



DATE: September 29, 2010

TO: CUPE and other support staff unions in K-12

SUBJECT: BCeSIS problems and their implications for shared services in K-12

Introduction

Start of the new school year has brought with it major problems in the ongoing implementation and use of BC's online student information system. Named the *BC enterprise Student Information System* (BCeSIS), the system has been plagued by repeated breakdowns that continue to disrupt the important job of maintaining up-to-date records for the province's 546,000 public school students.

While teachers and others have been strident in their criticism of BCeSIS, it is school district CUPE support staff that, on a day-to-day basis, has had to contend with major and chronic work disruption caused by the shortcomings of the online information system.

Background

First unveiled in 2005, BCeSIS uses a web-accessible database to help track student information in the areas of timetables, attendance and performance. The system is touted as delivering timely access to relevant up-to-date student information capable of assisting administrators, teachers and others to both manage records and improve student achievement. BCeSIS is also the first major "shared services" project in the K-12 system because it seeks to establish a cross-district model of data processing and administration. This is how Shared Services BC, an agency within the B.C. government that promotes these arrangements that centralize payroll, information systems and other areas within government and the broader public sector, describes BCeSIS:

The Common Student Information System (known as BCeSIS) is a shared School District application that has replaced many of the existing standalone student information systems that have become increasingly obsolete and unable to keep pace with growing school and School District management needs... The new

common application provides the underlying systems infrastructure needed by school authorities.

Since its inception, BCeSIS has not been without controversy, most recently as a result of a cascading sequence of technical glitches that have brought the system to a crashing halt numerous times during the September 2010 school startup. Problems with the system have had major implications for support staff workflow and workload.

BCeSIS has also been costly. Currently the Ministry and districts pay \$21 per student per year, with \$10 of costs falling to boards. The latter figure represents a 5 to 6 million dollar annual cost to district budgets. This past spring and in the face of mounting evidence of structural funding shortfalls, the BC School Trustees Association passed a resolution calling on the provincial Ministry of Education to waive BCeSIS fees for the 2009-10 year.

Despite this, Education Minister MacDiarmid has made no commitment to provide extra money to resolve the technical problems or make needed improvements. When queried in the Legislature about new funding being made available to improve BCeSIS, she responded:

“(W)e have really shifted very much away from the system where there was a line item for each different cost that is there for a school district... It's a very diverse province, and the needs in each of the school districts vary as well.”
(Hansard, May 6, 2010)

On September 23rd, when queried about mounting technical problems with the system, the Minister had this to say:

“We've had problems this year but to be clear, the last time there was any major problem was in 2006. So this system has been working well but I certainly acknowledge this year has been very difficult going forward. Everything possible is being done and this system is now working well.” (News 1130 Radio, September 23, 2010)

Support staff experiences with BCeSIS

CUPE support staff work on the front line with BCeSIS in our public school system. They enter data into BCeSIS (often in conjunction with classroom teachers), generate necessary reports, do staff training and, in some cases, handle behind the scenes administration of the data systems crucial to the operation of school districts and to meeting Ministry requirements. CUPE staff is therefore uniquely placed to offer insight into problems plaguing the system and what is required to fix these problems. The following section provides comments from CUPE support staff working in varying capacities – from school level secretaries to technical support personnel – on problems experienced with BCeSIS.

Support staff report that system slow downs and crashes have been a constant source of frustration, during September 2010 in particular:

“If you leave your terminal for 15 minutes it will log you out. This is a major problem for school secretaries whose work is frequently interrupted by the need to talk to people at the office counter. When you come back to the terminal and then try to get back in, you are forced to wait another 15 minutes before you are allowed back in.”

“The teachers cannot do attendance so as a result there is no consistent record of absences. This is been going on for three weeks now. It has a major impact on office staff because they’re not in a position to field requests from the public when someone calls to see whether their son or daughter has been skipping classes.”

“The fact that the program logs you out after a period of inactivity is a major problem. I’m often called away to deal with someone and when I get back am not able to get on the system for another 15 minutes.”

Significant time wastage comes as a direct consequence of increased downtime:

“Many teachers go on the system first thing in the morning between 8:00 and 9:00 am. If they are not able to get on then it directly impacts my job. Whereas previously entering attendance information might take 10 minutes, it now takes at least an hour.”

“Many of our people now find their whole day revolves around trying to use BCeSIS. It is particularly bad right now because we’re having to input for funding purposes by the end of September.”

“I would say right now that approximately 1 to 2 hours of my work each day are wasted by the system.”

To support workers, particularly those with technical backgrounds and involved with the implementation of BCeSIS, the problem is one of an inadequately resourced system prone to bogging down:

“Because of all the different modules within BCeSIS, you now have teachers, secretaries, principals, and resource people all trying to access the system during work hours. There are up to 10,000 users logging on at any particular point in time and the system gets overloaded.”

The solution to the problem lies in a major overhaul that sees proper equipment updated and system bandwidth increased to handle the expanding volume of users:

“There is no easy solution to the problem. The software vendor is always working on patches to the system but the underlying problems remain. What this means is that we either find a whole lot more money to spend on upgrading the system or we have to move to a way of rationing access.”

“Bandwidth is limited. This is largely related to the fact that we are using older equipment. When the system was first implemented they did not pay attention to the equipment problem. Now that so many different modules have been added to

the system and more people are using it, it breaks down and crashes on a regular basis.”

At root, the problems currently afflicting BCeSIS stem from lack of proper planning, leading to inadequate resourcing and support:

“I think that when we went to BCeSIS, the benefits of the system were oversold. Not enough money was invested in upgrading the hardware and bandwidth to deal with the level of usage currently have.”

CUPE support staff working with BCeSIS see the solution to technical problems plaguing the system over the past month as requiring substantial new capital investment. Such investment requires funds boards do not have and which the Minister currently refuses to commit to allocate.

Conclusion: BCeSIS implications for shared services in payroll and business systems

Current problems with BCeSIS do not bode well for the next stage of shared services planning for K-12, that focusing on district payroll and business systems. This past May, the Ministry of Education announced a four-district pilot to look at opportunities for cross-district service consolidation leading to hoped-for cost savings. The initial stage of the pilot is a “fact-finding and due diligence review” of existing systems, needs and capabilities scheduled to last up to 24 months.

The pilot will confront real challenges. Payroll cannot be segregated out from larger human resources management systems in widespread use by boards. Add to this difficulties associated with managing 150+ collective agreements across 60 districts and differentiated bargaining units containing varying rules and provisions governing how payroll is to be administered.

Using experience with BCeSIS as a guide, shared services planning for payroll and business systems will have to proceed with due care and attention to the complexity of the task at hand. If the Ministry is of the view that substantial costs savings are to be had by administrative re-organization alone and without substantial new investment in hardware and software systems as well as in staff training and expertise, the pilot payroll initiative may well lead to another administrative debacle similar to that currently unfolding with BCeSIS.

If anything, the past few weeks experience with BCeSIS helps underscore the importance of proper planning, consultation with appropriate support staff and a willingness to invest in resources – both personnel as well as well as system-related – needed to give shared services a fighting chance.

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