

More thorough evaluation needed for Sask. early learning supports: provincial auditor ^[1]

Auditor Judy Ferguson's examination of two areas of early childhood education was affected by COVID-19 educational disruptions.

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Source: Saskatoon StarPhoenix

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Jun 2021

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EXCERPTS

Saskatchewan's provincial auditor has found room for improvement in supports for early learners.

In her 2021 report ^[3], released Tuesday, Auditor Judy Ferguson looked at two areas of early childhood education.

"Initiatives to help early learners are critical given the percentage of kindergarten students in Saskatchewan's publicly funded schools assessed as 'ready for learning' is well below the provincial goal of 90 per cent," Ferguson said.

The provincial average is 79 per cent, even lower for self-declared First Nations, Metis and Inuit kindergarten students, which were at 56 per cent in 2019-20.

The first audit focused on the Ministry of Education's ability to evaluate the Early Learning Intensive Support program, which advances the development of preschool-aged children living with learning disabilities.

Ferguson found the ministry set a "good foundation" for future evaluation of the program, but could conduct more robust data collection regarding its progress.

The program funds existing pre-kindergarten spaces for children in need of intensive learning supports. It started in the 2017-18 school year — with 120 spots across four divisions — and has since expanded to 242 spots across 23 of the 27 divisions, at a cost of \$3 million.

In a statement on Tuesday, NDP Opposition education critic Carla Beck said the audit shows "the Sask. Party isn't giving educators the resources they need," and is not keeping track of the outcomes of the programs it funds.

The ministry said it accepts the findings and "staff have already met to discuss the report and possible responses to the recommendations including necessary changes to the data collection surveys which occur in June 2021."

Saskatoon public schools

Ferguson examined whether Saskatoon public students are properly equipped as they transition out of Kindergarten.

While the division has "taken many positive steps and actions," it needs to do more to monitor that process, she found.

The audit says teachers did not always assess students twice a year, as expected, or use suitable assessment tools. Some students also didn't participate in the assessments.

Without sufficient data collection, teachers might not be able to adapt their teaching practices or seek additional resources, Ferguson said. She also found analysis of the data needs to be improved to identify trends and areas of improvement.

Among Ferguson's recommendations was giving schools and teachers written expectations about the minimum frequency for assessments.

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Trish Reeve, the division's superintendent of education overseeing early learning, said the division has responded by ensuring its assessment calendar is not only provided to school-based administrators, but to all staff conducting those assessments. It will also be posted online.

The COVID effect

Ferguson notes that COVID-19's educational disruptions had a role to play in the audit's process.

The pandemic prevented the Ministry from collecting key information, as it "did not want to overburden schools and teachers with

information requests” during remote learning. It deferred its next review of the program as a result.

The ministry also did not request information “critical to a child’s success and their transition,” which means it didn’t know if certain aspects of the program are working – which is especially important as schools closed, Ferguson said.

The public division audit looked at an 18-month window ending June 30, 2020, “a unique time” to have it conducted, Reeve said. That created challenges in producing information and documentation, as well as in a professional development capacity.

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