INTRODUCTION:

**CAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS USE THEIR OWN DATA TO MANAGE EFFECTIVENESS?**

With the advent of the Obama Administration’s Race to the Top grant, district administrators and educators across the country have witnessed a dramatic change in how educators are evaluated. Policy, legislation, and public sentiment have placed tremendous pressures on local districts to determine teacher effectiveness ratings, including measures such as observable practice, value-added measures (VAM), and student achievement levels. In some instances state education agencies (SEA) have put data-collection tools in place with the hopes of assisting local education agencies (LEA) through this process. Frequently, these “one-size-fits-all” data solutions fall short in these three areas:

– Typically relying on disparate or unrelated data sets;
– Failing to take individual district business practices into account; and
– Often relying on limited, unconnected data points to determine educator effectiveness.
Of equal importance – yet often overlooked – is the central question of who owns the data. Districts have tremendous opportunities to analyze their own data, make mid-course corrections, and tell their own stories to their communities by using their own data solutions. The West Warwick Public Schools decided to forgo the use of the state of Rhode Island’s data system, and instead, integrated their educator evaluation process into a comprehensive, integrated management-information system (MIS) from Follett School Solutions. This MIS, Aspen, provides individual districts with a robust, district-designed, flexible solution that can help educators connect the dots between observed teacher practice, student performance, and final educator effectiveness ratings.

**HOW WE GOT HERE: THE LONG ARM OF FEDERAL REACH**

The upcoming 60th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education\(^1\) reminds us of the tremendous impact the federal government has on local educational policy, and how much has changed over the past sixty years. Brown serves as a pivotal point in American educational history for many reasons. Not only was it a watershed moment in our country’s civil rights history, it marked the seminal federal impact moment on state and local educational activities.

Over the last 20 years, we have witnessed a dramatic change in the federal government’s focus on educational law, regulation, and policy. George W. Bush’s educational policy, commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), put a clear focus on student achievement tied directly to standardized test scores. Although these test scores were closely connected to individual teachers, the information was essentially used to report on the overall effectiveness of both a school, and the district. This information was reported to the public as the determining factor as to whether or not the school reached its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.

Not until after 2010 did educational policy make a more dramatic shift. Under the policies of the Obama Administration and its Race to the Top Fund, more and more responsibility for student achievement has been attributed directly to individual educators. The *Race to the Top Executive Summary* outlines the four major goals of this historic legislation:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- Turning around our lowest-achieving schools.\(^2\)

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Although the impact on students and teachers has almost been immediate, it will take decades for researchers, educators, and the general public to understand the full effect of the Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation. School districts across the country struggle with their responses to RTTT – to create educator-evaluation processes that are research based, to follow best practices, to collect the most valuable learning data, to collect the appropriate evidence of observed educator practice, and to analyze these thousands of data points in order to arrive at an educator effectiveness rating that is reliable and valid. The West Warwick Public Schools employed Aspen SIS as the foundation for their response to the Rhode Island Department of Education’s regulations around educator evaluation.

ONE DISTRICT’S JOURNEY: CONNECTING RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE & DATA SOLUTIONS

The West Warwick Public Schools joined six other urban school districts in Rhode Island – members of the Rhode Island Innovation and Evaluation Support System (RIESS) – to employ Aspen SIS as the foundation for their response to the Rhode Island Department of Education’s regulations around educator evaluation. Design team members from each school district, along with national consultants from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Teaching Learning Solutions (TLS) worked for more than a year to develop an educator-evaluation system “that includes measurements of students’ learning and provides meaningful feedback so educators can improve.”

The educator-evaluation system employed in each RIESS district is based on the research and work of Dr. Charlotte Danielson and her Framework for Teaching (FFT). The Framework for Teaching outlines four main areas of observable practice: Domain 1, Planning and Preparation; Domain 2, The Classroom Environment; Domain 3, Instruction; and Domain 4, Professional Responsibilities. A teacher’s classroom practice is directly observed by a certified evaluator, scripted, and rated using a collection of rubrics based on each of the four domains outlined in the FFT.

In addition to the observed practice, teachers also have to gather evidence of each student’s learning over the length of a school year or a semester. This evidence of student learning is collected using the Student Learning Objective (SLO) process. The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) first developed Student Learning Objectives with Denver Public Schools when it instituted a pay-for-performance initiative in 1999. The Center explains SLOs as (excerpted from its website):

... carefully planned goals for what a student will learn over a given time period and can be written for both tested and non-tested subjects. [SLOs] are used in teacher evaluation systems to help gauge a teacher’s affect on student learning and to directly link a teacher’s classroom instruction to specific measures of student achievement or growth in that content area. Teachers examine baseline student performance data, establish student growth targets, and identify how growth will be assessed. At the end of the specified teaching interval, the teachers provide evidence to the principal demonstrating the degree of attainment of the student growth targets.4

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The Rhode Island Department of Education utilized the expertise of CTAC in the inclusion of SLOs in the RIDE Educator Evaluation Model. Each district in the state needed to include SLOs as a component of their evaluation system in order to garner RIDE approval.

Depending on the district’s existing evaluation system, teachers and evaluators were moderately comfortable with the process of directly observing teacher practice and reporting on the evidence observed. Many districts had to learn a new process and gain a deep understanding of the rubrics being used to assess an educator’s observable practice. Over the last two decades, educators and administrators have gained substantial experience in using rubrics aligned to standards to assess performance; therefore, this aspect of the educator evaluation process had a sense of familiarity. The process of gathering SLO data directly connected to educator evaluation was new for most educators and evaluators, and brought its own challenges and anxieties. In Rhode Island SLOs have a substantial impact on an educator’s final effectiveness rating as illustrated in the chart below from the RIESS 2012 Handbook. Student learning-achievement levels can easily increase or decrease an educator’s final effectiveness rating as presently practiced in Rhode Island school districts. The RIESS chart illustrates how SLOs are used in the Innovation Consortium school districts to help calculate an educator’s final effectiveness rating.

![Final Effectiveness Rating Matrix](image)

The unfamiliarity of a new process, SLOs, and the connection to an educator’s certification created considerable anxiety in most Rhode Island school districts, and the methodology used for calculating final SLO ratings provided additional angst for most educators. The chart below from the Rhode Island Department of Education's August 2012 *Measures of Student Learning, Edition II* guidebook illustrates how RIDE calculates an educator’s Student Learning Rating using multiple SLOs.

| Table 1: SLO/SOO Scoring Lookup Table for 2 SLOs/SOOS |
|----------------------------------|------------|-----------------|
| SLO/SOO 1                        | SLO/SOO 2  | Final           |
| Exceeded                         | Exceeded  | Exceptional Attainment |
| Exceeded                         | Met       | Full Attainment  |
| Exceeded                         | Nearly Met| Full Attainment  |
| Met                              | Met       | Full Attainment  |
| Met                              | Nearly Met| Full Attainment  |
| Exceeded                         | Not Met   | Partial Attainment |
| Met                              | Not Met   | Partial Attainment |
| Nearly Met                       | Not Met   | Partial Attainment |
| Not Met                          | Not Met   | Minimal Attainment |

The West Warwick Public Schools incorporated the use of its data system, Aspen SIS, in an effort to support educators and evaluators, keep track of the process, and analyze the tremendous amounts of data collected. The district opted out of the state of Rhode Island's data system because of the inability of the system to connect the educator-evaluation system to curriculum maps, student and teacher schedules, and teacher gradebooks. The data system used for educator evaluation had to meet the following requirements:

1. **Be comprehensive, and integrate multiple data tables**
2. **Integrate a variety of student data points**
   a. Student attendance data
   b. Student discipline data
   c. Student assessment data
   d. Student gradebook data
   e. Student scheduling data
3. **Integrate a variety of staff data points**
   a. Staff attendance data
   b. Staff professional-development data
   c. Staff discipline referral data
   d. Staff scheduling information
4. **Align with district curriculum maps**
5. **Align with district-created assessments**

Not only did the system need to integrate seamlessly with all of the data points listed, but it also needed to comport with the district's individual business practices concerning the educator-evaluation process. The image below depicts the level of complexity regarding the business rules associated with the educator-evaluation process found within the West Warwick Public Schools.
**CONCLUSION:**
**WEST WARWICK PUBLIC SCHOOLS CHOSE ASPEN SIS**

Aspen SIS met all of West Warwick Public Schools’ requirements – and proved to find the educational promised land: connecting instruction, student learning, and educator evaluation could be cautiously broached, because now the district could utilize one comprehensive, integrated data system versus keeping data in disparate data systems. Simply put, Aspen SIS allowed the district to draw a straight line from curriculum maps in the Curriculum & Learning (CL) module, to students scheduled in a course connected to an educator, to assignments aligned to the Common Core, and, finally, to the work generated by a student connected to a Student Learning Objective (SLO).

All teachers and evaluators in the district utilize Aspen’s Workflow technology to keep track of the process. Teachers initiate the process, establish their professional growth goals, and set their Student Learning Objectives early in the school year. Teachers and evaluators use Aspen SIS to keep track of each step in the process, and the outcome of each phase. Both the educator and his or her evaluator have access to different phases in the workflow. Each phase of the workflow contains district-created forms and reports, and houses thousands of data points, from rated areas of the evaluation rubric to pages of scripted text from observed lessons. The illustration below depicts the initial phases of the educator-evaluation workflow process.

Now the district could utilize one comprehensive, integrated data system versus keeping data in disparate data systems.
Article | Educator Evaluation

Evaluators interact with the same workflow technology to gather and rate the evidence associated with each domain of the Danielson Framework for Teaching. This vast amount of data connected to the four domains allows the district professional-development staff to create dynamic professional development geared to the individual needs of teachers. District evaluators, administrators, and members of the District Evaluation Committee (DEC) are able to review individual elements of the Framework for Teaching, review individual domains, and analyze the entirety of all of the data points collected. The district was able to make the connections between the Common Core-aligned curriculum, student schedules, and student performance on district-created assessments. This was possible only because the district made the purposeful decision to house all of its data within Aspen SIS, Follett’s comprehensive, flexible curriculum and management system.

Works Cited


Race to the Top Program Executive Summary.


The district was able to make the connections between the Common Core-aligned curriculum, student schedules, and student performance on district-created assessments.