



CASE STUDY: McLean County Unit District No. 5: Seven Years of SIF

Highlights

Challenge

Integrate data from disparate systems

Key Benefits

- Reduced data entry
- Real-time access to information
- Add new applications with ease
- Accurate data informs teachers

Overview of Growth of the SIF Implementation

In 2002, McLean County Unit District No. 5 (Unit 5) was challenged to integrate data from disparate systems and reduce redundant data entry. They turned to SIF for answers. What started out as a typical SIF Implementation for the seamless integration of two databases has grown and evolved over the past seven years. Unit 5 now has a mature district-wide solution in which student data is transferred real-time to key stakeholders and used to inform teacher practice in the classroom.

Original Challenge

Seven years ago, Unit 5 was experiencing a disconnect between their AS400 Student Information System and their transportation, special education, and network directory systems. Given that the district covers 200 square miles, it was imperative that they have accurate and up-to-date student information in the transportation system as they needed to identify the most efficient way to bus almost 10,000 students to school every day. Additionally, with roughly 300 new students per year, timely creation of new student accounts was a priority. Unit 5 turned to SIF as its technology solution for real-time data transfer.

Demographics

McLean County Unit District No. 5 is located in Central Illinois. The district encompasses:

- 200 square miles
- 21 campuses
- 13,000 students
- 24% economically disadvantaged
- Student Population:
 - 71% White
 - 12% African American
 - 6% Asian
 - 5% Hispanic
 - 5% Other

Technical Solution and Development

The number of applications integrated into the SIF Implementation has continued to grow over the last seven years to reflect changing district needs and to support innovation. The SIF Specification has provided the framework to add new applications for a more robust solution.

The first phase of the SIF Implementation entailed integrating the AS400 Student Information System (SIS) with the Versatrans Transportation System, Novell eDirectory for network services, and SPED Kids for Special Education. Unit 5 selected the CPSI SIF-Connect Server for the ZIS as the information hub of their SIF Infrastructure. The CPSI Universal Agent was used to integrate the legacy SIS and serves as the primary provider of data into the SIF zone. Unit 5 chose Integrity Schools to develop the SIF agent for the special education software application and provide integration services support.

In 2006, Unit 5 migrated to the Skyward Student Information System and chose to continue utilizing the CPSI Universal SIF Agent for its rich data set. In 2008, Unit 5 began work on a district data warehouse built and implemented by Integrity Schools. Integrity also provided the agent necessary to draw data from the ZIS into the data warehouse, thereby maximizing the SIF Infrastructure. Unit 5 now has reporting capabilities to provide demographic, class and assessment data to teachers on their desktops.

Drawing information out of the Student Information System is the number one bonus of SIF.

- Loren Baele, Director of Technology,
McLean County No. 5

Benefits Achieved and Results

Reduced data entry and real-time access to information across all the connected systems are major benefits of the SIF Implementation. "Drawing information out of the Student Information System is the number one bonus of SIF," says Mr. Loren Baele, Director of Technology at Unit 5. "Being able to apply that information to various applications is critically important." For example, having new student data immediately available for assignment into bus routes and loaded into the special education system expedites student services for new children to the district.

With the time saving gained from reduced manual processes, Unit 5 is better able to "...maximize the I.T. Staff. We do not have a lot of situations that we have to get involved [with] when SIF is working correctly. It is seamless," states Mr. Baele.

The start of a new school year is the most demanding time with new students, new staff, new transportation routes, and new IEPs in the special education software. When the technology and processes work properly from the start, the rest of the year runs smoothly. To that end, SIF assists with the year-round processes and overall student movement.

The addition of the data warehouse to the SIF Implementation has resulted in informed decision making at the classroom level. "The Data Warehouse has become very powerful, especially at the elementary school level in which teachers have the same students all year. The teachers can apply interventions and see the results," states Mr. Baele.

Drivers of Success

The team approach has been essential to the successful SIF Implementation at Unit 5. The District gathered all of the key stakeholders together from the beginning, recognizing that this was not merely an I.T. exercise. While the project was born out of the I.T. Department, its success was dependent on buy-in and involvement from the Transportation and Special Education departments as well.

Lessons Learned

Mr. Baele recommends having a clear understanding of your goals with SIF before you start the implementation process. Then, thoroughly research vendors and providers to ensure they fit what you are trying to accomplish. Continual communication with the vendors is critical to overcome any technical issues that arise.

Over time, Unit 5 learned the best organizational processes to maximize the benefits of real-time data transfer. The District put checks and balances in place to ensure accurate data is manually entered into the student information system and then propagated to the other systems.

Next Steps

Even after seven years, Unit 5 continues to innovate with its SIF Implementation. The next steps will be to incorporate the library system into the mix. Unit 5 chose Atrium from Book Systems to implement in the spring of 2010. Since Unit 5 already has SIF in place, adding a new application will not be difficult as there will be no additional hardware expense.

About the SIF Association

The SIF Association is a unique, non-profit collaboration composed of over 2,300 schools, districts, states, U.S. Department of Education, International Ministries of Education, software vendors and consultants who collectively define the rules and regulations for educational software data interoperability. The SIF Implementation Specification enables diverse applications to interact and share data and information efficiently, reliably, and securely regardless of the platform hosting those applications. The SIF Association has united these education technology end users and providers in an unprecedented effort to give teachers more time to do what they do best: teach. For further information, visit <http://www.sifassociation.org>.



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