

Chapter 18

Education—Evaluating the Early Learning Intensive Support Program

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Early Learning Intensive Support Program is one of the Ministry of Education's key programs to support inclusivity of preschool-aged children (3–4 year olds) with intensive needs. Since 2018, the Ministry offered this Program in existing prekindergarten programs at 26 out of 27 school divisions. In 2022–23, the Ministry designated almost 400 prekindergarten spaces for children requiring intensive supports.

The Ministry made significant progress in addressing our two recommendations related to evaluating the Program, having implemented one recommendation and partially implementing the other one.

At August 2023, the Ministry collected sufficient information from school divisions within the Program on each child's progress (e.g., ability to develop friendships and play with other children) in their transition to kindergarten. Also, kindergarten teachers who responded to a Ministry survey in 2021 indicated 58% of children participating in the Program effectively transitioned to kindergarten. This information can assist the Ministry in determining whether the Program adequately supports children with intensive needs in their early learning and development, and in their transition to kindergarten.

The Ministry is in the process of collecting action plans from school divisions to address identified challenges with the Program. It also plans to require timeframes for implementing these action plans, and monitor implementation at each school division.

Addressing challenges and regularly monitoring Program outcomes can assist the Ministry in assessing each child's developmental growth, and in determining necessary steps to support children with intensive needs who participate in the Program.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

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

¹ *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 3(1) and 3(1.1).



The Ministry provides leadership and direction to the prekindergarten to Grade 12 education sectors.² The Act also makes the Ministry responsible for overseeing school divisions and for providing educational services to students with disabilities, including those with intensive needs.^{3,4}

2.2 Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement

On August 13, 2021, the Ministry of Education and the Federal Government signed an extension of the Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement to 2025–26, in order to ensure continuity of programs and services under the previous agreement.

As shown in **Figure 1**, under the extended Agreement, the Federal Government estimates paying Saskatchewan about \$18 million in 2024–25 for early learning and child care programs.

Figure 1—Estimated Amounts to be Paid to Saskatchewan

Fiscal Year	Amount Allocated to Saskatchewan (in millions)
2021–22	\$ 13.6
2022–23	\$ 17.5
2023–24	\$ 18.7
2024–25	\$ 18.7

Source: Saskatchewan's Action Plan for fiscal year 2022 to 2023. www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/saskatchewan-2021/action-plan-2022.html (30 June 2023).

Under the Agreement, the Ministry agrees to commit about one-third of the annual federal funding toward addressing the inclusivity of children with intensive needs, such as establishing programs for preschool-aged children experiencing disabilities.⁵ The Early Learning Intensive Support Program is Saskatchewan's largest program funded under this Agreement for preschool-aged children experiencing disabilities.

2.3 Early Learning Intensive Support Program

The Early Learning Intensive Support Program is an early learning program for children with intensive needs and significant delays in their learning and development, and who require a substantial level of support to participate in an early learning program. The Program may include children diagnosed with autism, cognitive delays, physical challenges, auditory issues, or significant behavioural issues.⁶ The Program provides opportunities for children to engage in inclusive learning with other children of the same age.⁷

² *Ministry of Education Plan for 2023–24*, p. 3.

³ *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 280.

⁴ *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 178.

⁵ *Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*, p. 2 and p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷ Early Learning Intensive Support Program—Information for Families brochure (26 September 2023).

Under the Program, these children attend an existing prekindergarten program and that prekindergarten classroom receives additional resources (e.g., educational assistants, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists) to help support the children with intensive needs.^{8,9}

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, since the Program's inception in 2018, the Ministry of Education gradually expanded the Program to nearly all (26 of 27) school divisions and, in turn, increased the number of spaces available to 392 spaces in 2022–23 (2017–18: 120).

Figure 2—Early Learning Intensive Support Program Spaces and Spending from 2017–18 to 2022–23

Fiscal Year	Amount (in millions)	School Divisions Accessing Program Funding	Spaces in Existing Prekindergarten Programs Designated for Children Requiring Intensive Supports
2017–18	\$ 0.70	4	120
2018–19	\$ 1.94	13	166
2019–20	\$ 3.03	23	242
2020–21	\$ 3.03	23	242
2021–22	\$ 3.03	23	242
2022–23	\$ 4.90	26	392

Source: Adapted from Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan *2021 Report—Volume 1*, Chapter 5, p. 37 and Government of Saskatchewan news release [More Spaces Added to The Early Learning Intensive Support ELIS Program in Saskatchewan Schools | News and Media | Government of Saskatchewan](#) (26 September 2023).

Effective processes to evaluate the Program can assist the Ministry in determining whether the Program helps preschool-aged children with intensive needs obtain a good start in their transition to kindergarten, and in supporting their learning and development. Systematic and ongoing evaluation can help to identify adjustments such as providing training materials and educational assistants to improve Program outcomes.

2.4 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up audit of management's actions on the recommendations we made in 2021.

In 2021, we assessed the Ministry of Education's processes to evaluate the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. Our *2021 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 5, concluded that the Ministry had effective processes, except in the areas of our two recommendations, for the period ended December 31, 2020, to evaluate whether the Program helps preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports to receive a good start in their early learning and development.¹⁰

⁸ Early Learning Intensive Support Program—Information for Families brochure (26 September 2023).

⁹ Prekindergarten in Saskatchewan is an early childhood education program targeting vulnerable three and four year old children. Prekindergarten focuses on fostering social development, nurturing educational growth, and promoting language development.

¹⁰ *2021 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 5*, pp 35–50.



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 from the original audit. Ministry management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To carry out our follow-up audit, we interviewed Ministry staff responsible for the evaluation process of the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. We reviewed mid-year reports, evaluations for a sample of school divisions, and 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 31, 2023, and the Ministry of Education's actions up to that date.

3.1 Key Information Collected from Stakeholders

We recommended the Ministry of Education periodically collect sufficient data to enable future assessments of all expected outcomes relating to the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. (2021 Report – Volume 1, p. 44, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Education collects data to assess the expected outcomes related to the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. For example, the Ministry collects sufficient information from school divisions that includes individual child progress plans and whether the child would smoothly transition to kindergarten.

The Ministry collected data in spring 2021 by surveying key stakeholders: prekindergarten teachers, educational assistants, Program-specific educational assistants and parents to understand how effectively the Program operates.

The Ministry also surveyed children in the Program. We found the Ministry appropriately summarized all of the children's responses from 23 school divisions with the Program in 2021–22. The response rate for the children surveyed ranged from 0%–25% for three school divisions we sampled. The Ministry indicated that it did not include children's responses in the 2021–22 evaluation survey results to school divisions because of the low response rate it received from participating children. The Ministry indicated it plans to discuss the survey results of the children during its annual meeting in fall 2023 with school divisions.

The four outcomes of the Early Learning Intensive Support Program:

- **Individual child progress**—Program supports are beneficial to children, children are supported to develop friendships and play with other children
- **Impact on the classroom**—integrity of the general prekindergarten class is maintained through implementation of the Program, early learning teams are able to balance the needs of all children in the prekindergarten classroom
- **Parent/guardian engagement**—parents are involved in the development of their child's Inclusion and Intervention Plan
- **Fluid transitions to school**—sufficient planning and effort go into supporting a smooth transition for children from prekindergarten to kindergarten

The Ministry also worked with school divisions to gather additional information from kindergarten teachers in fall of 2021 regarding the transition to kindergarten for children who participated in the Program. Fifteen out of 26 school divisions responded to the survey. We found one school division in our sample with a high allocation (i.e., 54 spaces) of students in the Program did not respond to the survey. It is important for the Ministry to require and obtain responses from all school divisions participating in the Program in order to evaluate whether it needs to offer additional supports or adjustments. The Ministry plans to do another survey in fall 2024 with kindergarten teachers.

We found the survey questions relevant and reasonable to assess the effectiveness of participating children's progress and their transition to kindergarten. For example, the Ministry asked whether collaborative teams responsible for each child recorded transition plans in the child's Inclusion and Intervention Plan (IIP); whether teams fully implemented the transition plan in the IIP; and whether the prekindergarten teacher shared information on the child's progress with the kindergarten teacher.¹¹

The survey indicated that 58% of kindergarten teachers stated that the children participating in the Program effectively transitioned to kindergarten. The Ministry also received suggestions from kindergarten teachers on how to improve transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten. For example, kindergarten teachers would appreciate a transition meeting with the prekindergarten teacher and educational assistant to understand each child's strengths and areas needing support.

In addition, we found that the Ministry appropriately collected data (e.g., number of children enrolled, type of specialized services provided) through fall and spring (mid-year) reports from school divisions to monitor outcomes of the Program.

Collecting sufficient information and obtaining key input that includes the perspective of kindergarten teachers can assist the Ministry in determining whether children with intensive needs participating in the Program receive sufficient support to learn and develop.

3.2 Data Collection of Division Actions to Address Program Challenges Ongoing

We recommended the Ministry of Education regularly collect information about school divisions' actions to address the challenges identified in reviews of the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. (2021 Report – Volume 1, p. 44, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 2, 2022)

Status—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Education drafted an action plan template to collect information about school divisions' actions to address challenges identified in the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. Ministry staff plans to discuss 2021–22 evaluation results with each division during the Ministry-Division annual meeting in fall 2023, and require divisions to provide mid-year reports on action plans by February 2024.

¹¹ An Inclusion and Intervention Plan (IIP) is a document developed and implemented by a collaborative team (e.g., teachers, professional support staff, and parents) that sets out student outcomes, focusing on the key areas of development that will have the most impact on student success during the current school year.



The action plan template requires school divisions to use survey results and discussions with Ministry officials to identify actions and set timeframes to address areas for improvement. Consistent with the Program's bi-annual reporting structure, the Ministry plans to collect and evaluate, through divisions' mid-year reports, these action plans for addressing identified risks/challenges by February 2024.

We reviewed the Ministry's guidance for the newly expanded mid-year reporting template that divisions would use beginning February 2024. The Ministry appropriately included a requirement for divisions to identify goals/areas for improvement, actions that divisions have taken or will take, and a timeframe to complete these actions. Previous mid-year reports did not contain this requirement. Including action plans and timeframes for completion is reasonable to assist the Ministry in evaluating division-specific plans to address challenges identified in the Program.

Addressing challenges identified in Program reviews helps to reduce the risk of the Program not meeting the learning and developmental needs of children with intensive needs. Addressing challenges may also result in increasing children's success in school and life.