

Essay

## ***Supporting Strategies for English as an Additional Language (EAL) in PreK-12 Education***

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Saskatchewan has experienced unprecedented growth in the past six years. The growth can be attributed to key factors such as the economy, interprovincial migration, and a government immigration strategy that enables skilled workers to come to Saskatchewan to live, work and raise their families. Between 2008 and 2013, the province's population increased by 100,000 and this increase has had an impact on Saskatchewan classrooms. School divisions have reported significant increases in enrolment, classroom diversity and the number of students who speak other languages and require support for English as an Additional Language (EAL).

### **Background**

In 2008, provincial demographics revealed a long-term pattern of decreased population growth and a steady decline in school enrolments:

“The total student population has been declining. Enrolments have continued to decline over the past five years, with decreases largest at the elementary and middle levels. In 2007-08, there were 10,098 fewer Grade 1-9 students than in 2003-04, and completion of high school by the children of the baby-boom generation accounts for most of the 1,555 student decrease at the secondary level. Enrolments have declined in every grade level over the past five years ...” [Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report, 2008](#), p.94

In the years prior to 2008, small pockets of international students and refugees were located in urban high schools in Saskatoon, Regina and Moose Jaw. However, the numbers comprised less than 1% of the total student population. English language support for this target audience was considered a local need, and for this reason the ministry recommended the preparation of locally-developed courses in English as a Second Language (or “ESL”, a term used previously in the Ministry of Education).

Between 2008 and 2012, the number of PreK-12 students in the province requiring support for EAL grew dramatically following the introduction of the [Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program \(SINP\)](#). Data available from [Citizenship and Immigration Canada](#) indicate that 39,477 new residents settled in Saskatchewan during this time period, with the majority arriving as economic immigrants through the SINP. Statistical Reports from the [Ministry of the Economy](#) further indicate that most skilled workers (to a maximum of 4000<sup>1</sup> annually) who move to Saskatchewan have families consisting of a spouse and at least one child. Therefore, based on maximum annual arrivals, at least 12,000 new residents have made Saskatchewan their home through the SINP, with one-third of the total being children and youth between 0-19 years of age.

### **Describing the Target Audience**

The Ministry of Education describes learners of EAL as speakers of other languages who are adding English to their language repertoire in order to access the English language curriculum and achieve grade level outcomes. Students may be newcomers to Canada (e.g., immigrants, refugees, fee-paying international students), or they may be Canadian-born students living in homes where languages other than English are used (e.g., Hutterite students, First Nations and Metis students). The common element in identifying learners of EAL is their need to add English to a first or home language(s) in order to be successful with school curricula. All students attending school in Saskatchewan are required to attain high school credits in English Language Arts in order to graduate. As such, non-English speaking students enrolled in Francophone schools and French Immersion programs will require EAL support in order to meet English Language Arts credit requirements for graduation.

### **Ministry Strategies to Support EAL Needs**

In order to complete grade level outcomes and to graduate, EAL learners need to catch up to their English-speaking peers very quickly. Canadian researchers Jim Cummins (1999-2003) and Elizabeth Coelho (2007) have indicated that it may take five to seven years for learners of EAL to reach levels of proficiency that allow them to access the curriculum in a manner similar to their English-speaking peers. For this to occur, learners of EAL need to move beyond conversational language toward academic language and this transition requires strategic, targeted support over time. Academic language, or the *language of schooling*, refers to vocabulary used

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<sup>1</sup> The federal cap for annual arrivals to the province through the SINP was increased from 4,000 to 4,450 in 2013.

in academic texts for subject specific topics. Academic vocabulary is not the same as vocabulary used in daily routines or social interactions between friends.

Research findings indicate that given sufficient time and appropriate levels of support, EAL learners do catch up with their peers and perform very well academically. However, if support is pulled away too quickly, effects can be detrimental to student comprehension of text-dense material in the middle and upper grades. The findings of Hetty Roessingh and Susan Elgie (2009) illustrate that comprehension difficulty among EAL learners in high school can be traced back to insufficient support for vocabulary building in the elementary grades.

In Saskatchewan schools, the philosophy of inclusive education promotes the integration of all learners into classrooms together with their grade level peers. This philosophy also applies to learners of EAL. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a way to put the *Student First*<sup>2</sup> by differentiating instruction and accommodating individual needs so that students can achieve curricular outcomes. This means planning for instruction and assessment using strategies that are most effective with learners of EAL. Strategies may include small-group instruction, direct instruction, tutorials, sheltered instruction, use of dual language resources and access to EAL courses for high school learners.

After thoughtful consideration of current research findings and an examination of EAL practices from other jurisdictions, the ministry embarked on several strategies to build a network of support to meet EAL needs in Saskatchewan schools. The support network required strategic planning, additional funding, and collaboration between the ministry and school divisions. Beginning in 2010, a ministry initiative with ten school divisions led to the development of a locally-developed EAL course for beginning language learners in high school. During course development, ministry personnel took time to explore big picture EAL questions with the school divisions: What constituted language progress? How could a baseline be established across the province? What language skills did newcomers have? Did school divisions have similar or differing interpretations of progress? At what level did English language learners no longer require EAL support? Following dialogue and debate, some common responses emerged and directions began to take shape.

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<sup>2</sup> Student First in the Ministry of Education involves individualizing and personalizing experiences and supports for each student by name, by strength and by need.

School divisions requested ministry support with professional learning opportunities to build greater capacity among classroom teachers who were working with EAL learners. During the 2011-12 school year, the ministry provided several webinars, a series of Middle Years EAL Modules and presentations at provincial conferences. By the end of the year, a contact network of EAL specialists, co-ordinators and consultants from all parts of the province was established. Cohort sub-groups emerged among urban school divisions, smaller rural divisions, and those in the northern and southern parts of the province. The sub-groups discussed classroom EAL issues, as well as broader topics that included the role of Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS), support for refugee learners and communication strategies with newcomer families.

In the same year, the ministry put forward a plan to introduce a common scale for identifying English language proficiency levels. Many school divisions had developed their own approaches for assessing, monitoring and recording the progress of EAL learners. However, there were inconsistencies across school divisions in defining baseline language skills and assessing English language progress. There were also variations in registration and placement, and the use of standardized assessment tools. This high degree of incongruence compromised the ministry's ability to collect reliable provincial data about EAL learners and to provide appropriate levels of support. Therefore, a consistent approach to defining language abilities and monitoring progress was required by the ministry in order to gather accurate EAL data and to make evidence-based decisions for equitable and effective supports to all school divisions.

In the spring of 2012, the ministry introduced the [Common Framework of Reference \(CFR\)](#), a provincial language reference scale for charting language proficiency. Based on the [Common European Framework of Reference \(CEFR\)](#) developed in previous years by the Council of Europe (2001), the CFR presented a reputable, reliable and objective scale for monitoring progress, facilitating self-assessment and recognizing formal and informal language learning experiences. In 2010, the [Council of Ministers of Education in Canada \(CMEC\)](#) recommended use of this scale as a reference tool for languages in Canada.

Following several implementation workshops on use of the CFR, school divisions began to develop consistent, objective processes for identifying, monitoring and assessing English language progress. Use of the CFR scale on a provincial level facilitated the implementation of a new data-gathering system for EAL in the ministry's Student Data System (SDS). In its inaugural year, data gathered through the SDS in 2012 revealed that approximately 10,000

students in Grades 1-12 were receiving EAL support, and that at least 25% of these learners were new arrivals to Canada in the previous year. The intention is that comparative data gathered annually through the SDS will allow school divisions to monitor language progress of EAL learners and to determine where additional, targeted supports might be required. Analysis of comparative data will also enable the ministry to provide equitable levels of funding and other types of support to school divisions based on enrolment levels and language growth patterns of EAL learners.

The provincial SDS does not include EAL data for learners in Prekindergarten and Kindergarten who may be speakers of other languages. In 2012, the ministry began implementing the [Early Years Evaluation](#), or EYE, as an assessment tool for charting the initial readiness skills and ongoing progress of children between 4 and 5 years of age in Saskatchewan. A 2012 ministry project with five school divisions resulted in the development of an EAL Initial Assessment Toolkit to assist all school divisions in gathering information about language and readiness skills of newcomer learners upon arrival. The toolkit, which was targeted at learners in Grades 1-12, was embraced by smaller school divisions that lacked the EAL capacity to develop their own registration processes and initial and ongoing assessments procedures. The toolkit sparked thoughtful dialogue about the use of large-scale standardized assessments with EAL learners. School divisions took time to reflect on their current practices and make decisions on whether to strengthen or alter these practices, aided by ministry funding available for EAL assessment projects.

The EAL needs of school divisions were recognized for the first time in the Supports for Learning component of the ministry's 2012-13 [Pre-K-12 Funding Distribution Model](#) . In addition, a separate block of funding was made available to school divisions in 2012-13 and again in 2013-14 specifically targeted at initial assessment of newcomers and ongoing assessment of all EAL learners. The ministry recognized that the unpredictable nature of immigration and the variations in time of arrival, age, literacy level and prior circumstances of newcomer learners required additional levels of support. The availability of assessment funding enabled school divisions to conduct on-site assessment of newcomers upon arrival, followed by team planning and decision-making to determine appropriate levels of classroom support for each EAL learner.

In recent years, emphasis has been placed on the significant role of first languages in maintaining and extending the literacy of EAL learners and their families. First languages are an integral part of the learner's identity, culture and connections with family, friends and community. Languages are supported through ministry funding to heritage language schools, ministry-approved high school credit courses in various languages, and the availability of [multilingual resources](#) in the Saskatchewan Public Library System. The research findings of Espinosa (2013) and others indicate that instruction in English and a child's home language, particularly in the preschool and elementary years, promotes success with academic outcomes and English proficiency. The research illustrates the advantages of continued support for the first languages of Saskatchewan residents, in addition to support for English as an Additional Language in school.

Appropriate levels of English proficiency are necessary to achieve curricular outcomes, to gain high school credits, and to pursue academic goals, skills training or career goals. In a sense, English proficiency becomes the gatekeeper to graduation in Saskatchewan. The Ministry of Education will continue to work with school divisions to identify language needs and to develop supporting strategies for EAL. Decisions on future initiatives will be informed by research, current data, provincial perspectives, and interprovincial dialogues.

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