Cincinnati Public Schools Uses Business Dashboards for Data-Driven Decision Making

WITH POWERSCHOOL UNIFIED INSIGHTS™ BUSINESS OPERATION

Cincinnati Public Schools is focused on data-driven decision making. To achieve this, they've built real-time analytics dashboards to improve their ability to effectively manage district finances and business operations.

Overview

Cincinnati Public Schools is Ohio's fastest-growing large city district, with enrollment up more than 20 percent since 2012-13. The district serves 36,000 students, from preschool to 12th grade, across 65 schools.

When **Jennifer Wagner** took over as **Treasurer and CFO** in 2015, she brought a wealth of experience in IT and quality improvement. With this background, she was a great partner for **Michael Gustin, Cincinnati Public Schools Director of Business Technology**. One of their first projects was the implementation of Unified Administration™ BusinessPlus as their financial system. At the same time, the district was creating a new multi-year strategic plan with a focus on data-driven quality improvement.

By the beginning of 2020, the team was ready to roll out a set of real-time analytics dashboards to help decision makers at all levels actively monitor their departments and functional areas. And then the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

"We went from a growth mindset where we had enrollment growing and a lot of exciting stuff going on to having to slam the brakes. We very quickly had to pivot from thinking, 'How much are we going to grow next year?' to 'How are we going to instruct our students next year and what does that mean for our budget?" says Gustin.

AT A GLANCE

Challenges

- Desire for real-time data to help drive decision making
- Lacked support for district quality-improvement efforts
- Evolving changes in budgets and expenses due to COVID-19
- Struggled to gain support for business operations initiatives

Solution

- PowerSchool Unified Insights™ Business Operations (formerly Cognos reporting)

Results

- Ability to actively monitor a limited budget.
- Analytics data to proactively drive district decisions.
- Tracking daily operations to monitor and improve behavior, purchases, and expenses.
- Enhanced support of proactive management of district business operations.

As a result, the Board of Education and Treasurer decided to begin the new fiscal year with a temporary, three-month budget, making it even more critical for the team to manage their limited time and financial resources proactively and effectively.

Managing the Business with Better Data

Tighter budgets meant the district needed to be as accurate as possible in budgeting and encumbering funds. They also needed to closely track approvals to ensure expenses fell into the correct quarter. Minor delays in one quarter could have a significant effect on future spending.

Fortunately, the team was already well on their way with their dashboard project built in Unified Insights™ Business Operations (formerly Cognos) and based on the finance, HR, and payroll data that they managed in their BusinessPlus solution. BusinessPlus brings together Cincinnati Public Schools' data into one convenient system to easily track, manage, and monitor finance and trends in operational performance. The analytics solution gives the districts the ability to create comprehensive views of finances with easy-to-read, customizable dashboards to understand their complete financial and HR performance better.

Stakeholders have access to visually compelling, premade dashboards and ad-hoc reports. These dashboards get the right information to the right people, securely and in real time.

"The real-time graphical nature and inclusion of security means each manager can easily pinpoint their own roadblock, issues, and errors," Gustin says. "We're preventing problems instead of reacting to them. This is much more powerful than just reports."

The dashboards have already helped with the transition from last year's annual budget to this year's initial budget. As the end of the period approached, the district could see how many requisitions still needed to be processed. Going forward, they will also be able to see when an approval is sitting too long, so they know to take action and keep things moving.

With 65 schools and 35 departments each submitting their own requests, it's crucial to have this level of process oversight. This helps ensure they know exactly how much money is encumbered versus available for the rest of the year.

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>
> **MICHAEL GUSTIN**
> Director of Business Technology,
> Cincinnati Public Schools, OH

The district has made more informed decisions by being able to drill down into the data for details.

"Budgets and encumbrances had to be really tight, because we couldn't overspend when only a quarter of the budget was approved," Gustin says. "As a manager with a limited amount of time and bandwidth, this gives you exactly the information you need for your role. It allows managers to do interventions based on the data."

"One of the cool things is you can drill through to see where individual things were sitting at," he says. "It tells you who the next approver is, or, if it's out of workflow, it shows it's out of workflow. Then you can target people to let them know what's in their queue to take care of."

Ensuring On-Time Payments

Dashboards allow teams and individuals to work on the district's business, instead of spending time looking for and gathering information. This lets them implement and execute decisions instead of spending time finding out what's going on in the first place.

Unified Insights™ Business Operations dashboards help Cincinnati Public Schools track incomplete activities that lead to unpaid invoices, which can disrupt a vendor's business as well as the district's relationship with that vendor. Invoice procedures require workflows, receiving, and other issues that can impact the ability to post them. Visibility into unpaid invoices lets the Finance department connect with whoever is responsible.

"This gives us a real-time look at which invoices are sitting out there that need to be paid. It's filtered out by budget unit so whoever owns the budget can see their part of it, or if you have permissions, you can see the entire district," Gustin says.

Improving Ongoing Business Operations

With Unified Insights™ Business Operations, the district saw clear trends of people who have repeated requisition rejections. Adam Goeppner, Business Systems Analyst, says, "We are able to track how many requisitions are being rejected and for what reason. When you drill down, it gives us the details and the 'why' behind it."

With this data, the team realized they needed to improve both their process and their training. They worked with the Finance team to revamp the requisition review process, so the requestor received better feedback on any improvements needed for a rejected request. They also trained business staff on how to submit accurate and actionable requests so that they wouldn't get rejected.

How Real-Time Analytics Ultimately Impacts the District

Through real-time analytics dashboards, Cincinnati Public Schools was well prepared for the challenges COVID-19 placed on school districts. They had the right tool to proactively manage their district finances with real-time data and powerful visualizations. By partnering with PowerSchool, the district was able to monitor its limited budget, make better decisions with data, and efficiently track daily operations.

Instead of digging through reports to find the right data, the district was able to spend more time analyzing data, making sound decisions, and preventing problems.

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> Director of Business Technology,
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