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Top Four Trends in Student Information Systems

District leaders should consider today's trends in student information systems before going forward with upgrades or new purchases.

By Robert Weathers



From providing handheld mobile access to critical student and instructional data, the new student information systems (SIS) outshine older systems. Because the SIS is a must-have enterprise solution for most school districts today, administrators who are considering an upgrade need to be aware of emerging trends and the powerful functionality that provide far more than just the basics.

Modern third-generation student information systems are network- and web-based systems that take advantage of the telecommunications infrastructure investment that school

districts have put in place since the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Today's student information systems are longitudinal with databases that capture and maintain practically unlimited amounts of student data, spanning each student's full pre-K-12 experience in real time.

Modern systems update in real time, validate data one time at the source, and are highly transparent and easily accessible on a daily basis by students, teachers, parents, and authorized administrative staff within schools and district offices. The modern SIS is a powerful administrative tool with robust

functionality. As such, it is essential that school and district administrators consider these top trends in modern student information systems before going forward with system upgrades or new purchases:

1. Support for Classroom Instruction

With today's emphasis on differentiated instruction and data-based instructional decision making for each student, SIS vendors are adding functionality that supports teacher effectiveness and productivity. For example, in the past, students, parents, and teachers had to wait for weeks or months for the results of high-stakes assessments to see how students were performing. Today, teacher portals and grade books are supplemented with SIS functionality that allows parents and teachers to evaluate in real time how students are performing against Common Core, district, and state standards.

The modern SIS is a powerful administrative tool with robust functionality.

Teachers now have the opportunity to individualize instruction to meet the needs of every student based on how he or she

is progressing and logically to subdivide students into learning-appropriate groups. Parents can check grades and actually drill down into the individual learning concepts their children are struggling with, enabling them to identify other learning resources that may help concepts click.

Through this same portal, teachers can access curriculum content and learning materials and organize them for each group of students. Teachers can transmit assignments, grades, and progress reports to students electronically or manually as often as they believe is appropriate. They can post assignments and progress reports in the grade book, which automatically updates the student database and allows the information to be viewed in real time through parent and student portals.

Vendors are adding functionality to these portals that allow students to continue the learning process after leaving school each day. Such functionality enables students to access assignments through home computers and to submit their completed work to their teacher through an electronic drop box.

Student and parent portals are emerging as a way to access student data, but also as transaction-processing tools that enable online registration, demographic data maintenance, online course scheduling, and collaboration among stakeholders who have an interest in each student's success.

2. Third-Party Functionality

For the most part, the last generation of SIS typically does not exchange information with other applications, such as special-education and IEP (individualized education program) solutions, health systems, and grade books. If they do, they do not do it well. In addition, a periodic off-line extract, transform, and load process drives the exchange of information. Such exchanges are time-consuming, encompass a very limited exchange of data (frequently one-way only), and result in the two application databases being out of synch immediately after the exchange. The Schools Interoperability Framework attempted to solve this problem but has not enjoyed widespread adoption, primarily because it is an expensive and only partial solution.

Teachers can access the SIS and manage their classrooms and grade books from anywhere.

Having a SIS that provides the functionality that previously required a separate third-party application is important because it reduces the total cost of ownership for the wide array of application software licenses required to maintain and operate the entire organization. A comprehensive system is also more efficient and provides the capability to increase the availability of all student-related data. Accuracy is also improved because data are entered only once at the source, validated against centralized business rules, checked for consistency with other data, and monitored for compliance with state and federal program and reporting requirements, then updated in a single district-wide database in real time.

With these advanced capabilities, student-related data are consistent throughout all queries and reports generated by students, teachers, parents, or school or district office staff.

Today's modern SIS has already incorporated many critical applications, and leading SIS vendors continue to add more functionality each year. To maximize today's SIS investment, administrators should seek solutions that at the very least offer integrated special-education and IEP management, standards-based grade books, health, discipline, and parent and student portals.

3. Data-Driven Decision Making for Instructional Improvement

Today's public school stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, school and district administrators, colleges and universities, and state departments of education) are demanding much greater granularity, transparency, currency, and frequency of reporting. Increasingly, schools must be able to demonstrate in detail that assignments

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and learning materials are standards based, validated by research, and continuously monitored and modified based on frequent assessment of student progress. In addition, the grades given during each marking period should be objectively derived from student performance against these assignments and assessments.

Data-driven instructional decision making, which has long been touted as a desirable aspect of instructional improvement, is now being supported by information management tools that accurately summarize student performance using multiple measures. Making this information accessible to teachers has been the challenge in the past, but today's innovative SIS solutions incorporate technologies such as role-based "dashboard" views to distill complex information into easily understandable data.

4. Mobile Apps and Real-Time Information

Portable devices such as tablets and smartphones can extend significant aspects of SIS functionality to parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Parents can access near real-time information about assignments, test scores, and attendance in multiple languages on mobile devices, and students can stay on top of upcoming school events, classroom schedules and activities, assignments, tests, and their own academic performance.

Teachers can access the SIS and manage their classrooms and grade books from anywhere. Administrators

can access general student information, see grade books and class schedules, report disciplinary incidents, and record tardy students via bar codes. Some SIS vendors even offer familiar collaborative tools that encourage interaction among parents, students, and teachers.

The benefit of these mobile applications is far-reaching as teachers and administrators save significant time, and parents and students gain easy, familiar, and anytime access to engage in the educational process.

SIS and the Return on Investment

Effective data-driven instructional decision making in a transparent and collaborative environment depends on the accuracy and currency of data. Administrators who are considering upgrading their student information systems may be surprised at the functionality of modern systems and the level of investment that is required to implement a robust solution.

However, a full return on investment comes from the delivery of meaningful services that truly integrate technology into how teachers teach, how students learn, how school administrators and staff support classrooms, and how parents participate in the process.

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