



A LARGE DISTRICT'S COMPLEX DATA NEEDS REQUIRE FLEXIBILITY, CUSTOMIZATION

BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Boston, Massachusetts

Boston Public Schools (BPS) is not your average school district. With 137 schools and more than 57,000 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse K-12 students, they have mountains of information to manage. Each of the schools and students has unique needs, and no single formula works universally. With so much to manage, in the 2009-10 school year, BPS sought a new way to organize, streamline, report and securely store their student data, and they needed above-average flexibility.

After much research and discussion, the district opted to discontinue use of their proprietary SIS (which they created themselves over two decades) in favor of the Follett Aspen™ Student Information System (SIS). Aspen is a centralized platform for hosting and managing student data, capable of securely storing class schedules, school events, student performance, athletic eligibility, individual health records and more. It is a powerful tracking and communication tool for students, teachers and parents, able to scale to meet the performance needs of large districts.

During their search for a new SIS, the district knew they needed a highly configurable, sophisticated, yet user-friendly SIS. The district would always grow and change, they realized, and their new SIS must evolve and improve along with their needs. With flexibility at the core of what they were looking for, BPS chose Aspen because it lived up to the demands of their district's size and complexity.



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STEPHEN LYLE

*SIS Program Manager
Boston Public Schools*



CUSTOMIZATION FOR USING DATA MORE EFFICIENTLY

Smaller districts often use Aspen as an out-of-the-box solution, which meets general needs and allows for convenient, cost-effective data management. BPS's situation required more, however, and the Aspen team answered the challenge. Later, BPS added staff developers to manage all aspects of the program and reach a dynamic level of "sophisticated simplicity."

As Stephen Lyle, SIS Program Manager for BPS, explained, Aspen's Programs and General Education Plans allow the district to create customizations affording great

flexibility and usefulness. "There's not a screen in Aspen we aren't able to customize and adapt to our specific needs," said Lyle. "These customizations make the data we present through Aspen easier for users to use and make decisions to support students."

Aspen's ready-made features remain powerful, Lyle explained. "Aspen provides a lot out of the box, and lets us add what we require, saving us money in procurement, integration and support, and tremendous time in user efficiency and the simplicity of a totally integrated solution. Teachers

and administrators don't want to log on to a separate system just to see the support a student is receiving, document an intervention or make a referral to a particular department. But that's what we'd have to do without the unlimited flexibility Aspen provides."

Director of Technology Mark Racine agrees. "Aspen allows BPS to mold our SIS to our users and needs, and helps us avoid purchasing additional software, as we can innovate on its incredible flexibility to meet new challenges, all while simplifying the lives of all our users."

USING ASPEN FOR BETTER IEPs AND ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

Individual education plans (IEP) help students with specialized learning needs get the academic services they require. Many students don't need an IEP, but do need support or assistance to stay on track. The challenge for schools has always been to identify these students before they are already off track and become at risk. Aspen helps BPS create lighter-weight general education plans (GEP) for these students, allowing for earlier diagnoses and intervention before difficulties can escalate.

For example, BPS customized Aspen to auto-generate an Attendance Intervention Plan, based

on the GEP framework, as soon as a student has reached the fourth unexcused absence within a term. Automatic notifications are sent to homeroom teachers and the guidance counselor, with specific instructions on how to work with the student, discuss the matter with the family and alert one of the district's attendance officers if the problem continues.

Lyle adds, "The simple notifications and reminders make it much easier for teachers to remember which students have crossed the unexcused absence threshold, especially as those absences may not have been consecutive.

We remind teachers of basic things like saying to the student when they come back, 'Hey, I missed you in class yesterday.' The data shows us that, in many cases, simply talking to and checking in with students and families makes a huge difference in student attendance."

This use of Aspen has resulted in measurable successes. For instance, the number of students on an attendance plan (students with four or more unexcused absences) has decreased over 30% in the semester since implementing this feature in Aspen.



REFERRALS TO STUDENT SUPPORT TEAMS

Student Support Teams (SSTs) are small groups of teachers who meet weekly to discuss individual needs of students and brainstorm how to help them succeed. With Aspen, BPS now allows (for the first time) for an individual teacher to create an electronic SST Referral. The referring teacher enters the following:

- Presenting concerns
- Interventions tried
- Results of interventions

Guidance Counseling receives the referral, and after review, has Aspen notify all the current teachers of the student, with instructions for them to comment on the referring teacher's observations, interventions and results. Then, when the SST meets, they already have the presenting concern and every teacher's input on that concern right on their screen. With this information immediately available, the team can more quickly identify a success strategy

for the student and document it within the SST Plan. All the current teachers are notified of the plan, recommendations and supports that will be provided, and Aspen notifies them four to six weeks later to again provide their input on how things are going. This cycle then continues until the team either determines the student is back on track, or an escalation to the next tier of intervention is required.

FLEP STUDENT PROGRESS MONITORING

FLEP stands for Formerly Limited English Proficient and refers to students who have exited an English Language Learners program. These students are no longer classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP), but are assessed quarterly, for a time, to track progress and monitor for any sign of difficulty keeping up.

"Aspen has allowed us to create a monitoring program for these students," said Lyle. "As soon as a student's classification changes from LEP to FLEP, Aspen auto-generates the necessary program record that teachers can then easily complete with their observations. This allows us to very quickly, either at the school or the central office, identify students who may need a bit more support to continue to succeed."

To help already busy teachers keep from feeling overwhelmed by

such a rich, full-featured program, BPS further customized Aspen to rearrange some navigational elements. This has resulted in a cleaner interface in which teachers have faster access to the frequently used functions the BPS team has developed. For example, when the FLEP monitoring programs were first created, it took four mouse clicks to get to the right screen once the student was pulled up. Now, there is a top-level navigation element for Programs, and FLEP Monitoring (among other types of programs) is a single click under that. "At this point for a teacher," Lyle explained, "finding the student is the same as finding the FLEP Monitoring record. We've elevated those records to a higher level in terms of its arrangement within the interface because FLEP Monitoring is such a common and important task."

The way data is organized within a system and how users navigate through it is called its "Information Architecture." As Lyle noted, "Every SIS has an Information Architecture determined by the vendor. Aspen's incredible flexibility lets us alter that architecture and arrange screens and data in a way that reflects our priorities and makes things easier and more intuitive for our users."

This approach has genuinely paid off for users. A history teacher at Brighton High School commented, "Aspen is much more intuitive now than when it first launched." Lyle grinned as he heard this and said, "She doesn't realize we've been able to move around the screens we use most, and entirely remove some that we don't." Aspen now reflects the way BPS works, all the way from the classroom to the central office.



TRACKING COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECTS

Community service is a requirement for graduation at several Boston high schools. Until recently, each school has been responsible for its own tracking, leading to an inconsistent and messy set of data and records. Lyle and his team used Aspen's

Programs feature to make custom screens in Aspen for teachers to easily document where students are doing their service. The screens auto-tally the hours by location and school year, and Aspen's built-in Graduation Requirements

functionality now incorporates those tallies to automatically show guidance counselors, parents and even the students themselves, how they are progressing to meet the requirement.

RELYING ON THE ASPEN COMMUNITY OF USERS

The prospect of changing from one SIS to another is daunting for a district, whether small or large. "It is tremendously difficult to roll out a new SIS, but not doing so often means your users are missing out on a lot of great functionality that more modern systems provide," Lyle explained.

As any district that has waited too long will understand, as the legacy SIS grows old, users will start creating their own solutions in spreadsheets, local databases, or various free or even personally purchased online database platforms. This makes the situation even worse as schools and individual users can become attached to their own ways of managing data.

Even though it's difficult, Lyle recommends taking the plunge to put in place an SIS designed to meet the district's current and future needs. "One of the top recommendations I would make for any district looking for a new SIS is to find out about the user community. A good vendor will provide a great deal of support, as Follett did for us," said Lyle, "but other districts can offer some of the most valuable information on how to solve your day-to-day challenges and how to leverage the software to meet evolving needs. Your Aspen 'neighbors' (whether around the state or across the country) face the same obstacles you face, and are more than willing to share how they solved challenges in their district."

"Aspen was built with extreme flexibility as a core principle, which we know from our own due diligence, while other systems have attempted to add flexibility to what is fundamentally an inflexible platform."

STEPHEN LYLE
SIS Program Manager
Boston Public Schools



THE FUTURE FOR BPS WITH ASPEN IN PLACE

Today, BPS is thrilled with the way Aspen allows them to identify the needs of users, and then tailor everything from individual screens up to whole new modules of functionality to address those needs. “It’s a platform we can innovate upon, while it handles the core SIS functions of attendance, conduct, scheduling, gradebook, and parent and student portals quietly and efficiently,” said Lyle. He also described three new aspects of Aspen the district will soon implement.

- Adding visualizations, giving users the ability to see a student’s assessments, attendance, grades, conduct and other data as they trend across years, providing faster insight into how to help the student grow
- Building custom modules involving competency-based education, badging and other innovations
- Expanding General Education Plans to incorporate student and family input

As Lyle explained, the potential Aspen offers will allow BPS to continue to grow and involve all communities. “I’m really looking forward to bringing our families and students into the picture as not just viewers, but contributors to their personalized learning plans through helping to construct their own learning profiles of strengths, challenges, interests and vulnerabilities, so each of their teachers will be better equipped to help them navigate new subjects and continue to grow.”



“With Aspen, Boston Public Schools gets the best of both worlds – a system we can adapt to our unique needs and one that continues to evolve with the market. While many systems make this promise, we’ve found Aspen to be singularly able to actually deliver on the promise.”

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