

March 2007

## News from Take Two



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### Feature Article: CIMS 'Lots going on'

CIMS 17<sup>th</sup> annual conference is in Winnipeg April 25<sup>th</sup> thru April 27<sup>th</sup>. If you have not registered already – get it done. The agenda is available on our Take Two Website. We are excited about the content, about supplier participation, and about social events planned on Wednesday and Thursday. The quality of sessions depends on each of you! The continued enhancement/direction of CIMS depends on the advice and ideas we receive from customers in such settings. There are sessions for everyone. If you have any questions or concerns about the agenda – please give us a call. Every district should have representation from each product and for each level (management/clerical) – Schools Student, Purchasing, Finance, Payroll, H/R, I/T. If you require accommodation, we need you to register soon! Our give-a-way items this year are VERY cool. If you want to make sure you get one – we need your registration in to know how many we are ordering.

CIMS got sold! Pearson sold their CIMS business (code, customers, support for all of CIMS Finance, Payroll, HR, student) to Weidenhammer – a current CIMS Business Partner who supports 850 CIMS accounts. Take Two offered two webinars to explain the sale and introduce the new owner. This new owner is beneficial. There are no negatives for customers in this new arrangement. Weidenhammer will be onsite at Conference to meet you all and talk about your goals and expectations.

CIMS development is going great! The pace of our web development is increasing. Applications are being deployed successfully (good feature, low error rate, scaling nicely). Customers are coming onboard (5 customers are currently using our web applications live - over 100 teachers). 'Get Connected'. We are offering solutions in student, HR, and Payroll. Will School Accounting web be our next offering?

### News and Views:

- An Employee Release was distributed in January
- A Student Release is being distributed in March (out to sites week of March 19<sup>th</sup>)
- Parent Connect and Teacher Connect updates will be available last week in March. The student release must be installed before applying the new version of web.
- Employee Job Connect is working live at Fort McMurray. Will Brandon, Campbell River, or Courtenay be next?
- Donna & Deb made visits to Campbell River and Courtenay School Districts this quarter.
- Teacher Connect is being used in 10 schools that we know of.
- Salmon Arm is full-swing into Parent Connect. Armstrong publicized access in the local newspaper. Parents are impressed.

### And the last word goes to? BC Teachers

BCeSIS is the software solution the province of BC has been investing in heavily over the last 3 years. It was their goal to have half or more of the province on by now. We appreciate that our Canadian CIMS customers at that time were worried as to the fear that we could lose 6 customers. This article was recently submitted in the BC Teachers Newsletter. It is worth a read!

## BCeSIS: What's wrong with this picture? by Larry Kuehn

The BC enterprise, Student Information System (BCeSIS), is a centralized data system initiated by the Ministry of Education to collect and process data on all students. Currently it is being used in districts with about a third of the students in the province. Teachers in districts using BCeSIS have reported many problems. Teachers in other districts who may only have heard about the difficulties can be thankful their district was not one that took the lead in implementing the program.

The ministry says that the purpose of BCeSIS is management of student performance information and "data-driven decision making." It has several components, from demographic and attendance data to holding all student assignment marks and issuing report cards and eventually letting parents get access to the information on their child, online.

### **BCeSIS has serious performance problems**

The program has had serious performance problems at key times. Last June, it slowed down considerably, probably because of heavy demand when secondary schools were doing scheduling for the next year. That was a warning of things to come when the demand is greatest in September.

The system shut down completely over two days in late September, just when school districts had to provide information to the ministry on students' registrations and staffing levels. The company with the contract to provide the service, Fujitsu, had greatly underestimated the demand.

Several factors were at work here. One is that the technical people do not know the practices and demands of the education system. Another is that this is the first time this program has been used for a provincial jurisdiction, so there is no other experience to fall back on to gauge the level of demand.

Still another problem is that the ministry selected a completely centralized system over the view of teachers on the selection committee that they should have chosen another type of software and a distributed system.

Many teachers who have been putting their marks in the program have experienced very high degrees of frustration. One teacher required to use the system has written a two-page list of the problems with the grade-book program. Another reports an experience of marks having been changed. "The word *frustrated* doesn't even get close to the way I'm feeling right now," he said.

The general advice from many who have tried the BCeSIS grade book is, don't use it. It is possible to maintain marks in another program and to upload only the overall marks, work habits, and comments for report cards.

Teachers using the attendance program report it taking much longer to enter attendance than systems used in the past. One teacher timed it at 16 minutes more a day taken out of instructional time—a loss of over 40 hours in a year.

Despite all the problems, in October the ministry issued a press release announcing "British Columbia's new system for streamlining student records and improving achievement has received national recognition" - a bronze medal for "innovation and excellence."

The technology contractor for BCeSIS is just as out of touch with reality. It did an internal review after the system collapsed at the end of September. Fujitsu's conclusion about its service: "The Ministry and School Districts are being serviced by a world-class operation."

### **The real costs of BCeSIS**

When school boards signed on to the program, they were told the cost would be \$10 a student per year. In fact, the costs, as one ministry official told BCTF Executive Committee member Jill McCaffery, are closer to \$140 a student per year, which would be about \$80 million a year if all students were included.

The significant costs include local hardware and technical support, training and local staffing to carry out all the functions necessary to implement the system and get it running. In addition, the complexity of the system has forced most districts to hire external consultants. This compares to the \$3.50 per student that the province provided as a one-time textbook grant.

To give an idea of costs with a system like this, Fujitsu projects that \$1.3 million is required just to implement a test database so that new developments can be tested before they are put online and create unanticipated problems.

### **BCeSIS as a surveillance and control system**

The aim of this centralized database can be seen in the recent appointment of a "Joint Committee on Curriculum, Assessment and Report." This is a joint ministry/district committee to look at processes for managing student achievement information for elementary and middle schools. As is typical with this project, the committee is selected by the BCeSIS Service Management Council, rather than being open to teachers to apply or having the BCTF appoint representatives as is typically done for IRPs.

The ministry claims that the data in BCeSIS belongs to the school districts and can only be taken by the ministry with agreement by the district. However, already with distributed learning schools, districts are required to upload "achievement data for all active students" on five specified dates during the year. Districts can either agree to let the ministry take the data from BCeSIS directly, or the district can extract the data itself, and then upload it to the ministry. Any claims of the system being "voluntary" on the part of districts is straight obfuscation.

### **BCeSIS may not meet the ministry's own FOIPA issues**

It was recently discovered that there is a data field in BCeSIS for teacher social insurance numbers. Some districts have 'uploaded' this information to the system. It now turns out that at the end of the year the teacher SIN number becomes part of the student record and travels with the student as they change schools within BC and other places.

### **BCeSIS and Sector Data Warehouse**

Although the promise of BCeSIS was to provide data that districts could use for decision making, it turns out that BCeSIS is woefully inadequate for this task. BCeSIS does not store historical data such as attendance or school marks over time. For example, if a district wanted to measure progress of a group of students, such as looking at Aboriginal transition rates, BCeSIS is unable to perform this task. This is why the ministry is not commissioning to develop, build, and maintain a Sector Data Warehouse at this time. The cost of this project is not yet known.

BCeSIS was not designed for all the objectives that the ministry was seeking to meet and a lot more money will be thrown at it if it is to meet those objectives. Much of the cost of BCeSIS is downloaded onto school districts as they hire staff and consultants to make up for the problems with BCeSIS.

*Larry Kuehn is director of the BCTF's Research and Technology Division.*