David Akridge is coming up on 20 years in Alabama’s Mobile County Public School System. But Akridge’s roots run even deeper than that, for he is the third generation in his family to make a career in the Mobile system, albeit the first with technology credentials. Now CIO for Mobile County Public Schools, Akridge has an encyclopedic knowledge of the inner workings of the system that reflects his broad exposure to different facets of its operation. Though never a teacher himself, thinking from their perspective—recognizing their challenges, imperatives and priorities—has become second nature.

Like most school systems, Mobile County’s has no shortage of challenges, including the need to improve academic performance and, more prominently, to decrease the share of its students who drop out of school. In 2008, that share stood at 48 percent, translating into roughly 2,500 Mobile youths entering a tight labor market in which educational attainment has become the passport to economic opportunity—and lack of it, a barrier. Up to that time, Akridge and his team had played a significant role in efforts to turn the dropout rate around, including providing information support for Mobile County’s No Child Left Behind compliance. But by and large, there was a clear and growing sentiment that to make meaningful progress on complex problems like the dropout rate, Mobile County would need to use information like it never had in the past.

Mobile County Public Schools: Analytical insights help keep students on track

— David Akridge, Chief Information Officer, Mobile County Public Schools

Leadership Spotlight

After guiding the deployment of a breakthrough performance tracking system, David Akridge, CIO for Mobile County schools, can bask in the glow of success. But his most lasting impact may come from the efforts he made to restore the courage of key decision makers who had been shaken by an initial disappointment.

How the Mobile County Public School System got smarter

Mobile County doesn’t have the kind of school system that sticks its head in the sand. That’s why, in the face of tight budgets, Mobile County opted to build a comprehensive, real-time performance tracking system in a bid to improve performance and keep more students on track to graduate. The intelligence-based system gives teachers and counselors a new level of insight into students and the triggers they need to intervene early—when they can make a difference.
The benefits of Mobile County’s performance tracking solution

- 3% increase in graduation rate through the ability of teachers, counselors and staff to intervene with at-risk students before they drop out
- Improvement in test scores due to curriculum and teaching changes inspired by the solution’s metrics
- Improved ability to assess teacher performance, thus strengthening accountability and quality
- Increased eligibility for funding due to higher enrollment, the result of a lower dropout incidence

Taking the first steps

This realization didn’t come overnight. A few years earlier, Mobile County had sent a delegation to a handful of comparably sized school systems outside of Alabama to observe the advanced tracking and reporting solutions they had deployed. Part information and part inspiration, the tour had provided key players in the school system with a sense of how more transparent access to information could be used to change practices. The seed was planted. Then, in early 2008, a new superintendent, Dr. Roy Nichols—known as a strong proponent of data-driven education practices—came on board. In the atmosphere of ambition and hope that prevailed at the time, Mobile County got the funding and the go-ahead to build its own solution.

This one step forward was followed by two steps back. For a litany of reasons, the vendor Mobile County chose to deploy the solution failed to deliver after more than a year of implementation effort and lots of money spent. To Akridge, why it failed was less important than the impact that initial failure had on the project’s future prospects. “People who had been strongly behind the project were disappointed and demoralized—even doubting whether the vision [of an advanced reporting and analytics system] could be achieved,” explains Akridge. “On top of that, the school board was reluctant to spend even more money at a time when we were cutting teachers, supplies and budgets.”
Lessons learned:

Think downstream

Having an early warning system to spot at-risk patterns among students is necessary, but not sufficient for dropout mitigation. School systems must also have consistent protocols for intervention and the means to carry them out effectively. “Since this is really a new model of interacting with the student, schools might not know what the appropriate intervention is in different scenarios. We’re working to establish clear guidelines to ensure consistency,” says Akridge.

— David Akridge

Leadership is:

Restoring momentum

Mobile County found out that having the right vision is no guarantee of success. Akridge needed to reestablish the conviction of key influencers to move ahead—again. “The core message was that the only way to solve the problem was to give teachers, counselors and principals the information they need to help the students who need it.” The original vision was sound, but we needed to summon the will—and the resources—to make it happen.

— David Akridge

From resistance to renaissance

Akridge recognized that inaction was not an option, and that to restore momentum to the project—to hit the reset button—he needed to make a strong case to the system’s top influencers. These included not only the five-member Mobile County School Board, but also a number of assistant superintendents whose opinions carried significant clout. The core of his message was, in essence, to get back on the horse, but to this time make sure it was the right horse. “The core message was that the only way to solve the problem [of low scores and graduation rates] was to give teachers, counselors and principals the information they need to help the students who need it,” says Akridge. “The original vision was sound, but we needed to summon the will—and the resources—to make it happen.”

Akridge had built a case for action that relied less on numbers than on the principle that inaction or foot-dragging was a considerably riskier course. As the project’s strongest advocate in a climate of caution and skepticism, Akridge had taken on an uphill battle. However, just seven weeks after its new provider began implementing the new system, his optimism—and the trust that the stakeholders had placed in him—was rewarded when the system began producing the reports and analyses that the system’s top administrators had yearned for.

Eyes widened and jaws dropped, not only at the findings themselves, but at how reports incorporating information from the entire school system—reports that could take several months to produce in the past—were now available in real time. It was the first sampling of what would become a rich source of analytical insights. The foundation of the system is a data warehouse that integrates administrative and academic information from each of the system’s 95 schools. On top of it is a business intelligence and performance management solution that provides a wide range of metrics, from the systemwide level all the way down to the tracking of individual students. It’s the latter that makes the solution a powerful tool for helping to keep at-risk students in school.

“Since this is really a new model of interacting with the student, schools might not know what the appropriate intervention is in different scenarios. We’re working to establish clear guidelines to ensure consistency,” says Akridge.

— David Akridge
Prevention through prediction

The solution’s value in helping to curb the incidence of dropouts derives from the fact that they don’t just happen out of the blue. In almost all cases, measures such as falling grades, absences, and the incidence of disciplinary problems—often occurring in combination—presage the decision to drop out. Just about any principal, teacher or counselor can tell you that. What they generally can’t do, explains Akridge, is detect these signs early enough to constructively intervene in the lives of at-risk students and provide the support they need to stay on track to graduation. “A principal walking the halls of my school in a sea of 1,500 kids can’t know the back story of every one of those students,” says Akridge. “But if we’re able to see those students from a different perspective, we can identify the kids who need personal involvement.”

In the Mobile County solution, that different perspective is a business intelligence capability that enables school officials to define different at-risk scenarios. This helps school officials and teachers to not only proactively identify students at risk of dropping out, but also to more deeply understand the different factors—be they social, domestic or learning-related—that affect this risk. Moreover, because these patterns can form quickly, time is also of the essence. Mobile County’s ability to identify and track risk patterns in real time enables teachers and counselors to intervene before problems begin to snowball. To further strengthen this safety net, Akridge and his team are developing an automated “early-warning” system that notifies key personnel when predictive patterns—such as a combination of a suspension and multiple absences—develop.

The performance tracking solution has also proven to be a valuable tool at the administrative and policy-making level by giving school officials a real-time view of the most important performance metrics, ranging from test scores to truancy. Akridge likens it to a set of gauges, with the administration aiming to “move the needle” to a desired level through a combination of more current information and a willingness to try new tactics and strategies. A key venue for these discussions is a large space in the central office dubbed the “War Room,” where Superintendent Nichols and his staff of deputy and assistant superintendents regularly deliberate on key issues. On the walls are freshly updated charts and graphs that outline progress on key metrics, pinpoint areas where improvement is needed and serve as the focal point for brainstorming.

Mobile County rightly saw its ability to identify and track at-risk students as a breakthrough in its efforts to reduce its dropout rate. But it also recognized that the full potential of the early warning system would only be realized if it had the means to translate these insights into meaningful actions. As with all school systems, Mobile County’s has existing protocols for different situations—when to refer a case to truant officers, when to pay a visit to the home, and so forth. Moving toward a more preventative approach requires a corresponding shift in intervention response. As Akridge points out, the biggest challenge is creating a consistent response protocol across the entire network of schools. “Since this is really a new model for interacting with the student, schools might not know what the appropriate intervention is in different scenarios,” says Akridge. “We’re working to establish clear guidelines to ensure consistency.”

"If we’re able to see those students from a different perspective, we can identify the kids who need personal involvement," says Akridge.
Turning the corner

Complex problems like raising student graduation rates don’t get solved overnight, especially in a time of budget cuts and tighter resources. Still, Mobile County is making significant progress on a number of fronts, and its performance tracking solution is seen as an integral part of that success. While the dropout rate has been nudged downward by three percent since the solution’s introduction, other trends show the promise of even more success in the future. For instance, test scores are rising, in part because of curriculum and program changes guided by the insights the solution has provided.

Akridge sees Mobile County’s visionary decision to move ahead with its smart performance tracking solution as an investment in its future that will pay dividends far down the road. “We’re using intelligence to forge a closer bond with our students, to help provide them with what they need, and to make sure they get the most from their educational experience,” says Akridge, whose two children are currently in the Mobile school system. “It’s helping us to shape citizens that are better prepared for today’s more competitive world.”

Mobile County’s smart performance tracking solution is...

Software
IBM® Cognos® 8 BI Version 8.4

Services
IBM Global Business Services®: Business Analytics and Optimization

Business Partner
DecisionEd Group

For more information
Please contact your IBM sales representative or IBM Business Partner.

Or visit us at: ibm.com/smarterplanet