Do You Automate?
Saving Time and Dollars

By Christine H. Carmichael

The mission of every teacher, every hourly employee, every principal, and every district administrator in K–12 education is to ensure all students receive a high school diploma. Yet the fact remains that students and educators today are struggling against the effects of economic and demographic forces, the likes of which have not been seen in this country for generations.

A few relevant facts and statistics will offer some insight into the scope of the problem educators face as they seek to improve student outcomes:

- According to the National Center for Education Statistics report, "Public School Graduates and Dropouts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2007–08," high school dropout rates in the U.S. are at crisis levels with 26.8% of freshmen failing to graduate. *How can this tide be stemmed and performance improved for children who remain in school?*
- Five years into their teaching careers, 50% of all teachers leave the profession, reports First Research. Of the teachers and other K–12 employees who remain, more than 40% are due to retire in the next decade. *How can teachers be induced to stay?*
- Most state governments are slashing budgets, resulting in teacher layoffs, increases in class size, and reductions in learning resources—at a time of unprecedented need for investment in these very same resources and infrastructure. *How can you recoup some of these lost budgetary funds?*

Worse, more budget cuts are on the way next year. And considering that analysis shows that as much as 80% of a school's operational budget is spent on labor (and that labor costs are a school's largest controllable expense), what might you do to blunt the effects of the ongoing economic strain so you can continue to implement your education mission?

Automated Workforce Management

An automated workforce management strategy can help schools save jobs, improve the job satisfaction of teachers and staff, and free up precious budget dollars for investments in critical learning resources.

Automated workforce management systems can help schools control labor costs, minimize compliance risk, and improve employee satisfaction. These benefits are realized in several ways. We'll look at a few examples here: facilitating grants management, avoiding overpayment, managing overtime effectively, and optimizing schedules.

Grants Management

Given the central importance of grant funding in K–12 education, it is essential to avoid putting these funds at risk. Nearly all schools in this country depend on grants for a portion of their funding. While it's true that grants come to K–12 schools from many sources, the federal government alone gives out more than $13 billion in grants each month. Additionally, the American

Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009 will put nearly $6 billion forward in new competitive grants to states to help them pursue higher standards. A significant portion of those dollars will go to school modernization.

The requirements for properly managing the funds available under the act and other grants are extensive. Similarly, the need for district accountability with respect to good time-and-effort reporting cannot be underestimated. Such is the magnitude of the need for rigorous grants management.

Two large urban school districts recently estimated that as much as 2% of the total value of any grant is at risk when time-and-effort reporting is mishandled, or managed using a manual "system."

Automated workforce management software, on the other hand, can give districts the tools to help them accurately track and calculate employee work time across job types, schools, and the district so they can stay in control and on budget.

Ultimately, an automated solution can help districts allocate all associated labor to grants by accurately tracking for reimbursement and reconciliation, and incorporate project codes, tasks by phase, and relevant assets as well.

Overcome Overpayments

Among its many benefits, the automation of employee time and attendance effectively eliminates overpayments to employees that are often due to manual errors, such as rounding up worked hours, but in some cases are the result of fraud.

These overpayments can add up. One school district in Florida automated its time and attendance functions in part to reduce overpayments to substitute teachers. Now that substitute teachers' time is tracked using digital terminals rather than time sheets, there is far less padding of the hours these workers record in the system. As a result, the payroll cost for substitute teachers decreased by 4%—a huge savings considering this school district employs 5,000 substitute teachers on average each day.

Studies show that overpayments to nonexempt employees like bus drivers, facilities workers, groundskeepers, public safety workers, and substitute teachers due solely to transcription error amount to between 0.5% and 2% of payroll. On that basis alone, it would seem, few K–12 school systems can afford to be without an automated workforce management system.

Another major source of labor cost to schools is accrued leave. Although accrued leave certainly does not translate into "overpayment," it can still prove burdensome. With the ability to track employee vacation days, holidays, and other time off as it is accrued and used, automated systems give administrators unprecedented visibility into their distributed labor costs so they can act to control costs as necessary.

Over Budget on Overtime?

Faced with unprecedented funding cuts, many K–12 schools have implemented layoffs and furloughs in an effort to keep their heads above water. But in some cases, these steps have resulted in escalating overtime costs, given that remaining staff members have to cover for their missing colleagues. Do you lay off an employee and risk excessive overtime or hold onto him or her in order to realize the relative savings?

The automation of employee time and attendance effectively eliminates overpayments to employees that are often due to manual errors.

Insight into overtime spending is essential. But trying to track overtime across multiple sites—as it occurs or, better yet, just before it occurs—is practically impossible without an automated workforce management system designed specifically to do this job. With this software, you can have continuous visibility into your labor costs using on-demand Web "dashboards" that display both district and school-level labor cost data.

What's more, you can track key performance indicators and set per-

formance thresholds in critical labor cost areas like overtime. So you not only can keep track of these labor expenses with precision but can also minimize them, permitting you instead to preserve programs—or even people—that benefit students directly.

Right Person, Place, and Time

While automated scheduling applications can save money, their immediate effect is often felt when they are used to help put "the right person in the right place at the right time."

Take the case of the southern state that did not at the time have the ability to anticipate demand and workload. One spring day, as it happened, 81 bus drivers were absent for the morning run and 11 drivers were on approved leave. As a result, several drivers had to complete their regular runs, then go back for another. Ultimately, a significant number of students were left waiting at home, some alone, arriving at school much later that day.

If the transportation supervisor had an automated scheduling system, no doubt she would have been able to see the district's scheduling exposure and would have been able to plan more effectively to make allowances for the unforeseeable absenteeism.

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Automated scheduling is ideal for a variety of nonexempt employee types. Whether it's bus drivers, food service workers, substitute teachers, or public safety employees, scheduling is essential for

- Anticipating demand and determining workload
- Managing according to constantly changing requirements
- Positioning and scheduling workers optimally

Automated workforce management solutions, then, can have an important effect on saving jobs in K–12 schools, on making learning resources more available, and on boosting the job satisfaction of teachers and staff members. The means by which this feat is accomplished is relatively simple. These automated solutions help administrators control their labor-related costs—so they can inject precious funds back into their school districts—and run operations more smoothly. The result? Employees are happier and students get the best education that available funds and satisfied teachers can provide.

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