

Chapter 20

Saskatoon School Division No. 13—Supporting Students with Intensive Needs

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By March 2024, Saskatoon School Division No. 13 improved its processes to support kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs. Of the five outstanding recommendations we first made in 2018, the Division implemented three and made progress on the other two recommendations.

Since our original audit in 2018, the Division supports an increasing number of kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs—34% increase from December 2017 to December 2023.

The Division implemented an internal review process in March 2023 to check whether school staff documented parental agreement on individual learning plans for students with intensive needs, or their attempts to obtain agreement on the plans. The Division found a high rate of compliance through the review process.

The Division regularly monitored student progress in achieving individual learning plan goals by reviewing whether staff completed progress reports for each student with intensive needs, the number of individual learning goals, and progress rating on each goal. The Division also analyzed the average number of goals set for students, as well as the overall average progress rating. The Division found students progressing less than expected on average.

The Division needs to:

- Set expected timeframes for completing professional assessments of kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs. The average number of days to complete these assessments has been increasing (e.g., for speech-language pathology assessments, the average increased from 51 days in 2020–21 to 86 days in 2022–23).

Setting reasonable timelines to complete professional assessments can help avoid delays in implementing learning supports for students with intensive needs.

- Provide senior management and its Board of Education with robust reporting on learning supports for intensive needs students in kindergarten to Grade 8. For example, the Division could provide the Board with its analysis of progress ratings of learning plan goals for students with intensive needs.

Providing more detailed information would assist the Division in assessing whether it delivers educational services consistent with those students' educational needs and abilities, and sufficiently accommodates all students with intensive needs.



2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

Saskatoon School Division No. 13 is an urban school division in the city of Saskatoon. It employed approximately 2,628 full-time equivalent staff, including approximately 1,416 FTE classroom teachers and 834 FTE educational staff in other positions (e.g., psychologists, educational assistants) in the 2022–23 school year.¹ The Division has about 26,500 students of which approximately two-thirds (17,000) are elementary students in kindergarten to Grade 8.²

The Education Act, 1995, requires school boards to reasonably accommodate students with intensive needs in a regular program of instruction with their peers. Students with intensive needs are those assessed as having a capacity to learn compromised by a cognitive, social-emotional, behavioural, or physical condition. If school boards cannot accommodate these students in regular programming, the Act expects them to provide special programming to meet those students' learning needs.

At December 2023, the Division identified 1,400 kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs—a 34% increase since December 2017.³ Approximately 25% of the Division's intensive needs students are in specialized programs.⁴

The Education Regulations, 2019, place further expectations on school divisions in identifying students with intensive needs and providing them with learning supports. For example, upon request, a school division's Director of Education must direct staff to conduct an assessment to determine whether a student has intensive needs.⁵ Further, school boards are responsible for making programs and supports available to students with intensive needs, at no cost to parents, using qualified individuals to provide programs/supports.⁶

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our second follow-up audit of management's actions on the recommendations we made in 2018.

In 2018, we concluded that Saskatoon School Division No. 13 had effective processes to support kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs, except in the areas of our 11 recommendations.⁷ By April 2022, the Division implemented six recommendations and made some progress on the other five recommendations.⁸

¹ *The Board of Education of the Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13 of Saskatchewan 2022–23 Annual Report*, p. 35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³ Information provided by Saskatoon School Division No. 13.

⁴ Saskatoon School Division offers specialized programs targeted to students with specific needs (e.g., behavioural challenges, intellectual disabilities), including the Autism Support Program and Functional Life Skills; the Division also has a specialized school for students with severe or multiple disabilities (John Dolan School).

⁵ *The Education Regulations, 2019*, s. 48(5).

⁶ *Ibid.*, s. 50(1).

⁷ *2018 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 11*, pp. 157–178.

⁸ *2022 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 23*, pp. 225–232.

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

To perform our follow-up audit, we discussed actions taken with Division management. We assessed the Division’s processes by examining policies and other guidance relating to providing supports for kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs.

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 March 31, 2024, and Saskatoon School Division No. 13’s actions up to that date.

3.1 Expected Timelines for Completing Assessments Needed

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 provide guidance on expected timelines for completion of assessments of kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs. (2018 Report – Volume 1, p. 172, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 25, 2019)

Status—Partially Implemented

Saskatoon School Division No. 13 continued to analyze average time to complete assessments, but it had not set expected timelines for completing professional assessments of kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs.

The Division centrally tracks the time from when Division professionals (e.g., speech language pathologist, educational psychologist) receive assessment referrals from schools to when they complete each assessment. During the 2022–23 school year, Division professionals completed 1,151 assessments. As shown in **Figure 1**, not only is the time taken to complete professional assessments increasing, but also the number of students with intensive needs in the Division is increasing.

Figure 1—Average Time (Days) Taken to Complete Assessments

	Speech-Language Pathology Assessments (Days)	Psychology Assessments (Days)	Students with Intensive Needs ^A
2022–23	86	49	1,839
2021–22	62	47	1,676
2020–21	51	41	1,542

Source: Adapted from information provided by Saskatoon School Division No. 13.

^A Total includes kindergarten to Grade 12 students with intensive needs.

The Division indicated it plans to use its tracking of assessments to set out guidance on expected timeframes for completing professional assessments of kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs for the 2024–25 school year.



Setting reasonable timeframes to complete professional assessments can help avoid delays in implementing learning supports for students with intensive needs.

3.2 Monitoring Parental Agreement on Learning Plans

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 retain evidence of agreement on learning plans for kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs. (2018 Report – Volume 1, p. 173, Recommendation 7; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 25, 2019)

Status—Intent of Recommendation Met

Saskatoon School Division No. 13 reviews whether school staff retained evidence of parental/guardian agreement on learning plans for its kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs.

Annually, the Division expects school staff to meet with parents to discuss their student's learning plan, and sign-off their agreement with the plan. The Division also expects school staff to document in the learning plans all attempts (e.g., phone calls, emails) to meet with students' parents. School staff maintain copies of completed student learning plans in the student-supports IT system (called CLEVR).

The Division implemented an internal review process in March 2023 to check whether school staff documented parental agreement on learning plans for students with intensive needs, or attempts to obtain agreement on the plans when parental meetings did not occur. The Division found an overall 93% compliance rate (i.e., either obtained parental agreement or documented attempts) after reviewing all student learning plans in CLEVR for both elementary and high school students with intensive needs. The Division communicated these internal review results to its schools and followed up on instances of non-compliance. The Division intends to conduct this review annually.

Documenting agreement on learning plans for students with intensive needs shows that school staff and parents agree on the Division's approach to address learning needs.

3.3 Students' Learning Progress Centrally Monitored

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 regularly monitor students' progress in achieving goals set out in learning plans for kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs. (2018 Report – Volume 1, p. 174, Recommendation 9; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 25, 2019)

Status—Implemented

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 centrally monitor whether schools sufficiently support kindergarten to Grade 8 students with identified intensive needs to enable students to progress toward their individual learning goals. (2018 Report – Volume 1, p. 175, Recommendation 10; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 25, 2019)

Status—Implemented

Saskatoon School Division No. 13 regularly monitors progress of kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs in achieving individual learning plan goals.

The Division expects school staff to complete reports on each student's progress in meeting the goals set out in each student's learning plan at least twice a year. School staff maintain copies of progress reports in the student-supports IT system.

The Division generates a report for each student with intensive needs from its student-supports IT system that includes whether staff completed the progress report, the number of individual learning goals, and a progress rating for each goal. For the first term of the 2023–24 school year, the Division found staff completed progress reports for 87% of students with intensive needs with learning plans. The Division shared these review results with its schools.

The Division also analyzed the average number of learning plan goals for students with intensive needs, as well as the overall average progress rating. See **Figure 2** for the Division's progress report rating scale.

Figure 2—Division Progress Reporting Descriptors for Learning Plan Goals

Descriptor	Progress Report Rating
Experiencing Difficulty	1
Making Progress Less Than Expected	2
Making Progress as Expected	3
Outcome Achieved	4

Source: Adapted from Saskatoon School Division No. 13 information.

The Division expects at least three individual learning plan goals for each student with intensive needs and found students had 3.8 goals on average for the first term of the 2023–24 school year. The Division found students progressing less than expected on average (2.7 average progress rating). It shared these results with its schools.

The Division indicated it plans to integrate this analysis into its existing processes to determine the number of students with intensive needs and to forecast staffing required to support them. The Division also provided school staff with additional guidance on improving goal writing to ensure learning plan goals are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely.

Regularly assessing kindergarten to Grade 8 students' progress in meeting learning plan goals decreases the risk the Division does not make timely adjustments to teaching or the learning goals, which may impact student success. Monitoring whether students progress in their individual learning plan goals helps the Division determine whether it provides sufficient support to students with intensive needs.



3.4 More Reporting Needed on Sufficiency of Learning Supports

We recommended Saskatoon School Division No. 13 provide senior management and its Board of Education with enough information to determine the sufficiency of learning supports for kindergarten to Grade 8 students with intensive needs. (2018 Report – Volume 1, p. 177, Recommendation 11; Public Accounts Committee agreement September 25, 2019)

Status—Partially Implemented

Saskatoon School Division No. 13 provides senior management and its Board of Education with some information on learning supports for intensive needs students in kindergarten to Grade 8 but needs more robust reporting.

During the 2022–23 school year, the Division provided its Board with an overview of its specialized programs and processes to support students with intensive needs (e.g., program capacity, current enrolment, referrals, waitlists), as well as trends in the number and categories (e.g., blind or visual impairment, intellectual disability) of students with intensive needs.⁹ For example, the Division reported its total intensive needs students increased from 1,676 in 2021–22 to 1,839 in 2022–23.

As noted in **Section 3.3**, the Division analyzed the average number of learning plan goals for students with intensive needs as well as the overall average progress rating of each goal. The Division has not yet shared these results with senior management and its Board, which would help them determine whether sufficient learning supports are provided to students with intensive needs.

Providing senior management and the Board with robust reporting to determine the sufficiency of learning supports would assist the Division in assessing whether it provides students with educational services consistent with those students' educational needs and abilities, and sufficiently accommodates all students with intensive needs.

⁹ The Ministry of Education identified 11 categories of intensive needs. pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/82982/82982-intensive-supports-categories.pdf (12 October 2023).