

Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot

Why is there an Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot?

There is a need for access to high quality early learning programs for 3- and 4-years old children with intensive needs. Programs are available in Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, North Battleford, Moose Jaw, Yorkton and Swift Current.

What is the difference between Prekindergarten and the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot?

Prekindergarten is a high quality early learning program allocated to school divisions and funded by the Ministry of Education. These programs are assigned to certain schools and are for children who are 3- and 4-years-old. Access to this program is not universal; the program is targeted for children in vulnerable circumstances. There are 16 spaces for children and it is a half-time program. Selection criteria are used to identify children with the greatest need. The selection criteria and process are determined by the school division but the vulnerability criteria are established by the ministry and include: low socio-economic status, referral from a government or community-based agency, social isolation or not having access to early learning programs, family health care challenges, exposure to family trauma, and delays in the child's development.

“Inclusive education and employment exist when all individuals, regardless of ability or disability, are educated or working together in the same space. Effective inclusion involves a certain degree of flexibility in teaching and learning that allows for improved educational and employment outcomes for all individuals. It must also be a collective agreement in the mindset, beliefs, values, and culture of the school or place of employment”.

Timmons & Thompson (2017), p.2

Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot allows additional children to attend existing school division selected Prekindergarten programs. These spaces provide children with intensive needs access to the program outside of the typical Prekindergarten selection criteria, meaning these children do not meet the vulnerability criteria required to access the 16 Prekindergarten spaces. Additional supports are put in place to ensure the needs of all students are being met. There will usually be two children who require intensive supports placed in the classroom, but this may range from one to three children based on a number of factors including the unique needs and circumstances of the child, the class and facility.

How are children identified for the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot?

The Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot is available to children with intensive needs who require a significant level of support to participate in an early learning program (significant delays in development). Admission into the program is by application as there are limited spaces available. School divisions will select students based on greatest need as well as additional factors. Family needs and reducing transitions throughout the day should also be considered in the selection process for the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot. Many families require all day care for their children while they are working or in school. Children, who already attend a licensed child care facility or another early learning program where intensive supports are provided, should not also be accepted into the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot.

Children requiring intensive supports can qualify for an enhanced accessibility grant to hire additional staff to support the integration and achievement of the child's individual goals in the early learning program at the child care centre. This matching of family need with program hours allows for an increased number of children to access and benefit from the early learning programs available in the province.

Additional Considerations for Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot

"Creating an environment that provides an emotionally safe space, visible cultural representation and physical adaptations to accommodate diversity" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2017, p.4) is critical for inclusion. The following factors offer additional considerations in determining suitability of placement:

- Access to and within the physical building (e.g., wheel chair accessible).
- The child's home school/neighbourhood, where will they attend Kindergarten.
- Size of the classroom. The amount of physical space may restrict the number of children that can be accommodated in the program according to minimum floor space per child requirements.
- Additional physical space above the Prekindergarten minimum floor space/child requirement may be needed if child specific equipment is needed (e.g., wheelchair, standing frames).
- Learning needs of other students in the class.
- Additional accommodations for personal care may be required (e.g., toileting, feeding).
- Additional equipment (e.g., assistive technology) and learning materials may need to be identified and accessible.
- Prekindergarten staff qualifications and experience.
- Access to support to complete the Inclusion and Intervention Plan (IIP).

"The Ministry of Education supports the belief, attitude and approach of inclusion for meeting the needs of all individuals. Inclusive education creates environments where students feel accepted, valued, confident and safe to engage in learning and where school personnel, families, students and community agencies form collaborative teams that are committed to a shared vision to support students in reaching their full potential."

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2017), p.2

What are the guidelines for the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot?

The guidelines for the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot include the following:

- Both 3- and 4-year-old children are eligible. However, priority is given to 4-year-old children.
- Generally two additional children with intensive needs will be included in the half-day program.
- The high quality Prekindergarten programming is provided to all children. Engaging family as active participants and partners in their child's learning is expected including regular communication and sharing of progress for all children.
- The Prekindergarten teacher, program and collaborative team articulate and model/demonstrate the inclusionary philosophy and beliefs.
- Children who meet the Early Learning Intensive Support criteria will have an Inclusion and Intervention Plan (IIP) which identifies individualized goals, required supports and transition plans.
- Family participates in the development of the IIP and team meetings to discuss ongoing assessment and planning.
- Individualized goals are embedded into the early learning program.
- An additional staff (educational assistant) must be assigned to the program to support the successful participation of the children with intensive needs. This includes facilitating the building of peer relationships and providing supports to facilitate the holistic development of all children.
- Professional support/specialized services must be regularly available to the classroom team.
- Professional development opportunities will be available to the educator and team.
- The early learning environment will be reviewed to determine any modifications required to meet the learning needs of all the children.
- A transition plan must be developed and recorded on the IIP to support the process of transitioning children into Kindergarten and developing a plan of supports.

What are the roles within the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot?

The roles within the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot are diverse and collaborative, building on each other's knowledge, experience and the principles of inclusion.

Child

The child is an active, competent and capable learner. The child is viewed as a contributing and valued member of the early learning program and the community. The child is accepted at their current developmental level with the recognized potential to learn and develop through strength based approaches.

"Individuals alone cannot make inclusion happen; they must band together and work as a cohesive team."

Timmons & Thompson
(2017), p.11

Family

Families are respected as knowledgeable with expertise regarding their child, culture and context. They are valued and active participants in the collaborative team who provide unique perspective and experience in problem solving and decision making.

Prekindergarten Teacher

Prekindergarten requires a certified teacher with a recommended specialty in early childhood education. Additional professional development and training, experience and knowledge in inclusionary philosophy and skills are critical to meet the needs of all children. These qualifications support understanding and the ability to assess developmental levels to create a learning environment and program that is of high quality; responsive and appropriate for the range of developmental levels of the children. Teachers believe in the importance of family engagement and child-centred learning. Teachers are committed to collaboration, working with the collaborative team, as well as being leaders of the early learning team within the classroom, reflecting, planning and working closely with the Prekindergarten Associate and the Educational Assistant.

Prekindergarten Associate

The Prekindergarten Associate has a combination of experience and training in early childhood education and significant knowledge of the local community and culture(s). The Prekindergarten Associate and the teacher work together to provide learning opportunities for children and to meet the adult to child ratio. The position requires effective interpersonal and problem-solving skills, respect and affection for young children and an understanding and appreciation of the cultures and experiences of the children, their families and the community. Prekindergarten Associates commit to working collaboratively as part of the early learning team.

Educational Assistant

The Educational Assistant has a combination of specialized knowledge, experience and/or professional development or training in supporting children with intensive needs. Knowledge and/or experience in early childhood development are ideal to support the children with intensive needs to build relationships and interact with peers and participate in the learning opportunities within the program. The position requires effective interpersonal and problem-solving skills, respect and affection for young children and an understanding and appreciation of the cultures and experiences of the children, their families and the community. Educational Assistants commit to working collaboratively as part of the early learning team.

“What stuck with us as researchers were the similarities, not in the structures, but rather in the attitudes, leadership, teamwork and openness we observed. All participants were totally committed to the work they were doing, they believed that all children should be educated together and that men and women with disabilities can do meaningful work in an inclusive setting.”

Timmons & Thompson (2017), p.15

School Division-Based Administrator

The school division based administrator is the main contact at the school division for applications and any questions regarding the Early Learning Intensive Support Program. They assist in determining resources available including placement options within the school division.

School-Based Administrator

The Administrator supports the inclusionary philosophy and beliefs. Administrators are the visionaries who provide motivation for the whole school to take on an inclusive vision (Timmons & Thompson, 2017). The Administrator develops relationships with children and families to support being part of the school community.

Learning Resource Teacher

The Learning Resource Teacher is a certified teacher who has also obtained an additional qualification in inclusive education. They provide consultation and support to the Prekindergarten teacher and team. They support the development and monitoring of the IIP. The Learning Resource Teacher assists with coordinating the collaborative team meetings at the school level and help with developing transition plans and supports for the upcoming school year.

Specialized Services and Professional Support

Prekindergarten classes with ELIS students are to have regular access to specialized services for in-class support. The type(s) of support provided is to be determined by the school division with regard to the students' needs. Examples could include having a speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, or special education teacher modelling strategies for oral language development, using adaptive technology, sensory integration or responding to challenging behaviour. This support would not include individualized therapy but instead the modeling of strategies and building of staff capacity. This supports progress on IIP goals for ELIS students as well as supporting all students in the class.

Process for the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot

- Family completes the Application for Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot.
- Application is reviewed to determine eligibility and identify child's learning needs and required supports.
- Program options, availability and appropriateness are identified and shared with the family.
- Family makes a decision that best meets their needs from the options provided.

If selected for the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot:

- Family is introduced to school based team and visits program.
- Collaborative team develops the Inclusion and Intervention Plan (IIP).
- Child begins attending the Prekindergarten program (staggered entrance or individualized schedule may be required initially).
- Team meets to review IIP and supports, share progress and create a transition plan.
- Process of transition begins.
- Supports are in place for the following year.

For more information on inclusive education in Saskatchewan, please refer to the following documents and resources:

- *Actualizing a Needs Based Model*
- *Inclusive Education*
- *Supports for All Learners*
- *Inclusion and Intervention Plan Guidelines*
- *Inclusion and Intervention Plan: Guidelines for Parents and Guardians*

References

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2017). Inclusive Education. Regina: Author. Retrieved from: <http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents/11/99073-Inclusive%20Education-FINAL.pdf>

Timmons, T. & Thompson, A. (2017). Voices of Inclusion. Regina: University of Regina, Government of Saskatchewan and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/early-learning-child-care.html>