Iowa Department of Education

LEGISLATIVE REPORT FOR HF 468

A STUDY REGARDING THE STUDENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS CURRENTLY IN USE IN THE STATE

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State of Iowa
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Grimes State Office Building
Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0146

Background

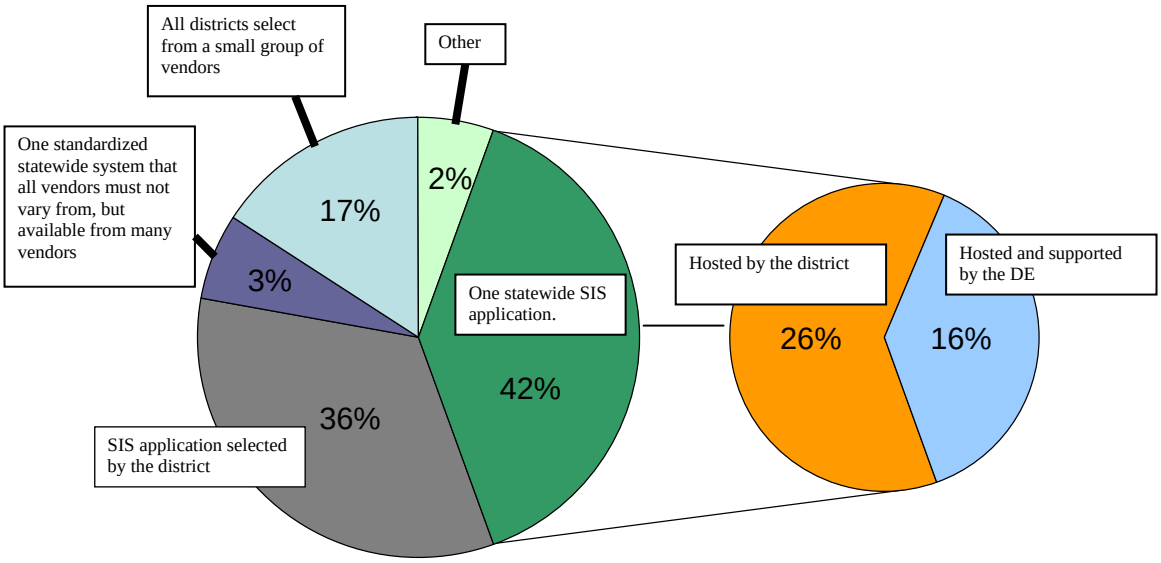
House File 468 directed the Department of Education (DE) to make recommendations concerning student information systems (SIS) used at the local K-12 district level.

> *…The study shall take under consideration a recommendation on limits on the numbers of software systems approved to connect to project easier. The study shall focus on systems that will improve efficiency, accuracy, and security of, and access to, the data by various users...*

The study is organized around addressing five research questions distilled from the legislation. The intent of the legislation, and DE's intent, is to consider all educational data infrastructure in a comprehensive, integrated manner; hence, the multiple questions. To address these questions, the independent researchers conducted both quantitative and qualitative research. During the fall of 2007, an online survey in which 471 individuals representing 283 local districts responded, six focus groups with 79 participants from local districts, one conference phone call with area education agency (AEA) staff that help support SIS, and telephone interviews with the vendors operating in Iowa were conducted. These data are the foundation upon which the analyses provided to the DE and contained within this report are based. This information was provided to help inform the decision-making process at the DE in regard to HF 468.

The opinions of the field on whether to limit the number of software vendors are split. A plurality, 42 percent of those who responded to the online survey, wants one system in one configuration or another. A sizable block, 36 percent, wants to keep their current district systems. And the remainder, 22 percent, want something in the middle with a few vendors either having one or many systems. While the results of the online survey in the study cannot be generalized to the entire SIS stakeholder community because it was not a probabilistic sample, the DE does know a sizable segment of stakeholders would prefer something different: fewer or even one system.

Student Information System Study Results
Majority Support Single Statewide Student Information System



These systems are costly for local districts to maintain. The report cites the average maintenance costs for the systems of respondents were nearly $14,000 per district per year and they required slightly more than two full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) to maintain. While the systems are necessary for districts to upload Project EASIER data, the SIS are also information systems the districts need and use for their own reporting, tracking, and evaluation needs within the district.

The current arrangement is costly for DE, too. Currently, the Planning, Research, Development, and Evaluation Bureau (PRDE) must support the transfer of data from 15 different student information system vendors to the state for Project EASIER uploads. Granted, there have been acquisitions in the market which will more than likely reduce the number from 15 down to nine vendors, but PRDE has to support those nine unique systems with their nine unique idiosyncrasies. This requires employees to specialize: with that many different systems, dedication of employees to each system is required.

Department Recommendation

The Department of Education recommends a request for proposal (RFP) process that would lead to a limited number of SIS in Iowa. Having only a few systems recognizes both the need for standardization for the sake of efficiency and accuracy and the needs of the districts to have options because of their unique circumstances. With this arrangement, districts could be required to have an automated capacity to share information using a standard format. A new SIS infrastructure would be phased in over five years. The rationale for the phase in being it gives districts time to adapt and a rough turnover rate from the survey was 20 percent: 21 percent of SIS study respondents were buying a new system in the next 12 months.

The following cost estimates were derived using three vendors currently operating in school districts. Exploration of SIS reveals that different size districts have different systems for reasons other than money. For instance, a small district may not have the personnel to utilize the more complicated reporting and analysis features of some SIS or the information technology staff and hardware to support them. In contrast, larger districts generally want the more extensive SIS to help them manage their complex, complicated operations. From exploration of the issue, it seems predominately that large schools use Infinite Campus and small schools use JMC. Medium size schools' vendors are much more diverse; however, the number of vendors serving these districts may be consolidated with the Pearson's purchases of other vendors in the market. To remain impartial and not have any appearance of endorsing a vendor, the DE has not named the three vendors used for estimation purposes.

For reference, the pricing SIS use is similar to a service contract instead of buying a software package which a district can store unlimited records within: a district does not buy a copy of the software per se, instead it pays annual fees based on its usage of the system and is responsible for all of its own hardware costs.

Small size district pricing reference for Vendor A:

- $3 license fee per student - to get a new student in their system.
- $5700 for a new server and an additional $1,500 for setup. Many small districts find they need a hardware upgrade to support system requirements and uploads to DE. For the purpose of the cost estimation, it's assumed 50 percent of the small districts will need an upgrade.
- Small districts are defined as those with as many as 599 students.
- Subtotal, including one-time annual fee and hardware estimate, for this group of 60,702 students and 160 districts: $758,106.

Medium size district pricing reference per student for Vendor B:

- $10 license fee - to get a new student in their system.
- $4.75 annual maintenance fee.
- Medium districts are defined as those with at least 600 students and no more than 2,499 students.
- Subtotal for this group of 193,556 students: $2,853,015.

Large size district pricing reference per student for Vendor C:

- $6 license fee – to get a new student in their system.
- $3 annual maintenance fee.
- $1 hosting fee – they must host some piece of the districts systems.
- Large districts are defined as those with 2,500 students or more.
- Subtotal for this group of 228,326 students: $2,283,260.

Current costs for licensing all students immediately into a new system - one year's fees and hardware for half of small districts - assuming every student must be relicensed, which may not be the case: approximately $6 million. If the legislature were to fund hardware upgrades ($5,700 per server with $1,500 setup) to half of the large and medium size districts to maintain equity, it would be approximately an additional $750,000.

As mentioned, DE does recommend the phase in be over a five-year period, so there would also need to be an allowance for inflation. After paying for the start-up costs of switching SIS, including the initial year's fees, districts would bear all costs. As would be expected, districts would remain responsible for their personnel costs.

Parex Consulting Group Study Results

Change is a process, not an event. We can't just will it to happen but need to provide leadership, coordination, and support that will ensure that local efforts can thrive and all educators can participate in the information revolution. The DE successfully accomplished the legislative directive under House File 468 that should produce further change in Iowa school districts. The study found that:

- There is uncertainty that a fewer number of SIS vendors would provide the school districts in Iowa with any greater "clout" when it comes to certification, training or technical support. Iowa may not have the critical mass to secure the attention needed from fewer or a single vendor.
- Only half the respondents indicated that their district had a written Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) policy and 95 percent said they "did not" or "did not know," if the district had a policy regarding minimum cell size when presenting aggregate data on their web page.
- Prior to any data being collected in the future by the DE, school districts must: first, have the module on their management system; second, have standardized definitions; and third, be populating the fields with the requested data.
- There can be as many as 12 steps to building a state-level management system (data warehouse) that will store data used by a department of education. These steps are critical for the success at both the DE and district levels.
- In all states, the foundation of the state-level data management system is a comprehensive policy with adequate funding that commits the organization to a strategic path that ends with the ability of a user to do extensive "data mining" that supports good educational policy.
- Conversely, state agencies do not usually have dedicated staff time, technical expertise, and/or the understanding of data management technologies for large-scale databases to build "in-house" systems without external consultation and contractors. Expenditures for state-level systems do vary based on the degree of customization, integration with local district SIS, sensitivity to implementation, complexity of the data sets being sought, as well as the ability to keep internal expertise to manage the system as it matures over time.
- These tools are used to make sense of the massive amount of data commonly found in a state-level data warehouse and have sophisticated tools for posting state reports on a web page, such as the Annual Progress Report, annual yearly progress or other state report cards.
- Out of the 20 states that Parex has consulted with, only two states had purchased a single SIS application for the entire state and only one state has built its own SIS application for all its districts.

These findings stress the importance of data management in Iowa. Data are a strategic asset for any agency, but their value becomes truly tangible when it is turned into viable information for everyone to use. A comprehensive data management system, with its decision-support tools, can create an opportunity to change the way the educational community in Iowa views student achievement, school improvement and program change.

While the results of this investigation may be useful to the DE regarding SIS applications, further study could be conducted in the areas of e-transcripts, collaboration with districts about data warehousing, and an improved meta data manual.

The long-term goal for the DE must be the timely presentation of educational data to policymakers. A statewide system can assist a policymaker in moving from guesswork to confidence in supporting a decision because of the high quality of data, the capability for rapid access, and the sophisticated data manipulation tools.

You may find a copy of the legislative report on HF 468 and the supporting materials from the study by going to www.iowa.gov/educate and clicking on "Issue Positions" under the Department of Education & State Board header. Then click on "Legislative Update." The Legislative Directed Studies are listed on this page.