A Transparency Checklist for K–12 Administrative Software

By Adam Eberle

School districts must report data while protecting sensitive information. Transparency is vital to doing both well.

Collecting, analyzing, and sharing data can strengthen student achievement, school district management, and community involvement in the local education process.

For example, distributing data-rich reports to stakeholders such as parents and taxpayers can help deepen overall community engagement. Internally, synthesizing data to evaluate trends can help refine strategic human resources planning for district employees.

In those aspects and all others, though, transparency is a key best practice of data management for K–12 districts. Clarity of purpose, accountability of action, and accuracy of results all matter when it comes to using administrative software systems to create an effective education system.

A transparency checklist can help set district policy and drive more robust collection and sharing of data.

A Word about Data Security

An important item on any transparency checklist should be the steps a district will take to maintain the privacy and security of personal information contained in the data collected. Transparency, as a best practice in this regard, must embrace policies that clearly convey to stakeholders not only the ways in which private information will be protected but also the reasons for and methods of collecting data and how stakeholder concerns will be addressed.

In addition, districts must comply with state and federal laws and regulations regarding data privacy. Those regulations change regularly, in part because of the increasing amount of data available to administrators. More recently, the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act provides greater flexibility for schools while demanding more detailed accountability to stakeholders and the public.

Finally, keeping data secure means ensuring that district data gathering is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act.

StriveTogether provides general guidance on protecting student privacy in its publication "Student Data Privacy Best Practices" (www.strivetogether.org/sites/default/files/StriveTogether_Student_Data_Privacy_Best_Practices.pdf). The guidance is based on the following overarching principles:

- Share responsibility
- Use data as a flashlight
- Use data for learning and continuous improvement
- Put student privacy at the forefront
- Share data only when necessary
- Be transparent about data use

Beyond regulatory compliance, a district's transparency needs can vary widely—and transparency, in theory and in practice, should respond to the unique needs of each district.

Building a Transparency Checklist

Here's a sampling of questions administrators should consider when developing their district's data transparency checklist.

- Are relevant stakeholders included in the development of transparency policies? Are they given enough information to make their participation meaningful?
- Are superintendents, chief information officers, and school board members on the same page? If not, can transparency measures help them get there?
- Can transparency of data collection and analysis facilitate needed benchmarking? Is transparency policy designed to be useful in benchmarking with comparable districts?
- Will the data management software system customize school success solutions? Can that capability be leveraged to further engage internal and external stakeholders?
- Is transparency promoted as a two-way street within the district? Are all stakeholders free to use transparent information to engage with one another and with district management?

Effective transparency policies can promote better human resources management, boost student achievement, and create greater community understanding and engagement.

Adam Eberle is chief commercial officer with SunGard K–12, based in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Email: adam.eberle@sungardps.com