SchoolMAX Enterprise: A Review of the Integration Process in Barrow County

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SCHOOLMAX ENTERPRISE

Setting

The Barrow County School (BCS) system is located about half way between Athens and Atlanta, Georgia. BCS is a system of fifteen schools, eight elementary, four middle, and two high schools. BCS has around 12,000 students with an economically disadvantage population of about 47%. All schools in Barrow County, with the exception of one elementary school, fall under Title 1 status. Until the 2008-2009 school year, Barrow County used several different data programs to keep school records, both academic and administrative. They used programs including I-Cue, Munis, and Crystal. Each of these programs kept up with a different aspect of the student information system. These programs were also server-based, meaning that the program was loaded on to each computer and could only be accessed at school or by someone on the Barrow County Schools network.

Barrow County Schools recently purchased an upgrade of the previous SchoolMAX software in place to track discipline and bookkeeping items. SchoolMAX went web-based in 2006 and the county office purchased this upgrade option in 2007. In addition to features for accounting and recordkeeping, the upgrade was supposed to integrate our Student Information System with our attendance and grading program so that all information would be in one location. I was a member of a committee of teachers was formed in late spring of 2008 to "test" the program an awesome program. The program that we were shown was a very user friendly program. It was web-based rather than server-based and so it required more "clicks" than the previous program used by the teachers and was accessible at home or at school. Based on this one demonstration of the program, the county office decided to utilize the program the next school year. The integration process was complicated by obstacles that teachers and administrators were not equipped to handle, making the successful implementation almost impossible.

Innovation Integration

SchoolMAX was the county's first program that compiled these aspects into one program. As good as this sounds, it was not a pleasant transition. As part of the implementation of the program

some teachers were given a two- hour tutorial and then were required to redeliver to coworkers to prepare them for the beginning of school. This was done during pre-planning of the 2008-2009 school year.

Open House night was the Thursday before school started the following Monday. Students come to the school and get their class schedule and can visit their soon to be teachers. On the day of open house, the SchoolMAX server crashed and all of the schedules were gone. We had to hand write around 750 schedules based on what few schedules we had printed out. It was a nightmare culminating with having to give students and parents hand written schedules that would probably have to be rescheduled the following week.

The school year began with teachers getting very little training and very little communication between the county office and each school regarding this new program. No one at the individual schools had been adequately trained. The county ITS department decided to start a Student Information Systems (SIS) committee. Principals from each middle and high school selected a representative from their teachers, registrars, and guidance counselors to serve on this committee. The committee began to meet to bring lists of problems each school was having with SchoolMAX to the county's attention. The lists were then combined, prioritized and discussed by the committee. The SIS Committee meets every 2-4 weeks in order to stay on top of problems with the program.

At one point, the problems with SchoolMAX had gotten so bad that the county looked into trying to get out of the contract with Harris Computers, the company that bought out SchoolMAX in the fall of 2008. It was impossible for the county to get out of the contract, however, the inquiry into leaving Harris Computers at the end of the contract prompted the leaders of the company to pay more attention to all the problems the county was having. Barrow County was one of five systems in Georgia that had signed on with the new integrated system and all were having difficulties. Harris Computers

sent a team of software, hardware and other experts to come to our county and see firsthand the

struggles the county was having due to the new program.

Currently the county and the SIS Committee are working together with Harris Computers to fix

the parts of the program that are not user friendly or do not work. It has been a long road since the

purchase of this program but I think we are finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel in regards to

complete diffusion of this innovation.

The Analysis

As a member of the SIS Committee, I am not aware of how the system came to purchase this

upgrade. If hind sight is 20/20, the county may see that the use of one of the diffusion models from

Surviving Change (2000) may have been useful to make the diffusion smooth.

Ely's Conditions of Change model allows implementation of new innovations to require the

environment to be taken into consideration. Ely has specified eight "ground rules" that must occur for

innovation implementation to be successful (Ellsworth, 2000). Let's examine the implementation of

SchoolMAX based on these eight principles.

According to Ely, there must be "dissatisfaction with the status quo" in order for change to occur

(Ellsworth, 2000, p. 68). Was the county not satisfied with their current system? Were there major

problems? As a teacher, I did not feel that there was anything wrong with the previous program. At this

point, I would have not recommended change because I was not dissatisfied and the product we had

served us well.

Once the dissatisfaction has been declared, Ely's next rule must be met. "The people who will

ultimately implement any innovation must possess sufficient knowledge and skills to do the job"

(Ellsworth, 2000, p. 68), meaning that the teachers and staff members that are actually working with the

innovation need to know how it works. In the instance of SchoolMAX, teachers were not properly

trained. This lack of training let our teachers to inadvertently hinder the diffusion process

Ely's next rule is "The things that are needed to make the innovation work should be easily accessible" (Ellsworth, 2000, p. 69). Barrow County economically disadvantaged student population is currently at 47% and is growing every day. The county does not receive a ton of money from SPLOST or property taxes because of this number. Therefore, our technology is somewhat outdated. Can this program run on an older machine? A lot of new software must have the latest and greatest in order to work appropriately. Our system does not me meet this requirement for effective implementation of SchoolMAX.

"Implementers must have time to learn, adapt, integrate, and reflect on what they are doing" (Ellsworth, 2000, p. 69) If a new technology or innovation is introduced to a school's staff, proper training and continued training must be implemented. With this grading program, it was given to us and we were expected to use with little or no training. Many teachers got frustrated very quickly and gave up on the program. This led to dissatisfaction by a large population of the system employees.

 "Rewards or incentives [must] exist for participants" (Ellsworth, 2000, p. 70). This goes back to "dissatisfaction of the status quo" (Ellsworth, 2000, p. 68). If there is a strategy or innovation in your school that is working, but there is something better coming down the line, the teachers that you expect to embrace and implement the change need to be rewarded for their extra work. Learning a new program takes extra time out of the teacher's schedule and this should be noted by principals and county leaders. Rewards and incentives will create a better atmosphere for teacher "buy-in".

"Participation {in the change process must be} expected and encouraged" (Ellsworth, 2000, p. 71). Administrators need to make sure the implemented practice is being utilized by the teachers in the classroom. They must have a positive attitude toward the innovation and expect the same of the teachers. This also goes along with the quality and ease of the program. SchoolMAX is not the most user friendly program. There needed to be extra emphasis put on getting to know the program before they are expected to use it in a regular setting.

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The next step in Ely's model involves the process of diffusion in itself. "An unqualified go-ahead and vocal support for the innovation by key players and stakeholders is necessary" (Ellsworth, 2000, p. 71). A person should feel involved in the process if they are expected to use the new innovation. If you just tell someone that they are going to do something, they are less likely to be on board wholeheartedly. In the instance with SchoolMAX, I feel that the support for this program was not available at the beginning. I think that if more people were brought on board at an earlier time, then the issues that were faced would not have been so substantial.

The final rule of Ely's model is "Leadership {must be} evident" (Ellsworth, 2000, p. 72). If leadership (individual or otherwise) is not evident, there won't be success of integration or innovation. The lack of leadership in the implementation of the new SchoolMAX software was very apparent. Although many people would say the implementation was not successful, I would have to disagree. Yes, it was very difficult in the beginning and yes, we failed according to Ely's model. However, we are still using the program so it is not a complete loss.

Ely's model for diffusion of innovations shows that Barrow County needs to think about how they implement new technologies into the school system. The model showed that the necessary items were not in place for the innovation to be a success. We will still be using SchoolMAX because of financial limitations, but going forward, I will look to these innovations with a more critical eye.

Resources

Ellsworth, J. (2000). *Surviving change: a survey of educational change models.* Washington, DC: Office of

Educational Research and Improvement.

(2008). *SchoolMAX Enterprise*. Retrieved from http://www.schoolmax.net/

Stansbury, M. (2009, August 31). SchoolMAX cited in back-to-school nightmare PGCPS administrators

blame software glitches and poor planning for scheduling breakdown that leaves parents and

students furious. *E School News*, Retrieved from http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/top-

news/?i=60424