Status Update on Implementation and Improvement of the Shared School District Data Management System

Subtitle: Act 66 of 2017, Section 17

REPORT

December 31, 2021

Report to the General Assembly

Submitted by

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VERMONT

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Introduction

Legislation

This report is submitted pursuant to [Act 66 of 2021, Sec. 17](#), which requires the Agency of Education (AOE) to submit quarterly status reports on the implementation and improvement of the Shared School District Data Management System (SSDDMS), and the Agency's management and oversight of the project's identified contractor, PowerSchool. The section requires a status update on the following five items:

1. System outages
2. Bank reconciliation
3. Reporting enhancement
4. System enhancement
5. User training

Sec. 17(b) requires the AOE to consult with the Vermont Association of School Business Officials (VASBO) and professional accounting firms actively engaged in school finance in Vermont.

Background

In Act 11 of 2018 (Special Session), the General Assembly required all Vermont supervisory unions, supervisory districts, school districts, and independent technical center districts to implement the SSDDMS system by July 1 of 2020. This made a voluntary program established by AOE in response to Act 179 of 2014 a requirement for all Vermont supervisory unions and supervisory districts (SU/SDs).

The Agencies of Education and of Digital Services (ADS), in collaboration with a group of Vermont school business officials, had already selected a contractor, PowerSchool, for the implementation of the voluntary program, using the eFinancePlus (hereinafter eFinance) software platform. Pursuant to the intent of the General Assembly in Act 18 0f 2018, this selected system became the requirement for all Vermont SU/SDs. Subsequently, the General Assembly adjusted the implementation dates of the program, in Act 72 of 2019, in response to concerns from school administrators that the implementation was complex and needed additional time.

In December of 2020, AOE Chief Financial Officer William Bates recommended to Secretary French that the Agency introduce a six month pause in implementation, to allow the vendor time to address identified deficiencies in its software and training. Both AOE and ADS worked with the General Assembly to establish this pause in Act 66.

Act 66 of 2021 extended the statutory deadline from July 1, 2022 to January 1, 2023, for all SU/SDs to be using the SSDDMS, and paused the further implementation for new SU/SDs until after January 1, 2022.

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Stakeholder Engagement

Pursuant to Sec. 17(b) of Act 66 of 2021, the AOE is required to collect input from VASBO and audit firm accountants in preparing these reports. The Agency will, on a quarterly basis, provide a set period for the collection of stakeholder input from VASBO and audit firms known to have recently performed audits for Vermont school districts.

Status Update (as of end of Q2, FY 2022)

In addition to general updates on improvement and implementation issues, Act 66 requires five specific additional items be addressed in this status report: Outages, Bank reconciliation, Reporting enhancements, System enhancements and User training, all of which PowerSchool had agreed to deliver to Vermont by July 1, 2021.

Implementation

As of December 2021, 20 SU/SDs have implemented eFinance, (one having gone live on July 1, 2021). Due to the pause referenced above, the remaining 34 SU/SDs are not scheduled to begin any implementation activities until after January 1, 2022.

System Outages

There was one outage event on October 28, 2021 that impacted system uptime and system speeds for many users for part of the day. A review of the outage determined it was related to a low server memory condition. More memory was added to the servers. There have not been eFinance issues reported since that time. Cognos, the IBM reporting tool that integrates with eFinance, was taken down on December 14, 2021 due to a global vulnerability that was identified by IBM. PowerSchool restored service by the next day.

Bank Reconciliation

The enhanced Bank Reconciliation process, promised for July 1, 2021 was finally made available in November and was pushed out to all customers on December 4, 2021. Two Vermont districts put in a tremendous amount of time and effort working with PowerSchool to iron out all the functionality issues. PowerSchool provided an updated training meeting for users, and the AOE is supporting users as they adopt the new system. We hope to have the two districts who participated in the testing deliver a training session sometime in January, to share best practices.

Reporting Enhancements

4 of the 5 Cognos reports promised for July have reached the sign-off stage. PowerSchool committed to having 5 Cognos reports in place by July 1, 2021. These reports included the following:

1. Trial Balance
2. Profit and Loss (P&L, or Income Statement)
3. General Ledger report that includes Assets, Liabilities, Equity, Expenditures and Revenues
4. Open Accounts Payable Aging

5. Payroll Journal Entry

As of late September, Cognos reports 1, 2 and 3 have been signed off. The Open Accounts Payable Aging report bypassed Cognos and was released directly as a front-end canned system report, but upon initial, and continued testing was found to be faulty. The last update to this report was on December 4, 2021, which appears to have corrected the outstanding issues. It is in the process of sign-off. The Payroll Journal Entry report in Cognos is still not reconciling for all users and is still being reviewed. The 4 reports originally released in Cognos are currently being coded and developed as front-end system reports. PowerSchool has announced that one or more of them could be released as early as January 8, 2022.

PowerSchool had originally promised to develop Vermont's top 10 reports. The work above reflects progress on the first 5 of those reports. A sub-group of users is currently vetting the list of the 5 additional reports to be requested at some point in the near future.

System Enhancements

Of the roughly 400 support tickets that were submitted as part of the 20.11 system update, less than 20 remain open as of early December. A 'stand up' meeting on these support issues takes place every other week.

The Due To/Due From interfund accounting feature was made available on July 1, 2021. PowerSchool met with a small group of users on September 28 to answer some outstanding questions about the system functionality, with the hope that PowerSchool would then lead an updated statewide training on the system shortly after that. The decision was made to postpone the statewide training until PowerSchool could ascertain whether adequate system reports were available in the eFinancePlus system to help users track and audit the specific accounting entries made by the new interfund system. As of early December, we are still waiting for the results of this investigation by PowerSchool and have held off on the statewide training. In the meantime, PowerSchool assures us that the system is making the necessary accounting transactions in the background, but the full visibility into some of these accounting entries does not appear to be available in the eFinance accounting system, i.e. tracing the individual debits and credits.

Another update requested by Vermont for July was a more formal process for Student Activities accounts. This was included as part of the 20.11 update, and training was provided. At this time, a few districts in Vermont have begun using the new feature. There have been at least 2 requests for enhancements of this feature, related to a need for more detailed reporting from the system and the ability to enter interest, fees or transfers between accounts.

Vermont's Governance and Change Advisory Board for eFinance (the Governance Group), in late September, updated and reprioritized their outstanding list of system enhancement requests to PowerSchool. The list includes over 100 unique requests, but the Governance Group will focus their attention on the top 30 items, some of which are recently finished (e.g. Bank Reconciliation) or still under development (e.g. integration with Vermont's educator licensing system), but most of which have not yet been initiated by PowerSchool.

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PowerSchool has its next major upgrade (similar to 20.11) scheduled for release in April of 2022 (version 22.4). Vermont may opt to begin testing this release in February.

User Training

As mentioned above, Vermont is still waiting on final guidance, training and documentation on configuring the Due To/Due From functionality.

PowerSchool has, at Vermont's request, scheduled a repeat series of trainings on Calendar Year End Human Resource requirements.

In mid-December, PowerSchool offered to make one of their specialists available to Vermont on a weekly basis, through a series of 'Ask the Expert' meetings.

Other Issues

PowerSchool replaced their Vermont eFinance Program Manager in July. As of October, their Project Manager went on an extended leave of absence and was taken off the Vermont project, and has not yet been replaced.

Two areas of functionality in eFinance have been or are being sunset and AOE has been in a long-term negotiation with PowerSchool on their replacements. PowerSchool recently agreed to provide 2 of its modules from its Unified Talent HR application to Vermont at no cost, those being Applicant Tracking and the Professional Learning modules. These should be made available to users sometime in January.

The Agency of Education will respectfully submit a recommendation to the General Assembly regarding the future of the SSDDMS project. This joint recommendation is being developed in partnership with the Vermont Association of School Business Officials (VASBO) and Vermont School Human Resources Professionals (VSHRP).

Input from VASBO:

None at this time.

Input from auditors:

None at this time.