

Seminole County Public Schools

Streamlines Data Certification and Tackles the Class Size Amendment

FLORIDA

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Preface

K-12 school districts are under more scrutiny than ever before, obliged to demonstrate compliance with a raft of education policies concerning topics such as teacher credentialing, student discipline, dropout prevention, class size limits, adequate yearly progress, and immunization requirements. It’s a lot for a district to keep track of. Unfortunately, the methods for monitoring compliance with education policies – such as data warehouses and analytic reporting applications – can be expensive and difficult to implement, and don’t always provide alerts or early warnings when a district has fallen out of compliance.

Alleviating State Reporting Challenges

Seminole County Public Schools (SCPS), a district of just over 65,000 students in Central Florida, was searching for a way to reduce the stress, cost and time commitment required to validate and correct student data, especially in preparation for state reporting. Florida districts are required to submit student, school and teacher data to the Florida Department of Education several times annually, including three submissions that are referred to as “funding surveys,” which tie state funding to the reporting of full-time-equivalent (FTE) students in each district.

SCPS was able to alleviate many of the challenges inherent in preparing student data for state reporting, through the adoption of Certica Solutions’ K-12 data certification software, called Certify™. The software, now in place at SCPS since the summer of 2007, allows districts to automatically validate, monitor and report on the accuracy and completeness of district data, improving the quality of the data that the district submits to the state, and dramatically shortening the time it takes to identify and remedy data errors.

Prior to implementing Certify software, SCPS had just one person who understood the state reporting requirements well – a risky situation that doesn’t usually lead to sustainability or easy knowledge transfer. The district had approximately 300 database queries which school personnel had been asked

to run periodically, looking for potential problems in the data – as is often the case, participation in that approach was limited. Then, just prior to state submission time, the district would bring data entry clerks from 75 schools into the district offices to sit in a computer lab and correct their student data. It was a tedious, manual process that impacted completion of other work also performed by these data entry clerks.

Today, using Certify, SCPS is able to automatically run a nightly certification of their data – called an “observation” – against the district’s student information system. The observation contains rules for each of the data elements outlined in the Florida survey requirements. School personnel then view a daily, online, personalized scorecard, detailing any data errors that have been identified for their specific school. Giving schools this automated, daily data certification process has reduced the amount of time that schools need to resolve data issues, and has ensured that the overall level of data quality has improved and can be maintained.

Tim Harper is SCPS’ supervisor for application support and FTE services. He has been instrumental in deploying Certify to improve state reporting by addressing data quality issues. “With Certify,” says Harper, “we’re assured that knowledge of our data is institutionalized, and doesn’t just reside with one or two people in the district. Allowing schools to take a more active role in the review and correction of their data has required a small culture change, but it’s helped us to improve our data significantly and reduce the amount of time that people spend reviewing and correcting it.”

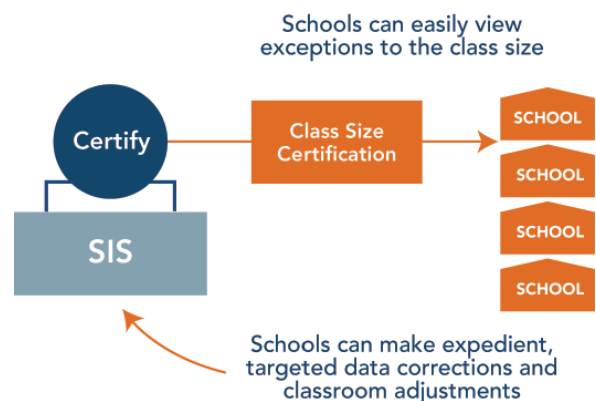
Notifying Schools of Non-Compliance with the Florida Class Size Mandate

Although improving the efficiency of state reporting was the initial challenge the district solved with Certify, SCPS is also using the software to address a thorny policy compliance issue: Florida’s class size mandate. Many states and districts have policies regarding student-teacher ratios, but few regions have guidelines or legislation as strict as the state of Florida.

Florida amended its constitution in 2002 to specify that by the 2010-2011 school year, the maximum number of students in core courses will be governed by law: no more than 18 students per classroom in grades pre-K through 3; 22 students per classroom in grades 4 through 8; and 25 students per classroom in grades 9 – 12. The goal of the legislation has been to reduce these student thresholds incrementally on a yearly basis. Districts which don’t comply will be penalized financially. Needless to say, the mandate has been controversial – so much so that the guidelines were slightly relaxed for the 2008-2009 school year, as state officials recognized the difficulty of implementing the amendment with shrinking education budgets, given the implication for an increase in the number of classrooms and teachers.

Nevertheless, districts are on the hook to comply and they’ve wrestled with their ability to assess their compliance in advance of implementation deadlines. The class size reduction guidelines have also gotten progressively granular: In 2003-2004, compliance was assessed at the district level; school-level compliance began in 2006-2007. Classroom-level compliance with the mandate begins in the 2009-2010 school year.

Certify Class Size Compliance



SCPS initially developed a process to calculate class size, but today uses Certify software to identify and monitor schools and classrooms that are out of compliance. Certify software tests the data with a battery of rules related to class size reduction, such as:

- Correspondence between the student's age and grade level;
- Proper designation of core courses versus non-core courses;
- Identification of team-taught classes;
- Validation of classrooms as documented teaching facilities;
- Status of teachers, whether certified or substitute;
- Proper entry of classroom "bell schedules."

With Certify, schools are alerted each day to situations that are out of compliance with the class size guidelines: for example, data that shows a traditional "one teacher" classroom where a total of 32 students are being taught in the same time period, but with two different teachers. Having been alerted to a situation like this, the school administrator can remedy the problem, either by making corrections to erroneous data, or by rescheduling the classroom, students and teachers appropriately.

This ongoing process of early detection, frequent review and expedient correction is helping SCPS and other districts in Florida manage their compliance with state mandates long before their data is submitted for review by the state education agency. Likewise, districts in other states use Certify to assess their compliance with other high-stakes policies, such as disciplinary policies, special education program enrollment, or dropout prevention.

Harper worked closely with Certica to create the initial set of data certification rules used to assess districts' compliance with the class size mandate. Says Harper, "it's been very helpful to get some early insight into which schools and classrooms are out of compliance, so that we're able to correct the problem well in advance of reporting our data to the state."

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About Certica Solutions, Inc.

Certica Solutions provides compliance and accountability solutions for the K-12 education system. The company's data certification software, called Certify, enables education agencies to maximize funding, optimize regulatory reporting, and ensure compliance with education policies and mandates. Founded in 2001, Certica counts among its customers several state departments of education, educational service agencies, and numerous school districts nationwide.

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