



How Not to Invest in Data Management Systems

By Adam Eberle

The right administrative software can drive efficiency across the district.

Here's a story about what happens when a school district buys the wrong data management system. And here's how the right administrative software solution can give your district's story a happier ending.

Two of the most common district investments in data management involve the student information system (SIS) and the educational resource planning (ERP) system. When those systems work well, their technology drives valuable administrative efficiency throughout a district. They offer effective ways to gather and share data, which can lead to better planning while revealing pathways to student achievement, teacher development, community involvement, and much more.

Despite the promise of data-oriented solutions, though, problematic aspects of mismatches between school districts and data management programs can show up in investments related to SIS and ERP programs. Not all tracking and planning systems are equal, for example. And not all education leaders understand how to make the best use of data management funding when it comes to their district's actual needs.

For example, does your ERP system account for changes in state law? Does your SIS protect student privacy? Do your programs offer transparency and accountability?

Proceed with Caution

Districts throughout the country have stories to share about systems gone wrong when it comes to their investment in SIS and ERP, including programs or systems that simply don't work as advertised.

One such tale is told by a superintendent new to his midsize school district. He inherited the SIS contract his district leaders had

invested in and, he says, it came complete with a cascading series of glitches.

"I quickly came to the determination that this system was just not functioning," he says. "Information was disappearing from one day to the next. No basic functions were being done, such as printing report cards or calculating grade point averages. User complaints were constant. Looking ahead to when graduation would be pending, we had a very serious scenario with concern from top to bottom."

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At the superintendent's recommendation, the district subsequently put its SIS needs out to bid and signed with a replacement system in the summer of his first year. The difference, he says, "was night and day." Instead of lines of students waiting for course schedules, the new SIS functioned so efficiently that wait times disappeared.

Data from three separate systems were converted into one overall program without a single error. Users worked with the new system during an evaluation period, and all personnel were trained and ready within a month. Most important, the new SIS offered enough flexibility for the district to customize data gathering and reporting.

Know Thy District

"The whole community knew the SIS had to be replaced," the superintendent recalls. "Teachers, parents, principals, everyone. It didn't take much to convince them. And we had a committee tasked with really analyzing our needs. So we had the buy-in that was needed."

Buy-in is the result of ensuring that all stakeholders are on the same page when it comes to district funding of data management programs. Accurate information, though, precedes buy-in. That is one of the lessons experts say should be learned from the disastrous consequences of the Los Angeles Unified School District's investing in a hardware-and-software package that failed—spectacularly—to yield the promised results.

The importance of addressing the varied and unique priorities of a district when it comes to investing in data management is profound and will weigh on almost every aspect of implementation.

A May 2016 *Wired* article included an on-point observation from Michael B. Horn, author of *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools*: “Districts are starting with the technology

and not asking themselves: ‘What problem are we trying to solve, and what’s the instructional model we need to solve it?’ and then finding technology in service of that. . . . Where I’ve seen these programs work is when the school starts off with its vision, and only once they’ve sketched out what the solution should look like do they go out to the hardware and software communities to mix and match to meet those needs.”

Improve Buying Strategies

Even after developing goals and strategies for a district, though, some observers say that data management is still a “buyer beware” market.

Harold Levy, whose experience includes serving as chancellor of New York City public schools and as vice president of Kaplan, says defining goals is only one aspect

of successful data management investment.

“What’s left out of the puzzle, however, is how to make local education agencies smarter, faster and more analytic,” he writes in EdSurge. “It’s good to identify systemic weakness but the core issue is how to get our [nation’s] 14,000 local school boards to become better shoppers.”

A good measure of a return on investment, then, starts with understanding that data management is more than simply investing in a series of software programs—the consideration of how SIS or an ERP system will become a school success tool or partnership is important to grasp.

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