

Chapter 21

Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre—Supporting Students to Complete Distance Education Courses

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation was established in 2022 through the acquisition of Sun West School Division No. 207's Distance Learning Centre. It provides distance education courses for kindergarten to Grade 12 students across the province. As a result of the acquisition, the Corporation known as the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre is now responsible for implementing the audit recommendations made to Sun West in 2022 regarding processes to support students' completion of Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses.

Some students (34% of Grades 10 to 12 students registered at the Centre) take only distance education courses, while others take some online courses to supplement their in-person classes at another school. For the 2023–24 school year, the Centre taught over 19,000 courses to about 8,600 Grades 10–12 students.

By April 2025, the Centre implemented the seven recommendations we first made in 2022.

The Centre formalized a framework in 2024–25 to guide course development and maintenance, as well as enhanced its course maintenance request process to help ensure courses are updated and renewed on a regular basis.

We found the Centre strengthened implementation of its marking and student inactivity policies. The Centre monitors teachers against a five-day target for completing marking of assignments. For a sample of teachers, we found Centre management (i.e., principals) appropriately used monitoring reports to develop action plans for teachers with marking backlogs. We also found teachers followed its policy, informing certain students and parents timely if those students fell behind in their coursework.

The Centre also set targets for course completion rates for all student groups (e.g., full-time, part-time) enabling effective assessment and understanding of its students' successes and challenges in distance education. Board reporting includes analysis on completion rates and why students drop courses (e.g., inactivity, restructuring of student course plan, course too challenging). This analysis helps the Centre to develop action plans (e.g., increase academic advisor engagement, extend graduation plans) directed at the root causes of incomplete courses.

Completing distance education courses allow students to graduate and develop essential skills for post-secondary education and the workforce.



2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

Distance education is the delivery of instruction to students through online or print-based resources, where students are in a different location than the course teachers. Resources include both synchronous (e.g., real-time broadcasts) as well as asynchronous (e.g., on demand, pre-recorded) instructional resources.¹

Established in December 2022, the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation (legal organizational name) known as the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre is a Treasury Board Crown Corporation mandated to provide high-quality kindergarten to Grade 12 online learning to students across the province. The Centre was established through the acquisition of Sun West School Division No. 207's Distance Learning Centre and expected to build upon the 14 online learning schools previously operated by the province's school divisions.²

High school students have access to over 120 courses at the Centre, with more than 70 offered as elective options in subject areas such as agriculture, business administration, creative arts, and trades, which provides students access to classes they may not have in their local schools, consider future career opportunities, and support their graduation plans.³

The Centre provided online education to nearly 2,900 full-time, 5,500 part-time, and 253 adult (age 22+) students registered in more than 19,000 Grades 10–12 online courses during the 2023–24 school year.⁴

In 2023–24, the Centre spent about \$29 million delivering online learning to students from across the province by employing approximately 327 staff (teachers, principals, management, and support staff).⁵

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up audit of management's actions on the recommendations we first made in 2022.

We concluded the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation (Sun West School Division No. 207) had, other than in the areas of our seven recommendations, effective processes to support students to complete Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses for the period ending November 30, 2021.⁶ With the acquisition of Sun West's Distance Learning Centre in 2022, implementing the seven recommendations became the responsibility of the Corporation (known as the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre).

¹ 2022 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 8, p. 126.

² Annual Report for 2022–23 Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre, p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Adapted from Annual Report for 2023–24 Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre.

⁶ 2022 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 8, pp. 125–140.



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

To carry out our follow-up audit, we discussed actions taken with management, reviewed relevant documentation (e.g., policies, reports), and analyzed data tracking teachers' timeliness of marking assignments. We also examined student records, training records, and the Centre's reports to its Board.

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 April 30, 2025, and the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre's actions up to that date.

3.1 New Course Development and Maintenance Framework Implemented

We recommended the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation implement a course development policy that includes the frequency of course reviews for distance education. (2022 Report – Volume 1, p. 132, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre formalized a course development and maintenance framework in 2024–25, as well as enhanced its course maintenance request process so that courses are updated and renewed on a regular basis (e.g., annually).

The Centre utilizes a combination of staff, established processes, and continuous improvement cycles to manage course development and maintenance.⁷ The new framework, approved in January 2025, incorporates analysis and feedback from interested parties (e.g., teachers) to continuously improve courses.

The Centre's centralized course development team is made up of three full-time equivalent instructional design consultants and 12 full-time equivalent teachers who develop all new courses to ensure quality and consistency. We found the Centre implemented a four-point rubric scoring matrix as the basis for its comprehensive course analysis; revising scores annually. If an offered course scores below 2, then it is considered in need of an update.

⁷ Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre, *Program Development and Maintenance Framework*.



Throughout the school year, teachers submit course maintenance requests such as correcting grammar or broken hyperlinks to major course-change proposals. A professional learning network facilitator approves these requests and then passes them on to the course development team. The course maintenance request process allows the Centre to gradually align older courses with updated Centre standards and policies until they need a full revision.

The Centre developed and renewed 22 high school courses in 2023–24.⁸ We found the Centre developed, changed, or renewed 46 high school courses in the 2024–25 school year (up to April 2025) while the course maintenance request process resulted in approximately 50 submissions for the same period.

Formalizing the course development and maintenance process supports adequate course reviews and updates during the year, which reduces the risk of outdated courses.

3.2 Timeliness of Teacher Marking Monitored

We recommended the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation monitor the timeliness of teachers marking distance education coursework in accordance with its policy. (2022 Report – Volume 1, p. 135, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre uses reports to monitor teachers' marking workloads, identify those who do not meet its targets, and support actions to address backlogs of marking.

The Centre expects teachers to mark assignments and exams timely, and get grades to students within five business days. Principals review reports to identify those who do not meet the five-day marking turnaround target and support actions to address backlogs.

We found reports appropriately identify teachers more than five working days behind in marking assignments. The reports are then used to discuss reasons for delays and determine expected completion dates.

We interviewed three principals to discuss how they monitored their teachers' marking workloads. Each principal indicated they review a report received every Monday to identify those teachers not meeting the five-day target for marking assignments. We found principals were taking appropriate action to eliminate backlogs when targets were unmet for certain teachers, including increasing monitoring, developing action plans, or engaging help for the teacher to catch up.

Monitoring timeliness of teachers returning marked assignments to students increase student engagement, success in completing courses, and better learning outcomes.

⁸ Annual Report for 2023–24 Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre. p. 13.

3.3 Student Inactivity Policy Followed

We recommended the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation consistently apply its student inactivity policy to engage distance education students falling behind in courses. (2022 Report – Volume 1, p. 136, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre consistently applied its student inactivity policy to engage students falling behind in courses.

The Centre developed new guidelines for addressing student inactivity in November 2024, referred to as leveling procedures. Leveling is a process by which teachers can better offer support to their students through intervention steps with the goal of re-engaging students who fall behind in their studies.⁹

The new guidelines expect teachers to assess students' completion of assignments monthly and then initiate leveling procedures for identified student inactivity. For example, a student about 30 hours behind in their schoolwork is classified as level 3 and a progress report is expected to be sent to the student and parents by a teacher. This is then followed by a phone call home to the parents. If a student ends up at level 4, they are dropped from the class due to inactivity and notification is sent to the parents.

Our review of a sample of five teachers' student enrollments found the teachers applied leveling according to policy. We found progress reports were sent to both the student and parents when a student was falling behind. The communication indicated the student was at risk of being removed from the class if significant progress was not made in the next month.

The renewed guidelines and the actions taken to address student inactivity are reducing the risk of students not completing their courses due to lack of student engagement. See **Figure 1** showing course completion rates were generally meeting targets.

3.4 Online Training Available for Teachers

We recommended the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation assess the need for ongoing focused professional development for teachers working in the distance education environment. (2022 Report – Volume 1, p. 136, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre provides ongoing professional development to all teaching staff throughout the year, including specific distance-education training offered online.

⁹ Adapted from Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre, *Building Relationships and Student Leveling Guidebook Grades 10–12*.



Teachers and other staff are provided professional development days throughout the year. According to Centre management, there have been certain online-instruction focused topics in the past (e.g., online teaching expert brought in). We found the Centre now offers specific distance-education training for its teachers online such as a course focused on teaching in a virtual classroom as well as another course summarizing curriculum interpretation for online course development. We found the online training system logged the training taken for Centre teaching staff, which allows the Centre to monitor course completion.

Ongoing training specific to distance-education will help teachers obtain the necessary tools to effectively engage and support students in the distance education environment.

3.5 Targets, Analysis, and Reporting Established

We recommended the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation establish target course completion rates for its students who solely attend the Distance Learning Centre. (2022 Report – Volume 1, p. 137, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

We recommended the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation analyze key information related to supporting students' completion of Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses to identify potential issues and take action. (2022 Report – Volume 1, p. 138, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

We recommended the Saskatchewan Distance Learning Corporation regularly provide complete written reports and analysis to its Board about supporting students' completion of Grades 10 to 12 distance education courses. (2022 Report – Volume 1, p. 138, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 7, 2024)

Status—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre established completion rate targets for different groups of students, analyzed why students do not complete distance education courses, and provided its Board with reports on student completion rates.

The Centre set course completion rates in 2024–25 for all high school student groups (e.g., part-time, full-time). **Figure 1** outlines the different segments of students registered in courses and their varied course completion targets and actual rates as of January 30, 2025 (end of semester 1). Different targets exist given the circumstances in which students engage with the Centre. Generally, each of the different student groups were meeting their targets.

Figure 1—Course Completion Target and Actual Rates by Student Group

Student Group	Target Rate	Actual Completion Rates January 30, 2025
Full-time students	70%	69.5%
Part-time asynchronous students	80%	85.0%
Part-time synchronous students	90%	86.5%
Adult students	60%	73.7%

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Distance Learning Centre records.
Synchronous students learn through real-time broadcasts while asynchronous students watch pre-recorded courses on demand.

The Centre has also started to track and analyze why students drop (i.e., do not complete) courses to understand the root causes, such as one of the following reasons:

- Restructuring the student's graduation plan (e.g., course timing changed)
- Course too challenging
- Student inactivity
- Moved out of province
- No longer in school
- Transferred to in-person school

Understanding root causes allow the Centre to address issues, where able, to increase course completion rates. For example, in January 2025, over 13% of full-time students did not complete their courses as planned due to student inactivity. Having such data enables the Centre to identify what courses may need to be reviewed because students continually do not complete them, or where more effort needs to be focused on engaging with students to prevent inactivity. For example, Centre management indicated course completion rates were higher for students where academic advisors were available at their local high schools (for part-time students) and planned to implement weekly teacher/student check-ins for full-time students.

Since 2024–25, the Centre provides its Board with regular, written reports outlining course completion rates including reasons why rates are lower than expected. We found the Board reports evolved since our initial audit to include completion rates for all student groups and better insights into why students dropped courses, allowing the Board to better understand what the Centre plans to do to improve course completion rates. This effectively reduces the risk of the Board being unable to understand overall successes and challenges of the Centre.

