



# THE DATA-DRIVEN DISTRICT

By Ron Schachter



## Schools analyzing everything from maintenance costs to lunch menus.

**T**he Brevard County Public Schools in Florida has instituted energy-saving measures that have cut electricity costs by almost \$4 million—or by 25 percent. In upstate New York, the Beaver River Central School District has a plan that could save and restore teacher jobs. And the Kent School District outside Seattle is discovering that it can afford to do more to maintain aging buildings.

It's all a result of data-driven decision making, a process that's been used for over a decade to enhance classroom instruction but only recently to improve school district operations.

"In a public, K12 environment, the focus of data is rightly on the educational and instructional results," says Lee Legutko, an educational consultant

specializing in district operations and finance, and the former chief business officer for the Duval County Public Schools in north Florida. "Components like transportation, risk management, and finance do not receive near the same attention, and that's been a problem for a long, long time."

So after years of heightened fiscal challenges, the district operations side is following the instructional side, using new online data management tools to measure everything from bus routes to the cost of meals per student to the timeliness of the district's payment processes for services and supplies.

The recent focus on benchmarks known as "key performance indicators" (KPI) requires a business mentality

that may be new to district leaders, says Legutko, who also spent eight years as an administrative manager for Xerox.

In the private sector, Legutko says, he received monthly data on 26 key performance indicators, from the response time in distributing new machines to the aging of accounts receivable.

"Over the last five years, more of the people occupying the role of CFO, COO, and CIO are coming from business, where they are used to measuring everything in operations and finance to make better use of their resources and dollars," adds Rick Passovoy, the CEO of TransACT Communications, which has developed the ActPoint KPI Performance Management System, an online data analysis and benchmarking tool for school districts.

### **Building a smarter district**

Using data more effectively has become the rallying call of several national and state organizations. For the past decade, the Council of the Great City Schools has been defining the KPI that mattered most to successful operations while also collecting the data for those indicators from its 67 member districts. Its list has grown to more than 300 KPI, including custodial cost per square foot, transportation cost per rider, fund reserves as a percentage of total revenue, and IT help-desk staffing cost per trouble ticket.

“We started (identifying key indicators) because our members—particularly COOs and CFOs—were looking for tools to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of their operations,” says Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

One of the tools the council created allows administrators to benchmark their performance against other districts. “If you wanted to know how you stacked up in areas such as meal participation, maintenance costs, and cash reserves, you had no way of answering those questions,” Casserly explains. “You had data internally, but no way of benchmarking that performance to the rest of the world.”

Five years ago, the council joined forces with TransACT Communications to build the ActPoint system. That tool incorporates the 300-plus KPI and allows users to view and manipulate the results on an easy-to-use dashboard. On one side, the dashboard might list all the functions of one department (for the finance department, the functions range from compensation to procurement). On the other side, for example, are the more than half dozen key performance indicators for procurement, as well as a graph comparing the district’s performance on each indicator with other districts.

The program was released almost two years ago and is used by more than 75 districts, not including the council’s schools.

Ralph Fortunato, director of fiscal services for the 27,000-student Kent School District outside Seattle, says an eight-month analysis using ActPoint KPI found that his district’s maintenance cost per student came to \$90.56, compared to a median of \$352 among 14 districts of similar size.

That’s good news, and not-so-good

news—while the low per-student rate puts Kent at the head of the class in this particular KPI, “It’s a wake-up call to invest more in school maintenance,” Fortunato says. “We may be more efficient, but we’ve got a lot of maintenance backlogs. Maybe it’s time to resurface the parking lots or replace a heating system rather than continuing to patch it.”



*Ralph Fortunato, director of fiscal services for the Kent School District, says an analysis found the district's maintenance cost-per-student was lower than other similar districts.*

Using the benchmark for the percentage of full-time district employees whose salaries are funded from grants, Fortunato discovered that Kent's 23 percent was almost twice that of its peer districts. That discrepancy makes the district more vulnerable in light of declining state and federal grant money, he says.

### Data tools for rural schools

The New York State Center for Rural Schools, run by Cornell University in New York, culls data for all of the state's school districts. Administrators can use its free data tools to compare their districts to other school systems. They also can use the state data to budget years into the future by estimating enrollment or exploring mergers with other districts.

"What used to take days or weeks for a consultant to pull together, you can do in 10 seconds," says John Sipple, the center's director.

Beaver River Central School District Superintendent Leueen Smithling, who oversees a single K12 building in Beaver

Falls, N.Y., has been using the tools to deal with the loss of \$5 million in state aid three years ago. The funding cut led to the layoffs of more than a dozen teachers, instructional assistants, and staff members. And Smithling's data analysis projected a rise in kindergarten and first grade students from about 50 to more than 80.

With such data, she is anticipating more per student funding, which in turn may enable her to bring back some teachers and aides in coming years. "I had to know where I was going with enrollment," Smithling explains. "I know that I've got a place where I can get something that's accurate."

### Energy savings in Brevard County

Operations and finance consultant Lee Legutko points to the 72,000-student Brevard County schools as a leader in benchmarking and data-based decision making. Six years ago, Associate Superintendent for Financial Services Judy Preston noticed the district was spending more than \$15 million annually for electricity.

As a result, Preston has embarked on an energy-saving campaign that has reduced yearly electricity costs by almost \$4 million, with another \$400,000 in savings budgeted for the 2013-2014 school year.

The district now limits how long school buildings are open each weekday to nine hours. In the months of June and July, when school is out, all of the buildings in the district are open from 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., avoiding the more



*Judy Preston, standing, Brevard County's associate superintendent for financial services, started energy-saving tactics after realizing the district was spending too much.*

expensive peak energy hours between 3 and 6 p.m.

At night, all building and parking lot lights are turned off. The district also is piloting a new program with the local power company to build roofs over parking lots and to install solar panels on those roofs. “Every year we’ve (used data) to find something more that could save electricity,” Preston says.

Those practicing and promoting new approaches to data management and data-driven decision making acknowledge that getting started requires time and effort. “It takes some work,” says Casserly. “It involves a fair amount of data entry. It’s a little bit like buying a gym membership. That membership doesn’t get you in shape unless you do the work.” **DA**

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*Ron Schachter is contributing writer to DA.*

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