



SYSTEMS INTEGRATION:

Making it Work for Your District



By Melissa Mace



Data systems have grown in the past few years that traditionally help a school district automate repetitive functions such as checking books out of the school library, taking attendance, or creating student login names and home directories.



Moving data from application to application can be a problem if you have not implemented a seamless solution for the transfer. The challenge for districts is to find a way to collect the data in a consistent manner and passing it between different applications. In the scramble to move from paper, the data can end up being spread among multiple software applications, spreadsheets and databases. This makes the collection and passing of data time-consuming.

Data systems have grown in the past few years that traditionally help a school district automate repetitive functions such as checking books out of the school library, taking attendance, or creating student login names and home directories. An important part of K-12 education is the ability to collect and analyze data from a variety of resources in the district. This information is essential to determining adequate yearly progress as well as having a means to deliver and communicate results to parents, students and the community.

As an example, I will use Grant Joint Union High School District (GJUHD). Located in McClellan, CA, GJUHD houses 13,500 students and 1,500 employees. It decided to implement the Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) standard

as the solution for systems integration. The district's database manager, Marty Schloegel, and fellow employees were introduced to the SIF standard through vendors such as Computer Power Solutions or CPSI, allowing data transfers of information to and from a single point of entry. They decided on a SIF-standards-based ETL (Extraction, Transformation and Load) tool which is used for data automation and moving appropriate data from one application or a group of applications to other applications or a central repository. The ideal solution in any district is to deliver data in real-time, not just a one time collection of static data that is useless the next day.

For those of you not familiar with the SIF standard, let me explain what it is. The Schools Interoperability Framework is a standard developed for K-12 education that provides a standardized means of interoperability between applications. (For more information, visit www.sifinfo.org). The U.S. Department of Education's National Technology Plan recognizes and recommends this as the standard for data interchange. (See www.nationaleledtechplan.org).

An increasing number of school districts have included the SIF standard as

a part of their technology plans. The standard relies on an architecture that is flexible, scalable, reliable, secure, and affordable.

GJUHSD, prior to the implementation of the SIF automation, was manually entering and transferring data between applications. Schloegel says, "Data was entered manually by individuals responsible for the information of students and employees through a terminal application or client piece. As a new employee (teacher) is hired, an entry is made through a terminal session with the County Office of Education. This is a menu-driven system. The data was input directly to an image database accessible only though reports generated by choosing from a static menu list."

He continues: "I became interested in SIF when it was introduced to us through a vendor of a transportation application. We felt with the need for becoming data driven being critically important for the future of education, having a framework for databases was the natural course. To be able to easily integrate database repositories of different applications was something that needed to be done as human resources in a school district are abundant."

Since the implementation, GJUHSD plans on using SIF for their assessment software package that is integrated with their Student Information System (SIS). Currently, all updates and logins for the assessment software are handled automatically. All student information required for those assessments are input by the teachers by using the SIS. They are able to import results of their state tests which are immediately uploaded to the assessment software.

"This allows for immediate and up-to-date reports on where our students are in terms of their education, individual school standings and where the district stands in regard to other districts, the state and nationally," says Schloegel.

GJUHD now has availability for student's information that would otherwise not be available. The district's 800 teachers enter information that is then assessed by the software. They wouldn't have been able to have access to this information simply because they did not have enough non-teacher employees to re-input data into another application or they would have the teachers enter the data twice.

Now, of course, there are always bumps in the road to simplification. Expect challenges with any new technology implementation. That's why it is important to choose the right vendor when upgrading your systems. You may want to ask around and get recommendations. As each

district has unique needs, vendors should always work to fit districts' specific needs and should be willing to work out the problems.

Imagine all of your district's systems working together, data flowing back and forth seamlessly and effortlessly. Imagine all of your systems being integrated, working together. To some this may sound like a far fetched dream, but this can be in reach. Just think if you were to implement tools or a standard that would allow your

data to be transferred effortlessly by you or your staff. What would you do with your extra time? Golf, surfing, cocoa and graham cracker break? Oh, the possibilities... ■

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