

Chapter 23

Saskatoon School Division No. 13—Kindergarten Readiness to Learn

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By January 2023, the Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 improved its processes to monitor its success in readying students for learning in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten. It implemented three recommendations, and partially implemented two recommendations, we had first made in 2021.

The Division:

- Clearly communicated its expected frequency for assessing kindergarten students using standard assessment tools in key areas of learning (e.g., literacy and numeracy) and development by providing staff with guidance and related training
- Tracked and centrally updated a list of kindergarten students who did not participate in required learning and development reassessments
- Provided teachers with a variety of online training modules (e.g., how to perform assessments, supporting kindergarten to Grade 2 students in writing) summarizing guidance on consistent application of key instructional practices

By January 2023, the Division:

- Provided guidance to teachers on alternative tools used to assess key areas of kindergarten student readiness, but had not implemented a method to track or approve teacher-created alternate assessment tools.
- Maintained kindergarten student assessment data (e.g., Early Years Evaluation results), but did not analyze data to identify trends or areas of struggle across all schools in the Division.
- Noted kindergarten students performed poorly at three Division schools, which resulted in the Division moving pre-kindergarten programs to these schools in an effort to improve student performance in kindergarten. However, the Division did not review these pre-k students' performance once they exited kindergarten to see whether these programs improved their performance.

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.



2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 is the largest school division in the province, educating approximately 17,000 students in 48 elementary schools.¹ At September 30, 2022, the Division had 1,942 kindergarten students.²

It employs kindergarten teachers in 65 full-time equivalent positions.³

Having effective processes to monitor success in readying kindergarten students for learning prepares them for future academic success in the primary grades.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow up of Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13's actions on the recommendations we made in 2021. We concluded, for the period ending June 30, 2020, the Division had effective processes to monitor its success in readying students for learning in the primary grades when exiting kindergarten, except in the areas reflected in our five recommendations.⁴

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

In performing this follow-up audit, we examined policies, reviewed the Division's annual assessment calendar, obtained evidence of training provided to staff and reviewed meeting minutes. We interviewed Division staff responsible for student evaluation, assessment and monitoring. We also tested a sample of kindergarten classrooms and obtained evidence of teachers reassessing students using standard assessment tools.

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 January 31, 2023, and Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13's actions up to that date.

¹ The Board of Education of the Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 of Saskatchewan, *2021–22 Annual Report*, pp. 8, 36.

² Adapted from information provided by the Saskatoon School Division No. 13.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *2021 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 11*, pp. 151–170.

3.1 Formal Expectations Communicated for Student Assessment Frequency

We recommended 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. (2021 Report – Volume 1, p. 159, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 12, 2022)

Status—Implemented

Starting in the 2021–22 school year, Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 provided its staff with an assessment calendar, adequately outlining how frequently staff must use standard assessment tools on kindergarten students to measure their learning (e.g., literacy and numeracy) and development.

In August 2021, administrators and teachers developed an assessment and communications plan for each school and grade level. The Division’s assessment calendar appropriately included the timing and frequency of kindergarten student assessments (see **Figure 1**) and was also included in the 2021–22 school package provided to teachers. The Division also posted the assessment calendar on an internal website for all staff.

For the nine kindergarten teachers we tested, we found all teachers performed the standard assessments in accordance with the frequency established by the Division or had reasonable explanations as to why the assessment was not available.

Clearly written expectations helps reduce the risk of misunderstandings and ensures tasks are completed as and when expected. Clear communication on timing and minimum frequency for assessments of students helps teachers collect sufficient and complete information on student learning and development in key areas.

3.2 Tracking and Evaluation of Alternative Assessment Tools Needed

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 confirm alternative tools, used to assess key areas of a kindergarten student’s readiness to learn, and collect sufficient and relevant information. (2021 Report – Volume 1, p. 160, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 12, 2022)

Status—Partially Implemented

Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 does not require teachers to vet the suitability of alternative assessment tools they plan to use in assessing key areas of learning (e.g., literacy and numeracy) and development. The Division also does not track teachers who use alternative assessment tools.

To assess student literacy and numeracy, Division management gives teachers the option of using standard assessment tools (noted in **Figure 1**) or choosing alternate literacy and numeracy screening assessment tools. Teachers can develop these assessment tools, or select tools developed elsewhere.



Figure 1—Standard Assessment Tools

Assessment Tool	Core Assessment Areas	Assessment Completion Dates
Early Years Evaluation Tool—Teacher Assessment (EYE-TA)	Awareness of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self and environment • Social skills and approaches to learning • Cognitive skill, language and communication • Physical development 	Fall and Spring (Spring only for students who did not achieve mastery in the fall assessment)
Phonological Awareness Quick Screener (PAQS)	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	October and June
Social Emotional Rubric (SER)	A student's social skills and emotional regulation	October, January, and June

Source: Adapted from Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 records.

Since 2021, the Division developed and provided access to online modules teachers can access to learn more about topics such as assessments, foundational reading skills, and responding to early learning evaluation results. Modules related to alternative assessment tools provided teachers with sufficient guidance on the types of assessments available and who should be performing them (e.g., teacher versus speech language pathologist).

While teachers have autonomy to create tools based on their classroom and student needs, the Division does not keep track or approve teacher-created tools. Management indicated principals are responsible for ensuring teachers are both instructing and assessing kindergarten students on a daily basis through observation. Therefore, principals have knowledge of the tools teachers use to assess students, but we saw no formal evidence of approval of these tools or tracking of teachers who use self-developed assessment tools.

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 a particular subject. Not having sufficiently robust assessment tools increases the risk teachers may not identify necessary adjustments to instruction, or pursue other strategies to improve student outcomes.

3.3 Missed Student Reassessments Tracked

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 understand reasons for kindergarten students who did not participate in required reassessments of student learning and development. (2021 Report – Volume 1, p. 161, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 12, 2022)

Status—Implemented

Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 centrally tracks kindergarten students who miss participating in standard reassessments.

Division management expects teachers to reassess all eligible students using standard assessment tools to measure student 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 barriers to learning and development.

The Division provided kindergarten teachers with training in January and March 2022, outlining the need for teachers to print Early Years Evaluation results and save them in student files, and to reassess students ranked as Tier II or III in their initial assessments.⁵ Kindergarten students who score Tier II or Tier III are reassessed in the spring.

Of the nine kindergarten classrooms we tested, five students had missed reassessments (in spring 2022). Of the five students:

- Four students moved to a school outside of the Division
- One student aged out of assessment

We saw that management kept a central document on its network, listing students who missed reassessment.

At March 2023, there were 136 kindergarten students still needing reassessment across the Division.⁶

Having a mechanism to track whether teachers completed required reassessments of students who did not demonstrate mastery in a previous assessment decreases the risk of overlooking students. In addition, it decreases the risk of teachers collecting insufficient data about student progress, which affects their opportunity to make instructional changes to help students succeed.

3.4 Additional Guidance and Training Provided for Sprint Cycles

We recommended 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. (2021 Report – Volume 1, p. 165, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 12, 2022)

Status—Implemented

Kindergarten teachers document their use of Sprint cycles—a key instructional practice used to increase student readiness—consistent with Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 expectations.

⁵ Tier II means the student is experiencing some difficulty in the areas assessed by the tool. Tier III means the student is experiencing significant difficulty. The Early Years Evaluation tool assesses a student's awareness of self and environment, social skills and approaches to learning, cognitive skills, language and communication, and physical development (fine and gross motor skills).

⁶ Adapted from information provided by Saskatoon School Division No. 13.



Sprint cycles are short intensive-focused and repetitive instruction for a small group of students (approximately six students) on a specific area of focus. See **Figure 2** for a brief description of a Sprint cycle.

Figure 2—Three Key Phases of a Sprint Cycle

A teaching Sprint consists of three phases:

1. **Plan:** use various sources of information about student 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 backward 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:** puts 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: Adapted from Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 materials.

As described in **Figure 2**, the Division expects teachers to use Sprint cycles to adjust their normal classroom instruction for identified areas where students need improvement. It expects teachers to document their planned and actual use of Sprint cycles. Sprint data includes the topic (area of focus), which students participated, student progress and lessons learned. Management informed teachers of this expectation via training provided during the 2021–22 school year.

For all five Sprint cycles we tested, each documented reasonable rationale for the topics chosen, the students included, and the results of the Sprint cycle. Principals appropriately approved each Sprint cycle.

Sprint cycles are a key strategy to drive adjustments in instruction and to improve student outcomes, and consistent use can help this strategy to effectively support students in achieving curricular outcomes. Adequate training and guidance for Sprint cycles ensures they are delivered in the most efficient and effective way for students and teachers.

3.5 Division-Wide Analysis of Student Assessment Results Needed

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 analyze kindergarten assessment data to identify trends and common areas of struggle across all schools in the Division. (2021 Report – Volume 1, p. 168, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 12, 2022)

Status—Partially Implemented

While Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 prepares reports for its Board of Trustees, it does not perform any kindergarten student data analysis to identify root causes for school or Division-wide gaps.

Kindergarten teachers and speech language pathologists test students periodically throughout the school year to determine student-learning progress. Teachers meet with Division management to discuss results and identify additional supports needed for students (e.g., special education consultants).

Additionally, the Division's Board of Trustees annually receives reporting on kindergarten student progress. It reports information on:

- Attendance
- Alphabet recognition (both upper and lower case)
- Alphabet sounds
- Phonological awareness
- Social emotional rubric results
- Early Years Evaluation results⁷

Our review of both Board reporting and internal consultations noted that while the Division collected data, it has further work to do in analyzing trends and root causes of reported results (e.g., student attendance, teacher experience, class sizes). For example, there may be some schools with more kindergarten students below the appropriate development level than average, and the Division should determine why.

During the 2021–22 school year, the Division noted three schools had kindergarten students performing at a lower level than expected resulting in it moving pre-kindergarten programs to these schools. We expected the Division to review these pre-k students' performance once they exited kindergarten to see whether these programs improved student performance. The Division had not performed this analysis.

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

⁷ Kindergarten Early Years Evaluation results for spring 2021 showed 77% of students exiting kindergarten were at the appropriate development level. In spring 2022, these results increased slightly to 79%.

