

## Chapter 15

# 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 select school divisions. In 2024–25, the Ministry designated 632 prekindergarten spaces for preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports.

By July 2025, the Ministry improved its processes for evaluating the Program by implementing the last remaining recommendation we first made in 2021.

In 2024, the Ministry reviewed action plans from school divisions to address challenges identified in its 2021 Program evaluation. The Ministry evaluated the Program again in spring 2025 and expects school divisions to develop associated action plans to address the identified challenges by February 2026. We found the Ministry also regularly monitors whether school divisions continue to meet Program expectations (e.g., utilization of allocated spaces, development of an Inclusion and Intervention Plan for each student).<sup>1</sup>

Addressing challenges identified in Early Learning Intensive Support Program reviews help to reduce the risk of the Program not meeting the learning and developmental needs of children with intensive needs.

### 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.<sup>2</sup> Prekindergarten is an early childhood education program (non-mandatory) available in some schools for vulnerable children ages three to four years old.

The Ministry provides leadership and direction to the early years and prekindergarten to Grade 12 education sectors.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An Inclusion and Intervention Plan (IIP) is a document developed and implemented by a collaborative team (e.g., teachers, professional support staff, parents) that sets out student outcomes, focusing on key areas of development that will have the most impact on student success during the current school year.

<sup>2</sup> *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 3(1) and 3(1.1).

<sup>3</sup> *Ministry of Education Business Plan for 2025–26*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *The Education Act, 1995*, s. 178 and 280.



## 2.2 Early Learning Intensive Support Program

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 to ensure continuity of programs and services under the previous agreement.

Under the Agreement, the Ministry agrees to commit a portion of the federal funding toward addressing the inclusivity of children experiencing disabilities, including establishing programs for preschool-aged children. The Early Learning Intensive Support Program is funded within this Agreement for children experiencing significant delays in development and may include children diagnosed with autism, cognitive delays, physical challenges, auditory issues, or significant behavioural issues. The Program provides opportunities for children to engage in inclusive learning with other children of the same age.<sup>5</sup>

Under the Program, these children attend an existing prekindergarten program in a classroom that receives additional resources (e.g., educational assistants, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists) to help support those children with intensive needs.<sup>6,7</sup>

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, since the Program's inception in 2018, the Ministry gradually expanded it to nearly all (26 of 27) school divisions and, in turn, increased the number of spaces available to 632 spaces in 2024–25 (2017–18: 120).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 1—Early Learning Intensive Support Program Spaces and Spending from 2017–25**

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
2023–24	\$ 4.90	26	392
2024–25	\$ 7.90	26	632

Source: Adapted from the Office of the Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan *2023 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 18*, p. 169 and information provided by the Ministry of Education.

<sup>5</sup> Early Learning Intensive Support Program—Information for Families Brochure ([pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/106058/ELIS%252BFamily%252BBrochure.pdf](https://pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/106058/ELIS%252BFamily%252BBrochure.pdf)) (20 August 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Prekindergarten in Saskatchewan is an early childhood education program targeting vulnerable three- and four-year-old children that focuses on fostering social development, nurturing educational growth, and promoting language development.

<sup>8</sup> Conseil des Écoles Fransaskoises No. 310 does not participate in the Early Learning Intensive Support Program because the school division does not have a Ministry-funded prekindergarten program.

## 2.3 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

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

We concluded, for period ended December 31, 2020, the Ministry of Education had effective processes to evaluate whether the Early Learning Intensive Support Program helps preschool-aged children requiring intensive supports to receive a good start in their early learning and development except for areas in our two recommendations.<sup>9</sup> By August 2023, the Ministry implemented one recommendation.<sup>10</sup>

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 evaluating the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. We reviewed a sample of school divisions' mid-year reports and associated action plans.

## 3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATION

This section sets out the recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at July 31, 2025, and the Ministry of Education's actions up to that date.

### 3.1 Ministry Reviewing School Divisions' Program Action Plans

***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 on March 2, 2022)***

**Status—Implemented**

In 2024, the Ministry of Education reviewed school divisions' action plans that sought to address challenges originally identified in the Ministry's 2021 evaluation of the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. The Ministry also evaluated the Program again in spring 2025 and expects school divisions to develop associated action plans to address identified challenges by February 2026.

<sup>9</sup> *2021 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 5*, pp. 35–50.

<sup>10</sup> *2023 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 18*, pp. 167–172.



The Ministry developed an action plan template requiring school divisions to use the spring 2021 Program survey results to establish actions for improvement.<sup>11</sup> The Ministry shared the survey results with school divisions in fall 2023, which identified areas for improvement (e.g., further professional development opportunities to help teachers respond to students with intensive needs, improved communications with families and between teachers and educational assistants). The Ministry expected school divisions to provide the action plans for the applicable identified areas for improvement within their 2024 mid-year reports.

The Ministry also maintains ongoing communication with school divisions to monitor whether they continue to meet the Program's expectations. We observed examples of the Ministry's emails with school division staff and of periodic meetings (spring and fall) with divisions. If expectations are not met, the Ministry would meet with a school division to understand any root causes contributing toward not meeting expectations and consider next steps.

We tested three school divisions and found the Ministry collected and reviewed the action plans included within those divisions' 2024 mid-year reports. We found the actions identified by school divisions primarily related to providing teachers and educational assistants with additional training opportunities (e.g., about inclusive education practices, or how to meet children's complex needs). Additionally, our review of these mid-year reports found the school divisions met the expectations of the Program (e.g., utilization of allocated spaces, development of an Inclusion and Intervention Plan for each student).

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

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<sup>11</sup> In our 2023 follow-up audit, we found the Ministry of Education collected data about the Early Learning Intensive Support Program in spring 2021 by surveying key partners (i.e., prekindergarten teachers, educational assistants, Program-specific educational assistants, and parents) to understand how effectively the Program operates.