

Chapter 4

Ministry of Education

Section 4.13

Student Success Initiatives

Follow-up to VFM Section 3.13, *2011 Annual Report*

Background

Ontario's Student Success Strategy is a collection of initiatives that the Ministry of Education (Ministry) has implemented since 2003 to help secondary school students graduate with their high school diplomas. At that time, the Ministry reported a five-year cohort graduation rate (the graduation rate as a percentage of the grade 9 population five years previously) for the 2003/04 school year of 68%. The Student Success Strategy aimed to raise the graduation rate to 85% by the 2010/11 school year.

The Ministry's Student Achievement Division is responsible for developing and monitoring the Student Success Strategy, while school boards and schools are responsible for delivering the strategy's initiatives. Every board receives funding for one student success leader to help implement programs in its schools, as well as funding for one student success teacher per secondary school who is responsible for providing supports to students at risk of not graduating. In the 2012/13 school year, the Ministry provided approximately \$150 million to school boards for the delivery of student success initiatives (almost \$130 million for the 2010/11 school year).

The Ministry has made steady progress toward the goal of an 85% graduation rate. The rate stood

at 81% for the 2009/10 school year, and for the 2011/12 school year the Ministry announced a graduation rate of 83%. However, in our *2011 Annual Report* we did note areas where refinements to the initiatives would help ensure that the Ministry can meet its objectives and that students acquire the knowledge and skills they need to go on to post-secondary education or employment. Some of our observations at that time included the following:

- Ontario school boards we visited track risk factors such as gender, absenteeism and course success to help identify students at risk and then provide them with supports. However, we noted that some other jurisdictions have found that targeting supports to specific groups of students based on factors such as ethnicity, disability and economic status has been very effective in improving graduation rates.
- The Ministry's reported graduation rate is based on calculating the percentage of Grade 9 students who graduate within five years. However, the 2009/10 graduation rate would have been only 72% if it had been based on graduation within the four-year span of high school. On the other hand, the graduation rate would have been 91% if it had been extended to when students reach the age of 25.
- The Ministry relies primarily on tracking changes in the graduation rate to measure the outcome of the Student Success Strategy.

However, graduation rates are generally not publicly available by school board, and boards do not use a consistent method of calculating graduation rates, so it is difficult to meaningfully compare rates across the province. Better information is also needed on graduates' level of preparedness for post-secondary studies and employment.

- We noted situations where the work placements in the Cooperative Education program did not appear to complement the students' curriculum requirements for in-class learning. Students earned credits in a wide range of placements, such as clothing stores, fast-food outlets, coffee shops and laboratories.
- In the 2009/10 and 2010/11 school years, only \$15 million of the \$245 million the Ministry provided to school boards for student success initiatives was allocated based on a direct assessment of student needs. Much of the remaining funding was allocated based on the number of students in each board, rather than being targeted to the boards, schools and students most in need of support.

We made a number of recommendations for improvement and received commitments from the Ministry that it would take action to address our concerns.

Status of Actions Taken on Recommendations

According to information received from the Ministry, progress has been made on implementing all of the recommendations in our *2011 Annual Report*, with substantial progress made on several. For example, the *Taking Stock* report that monitors students as they progress through secondary school has been revised to better identify students considered potentially at risk of not graduating. Also, as part of the re-engagement initiative, a

study was conducted to determine why students disengaged (i.e., left school before graduation), what was needed for them to successfully return to school and what preventive measures could be put in place that would decrease the probability of students disengaging in the first place. The Ministry informed us that, through this initiative, more than 8,000 students returned to school in the 2011/12 school year to work toward their diplomas. As a result, funding for this initiative was continued for 2013/14. Also, the Ministry has performed much of the initial work required to begin publishing school board graduation rates and to better track graduates who pursue post-secondary education and assess graduate outcomes.

The status of actions taken on each of our recommendations is described in the following sections.

MEASURING AND REPORTING ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

Recommendation 1

To help the Ministry of Education (Ministry), school boards, and schools generate timely data for decision-making purposes that are consistent and comparable, the Ministry and the province's school boards should:

- *set reasonable targets for graduation rates and student success indicators in line with overall provincial goals and require more formal reporting on the achievement of these targets at the provincial and school board levels;*
- *develop a common method for school boards to calculate and report graduation rates and other student success indicators;*
- *help school boards share best practices that would assist in the more timely verification and submission of student data;*
- *consider collecting information on high school graduates to identify any gaps in knowledge or skills that may require attention; and*
- *extend the use of the proposed student identifier number to include private career colleges.*

Status

The Ministry informed us that it has worked with school boards to identify and share effective data collection, submission and verification practices to assist in establishing reasonable targets for board graduation rates, creating common calculation and reporting methods, and monitoring students beyond secondary school. For example, the Ministry revised its *Taking Stock* report in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 school years to collect more refined data on secondary school students, including:

- the number of students identified to be potentially at risk of not graduating;
- the progress of all students toward the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) requirements;
- the progress of students enrolled in the Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL) program; and
- the progress of part-time students under age 18 and re-engaged students (i.e., returning to school after leaving the system).

To improve the monitoring of students at risk of not graduating, the Ministry held sessions with Student Success School and Cross Panel Teams on using and sharing student success indicator and *Taking Stock* data, and it also works with Managing Information for Student Achievement leaders in the boards.

Starting January 2013 the Ministry added the Grade 11 credit accumulation indicator for all school boards to the board progress report on the Ministry's public website. The Ministry has also decided on a plan in principle for implementing a common method for calculating and reporting board-level graduation rates, which it believes may motivate continued momentum in Student Success initiatives, act as a performance measure for the boards and provide greater transparency. The Ministry's next steps are to calculate school board graduation rates for the 2012/13 school year in March 2014, and to publish school board graduation rates for the 2013/14 school year in March 2015.

The Ministry indicated that it has enhanced its data confirmation procedures to support school boards with their submission of consistent and comparable student data. In addition, the Ministry implemented a strategy to mitigate barriers boards face in verifying and submitting student data. As a result, starting with the March 2012 submission, data collection for publicly funded school boards was 100% complete in four months.

Since the Ministry plans to publish board-level graduation rates in March 2015, it will need accurate, timely data from all school boards. The Ministry provided funding to 10 school boards through a data quality improvement effort in 2011/12 to identify best practices for data submission and verification, and in February 2013 the best practices identified through this project were shared with all school boards.

The collaborative College Mathematics Project analyzed mathematical achievement of first-semester college students in relation to their secondary school mathematics backgrounds since 2008. The results, along with ways to increase student success in college mathematics, were discussed with colleges and high schools. The Ministry informed us that this project has been expanded to include both language and mathematics achievement of recent Ontario graduates in their first and second semester of college. In addition, for 2013/14, the Ministry plans to undertake a study of other jurisdictions to identify effective practices in identifying gaps in high school graduates' knowledge and skills.

Since April 2011 the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) has been working with the post-secondary sector to extend the Ontario Education Number (OEN), and all Ontario colleges and universities have enhanced their systems to accommodate the OEN, validate education numbers and request the assignment of new numbers. With this new capacity, post-secondary institutions have been processing their existing student files and have been able to assign 307,000 new OENs to students for whom an OEN did not previously exist. To ensure that the same student

number follows a student from high school to post-secondary education, institutions need to update privacy notices for student data collection and contact students to resolve mismatches. The Ministry indicated that 90% of funded graduate and undergraduate students are expected to be set up by the fall of 2013. The 2014 student enrolment report is expected to contain OENs for all students registered with Ontario colleges and universities.

The Ministry informed us that a review with MTCU of privacy legislation is planned in 2013/14 to provide a clear authority to link personal information associated with the OEN from high school to post-secondary education. The Ministry noted that the data collection systems and business processes at private career colleges will likely not meet its authentication requirement. Consequently, it is assessing the feasibility of enhancing system security to allow for a self-authentication and retrieval model for students at private career colleges. In addition, the Ministry is considering amending the regulations to provide the legal authority for OEN use, assignment and information collection with private career colleges.

STUDENTS AT RISK OF NOT GRADUATING

Recommendation 2

To help identify students and student groups at risk of not graduating who may benefit from additional and specific supports and programs, the Ministry of Education and the province's school boards should:

- *establish a common definition for reporting grade 9 and grade 10 students considered at risk of not graduating;*
- *assess the viability of calculating student success indicators by a variety of attributes such as ethnicity, language, and socio-economic status, and consider a system or process for collecting data based on student self-identification; and*
- *review the processes used to record students who leave school without a diploma so that the reasons students leave school can be determined.*

Status

The Ministry revised its *Taking Stock* data report for the 2012/13 and 2013/14 school years to include more explicit guidelines to identify students considered potentially at risk of not graduating. To ensure consistency in board definitions, the revised report requires boards to deem all students who failed a specified number of courses to be at risk of not graduating. In April 2013, regional sessions were held to present school boards with the provincial perspective on identifying students as potentially at risk.

The Ministry indicated that identifying students or student groups at risk of not graduating on the basis of student ethnicity, language and socio-economic status raises issues of privacy, fairness and sensitivity. Taking these considerations into account, the Ministry completed in the summer of 2012 a detailed analysis of options and recommendations for reporting on the achievement of self-identified Aboriginal students. The Ministry is also working with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to improve the educational outcomes of children and youth in the care of, or receiving services from, Children's Aid Societies. This includes promoting the development of protocols between the education and child welfare sectors and identifying opportunities for better linkages and programs to benefit these students.

In spring 2013, the Ministry prepared materials on standardized criteria for analyzing and reporting on data on student sub-populations. The Ministry stated that it is analyzing options for producing student success indicators for sub-populations, such as students attending schools with particular socio-economic attributes. In addition, the Ministry intends to use student success indicator data to prepare reports at the provincial, board and school levels that group students by gender, special education status and English language learner performance.

In fall 2012, the Ministry approved a proposed list of new student mobility codes that are intended to improve the quality of the data collected from school boards when a student transfers or leaves

school. The new codes should assist the Ministry in better understanding the destinations of students who leave Ontario schools. Throughout the winter of 2012/13, the Ministry met with representatives from school boards to communicate the proposed changes in student mobility codes and receive feedback. The Ministry plans to begin using the new mobility codes for the 2013/14 school year.

The Ministry's new re-engagement initiative—Next Steps—builds on the success of a 2010 initiative to re-engage students who were close to graduating by integrating information gathered from a variety of sources. The initiative focuses on how to encourage students with significant credit accumulation to successfully return to school and what preventive measures would decrease the probability of such students disengaging in the first place.

STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGY INITIATIVES

Recommendation 3

To ensure that student success initiatives increase the number of students who obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma and are adequately prepared for college, university, apprenticeship, or the workforce, the Ministry of Education and the province's school boards should:

- *assess the re-engagement initiative to determine if the benefits that boards had noted justify the cost of maintaining the program in future years;*
- *disseminate best practices or guidance for helping students achieve their community service hours before graduation;*
- *better link work placements in cooperative education with course expectations to ensure that the placements complement the in-class experience as required; and*
- *assess the Credit Recovery program to determine whether students are achieving the required course expectations, and consider more detailed guidelines to ensure consistent program delivery across the province.*

Status

The Ministry continues to assess the re-engagement initiative by comparing school board data submitted through the *Taking Stock* report and found that in the 2011/12 school year more than 16,000 students (10,000 students in 2010/11) were contacted to return to school and more than 8,000 students (5,000 students in 2010/11) were re-engaged through this initiative. Although funding for the re-engagement initiative was expected to wind down, the Ministry informed us that, given the encouraging results to date, funding will again be provided to school boards in the 2013/14 school year to contact students who are near to graduation but have left the system and then mentor and monitor their transition back to the school system. The Ministry also noted that it was planning to make a concerted effort to re-engage all self-identified Aboriginal students who have left the system or are at risk of not graduating because they have not accumulated sufficient credits.

All Ontario secondary students must complete 40 hours of community involvement as a graduation requirement. In the summer of 2012, the Ministry requested assistance from members of the Ontario School Counsellors' Association (OSCA) in collecting best practices for helping students achieve their community involvement hours. In fall 2012, the Ministry participated in working groups with several organizations (Volunteer Canada, Change the World/MCI, the Ontario Volunteer Centre Network, Charity Republic, OSCA, Free the Children) interested in helping students find volunteer opportunities and promoting the spirit of volunteerism within the schools. At the time of our follow-up, three separate organizations were developing systems designed to enable students to track their volunteer hours online, provide an approval process for charities to acknowledge student participation, and enable school administrators to monitor student volunteer hours. These systems were expected to be piloted in the 2013/14 school year. In May 2013, the Ministry conducted regional training sessions with one guidance counselor from each secondary

school to provide information on these systems and share promising practices for supporting students in acquiring the 40 hours of community involvement required to graduate.

The co-operative education program allows students to earn secondary school credits while completing a work placement in the community. In spring 2012, ministry staff engaged the Ontario Cooperative Education Association executive and other regional co-operative education associations in discussions on practices related to personalized placement learning plans and improving linkages between students' co-operative education experience and in-class credits. In the summer of 2012 the Ministry contracted four school board co-operative education co-ordinators to document best practices. In the spring of 2013 the Ministry released a new resource for co-operative education teachers and school and board administrators highlighting best practices, including matching placements to curriculum expectations.

To help ensure consistency throughout the province in the Credit Recovery program, which gives students who have failed a course another chance to demonstrate understanding of specific topics rather than retaking the entire course, the Ministry has drafted a proposal to review the program for the 2012/13 and 2013/14 school years.

STUDENT SUCCESS FUNDING

Recommendation 4

To ensure that Student Success Strategy funding is spent efficiently to address the specific needs of students at risk of not graduating, the Ministry of Education and the province's school boards should:

- *adopt funding methods that target more money for schools and boards where students at risk most need the assistance and work with the boards and schools to better estimate student participation in application-based programs;*
- *improve existing processes to monitor board expenditures and ensure that overfunding is properly accounted for;*

- *allocate demographic funding based on the most recent data available; and*
- *assess the cost and benefits of ministry delivery of the Dual Credit program.*

Status

To help target funds to those students most in need of assistance, the Ministry modified its funding approach in some programs and sought models that show positive outcomes for vulnerable groups of students that could be adopted across the province. For example:

- The Ministry informed us that to address the needs of additional low-performing schools, it expanded the School Support Initiative (SSI) from three boards (27 schools) in the 2008/09 school year to 26 boards (116 schools) in 2012/13. As well, it determined that 55 of the participating schools demonstrated increased achievement in 2011/12 such that they no longer receive SSI funds. The Ministry also informed us that, for the 2013/14 school year, the program would provide additional funding to current SSI-eligible boards to better target the gaps in student learning and achievement for specific identified sub-populations such as self-identified Aboriginal students. The model is to be reviewed and may be further revised pending an assessment of the 2012/13 funding model.
- In June 2012, the Ministry contacted all boards to find additional participants for the second year of a pilot to explore effective practices to assist students in the Supervised Alternative Learning program. This program attempts to re-engage students 14 to 17 years old who are not attending school. For 2012/13 this pilot program was expanded from five to 10 boards to continue the focus on developing strategies and templates for tracking Supervised Alternative Learning students' achievements in non-credit learning activities.
- In January 2013, the Ministry invited all school boards to submit applications for funding

to run pilot programs focused on innovative delivery models to improve educational outcomes for secondary school students in the care of, or receiving services from, Children's Aid Societies. The Ministry noted that the educational outcomes of children and youth in care are significantly lower than those of the general population, and that it is committed to providing targeted, personalized support to meet the learning needs of these students. Funding has been allocated for the boards that will be selected to run pilot programs in the 2013/14 school year.

- Now that sufficient self-identified Aboriginal student data is available, student success activities are being enhanced in boards and schools where there are larger numbers or proportions of self-identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

The Ministry has been looking at historical trends in the number of students enrolled in the two major application-based programs: Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) and Dual Credit. The Ministry reduced funding to these programs after identifying that the projected numbers of students exceeded the actual number participating in previous years. Some programs with consistently low enrolment in comparison to the overall school population are to be reviewed for the 2013/14 school year. The Ministry also indicated that adjustments to funding for school boards and colleges for the SHSM and Dual Credit programs will continue to be based on student participation data.

The Ministry informed us that it revised expenditure reporting templates, which are now monitored more frequently to ensure that school boards are spending funding according to the stated contract deliverables and in a timely manner. For example, in the 2012/13 school year, ongoing visits were conducted to monitor board practices and to

support the implementation of the School Support Initiative. In addition, to help ensure funding is spent appropriately, education officers reviewed and analyzed the 2011/12 board expenditure reports with respect to the specific student success strategies being implemented. In December 2013, the Ministry plans to conduct a similar review of the 2012/13 expenditures. The Ministry also stated that unspent funding in Dual Credit programs was being reallocated to other programs and the Council of Ontario Directors of Education returned \$6.3 million of unspent funds to the Ministry of Finance in the fall of 2012.

Using the most recent census data available to calculate demographic funding resulted in significant redistributive impacts on school boards. To limit the impact on individual school boards, the Ministry is phasing in the funding reallocations over four years. During the phase-in period some boards will see their funding decrease and other boards will see progressive funding increases. The redistribution of demographic funding will be completed in the 2014/15 fiscal year.

In June 2012, the Ministry engaged a consultant to conduct a review and assessment of the management of the Dual Credit program and to provide options and recommendations for its future management. The focus was on analyzing the costs and benefits of transferring the delivery of the program from the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) to the Ministry. The consultant provided a number of program recommendations and management options, outlining the implications of each. The Ministry selected the option to strengthen and improve the current delivery process but transfer some of CODE's responsibilities to the Ministry. The Ministry noted that several of the report's recommendations relating to CODE's responsibilities have been put into practice and used to develop a 2013 action plan for the program.