ABC Case Studies

Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri

Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri (BBBSEMO) and their local school districts have created a unique, replicable and outcomes-oriented partnership that leveraged an early warning system (EWS) to improve the lives of children. Following an intense strategic planning process in 2005, BBBSEMO revised its vision and mission statements and set out to turn their big vision into meaningful, measurable and tangible outcomes for local children.

Focusing on the ABCs
BBBSEMO began by identifying a partner who was willing to innovate: Cape Girardeau Public Schools, where one of four students failed to graduate on time. BBBSEMO asked, “What results must we deliver in order to be considered a high value partner?”

Over nine months, BBBSEMO, the superintendent, principals, and Southeast Missouri State University educators developed ABC Today!, a program focused on tracking students’ Attendance, Behavior, and Classroom success as the first step in returning them to the graduation path. The agency planned to devote one year with the school district collecting this information—manually—and identifying patterns, policies, and interventions to guide their later work. Long-standing relationships enabled BBBSEMO to design data access procedures and obtain parent or guardian consent to meet FERPA and district requirements.

Workers began to quickly uncover unnerving new information about the children they had served for years: a second grade girl had been absent for 28 days due to chronic head lice and had failing grades in reading and math; a fifth grade boy had missed 38 days and had accumulated 13 discipline referrals that began after his father returned from prison. The organization decided 12 months was too long to wait for fine-tuning a process, and began “refueling in mid-air.” BBBSEMO targeted students who were flagged for increased interventions and soon saw results: attendance and course performance improved, and the number of tardies and behavior infractions decreased. Stakeholders are convinced that data helped—“We don’t have to fight over ABC; we know these are key performance indicators so we just have to work together to improve them.”

Replicating and Improving What Works
After the successes of the first year of data-driven interventions in Cape Girardeau, BBBSEMO was invited to replicate the model in St. Louis Public Schools. A Director of Impact was placed in the five schools and meetings were held—monthly with principals and quarterly with district leaders—to review data, identify trends, create intervention plans and examine outcomes.

The BBBSEMO staff met weekly to identify successful interventions and retool less successful efforts, and to set incremental, school-specific goals, regularly holding “blow it up” conversations—to “inflate” a good idea or “pop” a strategy that was not producing
results. Partners learned to balance the frequency with which data was examined against the time needed to see results.

**Partnerships Build Even Better Results:** Within four years, BBBSEMO’s work was endorsed by Civic Progress, an organization of St. Louis CEOs and leading executives. Wells Fargo Advisors stepped in with financial, technical, and human resources, greatly advancing the agency’s capacity by building systems to electronically transfer data between district and BBBSEMO databases, while retaining the early emphasis on easy, fast, and convenient processes.

**Widening the Circle of Engagement:** One result of the attention on outcomes has been a focus on results for all. When BBBSEMO first began using student data, staff looked only at red flags and acted on problems. But, as one staff member remembered, “it occurred to us that we should do something with every piece of data.” The staff decided to broaden attention to students who had no early warning indicators, enabling active reinforcement of good behavior and student performance across the board. As an unforeseen result, relationships were built with the parents of well-performing students and the number of volunteers and positive influences engaged with the school expanded. Now, according to BBBSEMO, “We celebrate or intervene on every piece of data we have.” Even that requires work. BBBSEMO is working with the school districts to develop standards around celebrations, including agreement on what qualifies as success and how to identify it. This collaboration and partnership is helping to make the culture of intervention and celebration a broader part of district and school culture. According to one district leader, “If our students are going to succeed we must create connections with the community and foster long-term commitments that provide support and encouragement to our families. Our school district is deeply committed to expanding our partnership with BBBSEMO and strengthening ABC Today! because it puts good hearts and data side-by-side.”

**Lessons Learned**

**Relationships Matter in Effective Partnerships:** According to one district leader, “we have seen first-hand how... collaboration can improve the educational opportunities and outcomes for our kids.” The pre-existing relationship with the community eased concerns around data privacy and access, and made parents comfortable with the role the organization was playing in their schools. The close relationships between BBBSEMO, the Cape Girardeau and St. Louis School Districts enabled educators and BBBSEMO workers to more effectively identify the causes of absenteeism and problem behavior, and craft effective interventions.

**Keep it Simple:** The flexibility of all parties in adapting the data system and re-evaluating student trends enabled an effective system. The constant quest to keep things simple and the traffic-light warning system created a reminder of the importance of usability when presenting educators and volunteers with complex data.

**Moving Forward:** Continuing its organic evolution, the BBBSEMO is considering replication opportunities locally and nationally, finalizing the development of a new web-based ABC Today! Intelligence Tool and launching a whole-school pilot reform model called ABC Today! School.
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS)

Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) is a large, diverse city/county school system serving 78,000 middle Tennessee students, 70 percent of whom are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. The District is a blend of both low-performing and high-performing schools. Its efforts to build and implement an EWS system are situated in a multi-year improvement effort called Nashville Achieves, which involves broad-based community participation, including the Mayor’s Office, City Council, business and nonprofit organizations and input from over 200 community leaders involved in transformational leadership groups advising the direction and content of reforms. In designing and implementing their EWS, MNPS exercised leadership and identified help where needed. They invested heavily in rollout and implementation of their system, integrating it thoughtfully with instructional reforms. Their system is one manifestation of the district’s cultural shift toward data-driven improvement and grew out of the superintendent’s advice for a data system: “Make it manageable. Make it meaningful. Make it matter.”

Getting the System Right

MNPS received technical support from the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University to develop their EWS triggers. Together, they analyzed longitudinal district data in the context of state and local policies, practices, and conditions. Currently, attendance, behavior, and course performance are flagged, with thresholds of less than 85 percent attendance, more than five offenses for behavior, such as suspensions, or less than a 70 percent average in core classes. Absence reports (including excused, unexcused, in- or out-of-school suspension) are differentiated in the reporting system. These triggers will be reviewed each summer to make sure that they accommodate most recent trends in data. Previous years can be viewed so that individual student trajectories are evident over time.

Lessons Learned

• **Use Existing Resources:** MNPS’ EWS was designed in-house and has grown organically over the last two years as a tool for instructional improvement, combining increases in technical complexity with user friendliness and implementation support for leaders and teachers.

• **Keep It Simple:** Sophisticated navigability means that the Director of Schools (Tennessee’s term for Superintendent) can, with only three clicks, see each school’s overview. The easy-to-use educational data warehouse is refreshed nightly and the system itself is accessible.

• **Provide Training and Support:** As the EWS fully moves out to the schools, a new unit is being formed within the central office to guide EWS implementation at a granular level. Previously principals and leadership teams became acquainted with system features in a gradual two-year process that created knowledgeable site-based mentors and advocates. By 2010-2011, observers perceived that most principals were comfortable interpreting the data now available in increasingly clear, clean dashboards and over 130 reports. Beginning in 2011-12, twelve central office data coaches and one oversight coordinator were made possible by Race to the Top funding. They will be deployed to each of the 12 school clusters, with priority given to high-needs schools. The
data coaches are charged to build a culture among teachers and counselors for understanding student-, classroom-, and school-level EWS data, and using it to guide intervention efforts. They also augment a sizable corps of instructional coaches and reflect a district-wide investment to build human capital through professional development and coaching.

**Challenges**
Challenges remain and will be addressed in the same way that the system was developed with ingenuity, creativity, and patience.

- Some schools are more welcoming of data coaches than others.
- There is not yet an easy interface with state data systems.
- Teachers do not uniformly use the electronic grade-book.
- The data system does not currently identify overage or under-credited students effectively.
- Interface with transportation and financial systems will help the district understand and improve student mobility and cost issues.
- A FERPA compliant interface with external community agencies will help MNPS assist its students with a wider range of interventions.
Chicago Public Schools (CPS)

Behind the Scenes
Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the nation’s third-largest school district, with 407,000 students and a long-standing and serious graduation challenge: in the mid-1990s, as in many urban districts at the time, the graduation rate was 46 percent. Numerous reforms have been implemented by superintendents since then, with the net effect that by 2010 the graduation rate had risen 20 percentage points, a great improvement but still far below goals.

In a strong partnership with CPS, the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) began analyzing longitudinal CPS data in the late 1990’s. In 2005, CCSR released a report identifying the major factors that predict CPS ninth-graders’ high school completion: failing no more than one class per semester and completing sufficient credits to be on track for grade-level promotion.

These factors were combined into the “Freshman On-Track” rate, and proved more accurate at predicting at-risk students than standardized test scores or student demographics. In 2007, the CCSR confirmed that using the Freshman On-Track rate, along with GPA and number of course failures could accurately predict a student’s graduation or dropout status 80 percent of the time. On-Track freshmen were almost four times more likely to graduate within four years than off-track freshmen.

Getting Started
In 2008-2009, CPS implemented a two-pronged initiative translating research into action. District-wide, high schools were informed at school opening by their Area Instructional Officers and by memos that actionable data for incoming ninth-graders was available electronically in a “watch list” that included eighth grade attendance and course performance. Later in the year, “success reports,” distributed every five weeks at the end of a marking period, flagged students with attendance issues or a D or lower in core courses. Principals were urged to organize their schools to use this data to identify and intervene with students who needed extra help, a recommendation given clout by the inclusion of “On Track” indicators for ninth graders in the framework for principals’ accountability.

In the same time period, a one-year grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation enabled creation of intensively-supported pilot Freshman On-Track labs in six high schools, with the district’s intention of taking lessons learned to scale. Two paid coordinators were hired for each lab school, and they, with support, training and protocols from the area offices, assisted school administrators, teachers and counselors in understanding the data, using it, and designing and implementing innovative intervention plans for students.

While all six of the labs received equal resources, there were varying degrees of success. Collaboration among administrators, teachers, and researchers was crucial to the use of data. Schools in which there was little support from administrators, or in which
resources were spread too thinly over too many students did not achieve the success of other schools. Schools with high teacher involvement yielded the most success. At the end of the school year, lessons learned were compiled and analyzed, resulting in “Freshmen on Track: A Guidebook to Help You Keep Your Freshmen on Track to Graduation.”

**Keep Moving, 2009 and Forward**

In school year 2009-2010, the Freshmen on Track guidebook was provided to all high schools, over the web, and on CD. Schools continued to receive watch lists and success lists. Misconduct data, both aggregated and student-level, was available in a separate report, the “Student Profile,” and the level of detail about what should be accessible to whom continued to be under discussion.

End-of-semester reports were added, focusing on credit accrual and need for placement in credit recovery to get back on track. Work on using the On Track indicators became more intentional; some area offices implemented coaching systems to provide targeted supports to schools; some had monthly meetings; and all held performance management sessions in which interventions to keep students on track were discussed. Teachers utilized lists to shape their classroom activities, and schools used them to manage extracurricular participation and wraparound service provision. Some schools put in extra effort; those in which data (other than attendance) were inputted daily were able to extract information and reports on a daily or weekly basis. Recognizing the value of additional support for using data and guiding interventions, some of the principals of the On Track lab schools were able to allocate funds to continue to support a coordinator even though grant funding had ceased.

By 2010-2011, the On Track system, although still variably implemented, had become institutionalized in the district and expanded to include tenth graders, based on a set of tenth-grader specific indicators; accountability for their On-Trackness was added to the High School Score Card. As the school system reorganized in 2011-2012, with networks rather than area offices, the work of providing help to schools shifted; schools that are part of external networks (for instance, the CCSR’s College Success Network) are further supported and coached in data use and interventions by external partners, just as some internal networks also provide help.

**Impact**

By several calculation methods, the On Track system has been successful. CPS data show that the freshmen On-Track lab schools have a 76.1 percent “on track” rate, exceeding rates before implementation and higher than the district average of 63.9 percent. District wide, with data from CCSR, the On-Track rate has risen approximately 10 percentage points, from a baseline of 56 to 59 percent in 2004-2007 to 69 percent in 2010.

**Moving Forward During Tight Fiscal Times**

Although recent cuts to data personnel and other services have reduced the degree to which CPS can support schools, providing student data is continuing. CPS believes that in the long run, investment in the On-Track system saves money, as it enables educators
to aid at-risk students earlier and to avoid costly supports later. The On-Track system was scaled to serve 60,500 ninth and tenth grade students at 107 high schools, and is slated for expansion to the middle school level and possibly eleventh grade during 2012-2013. The first cohort of students monitored through the On-Track system will graduate in 2011-2012, enabling impact studies. The district also plans to analyze different elements of data and effectiveness, including: which interventions are working best for students; how, longitudinally, students move on and off track; what grade distribution looks like, and how this affects student performance. With clearly documented rising graduation rates, the challenge ahead is to make sure that more high school graduates graduate well prepared for college and work. ACT scores, a benchmark for college readiness, have risen one percentage point in the last decade while participation has increased 10 percentage points.
Knox County Schools (KCS)

Knox County Schools (KCS) serves 57,000 students, 40 percent of whom are eligible for free- or-reduced-price lunch. This district has some of the state’s best, as well as lower performing schools. Through its five-year strategic plan, entitled *Excellence for All Children*, Knox County Schools set ambitious goals to prepare its students for college, for careers and for life. To address educational disparities, the Knox County Board of Education set a tough challenge for their community: 100 percent of entering ninth graders will complete high school in four years, 90 percent of those will graduate with the regular diploma, 90 percent of those who graduate with a regular diploma will have taken the ACT exam, and 90 of those who have taken the ACT will achieve a composite 21 or higher.

A Perfectly Aligned Partnership

The Knoxville Chamber, which in the summer of 2011 was named national Chamber of Commerce of the Year, set the challenge that Knox County and adjoining Oak Ridge would have the best workforce in the country as well as be a beacon for new business. To reach this goal, they asked KCS what was needed to achieve the high goals that had been set. Their answer was simple: funding. The business community responded to the call, asking questions like: “What should we fund? How will we know what is working? How will investment outcomes be measured?” They also got to work. With the district’s permission, MBA interns discovered these questions couldn’t be answered because there were 20 separate data repositories. They found that KCS had a great deal of raw data insufficiently integrated to answer tough questions about strategic investments. The conditions were right for a partnership. The new superintendent was familiar with the value of good data systems from a previous role. The business community knew the value of education and possessed strong technical expertise to help with solutions. Mutual commitment grew to build a basic integrated data warehouse. A retired CEO stepped in to oversee system design. Local philanthropies committed funds. A technology system from a college bookstore supplier that had powerful querying tools which were not operating-system dependent, (necessary because KCS had many different makes of computer) was identified for use and later purchased with school system funds.

Getting to Work

The superintendent determined that the system should enable viewing student progress longitudinally. Elementary and middle school teachers and administrators should be able to look at middle and high school data on elementary school graduates. Their high school counterparts should be able to look backwards at students’ performance in middle and elementary school. Focus groups of principals, teachers, and counselors were convened to advise on what was needed and in what format. From there, the education and business community designed a comprehensive and flexible system that combined a vast amount of historical information. This included financial, academic and demographic profiles, state assessments and ACT scores, daily grades, daily and period attendance and tardies, daily discipline, enrollments, and mobility among schools. In December 2009, just 18 months after inception, the first Education
Management Information System (EMIS) was unveiled in Knox County. By mid-year 2011, six years of data had been loaded.

**Lessons Learned**

They Needed to Learn More. Cost-benefit analysis showed that the lowest performing schools were receiving the most resources but needed help in choosing and targeting interventions to help the right students most effectively. Educators requested more instructional data. In 2011, outcomes of a district-designed formative assessment were added. Interest in these results was viewed as critical to developing educator ownership and use. Later that same year, a new reporting tool was released to all teachers and principals that assisted them in navigating through the data maze to an individual student profile. With just three clicks of a mouse, easily readable, color-coded, two-page profiles appeared.

**The Partnership Continues.** The Chamber has not strayed from its original goals. It has continued to press forward with the local school district to grow the best-prepared workforce in the country. Through its Workforce Development group:

- A gap analysis was carried out of present and future workforce needs and how area schools and institutions of higher education are meeting those needs;
- 100 community leaders committed to spreading the word about education and workforce needs with an “Education is a Community Issue” campaign and presentations. Materials and a video were developed to support these efforts;
- 10 or more companies support 100 teachers per summer in once-a-week summer lunch and learns, especially in science and math related occupations, giving educators the opportunity to internalize workforce expectations for both soft and hard skills and take these back to the classroom; and
- The business community joined with the superintendent to write a new strategic plan. A Chamber executive also joined the KCS implementation team, serving on the superintendent’s leadership team and often spending a day a week in the district.

**Moving Forward**

Latest results from the Tennessee assessment system (from the 2010-2011 school year) show that district scores have continued to rise. But the work is not over. In the 2011-2012 school year, there are plans to add an EWS component with fifth and eighth grade flags, and ninth grade indicators. Improvements will also enable data for transfer students to be accessed within a day of registering and fuel a study of school feeder patterns and their costs. Partners will continue to load longitudinal data until 15 years of data are in the system, making it possible to understand historical trends.