

Chapter 8

Education—Improving Educational Outcomes for Indigenous Students

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The persistent disparity in graduation rates, along with other outcome measures like reading levels, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students makes it important for the education sector to make concerted efforts to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. At June 2023, about 48% of Indigenous students graduated within three years of starting Grade 10 compared to 88% for their non-Indigenous counterparts.^{1,2}

By January 2025, the Ministry of Education fully implemented three and partially implemented two of five recommendations we first made in 2023 to strengthen its processes in applying its Inspiring Success Framework to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

In November 2023, the Ministry released its new *Provincial Education Plan 2030* focusing on the needs of all prekindergarten to Grade 12 students.³ While this Plan includes expanded measures and targets for academic achievement beyond graduation rates, the Ministry's targets do not specify actual quantifiable increases it expects to achieve. For example, defining a quantifiable target for improving Indigenous student literacy and numeracy outcomes year over year. Given the Plan does not include targets specifically for Indigenous student outcomes, school divisions have not started reporting results against such targets. This makes it difficult to determine whether strategies are supporting academic success for Indigenous students.

The Ministry did strengthen some of its collaborative work around Indigenous student achievement.

In 2023, the Ministry created a summarized report of the achievements and challenges faced by partnerships of the Invitational Shared Services Initiative (ISSI) and shared it with interested parties like school divisions and First Nations at a fall gathering. Sharing these reports can aid partnerships in identifying successful activities and barriers to implementation.

The Ministry now appropriately reviews reporting received from initiatives that support the Inspiring Success Framework. We found Ministry staff took action with partnerships and schools when it identified underperformance.

The Ministry's direct involvement in supporting the education sector's goals and strategies associated with improving Indigenous students' achievement is essential in making lasting changes to Indigenous student educational outcomes.

¹ Ministry of Education, *Annual Report 2023–24*, p. 8.

² Data includes students in provincially funded, independent, and First Nations schools.

³ www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2023/november/06/provincial-education-plan-supports-students-to-2030 (21 February 2025).



2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The Education Act, 1995, assigns responsibility to the Ministry of Education for all matters relating to early learning, elementary, and secondary education—this includes the education of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (i.e., Indigenous) students.⁴

In June 2018, the Ministry released the *Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK–12 Education Policy Framework*, which commits to working collaboratively with all the Ministry’s educational partners to strengthen relationships and achieve an equitable and inclusive system benefitting all learners.⁵ The Ministry is responsible for implementing the Framework to improve outcomes for Indigenous students.

The Framework is the umbrella for all actions related to prekindergarten to Grade 12 Indigenous student education as well as offers an approach to improving Indigenous student engagement and achievement.⁶ In 2023–24, approximately 38,000 of 203,000 kindergarten to Grade 12 students (almost 19%) in provincial schools self-identified as Indigenous.

Since establishing the Framework in 2018, Indigenous student graduation rates slightly improved. About 48% of Indigenous students (compared to 88% of non-Indigenous students) graduated within three years of starting Grade 10 in 2022–23 with five-year Indigenous student graduation rates also increasing from 59% to 62% in 2023.^{7,8}

The Ministry established several initiatives to assist in meeting the goals of its Framework, including Following Their Voices (FTV) and Invitational Shared Services Initiative (ISSI). These two initiatives receive the most annual funding (over \$2 million each) from the Ministry.

2.1.1 Following Their Voices Initiative

Following Their Voices is an initiative seeking to improve Indigenous student outcomes by engaging and supporting students through changes in student-teacher relationships and interactions, teacher instructional practices and the learning environment.⁹ It was designed for teachers to better understand the historical inequities of Indigenous peoples and to critically examine their relationships and instructional approaches with Indigenous students. The Ministry provides \$2.3 million a year in funding to FTV.

⁴ *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 3(1) and 3(1.1).

⁵ *Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK–12 Education Policy Framework*, p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ Ministry of Education, *Annual Report 2023–24*, p. 8. Five-year graduation rates are calculated as the percentage of students who complete Grade 12 within five years of starting Grade 10.

⁸ June 2023 statistics used as June 2024 statistics will be reported in the Ministry of Education’s 2024–25 annual report, which will be released in summer 2025.

⁹ www.followingtheirvoices.ca/about-ftv (24 February 2025).

Schools wishing to participate in FTV must apply and receive Ministry approval. The Ministry provides funding to schools for a school-based facilitator position to work directly with participating teachers in supporting, observing, monitoring, and providing feedback as they implement a range of culturally responsive instructional strategies for Indigenous students. In 2024–25, 36 schools participated in FTV (compared to 49 schools in 2020–21), supporting about 10,000 Indigenous students across the province.

2.1.2 Invitational Shared Services Initiative

The Invitational Shared Services Initiative develops partnerships with the provincial education system and First Nations education organizations to support Indigenous students who live on-reserve but attend provincial schools to provide supports and services to these students.¹⁰ For example, a partnership may hire a Grad Mentor to work with school staff to identify and support selected Indigenous students by creating an achievement plan for student success (i.e., provide tutors, and/or plans for increasing attendance and engagement).

Partnerships increased significantly since 2020–21 from 19 to 28 partnerships in January 2025. The Ministry gives over \$2 million a year to ISSI partnerships.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up audit of management's actions on the recommendations we made in 2023.

We concluded, for the period ended March 31, 2022, the Ministry of Education had, other than in the areas of our five recommendations, effective processes for implementing its *Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK–12 Education Policy Framework* to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.¹¹

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 reviewed the summarized annual report of the Invitational Shared Services Initiative (ISSI) partnership, tested a sample of ISSI partnership year-end reports to ensure they reported required information and Ministry staff saved information on the Ministry's central network drive. We also tested a sample of school division annual reports to verify they reported on Indigenous-specific performance outcomes, and verified the Ministry followed up with certain school divisions and partnerships to address underperformance.

¹⁰ First Nations education organizations with ISSI partnerships include First Nations tribal councils or First Nations. There are 70 First Nations in Saskatchewan. fnp-pnp.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNListGrid.aspx?lang=eng (27 March 2025).

¹¹ *2023 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 3, pp. 27–46.



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, 2025, and the Ministry of Education's actions up to that date.

3.1 Monitoring of Indigenous Student Success Occurring Before Grade 10, But Measurable Targets Needed

We recommended the Ministry of Education expand its measures and targets related to its Inspiring Success Framework for Indigenous students beyond graduation rates. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 35, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Education expanded its measures related to the Inspiring Success Framework for Indigenous students beyond graduation rates to monitor Indigenous student success before Grade 10. The Ministry now measures student success by looking at attendance, connectedness and safety concerns, readiness to learn upon exiting kindergarten, and literacy outcomes, including separate Indigenous-student data, but has not developed quantifiable associated targets.

In November 2023, the Ministry released its new *Provincial Education Plan 2030*. The long-term provincial education plan focuses on the needs of all prekindergarten to Grade 12 students, including those students educated by First Nations and Métis education organizations.¹² The Plan outlines four priority actions and five targets shown in **Figure 1**.

However, the Ministry's targets do not specify actual increases it expects to achieve, therefore, it is unable to sufficiently measure success on student educational outcomes, including Indigenous students. For example, defining a quantifiable target (e.g., defined percentage increase) in student literacy and numeracy outcomes year over year. Further, the Plan does not have separate targets for Indigenous students. This makes it difficult to determine what the Ministry deems successful (e.g., is 1% increase considered success).

Figure 1—Provincial Education Plan 2030 Priority Actions and Targets

Priority Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve student outcomes through effective assessment practices that guide and strengthen responsive instruction• Actualize the vision and goals of <i>Inspiring Success: Prek–12 First Nations and Métis Education Policy Framework</i>• Enrich and enhance mental health and wellbeing capacity in students• Foster connections for learners and their families while supporting learners as they enter and progress through school to graduation and determine a life pathway

¹² www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2023/november/06/provincial-education-plan-supports-students-to-2030 (21 February 2025).

Targets

- Student attendance will improve annually (reported separately for Grades 1 to 9 and Grades 10 to 12)
- Overall graduation rates will increase annually with a focus on decreasing the gap in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2030
- Upon kindergarten exit, the percentage of students ready for learning in the primary grades will increase year over year
- Student literacy and numeracy outcomes will increase year over year (for Grade 3 students)
- All students will have an increased sense of connection and safety in schools (based on completed student surveys)

Source: www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2023/november/06/provincial-education-plan-supports-students-to-2030 (21 February 2025).

The Ministry and school divisions started reporting progress on the Plan's established actions and targets in their 2023–24 annual reports for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students combined and separately. The results show Indigenous students continue to underperform compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. For example, Saskatoon Public School Division reported that 28.3% of Indigenous students are reading at or above grade level in Grade 3 compared to 57.2% of non-Indigenous students.¹³

While school divisions and the Ministry now report data on non-Indigenous and Indigenous students separately, we found the developed targets lack sufficient detail to quantify success. For example, although the Ministry targets that student attendance will improve annually, it is not clear by how much. We found the percentage of Indigenous students across all grades at Saskatoon Public School Division attending school decreased from 62% in 2017–18 to 48% in 2023–24, but it was unclear what the Division was targeting to achieve.¹⁴

Establishing quantifiable targets will help the Ministry to better analyze and understand the trends and barriers affecting Indigenous student outcomes. It will also clarify whether key strategies and initiatives successfully increase Indigenous student success and, if not, allow the Ministry to determine actions or supports needed.

3.2 Actions Taken When Initiatives Not Achieving Expected Results

We recommended the Ministry of Education determine action plans to address initiatives not achieving expected results related to Indigenous student success. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 40, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Education tracks the performance of its key initiatives under its Inspiring Success Framework and works with partnerships and school divisions to address underperformance at the individual school or partnership level.

For the two main initiatives of the Inspiring Success Framework (e.g., Following Their Voices [FTV], Invitational Shared Services Initiative [ISSI]), the Ministry developed methods for schools or partnerships to report back on each Initiative's outcomes annually.

¹³ The Board of Education of the Saskatoon Public School Division #13 of Saskatchewan, 2023–24 Annual Report, p. 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.



Following Their Voices Initiative

In 2024–25, 36 schools participated in Following Their Voices compared to 49 provincial and First Nations schools in 2020–21. FTV seeks to enhance the instructional relationships with Indigenous students and to increase Indigenous student engagement, credit attainment, and graduation rates. The Ministry has not defined how many schools it expects to participate in FTV. As more schools participate in FTV, more Indigenous students are likely to have opportunities for better instructional relationships with their teachers.

The 2022–23 FTV Report indicated underperformance in student engagement.

For FTV, participating schools set annual targets related to the number of student and teacher survey responses they expect to assess FTV student engagement.¹⁵ The Ministry monitors actual monthly survey response results compared to established targets. If the number of completed surveys decreases or if the school is unlikely to meet established targets by the end of the school year, this triggers the Ministry to have discussions with that particular school.

We found two instances at Regina schools where FTV survey responses decreased. For example, at one school, student survey responses decreased from 1,700 in the 2023–24 school year to only 121 for the period September to December 2024. When the Ministry identified the issue, we found it appropriately scheduled in-person meetings with the schools' administration teams to explain and train staff on the benefits of using the surveys and to try increasing survey response rates.

Invitational Shared Services Initiative

For the Invitational Shared Services Initiative, partnerships prepare a plan at the beginning of the school year and a year-end report in November of the following school year. Partnership plans include intended activities and results expected from the partnership (e.g., hire a grad mentor to support Indigenous student credit attainment), while year-end reports provide actual results.

Each partnership's intended results will be different. Year-end reporting outlines any activities undertaken by the partnership during the year and any challenges. The Ministry compares planned versus completed activities and reviews challenges reported by the partnership. Where partnerships do not achieve intended activities and results, Ministry staff work with the partnership to create an action plan for the following year to improve results.

We found one instance of an ISSI partnership the Ministry identified during its review of the partnership year-end report as not having met its intended activities and results for 2023–24. The Ministry requested the partnership submit a plan to improve performance during the next school year.

Enhanced reporting and monitoring helps the Ministry to determine actions to address root causes of underperforming activities and get initiatives back on track for Indigenous student success.

¹⁵ Following Their Voices (FTV) surveys are customized, perceptual surveys used to inform school planning and reporting. The surveys ask about student-teacher relationships, interactions between students and teachers, and the learning environment. Students who are more engaged and have positive relationships and interactions with other students and teachers are more likely to attend school more often and perform better in school.

3.3 Invitational Shared Services Initiative Year-End Reports Properly Stored and Reviewed

We recommended the Ministry of Education follow its established processes for reviewing and storing Invitational Shared Services Initiative year-end reports about Indigenous student partnerships. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 42, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Education appropriately followed its established process for reviewing and storing Invitational Shared Services Initiative (ISSI) year-end reports about Indigenous student partnerships.

At January 2025, the Ministry funded 28 ISSI partnerships. By November 30 each year, the Ministry requires ISSI partnerships to submit a year-end report and provides an adequate template for partnerships to follow when drafting reports. The Ministry expects partnerships to report on:

- Actions undertaken during the year and the result of those actions
- Outcomes achieved (e.g., graduation rates, credit attainment, student attendance for participating Indigenous students)
- Challenges experienced and addressed
- Partnership next steps (e.g., plans for the following year)
- A reconciliation of budgeted versus actual expenditures

The Ministry assigned one Program Manager to monitor the central email for any ISSI year-end reporting who saves reporting received on the Ministry's central drive for Priority Action Team Branch staff review and approval.¹⁶ The Program Manager also follows up with partnerships that have not submitted required reporting. We found all expected ISSI year-end reporting for 2023–24 appropriately saved on the central drive.

Once the Ministry's Priority Action Team receives ISSI year-end reporting, staff review reports to verify whether each partnership met Ministry expectations, as well as to assess partnership progress toward meeting established metrics (e.g., targeted three- and five-year graduation rates) set out in the partnership's plan.

For five ISSI partnerships' 2023–24 year-end reports we tested, we found Ministry staff appropriately reviewed each of the submitted reports. In all five instances, the partnerships reported the required information, so Ministry staff did not need to follow up. See **Section 3.2** for steps taken if Ministry staff identify underperformance of a partnership when reviewing year-end reports.

¹⁶ The Ministry of Education's Priority Action Team is responsible for the development, organization and implementation of both Following Their Voices and Invitational Shared Services Initiative.



Storing received reports in a central database decreases the risk relevant information can be lost or missed. Additionally, having Ministry staff review ISSI partnership year-end reporting, allows the Ministry to identify any challenges or underperformance by the partnerships.

3.4 Invitational Shared Services Initiative Year-End Reports Summarized

We recommended the Ministry of Education prepare and share a summarized report for the Invitational Shared Services Initiative based on year-end reporting received from Indigenous partnerships. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 43, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Education appropriately summarized Invitational Shared Services Initiative (ISSI) outcomes and challenges based on the year-end reporting of the Indigenous partnerships and shared the summarized version with its partners.

In 2023, Ministry staff prepared a summarized report on the actions and impacts of ISSI partnerships, which they submitted to the Executive Director of the Priority Action Team for review. Once finalized, the Priority Action Team appropriately shared the report with all partners (e.g., schools divisions and First Nations) at an annual gathering in fall 2023. The same reporting process occurred in 2024 with similar plans to continue going forward.

We compared the information reported in four ISSI partnerships' individual year-end reports to the summarized report for 2022–23 and found the summarized report accurately captured key information from the individual reports. **Figure 2** outlines some of the challenges and successes reported in the 2022–23 summarized report from different partnerships.

Figure 2—Examples of ISSI Summarized 2022–23 Report Successes and Challenges

Successes	Challenges
20% decrease in student absenteeism on cultural activity days compared to regular school days	Elementary student attendance rates lower than average
At a specific school, 40% of Grade 1 and 67% of Grade 2 Indigenous students were reading at grade level by the end of the year	No challenges reported by partnership
Community members reporting better communication and relationships with school	Student attendance
Graduation rates improved from 40.4% to 60.7% for Indigenous students between 2021–22 and 2022–23	Classroom designated for Indigenous cultural activities had to be moved during school year due to construction
Attendance at 74%, up from an average of 68% in the 2021–22 school year	Schools still working to return to pre-pandemic functioning

Source: Adapted from *Annual Report 2022–23: Invitational Shared Services Initiative*.

Having a summarized report of ISSI partnership performance provides the Ministry with a better picture of the partnerships' impact on Indigenous student success. Sharing the summarized report among ISSI partnerships aids them in identifying successful activities and challenges to implementation. Sharing effective strategies to reduce Indigenous-learning gaps is important to influence positive change across the system.

3.5 School Division Annual Reporting on Indigenous Student Success Needs Specific Targets

We recommended the Ministry of Education work with school divisions to obtain enhanced annual reporting on Indigenous student success once measures and targets are expanded in relation to the Inspiring Success Framework for Indigenous students. (2023 Report – Volume 1, p. 45, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Partially Implemented

The Ministry of Education provides guidelines and templates for school divisions to assist in preparing their annual reports, but as stated in **Section 3.1**, it still needs to establish appropriate targets for Indigenous students to include in this reporting.

Under *The Education Act, 1995*, school divisions are required to submit annual reports to the Minister of Education. To assist school divisions in preparing annual reports, the Ministry created a template outlining key information needed in annual reports. Consistency in reporting by school divisions allows the Ministry to assess whether divisions meet the Provincial Education Plan's expected actions and targets. The Ministry updates this template annually and provides it to school divisions electronically. We reviewed the Ministry's annual report template provided to school divisions and found it contained the requirement to report Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes separately.

In 2023–24, school divisions reported on measures of Indigenous-student attendance, graduation, credit attainment, reading, and readiness to learn in the primary grades. However, as noted in **Section 3.1**, the Ministry needs to develop specific targets for Indigenous students to improve outcomes. Without Indigenous-specific targets it is difficult for the Ministry, school divisions, and the public to determine whether reports show success for Indigenous students and whether Indigenous student outcomes are improving. Once the Ministry develops specific targets for Indigenous student outcomes its school division annual report template will require an update with these reporting requirements.

Undertaking sufficient analysis of Indigenous-student outcome data is key to understanding trends and barriers, informing change, and determining whether key strategies and initiatives increase success and academic achievement for Indigenous students.

