Data-Driven Decision Making
Analyzing your data to improve student learning
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Executive Summary

With funding shortfalls and calls for even greater accountability, school and district administrators need greater insight to face a future that requires them to reduce costs, implement efficient and effective academic programs, ensure that funding is used appropriately, use resources strategically, and provide all students with an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential.

That greater insight is attainable: Imagine that all decisions affecting the learning environment – district operations, state, local and federal reporting, an individual student’s learning plan, resource planning, etc. – could be made using accurate, reliable data. Next, imagine that all the data could be analyzed to give you the information you need at the time you need it. Now take it one step further, and imagine that you could use analytics to determine what programs are working or not working and which students are at risk so that you could intervene to help them.

Certainly, there is no shortage of data in today’s education system; however, the data is often scattered across many different databases and is difficult to access. Plus, it’s possible that you will get different results from each individual data source. Issues such as poor data quality, funding shortfalls, the graduation gap and accountability requirements have forced educational professionals to recognize the critical importance of analyzing clean, accurate data to drive decision making.

In order to make a difference in education, educators and administrators need to gain useful knowledge and draw insightful conclusions based on a single version of the truth – by letting data drive decision practices.

An effective, data-driven decision making strategy begins with a phased approach that may encompass data access and integration, reporting and data analysis. SAS provides integrated, flexible and scalable solutions that serve as the foundation for creating and delivering accurate, reliable information across your school or district. Since every school district has different needs and challenges, SAS partners with them to determine the best data-driven decision making solution to meet their challenges.

This white paper describes the benefits that may be gained with data-driven decision making, as well as information and case studies on SAS onsite and hosted solutions for education, the SAS® Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education and SAS® OnDemand for K-12. Using SAS’ award-winning data warehousing and business analytics to integrate and analyze data sources in a flexible, easy-to-manage reporting environment, you can achieve your ultimate goal of improving student achievement through the effective use of data.
Education Faces Great Challenges

Funding Shortfalls

According to a recent IDC report:\(^1\)

. . . Over 50 percent of local government spending is tied to education spending, and additional support comes from state budgets and federal grants. Unlike the federal government, states must balance their budgets and cannot carry deficits. Federal agencies’ contribution to elementary and secondary education funding represents less than 9 percent of the total spent for all education spending, according to the US Department of Education. This includes funds not only from the US Department of Education, but also agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services for Head Start funding, and the School Lunch Program funded by the Department of Agriculture. Federal funding is only as much as 12 percent of total education spending when support, loans and student financial aid for postsecondary education are added in.

Schools systems are dependent on these government funds and their budgets will fluctuate given the status of the local economy. With the financial and mortgage crises, local and state economies are hurting. Thus, schools must continue to do more with less in the foreseeable future.

Accountability Requirements

School systems are continuing to strive to meet the requirements of state and federal accountability requirements. With a new federal administration, these requirements remain and possibly may become more rigorous. The need to ensure that each child is given the same opportunity to learn and succeed will always be present.

According to First Research:\(^2\)

Some school systems cannot meet the requirements of the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act that requires new annual tests, more rigid hiring requirements and the need to identify struggling subgroups of students. Some school districts are bracing for the possibility that large numbers of students may be removed from their system if they can’t meet new legislative requirements. State education officials warn that the NCLB standardized test requirements will result in the majority of the nation’s schools being labeled ‘low performing.’ Educators say federal regulations outlining how to assess the quality of schools are dangerously arbitrary and inflexible, and will result in schools being treated as failures. Opponents believe that mandatory testing will result in teachers focusing on, or ‘teaching to,’ the test rather than on providing a well-rounded course of study.

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Increasing Enrollments

According to the US Department of Education, public school enrollment is expected to approach a record of almost 50 million students this year (see Figure 1). Total public school enrollment is projected to set new records each year from 2008 to 2016, at which time enrollment is expected to reach 53.3 million.

Student populations continue to increase and diversify while exhibiting a wider range of needs than at any other time in history. The requirements posed by today’s global economy are changing the expectations for students. All students must leave K-12 at higher levels of attainment if they are to realize or exceed their parents’ life choices.

As such, it’s simply not good enough for our educational system to operate as it has in the past. Current educational issues require more rigorous measurements of effectiveness and a more strategic allocation of resources.

Figure 1: US enrollment in private and public elementary and secondary schools for selected years.
Graduation Gap

Diplomas Count 2008\(^3\) published findings based on the latest data available (2005), which states that about 71 percent of ninth graders nationwide make it to graduation four years later. This figure drops to 58 percent for Hispanics, 55 percent for African-Americans and 51 percent for Native Americans. Those rates improved slightly from 2004 to 2005 for all groups, but large gaps are found in rates across states. For example, while more than eight in 10 students graduate on time in Iowa, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Wisconsin, the proportion drops to fewer than six in 10 in the District of Columbia, Georgia, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico and South Carolina.

Analyses conducted for Diplomas Count by the EPE Research Center also continue to show wide disparities between state-reported graduation rates and the center’s estimates. Such disparities are one reason that the US Department of Education proposed new rules in Spring, 2008, that would require all states to calculate graduation rates based on a uniform method that tracks cohorts of students as they progress through high school. States would need to have those methods in place by the end of the 2012-13 school year. States, districts and schools also would have to publish graduation rates for subgroups of students, and to use those results in calculating progress to help close the types of gaps highlighted in the Diplomas Count report.\(^4\)

As student enrollment increases with the likelihood of increased accountability for graduation rates, educators must address these needs now.

Data Analysis Holds the Answers to the Challenges

School and district administrators are under increasing pressure to take a holistic view of their organizations. At the same time, a silo-based and often-redundant data infrastructure prevents most administrators from seeing the big picture. The volume of available information in the form of collected data, coupled with data irregularities, can simply be overwhelming. Amidst such inconsistencies and disjointedness, organizations need to establish and utilize a single version of the data to ensure that they’re moving confidently, collectively and successfully into the future.

In order to make a difference in education, educators and administrators need to gain useful knowledge and draw insightful conclusions by letting data drive decision practices. An effective, data-driven decision making strategy begins with a phased approach that may encompass data access and integration, reporting and data analysis.

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Data Access and Integration

Data access and integration is critical to the success of any data-driven decision making initiative. Many current education systems include a reporting solution; however, accessing and reporting on information in one system does not give a fully comprehensive view of what is happening at the school or district.

Therefore, it is imperative that schools and districts transform and combine their disparate data from multiple sources and remove inaccuracies to create consistent, reliable and credible information. By accessing and integrating historical data from older legacy systems or the latest ERP applications, data from virtually any hardware platform or operating system can be accessed and processed.

Consistently providing correct data when and where it is needed gives users increased confidence in the accuracy and timeliness of information. It is possible for schools and districts to always have access to the data they need, when they need it, and not after the fact. In addition, you can now store years of data longitudinally and utilize this information to identify trends and patterns that may influence current-day decision making. Users can have self-sufficient, secure and easy access to enterprise data sources, alleviating the burden from IT so they can focus on other strategic projects.

Reporting

All schools and districts want to use their historical data to drive change and make the best possible decisions. Once data is consolidated and cleaned, it is immediately available to users for reporting. An easy-to-use, intuitive query and reporting solution is needed so that users can find the information they need to answer questions, format presentation-quality results and easily share their findings with others.

Without the ability to turn data into useful information, district leaders are limited to static reports, which are often out of date by the time they are received. Outdated reports are of little to no use in making informed decisions that can lead to more effective use of budgets and improved student performance.

A practical method is to use a Web-based reporting tool that provides report users and report authors across your school district with a single, comprehensive reporting solution that covers all types of reporting – production, business or ad hoc reporting – in one single interface aimed at users who need historical and analytical information. Users can either access canned reports from personal or public storage, or they can generate ad hoc queries to find immediate answers for their daily questions.

By providing tailored, role-based interfaces targeted at specific audiences, skills and needs, users can get their own answers while IT retains control over the consistency and reliability of the data they are using. In addition, a Web interface enables novice or casual users to quickly create basic queries and reports. Data is presented in business terms, so nontechnical users can search and choose the information they need without the confusion of data complexities.
Empowering users with self-service access to query and reporting capabilities allows them to make more accurate, data-driven decisions. And, using an accurate picture of district information, users can enhance the achievement of all students by understanding each student’s academic progress and program performance – not just at the end of the year, but throughout the entire school year.

While historical reporting gives you plenty of hindsight, it doesn’t provide the insight you need to make decisions for the future. That is where data analysis comes into play.

Data Analysis

Education thrives on an environment of continuous learning and improvement. Once users have access to information they become data consumers. As such, they tend to become more sophisticated in their questions. But, viewing a simple report or doing a query might not provide the insight needed (or the potential intelligence). Therefore, schools and districts employ analytics. It takes them from simply having information, or conducting forensic reporting, to developing true insight. Such insight is created when analytic techniques, such as forecasting, predictive modeling, statistical analysis and optimization, are applied to information about students, teachers, resources and more. As a result, educational leaders can ask questions such as “What will happen next?” and “What if this trend continues?”

Figure 2 represents this progression from simply knowing the past, which leads to reactive decision making, to predicting the future for proactive decision making.
Some examples of more in-depth questions could be:

- Which students are at risk?
- Which intervention strategies work best to help at-risk students stay in school?
- Which students are not on track to graduate?
- How can we best reallocate resources to schools?
- How can we predict likely student test results early in the year and take steps to improve student success on an individual basis?
- Which programs are working to improve student achievement and which are not?
- How do we optimize resources and funds by forecasting student enrollment, population patterns and student performance?
- What is the best way to allocate resources toward a data-driven intervention rather than toward one based on instinct?

By using analytics, educational leaders can determine answers to these questions and countless others. Instead of just reacting to data in hindsight, using analytics empowers leaders to become proactive, data-driven decision makers. They are able to use the analysis to discover problems, patterns or trends when they happen (not after the fact), and determine the best strategy to move ahead.

**SAS® Solutions for Data-Driven Decision Making**

As stated earlier, an effective, data-driven decision making strategy begins with a phased approach that should encompass data integration, business intelligence and analytics. With SAS, you can overcome information barriers quickly, allowing you to consolidate, store, analyze and share high-quality information to make critical decisions affecting your school or district.

The power of SAS also takes you beyond the reporting of historical information (what happened); it gives you the power of predictive analytics, so you can determine probable future outcomes (what might happen). SAS helps you understand longitudinal trends to inform overall planning and intervene where trends are undesirable; the right intelligence can put the right resources in the right place to affect the students’ outcomes when needed.

SAS provides integrated, flexible and scalable solutions that serve as the foundation for creating and delivering accurate, reliable information across your school or district. Since every school district has different needs and challenges, SAS partners with them to determine the best solution for data-driven decision making.
What follows is a description about an onsite solution – SAS Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education, and a hosted model – SAS OnDemand for K-12 (when resources, skills and funds are not available to support and maintain an onsite solution).

**SAS® Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education (EISE)**

The **SAS Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education** is an onsite solution for integrating, managing and analyzing data, and then deploying information across your school or district. It brings together the knowledge necessary for making informed decisions, taking you beyond the reporting of historical data and giving you the power to look ahead using predictive analytics.

The SAS Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education offers unmatched data integration, data cleansing, easy-to-use reporting and unparalleled analytics. Only SAS addresses the entire process of translating raw data into useful, trusted and timely information for fact-based decisions. It bridges the gap between what you have – masses of inconsistent data from a variety of sources – and what you want to achieve – consistent, reliable and trustworthy data you can use to make decisions that can help improve student performance.

The SAS Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education includes three main components: data integration, business intelligence and analytics.

**SAS® Data Integration**

**SAS Data Integration** leverages the data in your existing student information systems, enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, benchmark assessment systems, instructional learning systems and operational systems, etc. to feed into a single, central repository. From there, you can use SAS business intelligence and analytic solutions to explore relationships between and among all aspects of your school or district – and possibly find trends you didn’t know existed.

**SAS® Business Intelligence**

Effectively using business intelligence allows you to understand the past, monitor the present and predict the future as your school or district moves ahead. **SAS Business Intelligence** gives you the information you need in the right format, at the right time. It leverages data to deliver Web-based reports to all types of users in your school, district and community – including teachers, principals, administrators and parents. Using self-service reporting, users can quickly and interactively view summaries of large volumes of data and drill down for more details as needed – all based on a user-specific profile. With both Web-based and desktop reporting options, users with varying needs and skill sets can develop their own reports – relieving the burden on your IT staff.
SAS® Analytics

With SAS Analytics, integrated data from across your school or district can be quickly transformed into shared insights about the road ahead. You can analyze massive amounts of data to make discoveries, determine trends, solve complex problems and deploy results – all in far less time than expected. What’s more, you can link SAS to your existing IT environment, allowing you to reach immediate objectives and meet your evolving analytical needs.

Key Benefits

Using the SAS Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education, schools and districts can:

• Compile information in an accurate or timely manner from a wide variety of sources, such as information on students, grades, programs, personnel, facilities, finance, etc. to answer questions and support decision making.

• Track historical data, progress reports and student assessments.

• Collect, report and analyze data to respond to state or federal accountability mandates (such as NCLB) or grant proposals, quickly and easily.

• Store years of data longitudinally and utilize this information to identify trends and patterns that may influence current-day decision making.

• View and analyze assessment and performance data on students to understand how students are doing during the year in order to intervene quickly for more successful student performance.

• Map student assessment scores to state standards to understand the most effective strategies for supporting student achievement.

• Allocate resources based on maximum impact to student learning and needs.

• Measure program effectiveness and student progress to avoid surprises at end-of-year test time.

• Evolve from a manual process to a data-driven decision making process by accessing student data quickly, predicting outcomes and intervening to help students reach their potential.

• Optimize resources and revenues by forecasting student enrollment, population patterns and student performance.

• Focus on the initiatives and key performance indicators (KPIs) that support the organization’s goals.
Case Study: Liberty School District

SAS gives K-12 leaders the ability to consolidate, cleanse and analyze vast amounts of raw data, turning it into usable insight. Missouri’s Liberty school district is beginning to realize the benefits that can be achieved for education when data drives fact-based and timely decision making.

Consolidating data and delivering vital intelligence to make critical decisions with SAS: The Liberty school district has been named a high-performing school district by the state of Missouri for the past five years and is considered a state model for the effective use of technology for learning. The district has also been honored by the National School Board Association for excellence in technology.

Situation

School leaders know how important it is to use data to understand how students are doing and where they need help. But data that is difficult to access is meaningless. It is also too labor intensive if it takes an IT staffer a week to provide a yearlong attendance snapshot to a principal. Like so many systems around the country, Liberty must report data to the state on student test scores and report test results to the federal government under the NCLB Act. They wanted to be able to do it all more efficiently by pulling all data together into an easy-to-read dashboard for principals.

Solution

With SAS, Liberty’s principals have a Web-enabled dashboard they can check daily that incorporates test scores, discipline and attendance information. Principals can do their own analysis, drilling down in the data to look at test scores and attendance by different subgroups or individual students. The dashboard also brings in budget information and data from transportation and food services, which principals need to fulfill their job responsibilities. Information is conveyed in formats that principals are comfortable with and can be exported into Excel to make charts or graphs.

Using the SAS Enterprise Intelligence Suite for Education, Liberty is able to integrate, manage and analyze data, and then deploy information across the district. Liberty can now look beyond historical data using predictive analytics.

Results

Information that once took an IT staff member a week to put together is now available daily through a Web-accessible dashboard. With information at the principals’ fingertips, they are prepared to intervene before a child fails or study what makes some subgroups more successful than others. For instance, if principals see a troublesome attendance pattern they can consult with classroom teachers and counselors to intervene.

“We chose SAS because nothing else was powerful, flexible or stable enough to allow us to take data from various sources and pull it together and distribute the information quickly.”

- Trey Katzer, Director of Technology, Liberty Public School District in Liberty, MO

Read more at: www.sas.com/success/liberty.html.
SAS® OnDemand for K-12

For those schools or districts that do not have the resources, skills or funding to implement or support an onsite SAS solution for data-driven decision making, SAS OnDemand for K-12, a hosted solution, is another option.

SAS OnDemand for K-12 is a hosted, administrative solution that was developed using input from K-12 district superintendents. With a hosted solution, users become consumers of data that is stored and managed by another entity at another location.

For instance, with a hosted solution you can look at a report and know which schools across the district have a discipline problem and why. Or, see which students have a history of absenteeism and figure out how to improve attendance. Reports can tell you how enrollment is changing across the district, so you can determine which schools might have issues ahead of time. All this information is available to you on demand.

Users access information on select operational measures, as well as select student and administrative data for schools using a centralized Web portal. You can use measures and identify trends by using specific key performance indicators to provide benchmarks and guidance for real-time interventions and future improvement.

With SAS OnDemand for K-12, SAS delivers software and services that help you:

- Gain instant access to the volumes of data in your district through an easy-to-use, Web-based data management solution.
- View the district as a whole or isolate views to targeted schools and grades, with increasing levels of granularity to drill from the district level down to a revealing view of the individual student.
- Take advantage of powerful analytics through a centralized, secure Web portal that lets you query and report on select operational measures and student and administrative data, with limited hardware or human resources from your district.
- Monitor performance benchmarks customized for your school or district and enable more timely intervention with students.
- Reap the benefits of a hosted solution that gets up and running quickly and involves minimal staff or technical resources at the local level.

SAS empowers administrators and superintendents with views and insights into the business of running an effective and efficient school district. They can look at trends over time and determine what’s working and what is not – and proceed to meetings ready and confident that their information is valid and their recommendations credible. As a result, K-12 administrators can now confidently make informed decisions across their school districts.
Key Benefits of a Hosted SAS® Solution

Having a hosted solution from SAS offers many benefits. It offloads the need and expense of additional hardware, software and technical personnel and skills. Even more important, users gain access to reports with current, accurate information to make proactive decisions. With a hosted solution, someone else handles accessing, managing, integrating, analyzing and reporting on the data. In addition, it’s a green purchase that doesn’t require any CDs, DVDs or packaging.

Another benefit is that users no longer have to worry about software, upgrades or maintenance. Having a hosted solution ensures they will have the most current software available. No longer having to migrate data or reports frees up valuable time and resources that can be dedicated to more important projects.

Concerns over student privacy have traditionally cropped up when discussing hosted solutions. Researching the hosting company to ensure it is credible, reliable and stable is a simple first step. A track record of success in hosting solutions for other industries is important, as well.

Tactically, privacy concerns can be allayed by strict adherence to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Also, a hosted system is set up so that only designated school district personnel have access. Lastly, student data is only surfaced after being de-identified, and only school personnel know which numbers correspond to which students.

With a hosted solution, district personnel can finally use facts to make decisions quickly and easily. They can make all decisions about the learning environment – from district operations to student discipline and attendance – with confidence through a simple Web interface. They no longer have to worry about creating or maintaining the system, hiring experts, and buying hardware and software. It’s now possible – with a secure, hosted solution for data-driven decision making.

Case Study: Wilson County School District

Utilizing a centralized Web portal that lets district leaders access information, SAS OnDemand for K-12 measures and identifies trends by using specific KPIs to provide benchmarks and guidance for real-time interventions and future improvement, as is being realized in Wilson County, NC.

Turning school district data drawn from disparate systems into useful intelligence on individual students: The Wilson County School District in NC comprises 24 schools with 12,600 students and is supported by more than 1,600 administrative and operational staff members. The district has a small technology budget and a limited IT staff. For mandates like NCLB, which require specific methods for collecting, managing and reporting information, the schools lack the funds and resources to gather and report that information with any degree of accuracy. The district lacked the infrastructure to transform and combine disparate data and remove inaccuracies to create consistent, trustworthy information.
Situation

The Wilson County School District was “data rich but information poor,” and measuring and tracking qualitative outcomes against pre-established benchmarks had become impractical. District leaders were under enormous pressure to improve the quality of education while maintaining a balanced budget and complying with local, state and federal mandates. Reports on key metrics, such as student and teacher absences, discipline infractions, budget information and test scores, were only available at the end of the school year or later, which made proactive intervention impossible.

Solution

SAS OnDemand for K-12 gave Wilson County school leaders access to SAS software through a simple, secure Web portal. SAS OnDemand for K-12 handles all the back-end data consolidation, cleansing, analysis and reporting.

SAS delivered a secure, hosted solution that included:

- A centralized Web portal that gives immediate access to operational measures and select student and administrative data.
- The ability to measure and identify trends using specific KPIs to provide benchmarks and guidance for real-time intervention.

The SAS OnDemand for K-12 solution eliminates the need for large hardware purchases, lengthy software installations or on-site SAS experts. All that is needed is a computer, high-speed Internet access and a database administrator who pinpoints which data sources should be used to improve student achievement.

Results

School leaders now have key views and insights into the business of running an effective and efficient school district. In fact, each district that uses the on-demand solution can customize the main portal page to display information of its choice. The entry page might include important Web links or various dials for tracking measures that are most important to that district.

“Knowing that data exists that would help you make a decision, but is not available because the data is housed in four or five places, is very frustrating. SAS OnDemand for K-12 is a solution that gives me quick insights into key data about my school district and lets me drill down into the data when I need to know more. This is a tool that every superintendent needs.”

- Larry E. Price, PhD, Superintendent of the Wilson County School District in Wilson, NC

Conclusion

In order to solve the challenges of having to access and integrate scattered data and analyze the information to obtain reliable answers to serious questions, education leaders are turning to proactive, data-driven decision making. Limited resources and funding strain districts and schools to comply with the various mandates to measure and track quantitative outcomes against pre-established benchmarks. And with no single view of the data, how do you really know what is going on with your students, school or district?

Gone are the days of relying on hunches or gut feel to make decisions. Using an accurate picture of school or district information, you can enhance the achievement of all students by understanding each student’s academic progress and program performance – not just at the end of the year, but throughout the entire school year. You can determine which programs are working and which aren’t. As a result, program effectiveness and student performance in K-12 can improve dramatically.

SAS gives K-12 leaders the ability to consolidate, cleanse and analyze vast amounts of raw data, turning it into valuable insight. SAS technology brings together data on student achievement, finances, human resources, facilities, transportation and other areas to provide a clear picture of the organization – allowing you to make informed, proactive decisions. In addition, SAS takes you beyond reporting historical data and gives you the power of predictive analytics, enabling you to determine probable future outcomes.

As the case studies in this paper have demonstrated, SAS has partnered with schools and districts to successfully carry out data-driven decision making. Each district used SAS solutions to ensure a consistent flow of information while eliminating the need to consolidate incompatible systems to handle each step in the process. Through a proven track record of customer successes and best practices in education, SAS helps you deliver the right information to the right people at the right time – helping you make a difference in students’ lives.

By choosing SAS, you also reap the benefits of:

• **SAS’ educational roots.** Since beginning as a research project at North Carolina State University more than 30 years ago, SAS has provided software solutions, services and academic programs that spark innovation and expand educational opportunities.

• **SAS’ stability.** In business since 1976, SAS has a solid track record as a reliable partner with steady profit growth that will provide ongoing support no matter how your needs grow and change.

• **SAS’ R&D investment.** Each year, SAS reinvests more than 25 percent of annual revenues in research and development to ensure you have the best software available to meet your data, analysis and reporting needs.
So, whether your school or district has just begun to evolve its information capabilities or is further down the path, SAS has a solution that meets your data-driven decision making needs. SAS can adapt to your situation and drive your information evolution to the next level while leveraging and extending the value of your existing IT investments. And as your school or district’s needs evolve, the SAS solution will expand to meet your future demands.

SAS understands the critical role of accurate, timely data and how integrating and analyzing that information results in increased benefits for education. After all, SAS solutions have been helping education improve learning, services and management for more than 30 years.

**About SAS**

SAS is the leader in business analytics software and services, and the largest independent vendor in the business intelligence market. Through innovative solutions delivered within an integrated framework, SAS helps customers at more than 45,000 sites improve performance and deliver value by making better decisions faster. Since 1976 SAS has been giving customers around the world THE POWER TO KNOW®.
