By Michelle R. Davis

California’s Sanger Unified School District was collecting vast amounts of data on students for years, from absences to test scores and grades. But that information was stored in a variety of systems, teachers couldn't access it in a timely manner, and educators didn't have the digital tools they needed to help them use the data to improve instruction.

Now, the bulk of student data is housed in a consolidated student-information system that teachers can use to create assessments, score them, and get the results analyzed immediately, giving them the power to adjust their teaching based on what they're seeing and analyzing in real time. Gone are the days of waiting weeks, or even months, to get data about student academic performance.

"It's had a huge impact," said Dan Grossnicklaus, the student-information-systems manager for the 11,000-student district. "In the past, the results were more like an autopsy—not much you can do after the fact. Now there can be an intervention before a student leaves the class."

Districts are taking a hard look at the data they have, adding to the information and presenting it to educators in user-friendly ways. Those facts and figures are informing decisions about the deployment of valuable school resources and, in some places, are being shared in a transparent way.

In the Sanger schools, for example, the district deliberately opens up data at all levels. Teachers regularly share student-performance results with their teams to identify areas where instruction wasn't successful. Data may show one teacher had good results with a concept, while students of another teacher struggled. Data from classrooms, departments, and schools are also shared regularly at higher levels at an annual principals' summit, Mr. Grossnicklaus said. Principals present data that they've analyzed on the performance of their schools, down to the classroom level, to the district administration.

"The principals analyze the data and highlight where the holes are and where they're going to make the changes needed," Mr. Grossnicklaus said. "It's a pretty high-stakes presentation."

With all this focus on hard numbers, there's no hiding flaws, he said. The process requires trust that there won't be a focus on failings, but on how to improve. The district had to negotiate with the local teachers' union to be able to share such data, Mr. Grossnicklaus said.
Thinking Strategically

Like the Sanger schools, many other districts are already collecting statistics on students. The problem is they haven't figured out how to use the information strategically to improve student achievement, said Vera Turner of AASA, the School Superintendents Association, who is the group's project manager for the Closing the Gap initiative. Along with the Consortium for School Networking, or COSN, AASA created the initiative to provide districts with free resources to help them choose a learning management system or a student-information system, and to help train educators in how to organize a data initiative and share best practices around data use.

"In this current environment, there's a growing need for accountability and educational data," Ms. Turner said. "This project came about because of a lack of resources to help educators use data more effectively."

That's what the 184,000-student Fairfax County, Va., district is doing with its Electronic Curriculum Assessment Resource Tool, or eCART, system, said Aron M. Sterling, the eCART manager for the district, which is working with the Closing the Gap project. The system is a central repository for teachers to find and share content, lessons, documents, and other learning resources. Teachers collaborate using eCART to build assessments, and the system analyzes data not only from a particular student, class, school, or school cluster, but also longitudinally, a feature added this year, Mr. Sterling said.

Development of eCART has evolved over the past decade, and it continues to change, he said.

"Part of this is the understanding of the importance of data and where data lies," he said. "We talk about what type of data should be collected and how much is too much. It's a real, ongoing conversation."

This school year, the Fairfax County district rolled out a more user-friendly search engine for the system around curriculum resources. It now resembles a shopping search through Amazon rather than a more generalized Google search, Mr. Sterling said.

"Teachers wanted an easy way to filter results. They wanted to know which resources are vetted, which are in-house or which are external," he said. The district is also adding another way of collecting data: teacher feedback and ratings on those resources.

Adam Schechter, an 8th grade civics teacher at Mark Twain Middle School in the Fairfax County district, said the eCART system helps his team of civics teachers drill down to evaluate where students have struggled on a particular question or standard. If it appears one teacher had difficulty getting that concept across, another teacher who had success can provide strategies for improvement.

"We're not judging one teacher against another. It's a more collaborative effort," Mr. Schechter said. "We encourage teachers to get past the idea that they're on their own little island."

Empowering Students

In Gwinnett County, Ga., district officials said a new feature of their data system houses assessments, lessons, documents, and other learning resources available to teachers. It analyzes student data at the student, class, school, and school-cluster levels. The data can also be analyzed longitudinally. Teachers can collaborate on assessments and other documents.

What's new: This school year, the district launched a user-friendly search engine that mimics a shopping experience on Amazon. It uses filters for more targeted results, and teachers can post reviews of different resources.

Ramping Up With Data

The data system for the Fairfax County, Va., school district has evolved over the last decade. Now, the 184,000-student system uses an Electronic Curriculum Assessment Resource Tool, better known as eCART.

The beginning: eCART began as a simple learning management system run by an external vendor. In its next version, eCART became a district-built system that focused on assessment and curriculum with minimal data analysis.

eCART now: The system houses assessments, lessons, documents, and other learning resources available to teachers. It analyzes student data at the student, class, school, and school-cluster levels. The data can also be analyzed longitudinally. Teachers can collaborate on assessments and other documents.

What's new: This school year, the district launched a user-friendly search engine that mimics a shopping experience on Amazon. It uses filters for more targeted results, and teachers can post reviews of different resources.
In the future: Teachers will soon be able to add their own finds to the mix of learning resources available on eCART. The district is working on a data portal to allow parents to access the system and see data analysis about their children. The district hopes to ultimately have the eCART system interact with other district data-collection points, such as attendance or student goals, and find a way for it to factor in such learning opportunities as digital portfolios or other types of open-ended evaluations.

SOURCE: Fairfax County Public Schools
good data and you're partnering with decisionmakers," he said.

In the 21,000-student Syracuse city school system in New York, which was recently accepted into the Strategic Data Project for this school year, administrators hope to use data uncovered by Harvard researchers to gather information on key performance indicators.

Every department—from transportation and purchasing to curriculum—will examine how its operations affect student achievement, said Brandan Keaveny, the chief accountability officer. The district will try to link, for example, how late buses or a delay in technology purchasing might have fallout for achievement.

"We can begin to data-mine for relations we didn't even think were out there," Mr. Keaveny said. "Currently, the gap between the freshness of data from the operational side to when program and policy decisions are being made is too big."

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