LA School District Superintendent’s Resigns in Wake of Continuing MiSiS Woes

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We turn our IT Hiccups of the Week attention once again to the Los Angeles Unified School District’s shambolic roll out of its integrated student educational tracking system called My Integrated Student Information Systems (MiSiS). I first wrote about MiSiS a few months ago, and it has proved nothing but trouble to the point that it became a major contributing factor in “encouraging” John Deasy to resign his position last week as superintendent of the second largest school system in the United States. He’d been on the job three and a half years.

Deasy claimed in interviews after his resignation that the MiSiS debacle “played no role” in his resignation, and instead blamed it on district teachers and their unions opposing his crusading efforts to modernize the LAUSD school system. That is putting a positive spin on the situation to put it mildly.

Why? You may recall from my previous post that LAUSD has been under a 2003 federal district court approved consent decree to implement an automated student tracking system so that disabled and special need students’ educational progress can be assessed and tracked from kindergarten to the end of high school. Headway toward complying with the obligations agreed under the consent decree is assessed by a court-appointed independent monitor who publishes periodic progress reports. Deasy repeatedly failed to deliver on the school district’s promises made to the independent monitor over the course of his tenure.
What really helped seal Deasy’s fate was the latest progress report [pdf] from the independent monitor released last week. The report essentially said that despite numerous “trust me” promises by LAUSD officials (including Deasy), MiSiS was still out of compliance. The officials had promised that MiSiS would be completely operationally tested and ready at the beginning of this school year. But, said the report, the system’s incomplete functionality, the ongoing poor reliability due to inadequate testing, and the misunderstood and pernicious data integrity issues were causing unacceptable educational hardships to way too many LAUSD students—especially to those with special educational needs.

An LA Times story, for one, stated that the monitor found that MiSiS, instead of helping special needs students, made it difficult to place them in their required programs. A survey conducted by the independent monitor of 201 LAUSD schools trying to use MiSiS found that “more than 80% had trouble identifying students with special needs and more than two-thirds had difficulty placing students in the right programs [http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-lausd-report-20141014-story.html],” the Times article stated.

Deasy’s fate had been hanging by a thread for a while. For instance, at several LAUSD schools—especially at Thomas Jefferson High School in south Los Angeles—hundreds of students were still without correct class schedules nearly two months after the school year had started.

Another story in the LA Times reported [http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-1009-lausd-20141009-story.html] that continuing operational issues with MiSiS meant that some Jefferson students were being “sent to overbooked classrooms or were given the same course multiple times a day. Others were assigned to ‘service’ periods where they did nothing at all. Still others were sent home.”

The problems at Jefferson made Deasy’s insistence that issues with MiSiS were merely a matter of “fine tuning [http://home.lausd.net/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=393007&kid=27]” look disingenuous at best.

The MiSiS fueled difficulties at Jefferson, which extended to several other LAUSD schools, caused a California Superior Court judge about two weeks ago to intervene and order [http://www.myfoxla.com/story/26745165/judge-orders-officals-to-resolve-class-scheduling-problems-at-jefferson-high] the state education department to work with LAUSD officials to rectify the situation immediately. In issuing the order, the judge damningly wrote that, “there is no evidence of any organized effort to help those students” at Jefferson by LAUSD senior officials.

As a result of the judge’s order, the LAUSD school board last week quickly approved a $1.1 million plan [http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-lausd-jefferson-20141015-story.html] to try to eliminate the disarray at Jefferson High. Additionally, the school board is now undertaking an audit of other district high schools to see how many other students are being impacted by the MiSiS mess and what additional financial resources may be needed to eliminate it.

Fraying Deasy’s already thin thread further was his admission [http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-lausd-software-20141012-story.html?page=1] that MiSiS is in need of some 600 enhancements and bug fixes (up from a reported 150 or so when the system was rolled out in August), which would likely cost millions of dollars on top of the $130 million already spent to address them. Further, he also acknowledged that one of the core functions solemnly promised to the independent monitor would be available for this school year—the
proper recording of student grades—could take yet another year to fix all the bugs with it (http://[http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-lausd-software-20141012-story.html#page=1]), the LA Times reported.

According to the LA Daily News, LAUSD teachers complain (http://www.dailynews.com/social-affairs/20141012/software-glitches-plague-schools-across-lausd) that they not only have a hard time accessing the grade book function, but when they finally do, they find that student grades or even their courses have disappeared from MiSiS. Hundreds if not thousands of student transcripts could be complete shambles, which for seniors applying for colleges is causing major concern. Their parents are also unamused, to say the least.

Probably the last fiber of Deasy’s thread was pulled away last week when it turned out that even if MiSiS had been working properly, a majority of LAUSD schools likely wouldn’t have been able to access all of its functionality anyway. According to a story at Contra Costa Times, LAUSD technology director Ron Chandler informed the district’s school board last week that most of the LAUSD schools’ administrative desktop computers were incapable of completely accessing MiSiS because of known compatibility problems (http://www.contracostatimes.com/news/ci_26734070/high-level-lausd-staff-hammered-by-san-fernando).

A clearly frustrated school board wanted to know why this situation was only being disclosed now; Chandler told the board that the initial plan was for the schools to use the Apple iPads previously purchased by the school board to access MiSiS. But questions over Deasy’s role in that $1 billion contract (http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-deasy-ipads-20140826-story.html) put a hold to that approach. The school board was more than a bit incredulous about that explanation since they had not approve the purchase of iPads with the intent that they were to be used by teachers and school administrators as the primary means to access MiSiS.

Reluctantly, the school board approved $3.6 million in additional funding to purchase 3,340 new desktop computers for 784 LAUSD schools to allow them unfettered access to MiSiS.

While Deasy’s resignation will alleviate some of the immediate political pressure on LAUSD officials caused by MiSiS fiasco, the technical issues will undoubtedly last throughout this academic year and possibly well into the next. However, for many unlucky LAUSD students, the impacts may last for many years beyond that.

In Other News...

Baltimore County Maryland Teachers Tackling Student Tracking System Glitches (http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/education/bs-md-bcps-one-20140924,0,2867546.story)


Software Glitch Hits Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (http://www.newday.co.tt/news/0,201632.html)


Computer Error Allows Pink Panther Gang Member Early Out of Austrian Jail (http://www.israelidiamond.co.il/english/News.aspx?boneId=918&objid=15030)

Dropbox Bug Wipes Out Some Users’ Files (http://www.engadget.com/2014/10/13/dropbox-selective-sync-bug/)

Generic Medicines Might Have Been Approved on Software Error (http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/10/13/us-pharmaceuticals-software-thermo-fishe-idUKKCN0I210B20141013)


Spreadsheet Error Costs Tibco Investors $100 Million (http://blogs.wsj.com/moneybeat/2014/10/16/spreadsheet-mistake-costs-tibco-shareholders-100-million/)