

Northern Ontario Education Leaders



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Diane Findlay, MISA-NOEL project lead for NOEL.



Northern Ontario Education Leaders (NOEL) is a non-profit organization comprised of the leaders of educational organizations from eight regions in Northwestern Ontario, Canada. NOEL serves as a collaborative forum where directors, principals, teachers, and school board staff can discuss issues of common concern, and develop projects and optimize budget resources in a way that directly benefits its students. NOEL is composed of educational leaders from the following School Boards: Keewatin-Patricia, Kenora Catholic, Lakehead, Rainy River, Superior-Greenstone, Superior North Catholic, Northwest Catholic, and Thunder Bay Catholic.

Historically, the school principals had to manually sift through individual report cards and assessment data to determine student achievements—individually as well as by class, grade, school, and board. In an effort to reduce time spent creating spreadsheets and reporting on data, NOEL looked for an alternative that would automate this process. Ideally, the solution would enable principals and school board staff to spend less time with data and more time with teachers and students. It would also need to enable teachers to create lesson plans according to what works best for their students.

Challenges Faced

NOEL was in the process of evaluating student progress, when they realized that they needed a new infrastructure to enable them to effectively and efficiently determine the results. Such a move, however, would require an increase in budget—a factor that was highly unlikely for the non-profit organization.

Industry:

- Education

Geography:

- North America

Information Needs:

- Reduction of manual data collection from disparate systems
- Actionable student assessment information for principals, teachers, and staff

Platforms:

- Windows
- SQL
- Trillium and Maplewood ERP

Solutions:

- Cognos 8 BI

Benefits:

- Increased visibility into student assessment data
- Decreased time evaluating data and more time with students
- More effective teaching and increased learning by students
- Ability for non-profit to increase funding by re-selling Cognos solutions

“In the North, our school boards really struggle financially,” explains Diane Findlay, Information Officer, Keewatin-Patricia District School Board. “We are small school boards and although we receive funding from the Ministry for this initiative, individually it is not enough to afford any solution and sustain it. Recently we had been hit tremendously hard in our provincial funding and realized we were going to have to find innovative ways to



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ensure this initiative is sustainable. Fortunately the success of phase one provided us with a solid solution which caught the interest of other organizations.”

In collaboration with the Ontario Ministry of Education, NOEL engaged in a multi-year initiative to enable and implement effective evidence-based decision making in all Ontario school boards. This initiative, entitled Managing Information for Student Achievement (MISA), assisted the school boards in acquiring capacity to integrate a variety of data sources including student management, standardized testing, and legacy systems, into a single integrated data mart for reporting and analysis.

NOEL evaluated several decision support solutions and through a series of meetings with all the NOEL school boards, the decision was made to move forward with Cognos. Rainy River District School Board and Keewatin-Patricia District School Board would serve as lead boards for the consortium.

“Right from the start, everyone at Cognos demonstrated extreme professionalism and agility,” says Findlay. “The services organization made a lot of promises on deliverables and absolutely followed through. I’ve worked with many vendors before, and it was the first time that the vendor assumed such a positive leadership role.”

Strategy Followed

In order to get up to speed on Cognos software, lead board representatives, Diane Findlay of the Keewatin-Patricia District School Board and Chris Denby from the Rainy River District School Board attended a five-day training session. For the first several months, Findlay and Denby worked with Cognos consultants to establish parameters for a data warehouse that would support business intelligence (BI) reporting. Together, they designed a framework and set of standards to collect and publish data from a variety of data sources.

“The Cognos consultants were very professional and knowledgeable,” says Findlay. “They became very familiar with our environment and were able to quickly build upon this knowledge and provide recommendations—really a win-win situation for all of us.”

With the help of Cognos Data Manager, a component of Cognos 8 BI, the team was able to quickly capture the data collected from their Trillium and Maplewood customer relationship management database. They were then able to transform and clean the data, and load it into the BI environment. With all of this disparate data in

one place, they could now conduct a host of performance management activities including reporting, analysis, scorecarding and more.

With Cognos 8 BI, NOEL was also able to design, develop, and implement a repeatable education performance management (EPM) reporting and analysis extranet application. The application is accessible via a Web browser and can be deployed throughout the Canadian educational system.

“Thanks to the phenomenal people from Cognos Consulting, we were so successful with the first phase of the project that we were able to share our data warehouse solution to the York Region District School Board,” states Findlay. “Now we are strengthening our partnership and collectively moving towards a standardized data warehouse model.”

Benefits Realized

NOEL’s data warehouse and reporting solution has provided educators with the ability to see data in a way they never have before—clearly, timely, and presented in a meaningful way. “Cognos software has helped validate the time and effort our staff puts into teaching,” says Sherri-Lynn Pharand, Professional Network Centre Executive Lead. “Instead of blindly hoping what they are doing is making a difference, teachers know exactly what works and what doesn’t and can create lesson plans accordingly.”

Principals and senior administrative staff also enjoy the visibility that Cognos 8 BI brings. Before, the senior staff did not see the results of their information gathering. Now that the results are exposed, they are motivated and understand the benefit of their hard work. Principals are also able to identify, and act on, areas of improvement much faster than before.

“It’s really the results everyone cares about,” explains Findlay. “But in order to make those results happen, you have to spend time on the important parts; setting up the warehouse, making sure everything is classified correctly, and presented accordingly. This is where Cognos provides the most value.”

As a result of its success with Cognos, NOEL is planning to roll out expanded reporting to other decision areas within the schools including attendance, suspension, and human resources. “In future phases, we will start to see the amalgamation of different groups starting to answer questions they couldn’t answer on their own and start to think about even more questions they hadn’t asked before,” says Findlay.

Cognos provided a better decision-making tool for NOEL and a new line of business. School boards can work together to develop an Education Performance Management BI solution to maximize their limited funding.

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About Cognos

Cognos is the world leader in business intelligence and enterprise planning software. Our solutions for corporate performance management let organisations drive performance with planning, budgeting, and consolidation, monitor it with scorecarding, and understand it with business intelligence reporting and analysis. Cognos is the only vendor to support all of these key management activities in a complete, integrated solution. Founded in 1969, Cognos now serves more than 23,000 customers in over 135 countries.

