



Flexible Aspen SIS Helps Newton Public Schools Surpass Their Needs and Meet State Reporting Requirements

NEWTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
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THE CHALLENGE

Newton Public Schools had been using a student information system (SIS) for more than a decade when it reached its end of life. The district then chose a new SIS that promised tremendous technical capability. Unfortunately, Newton experienced many difficulties, and they realized they needed to transition yet again to a different SIS – a daunting scenario.

“The district looked to make a change,” Steven Rattendi, Director of Informational Technology & Library Services reported. “Though we had invested over a year in getting the second system up and running, our users were having difficulty adapting to the SIS’s interface; there were issues with the handling of our high school scheduling structure; and there were numerous state reporting problems,” Rattendi said.

The district opted to go back to the procurement process. “The district’s goal was to find a proven, user-friendly SIS that would be easy for our users to learn, had the ability to handle our middle and high school schedules, had state reporting proficiency designed specifically for Massachusetts, and that was customizable to our district’s needs,” said Jack Polnar, Data Management Specialist.



“Aspen is user-friendly, yet powerful. Anyone can start using it with just a few minutes of training, and it’s highly customizable to support district needs.”

JACK POLNAR

Data Management Specialist

Department of Information Technology, Newton Public Schools

THE SOLUTION

Newton Public Schools selected Follett Aspen® SIS, as the new SIS as part of the procurement process. Two years after the switch, the school district is very pleased with the results. Follett was one of the few vendors that had a SIS with more than 100 customers in Massachusetts. In addition, because neighboring districts recommended Aspen for its capability and customizability, Newton felt sure they could draw on the local community for advice and resources, as well as on the highly responsive Follett customer service, training and implementation experts.

“We were impressed that Aspen could be customized to handle our processes and high school scheduling,” said Brian Hammel, Coordinator of Instructional Technology. Katy Hogue, District Student Data Manager, agreed, saying that she “appreciated its solid-state reporting component.”

“What stood out most was the conversion methodology, which allowed us to provide the data and Follett to perform the conversion,” shared Polnar. “This was vital because we knew this was going to be a tremendous undertaking.”

With the selection process complete, Newton began the implementation process. As with any new student information system, a transition can be challenging, however with the right partnership the results can be very positive, as Polnar pointed out. “We worked closely with our implementation project manager, who connected us with resources within Aspen and outside of Aspen (the Aspen Community Forum) so we could implement Aspen the way we needed to.”

The entire Newton team took ownership of the transition, working closely with Follett to ensure their new SIS would offer the features they needed but also would best serve its users. “With an undertaking like this, it’s important that the district – not just the vendor – is willing to participate fully,” said Polnar. “Newton put

in a lot of resources, effort and willingness to change. Specifically, we took care in understanding how our users needed to use the system and what would make Aspen successful in Newton. We communicated that to the Follett team and together with their guidance we configured Aspen to meet our needs. We held trainings so that it would uniquely fit to what our district needed, and we took time to test and validate the data based on the guidance that Follett provided.”

Early in the implementation planning, Newton IT presented Follett with an unusual request: because their users preferred to make the change to Aspen mid-year, rather in the middle of the back-to-school rush, the district wanted to do a mid-year conversion, something not usually undertaken. (Conversions are typically done after one school year ends and a before new one begins).

“Follett worked with us to make this happen. The biggest challenge was converting current year schedules, which had to be perfect,” said Tony Sbordone, Data Management Specialist.

“Thanks to a well-thought-out Follett process, which included taking our existing data directly without having us convert it to spreadsheets, as well as multiple levels of validation of the data, our current year schedules, grades and attendance were converted with a high degree of accuracy. The Follett team’s guidance and support made the transition very efficient and accurate,” said Polnar.

“They really went the extra mile when we decided to self-host Aspen locally,” Polnar added. “Our locally hosted environment was not yet available for the planned launch of Aspen. Follett kept implementation on time by allowing us to launch Aspen on their hosted environment and then made it easy for us to transition back to our locally hosted environment when the timing was right for the district, with minimal impact.”



THE RESULTS

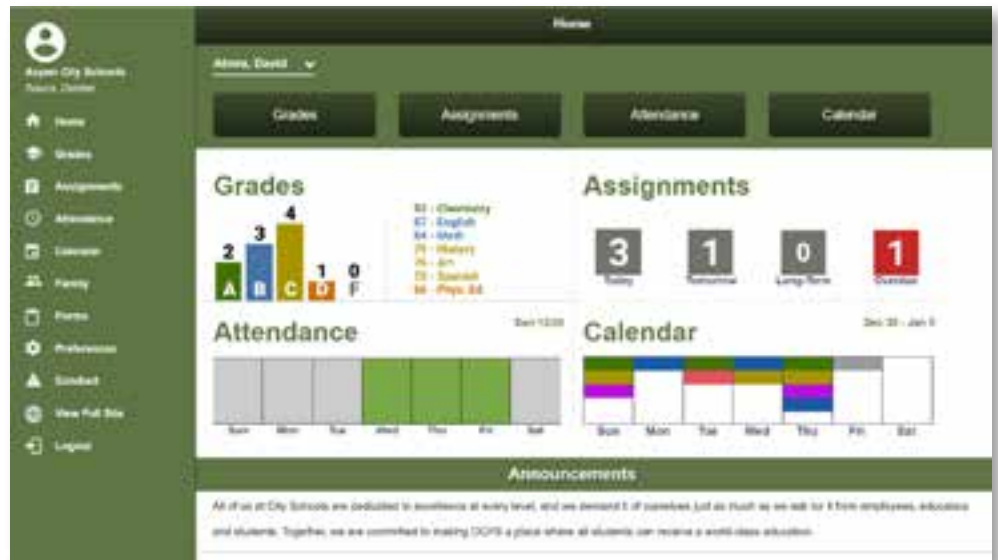
The district's expectations were not only met, they were far exceeded. "One of the key factors in our decision to select Aspen was its state reporting capability, and we are pleased with the results," said Brian McCarthy, Data Management Specialist. Kevin Dolan, Data Management Specialist, agrees. "Using Aspen enabled us to submit our state reports on time during our first state reporting period after the conversion, and we have been able to complete subsequent reports ahead of state deadlines ever since!"

"We recently transitioned to using the Special Ed module within Aspen. Having this data within the SIS along with regular education data has given regular education teachers the ability to review the special ed information that pertains to their students – and allows special ed staff to see up-to-date information about their students (including contacts and schedules) in one place," said Polnar. "This capability has allowed us to not only better meet the needs of our students and teachers, it has also made meeting state reporting requirements much easier."

Cliff Aurisma, also a Data Management Specialist with the district, is pleased with the extensive customization features within Aspen. "A good example of the family and student portal customization within Aspen is our ability to provide report cards, progress reports, and other documents. We have customized our reports to generate these documents, and we've been able to use the custom navigation feature in Aspen, which allows students to access the same reports as families."

Rattendi is quick to echo his colleagues' sentiments.

"Since implementation, we have successfully used many of Aspen's built-in modules, including Programs, Transportation, Fees and Special Education," he said. "More importantly, we've been able to custom tailor these to fit Newton's needs. We have also used document importing features to load the Parent/Guardian report so that families can review their MCAS scores online, allowing us to cut down on mailings by communicating electronically."



CUSTOMER SERVICE AND TRAINING BEYOND THE ORDINARY

"I can't say enough about Follett's state reporting experts, who not only were outstanding in helping us through our reporting issues, but also used our feedback to improve Aspen for the next round of state reports," Hogue shared.

Polnar also has nothing but praise for Follett's customer service. "We are self-hosted and that requires help from Follett to keep us apprised of Aspen updates and to make sure our system is performing optimally," Polnar said.

"We consider the Follett Aspen team as an extension of our team – they are so knowledgeable about the Aspen environment and are always very responsive and flexible in supporting us."

"The support provided by Follett and the Aspen team for scheduling a complex high school was invaluable," added Rattendi. He found the three-day scheduling

workshop with an expert Follett trainer to be extremely helpful, during which the Newton's scheduling teams mastered the process and worked through solutions together. "In addition to the scheduling workshop, we got quick and targeted support through e-mail and the Follett support system."

Today, the implementation of the Aspen system at Newton has enabled processes to run smoother and the IT team is in position to better serve staff, families and students, with accurate, efficient and centralized data management as well as reporting at all levels. While the implementation of a new SIS is never painless, the transition to a better system can be realized with strong project management, and dedicated project commitment and partnership between the school district and vendor.