended-time graduation rates for Distance Learning Centre students lag behind their in-person learning counterparts, and do not meet the 60% goal. Sun West noted that the lower completion and graduation rates are in part due to the types of students who register for distance education (i.e., often students who struggle in a physical school). However, more analysis of potential root causes for low completion rates would help Sun West determine whether additional support could increase student success (e.g., targeted professional development).

Figure 6—Sun West's On-Time Graduation Rates From 2016 to 2021



Source: Based on data from Sun West (8 February 2021).
On-time graduation is within three years of starting Grade 10 (within five years for extended-time graduation).

Figure 7—Sun West's Extended-Time Graduation Rates From 2016 to 2021



Source: Based on data from Sun West on (8 February 2021).
Extended-time graduation is within five years of starting Grade 10 (within three years for on-time graduation).
*There is no data for distance education students' extended-time graduations for 2016-17.

²⁹ Sun West School Division #207, 2020-21 Annual Report. p. 25.

Not analyzing student completion rates increases the risk that Sun West may not identify issues affecting student success such as course design or engagement and take action.

6. We recommend Sun West School Division No. 207 analyze key information related to supporting students' completion of Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses to identify potential issues and take action.

Sun West shares information on course completion rates of students attending its Distance Learning Centre with its Board. It plans to provide this information two or three times per year, which is appropriate based on the two-semester system used by the Distance Learning Centre. We found Sun West also prepares appropriate monthly financial reports (e.g., budget to actual, revenue and expense comparatives) for the Board.

We found Board reports lacked consistent data and analysis for the online courses delivered by the Distance Learning Centre.

We observed the Board only received one written report on student completion rates in 2020–21 (February 2021). Sun West management indicated it verbally presented the remaining two updates on distance learning courses. Providing written information in advance of Board meetings allows Board members time to read the information and formulate questions.

The February 2021 written report only included completion rates for Sun West students who attend other schools within the Division. It excluded students of the Distance Learning Centre (as shown in **Figure 5**, students from other schools within the Division had a 76% completion rate, a higher completion rate than the average for all students at 61%). Providing Board reports with complete information allows for comparison across the learning environments while also helping to ensure decision-makers have all relevant information.

We also found that data calculations were sometimes inconsistent for Board reporting purposes. For example, Sun West calculated completion rates for semesters one and two of 2020–21 differently, which does not allow for comparative analysis.

As shown in **Figure 5**, Sun West's average distance-education course completion rate for the 2020–21 school year was 61% for all distance education students. Sun West is not meeting its target for its other schools within the Division (i.e., target of 90% compared to actual 76% completion rates for distance education courses). Board reports do not provide analysis or reasons for these completion rates, including whether they are lower than expected and why.

Not providing the Board with regular written reports and analysis, including complete and consistent information about Sun West's distance education, increases the risk that the Board is unable to understand the overall successes and challenges of the Distance Learning Centre. Furthermore, without analysis in written reports, Sun West may not know whether its targets are attainable, or require revisiting.

7. We recommend Sun West School Division No. 207 regularly provide complete written reports and analysis to its Board about supporting students' completion of Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses.



5.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

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