Fast-Tracking the Paperwork for Federal Programs

Sylvie Hale has photographs of school district storerooms where the paperwork required to monitor federal and state education programs fills rows and rows of file boxes, stacked floor to ceiling.

"Federal and state programs, such as Title III for English language acquisition, address important equity goals in public schools," says Hale, who is Director of Program Development and Strategic Planning for the Comprehensive School Assistance Program (CSAP) at WestEd. "But, our team once estimated that just reviewing the compliance paperwork for one large urban school district's 20-plus federal and state programs required 11 state education agency staff members, working full-time for 20 days, and, with travel expenses, cost about $100,000."

Confident that technology could contribute to a more efficient, cost-effective way to do things, Hale and her development team created a web-based data and information management system called the WestEd Tracker. In just four days, "Tracker," as the system is known for short, can complete the kind of review that previously took four weeks.

Tracker is currently used in state and local education agencies in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah and is undergoing pilot-testing in Washington State. Its efficiency is freeing up resources for strategic planning and better implementation of federal programs—activities that directly affect school improvement efforts. Tracker is even improving the way state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) operate and interact with one another.

Streamlining Compliance Monitoring and Reporting

Using Tracker helps agencies meet the legal requirements that come along with federal and state funding, primarily the monitoring and reporting of how each dollar is spent to improve student achievement. "Simply on the basis of the savings it offers—in staff time, money, and paper—the system's compliance monitoring-and-reporting function "sells itself" to states and districts," says Hale.

Basic arithmetic partly explains its appeal. It's not unusual for a school or LEA to receive funding for up to 20 different federal and state categorical programs. Typically, monitoring these programs requires completing separate reports for each program, maintaining specific records and documentation, and tracking program activities for compliance. The quantity of paperwork can quickly jump to thousands of pages. As a result, preparing and maintaining documentation for compliance reviews creates a heavy burden on already stretched resources. With staff reductions, paperwork can back up and report deadlines can slip. With that much paper to deal with, documentation is easily misplaced and sometimes goes missing. Trying to share paper across various offices and mail

systems can be a logistical nightmare, Hale says, and LEAs are often asked to resend materials they have already mailed, in some cases a half a dozen times.

By contrast, Tracker users have access to all documents online. A messaging feature facilitates two-way communication among staff at the state, district, and school levels, keeping all participants advised of upcoming deadlines; updated guidance and resources; and progress toward compliance resolution. These project management functions also support transparency and mutual accountability.

Historically, the complex compliance and reporting process has demanded a great deal of SEA and LEA staff time, Hale says, and consequently has shaped agency job descriptions and organization. The focus on legal aspects is understandable, given that funding depends on them, she acknowledges. "Our job is to encourage staff to take a step back and realize that the legal requirements are, in fact, very straightforward and can be reliably addressed using Tracker." To persuade program directors that they are not jeopardizing funding by converting to web-based formats and functions, Hale and her colleagues have walked people through various forms and review instruments, item by item, detailing how each legal requirement could be most efficiently addressed using Tracker.

Shifting the Emphasis to Planning and Implementation

Promoting the benefits of Tracker to SEAs and LEAs as a planning tool is often more difficult than convincing them of its value for compliance reporting, Hale says. Nothing in the design of Tracker compels agencies to use its planning functions. Yet the benefits of doing so often become apparent as agencies begin using Tracker for monitoring—largely because it starts to break down the walls between separately managed categorical programs. As a common repository for information, to which all federal programs have access, Tracker begins to make each program more "visible" to the others in ways they have not historically been. It is not unusual for each program within a state or local agency to be headed by a different director, located in a separate office, and implemented completely independently of the others. For example, the Title I (disadvantaged students) director may have no contact with the Title III (English language learner students) director and know nothing about Title III goals and activities, and vice versa. Furthermore, as a result of this compartmentalization, the Title I plan may have a reading goal that is different from the Title III plan's reading goal. If an LEA is in improvement status, there may be an additional layer of reading goals associated with that. Yet all of these goals may be set for the same students.

As part of its technical assistance, CSAP encourages agencies to take advantage of the opportunity Tracker offers for a more effective approach to planning. What's most challenging to a state's or district's school improvement efforts—but, ultimately, most beneficial—is bringing staff together from the various programs to develop a single, integrated plan that articulates common learning goals for students based on academic standards. This requires staff to set aside traditional, program-centric approaches to learning goals—defined by compliance requirements and federal forms—and take a more student-centered approach. "They have to agree, for example," says Hale, "that a reading goal is just a reading goal—it's about students and learning, not about where the funding comes from." Once an overarching reading goal is established for all students, specific instructional strategies can be outlined, as needed, for students from migrant worker families,

students learning English, students receiving special education services, and other subgroups.

Arizona, one of six states that have adopted Tracker, has taken several steps toward consolidating program goals. "We have incorporated School Improvement, Title II, Title III, and Educational Technology programs, along with Title I, in our plans," says Nancy Konitzer, Title I Director for the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). "We are breaking down the silos in the state department by consolidating programs, setting a model that LEAs can follow."

Over the six years ADE has used Tracker, the agency has institutionalized some of the organizational changes prompted by the system. "We've learned that we need a formal structure that has representation from all of the federal programs involved, so we have a steering committee that meets regularly," Konitzer says. "We have added district representatives as well. The steering committee's charge is to assist with the implementation of the Tracker among programs with consistency, to prioritize Tracker development needs, and to jointly solve problems that arise."

Building Capacity Through Organizational Development

Its many strengths notwithstanding, Hale is quick to caution that Tracker is by no means a "plug-and-play" technical solution. "Although it may sound odd, Tracker is not principally about the technology," she says. "Tracker is delivered with a great deal of technical assistance, in order to adapt it to an SEA's or LEA's particular systems and needs. But more importantly, we've learned that the software is most effective when state and local education agencies are committed to the organizational development—changes in staff roles and responsibilities, procedures, and sometimes policies—that build capacity to improve planning, implementation, and monitoring of state and federal programs."

SEAs in the six states using Tracker have taken capacity building to the regional level by forming a cross-state learning community through which they can share Tracker ideas, challenges, and solutions with one another. "We facilitate a lot of conversations among program and IT people in each state so that they can use Tracker in their agencies more effectively," says Paul Koehler, Director of the Southwest Comprehensive Center at WestEd, which provides resources and technical assistance to help states meet federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind) requirements. "For the past five years, we've brought all the states together as a region each year to talk about how they've been using Tracker and what's been most effective." One result of those meetings is a list of ideas that goes back to the development team working on Tracker to continue to enhance and improve the system. "Ongoing development of Tracker," Koehler says, "is now being shaped by the states that are using it."

For further information about the WestEd® Tracker™ system, contact Sylvie Hale at 415.652.3188, or shale@WestEd.org.