

Addressing the Special Education Crisis

Commentary

Walter G. Amprey, Ed.D.
President, The KimKeli Group
Finksburg, Md.

School administrators are facing a crisis in special education delivery. Teacher turnover is high. Paperwork takes an excessive amount of time. Thousands of dollars are wasted or lost because of inefficiencies in public school systems. Yet many educational leaders continue to ignore the problem. Why? Perhaps it is because we have learned to live with the pain. We have come to accept the high cost of administrative and staff resources to manage special education because we think there is no solution. We accept the paperwork burden, low morale and high turnover. We accept losses in revenue reimbursements from Medicaid and other funding resources because we cannot accurately track student data. We continue to use paper-based and outdated technology systems because we think it would be too expensive or difficult to change.

Our schools are overburdened with federal and state rules and regulations that govern special education. It is not only the complexity of these rules and regulations that challenge us; it is the fact that many of these mandates are unfunded. Indeed, with new accountability demands such as the No Child Left Behind requirement that special education students reach the same benchmarks as their mainstream counterparts, the price tag will continue to grow.

In 2002, the Center for Special Education Finance published a report that revealed the cost of educating a student with special education needs during the

1999-2000 school year was 1.9 times the cost of educating a general education student. The report went on to cite that over 21 percent of the average school district's budget was spent on educating students with special education needs, even though these children average only 12 percent of a district's population.

In my past work as a superintendent, and in my current capacity as an educational consultant, I have seen hundreds of dollars, per special education student, wasted in unnecessary costs and lost funding opportunities resulting from out-of-date, ineffective management systems every year. In addition to the fiscal implications, consider the costs to our teachers and students every year. Sadly, it is they who pay the price. But it need not be this way. There is a solution: It's technology. Technology has enhanced greatly the ability of school leaders to measure almost all aspects of accountability. What follows are some examples that drive home this point.

In recent years visionary, business-minded school leaders have been turning to specialized technology-based systems to reduce the administrative burden of special education paperwork and compliance, while reducing costs, increasing accountability and achieving mandated gains. The technology is available, it's proven to work effectively, and it can even pay for itself in its first few years of use. So why aren't more administrators jumping on the bandwagon?

Perhaps it is our approach to technology in general. In the business world, technology is typically viewed as an investment that will pay for itself by replacing inefficient systems and increasing productivity. In the education world, however, we tend to view technology as another operating expense that will squeeze more money from our already strained budgets and create more work for our already overworked teachers and staff. I know of one school district that, when faced with a report showing that a Web-based special education management system would save the district \$800,000 in the first year of implementation alone, stated that they could not afford the new system. But could they afford to lose \$800,000 a year, every year?

By automating administrative processes, however, innovative districts, such as Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS) in North Carolina, are lifting the paperwork burden off the shoulders of teachers and staff and freeing them to spend more time in the classroom helping students make real, meaningful learning gains. There are various options, but WSFCS uses a system from a company called 4GL School Solutions, designed specifically for K-12 school districts. By automatically collecting and storing student information in a Web-based system, rather than a paper-based system, Winston-Salem administrators can instantly access real-time information on each child's special needs and timeline requirements to improve service delivery, and more effectively and efficiently use data to drive decisions.

Having such data available at our fingertips can have a significant impact on the bottom line. In school districts where accurate data are lacking when required or needed, an average of five percent of the child count funding and sometimes up to 50 percent of Medicaid funding can be left on the table. With the right

data, however, we can easily increase revenue recovery by finding services that go unreported and creating documentation that is correct and complete.

I have seen that the right system can typically provide a 100 percent or greater financial return to the district over a three-year period. This means that every dollar that a district spends will result in a dollar of savings and/or increased funding over that three-year period.

As educational leaders, we must continuously look for better ways to administer educational programs, improve business processes and increase the use of data in management and decision making. By more effectively managing the administrative complexities and critical decision-making processes inherent in programs for special populations, we can create a positive impact on the bottom line in our schools and make a profound, positive impact on teaching, learning and student achievement.