

# Evaluating a New Technology System's Impact on the Bottom Line

**M**onitoring special education, instructional programs, assessment programs, and individualized education plans (IEPs) has always been a challenge. Now, it is even more important because of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, No Child Left Behind, and the tremendous accountability we have for special-education students.

Charles County Public Schools, located in La Plata, Maryland, about 25 miles south of Washington, D.C., is recognized nationally as a leader in education technology use. We were the nation's first Cisco Breakaway Schools district and recently connected all our schools with a single converged network in which data, voice, and video run over the same infrastructure.

Our special-education management program, however, was problematic, with a homegrown software program and piles of paperwork still being completed by hand. It

was not uncommon for our teachers and staff to walk into meetings with IEP folders that were more than 12 inches thick. The size of the folders alone was indicative of the time and management issues we faced in monitoring each child's program and progress.

Like many districts across the country, the administrative and staff costs for such an outdated and inefficient system were high, and they would only get worse. As our student population increased and issues surrounding compliance with state and federal laws grew more complex, it became increasingly difficult to manage our program without a technology system that specifically addressed the needs of managing special populations.

When we launched a search for a new special-education management system, we carefully considered how this new technology would affect the bottom line—both at the time of the purchase and afterward. What would be the total cost of ownership? How could we ensure that there would



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be no hidden costs after the contract was awarded? Would we see a return on our investment?

Taking this “business” approach to the search for and evaluation of a new technology system was time-consuming and intensive. However, we believe that the time and energy we invested up front will not only save us time and money in the long run but will eliminate many headaches as well.

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### Evaluation Process

From the outset, it is critical to build a search team with representatives from every department in the district that will be involved in the purchase and implementation of the new system. Our team comprised staff from several departments, including special education, compliance, budget and finance, and technology, as well as principals, teachers, and district administrators. We knew that if we did not build systemwide ownership and support from the ground up at the beginning of the process, the new system simply would not work.

Once the team was in place, the real work began. We spent several months reviewing and analyzing our needs and brainstorming what we wanted to see in a new technology system. Among our requirements, we wanted a system that would allow us to

- manage and monitor all phases of the IEP process for a student, from referral to delivery of services, to ensure compliance with legal requirements;
- provide centralized access to information at both the school and district levels;
- calculate legally mandated time lines automatically;
- create electronic versions of district forms;
- verify compliance requirements as data are entered;
- collect and store data for state and federal reports;
- share student data with our student information and transportation systems;
- reduce redundant data entry and paperwork;
- promote consistent reporting across the district; and
- save time and energy that could be refocused on improving student learning.

We researched the systems that were available in the education market and issued a request for proposal, with detailed system specifications. After reviewing proposals from several vendors, we invited five to come in to meet with us and demonstrate their products.

To prepare for the vendor presentations, we developed guidelines to ensure that each vendor and product were evaluated according to the same criteria. However, we also

allowed ourselves the flexibility to ask questions during each presentation.

### Total Cost of Ownership

As we reviewed the systems, total cost of ownership (TCO) was a key consideration. Although assessing TCO has long been a standard practice in the business world, it is now gaining momentum in education as well.

With each system, we analyzed both the direct and indirect costs in key areas, such as hardware, software, technical support, and staff development. We did not need to consider costs for building retrofits, as our entire district had recently been retrofitted with the new converged network.

Although assessing TCO clearly created more work for us during the evaluation process, the information we gathered has proved to be valuable. Because we learned up front how much it would actually cost to purchase and implement the new system, we have had absolutely no surprises or hidden costs to date.

### Return on Investment

Another key consideration was return on investment. From the outset, we viewed our purchase of a new technology system not as an expense, but as an investment that would pay for itself in several ways. We thought that a technology-based system for special-education management could help us affect the bottom line positively by reducing paperwork, increasing productivity, increasing revenue reimbursement, and providing more data for informed decision making.

Following are a few examples of how the new system will provide a financial return to the district through savings and increased funding.

### Reduced Paperwork Burden

Our administrators, teachers, and staff spend a significant amount of time on paperwork and administrative duties related to special-education management. As accountability demands increase and our student population grows, the paperwork burden also grows. As such, teachers have less and less time to spend with children, and additional staff needs to be hired to maintain compliance.

By eliminating redundant data entry and paperwork, however, we can reduce the amount of time teachers spend on paperwork and increase the amount of time they spend in the classroom working with children. That, in turn, will create a more positive impact on student achievement.

In addition to saving time, we can decrease expenses related to paper processing. By using electronic forms rather than paper forms, we can reduce printing costs and the storage of paper files. Further, by ensuring that forms are filled out correctly and compliantly through automated

systems, we can ensure compliance with legal requirements and avoid state and federal liabilities.

### Increased Revenue Reimbursement

We believe that with our paper-based processes and previous software system, we were missing services that could have been reimbursed, simply because we could not track and access student data easily. By using technology to track all eligible students in the district automatically, however, we can ensure an accurate child count, appropriate placement, and full funding. Further, with current and complete documentation, we anticipate that we will be able to track services that may have previously gone unreported and, as a result, increase Medicaid reimbursement.

### Informed Decision Making

With our previous software, we put forth considerable effort entering data into the system, but it did not return the data we needed to make informed decisions or analyze program effectiveness. With a current technology system, however, we can create a consistent framework for accurate staff and resources planning and can more efficiently monitor students receiving services to reduce service discrepancies and unnecessary costs.

### Making a Decision

The entire evaluation process was very educational. Not only did it give us the opportunity to thoroughly review

what was available for special-education management, it made us even more knowledgeable about what we wanted and what we felt would be the best system for our district.

In addition to TCO and return on investment, other factors played a role in our decision. For example, it was important to us that the company we selected had a his-

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tory of proven successes in other school districts and that the company's personnel had experience and expertise in special education, in addition to technology.

By the end of the process, the district found what it had been looking for and selected 4GL School Solutions, Inc., and the Web-based ENCORE! suite of special-education management solutions. Through the use of technology, this system will give us the opportunity to save time, to ensure that our reporting is comprehensive and accurate, and to use these data to drive our instructional program.

### Lessons Learned

Although the process of finding a new system for special-education management was long and arduous, it was well worth the effort. Charles County Public Schools has 2,500 students in its special-education program. Whenever we encountered a challenge and people would say there were five reasons why this or that wouldn't work, I retorted that there were 2,500 reasons why it *had* to work. And it has.

Because we got all our stakeholders on board in advance and communicated with everyone throughout the process, we have created a lot of excitement about all the things the new system is going to do for us and for our students.

It is important to note that training will be a significant part of our implementation plan and is absolutely critical to the success of the new system. Our philosophy is this: We don't ask anyone to do anything they haven't been trained to do. That is true with *every* program we run. In addition to giving people the skills they need to use the program effectively, training builds ownership and confidence, which are essential for long-term success. Our people are motivated to begin using the system because they know that things will soon get dramatically better in our special-education program.

In education, technology is important but people make the difference. Watching the positive reaction to this endeavor is very exciting. It is a big victory for us and we earned it. ■

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