Modernization Brings Simplicity to K-12 Education

ERP initiatives in **Colorado** and **Florida** reduce complexities and boost productivity

K-12 school districts modernizing their enterprise resource planning (ERP) platforms must make thoughtful choices on cloud architecture to avoid unnecessary complexities in their systems. One popular option is a multi-tenant cloud architecture, which efficiently shares resources among multiple users and ensures high availability with simple, centralized administration.

The experiences of school districts in Colorado and Florida show how modernization initiatives create wide-spread benefits. These two districts moved from supporting multiple systems and data silos to an integrated solution that streamlines overall district operations.

Modernizing a K-12 school district's IT infrastructure might seem like a daunting prospect, but it gives districts the flexibility they need.

"One-size-fits-all doesn't work," says Dr. Monica Goldson, a senior fellow with the Center for Digital Education with 32 years of experience as CEO with Prince George's County Schools in Maryland. "Every district has its own nuances and is in a different place."[1]

The districts found the necessary flexibility with CloudSuite Public Sector, a multi-tenant cloud solution from Infor.

Moving to a multi-tenant solution is like renting commercial office space: It's far more economical than buying and owning the building because the costs and risks are distributed across multiple tenants and the landlord. Renters benefit from shared spaces and services.

Hillsborough County Public Schools

Hillsborough County, Florida, with 220,000 students and 24,000 school district staff, is the economic and cultural hub of the Tampa Bay region. The school district's ERP platform was long overdue for modernization.

"Our last major upgrade was back in 2008," says Rick Laneau, general manager of information technology with Hillsborough County Public Schools.[2]

The district's three-tiered system included technology from IBM, Microsoft and many more vendors. All those tools require specific skills that are difficult to keep up to date.

The district had also accumulated more than 440 customized programs that had become increasingly hard to maintain. When software vendors updated their code, the district's IT team didn't always have enough staff to fully test the upgrades to make sure they didn't cause disruptions.

Boulder Valley School District

The Boulder Valley School District is northwest of Denver on the scenic Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. With 27,000 students and 4,300 staff, the district is big enough to need top-tier technology but small enough to require fiscal thrift.

"Resources aren't unlimited," says Bill Sutter, chief financial officer with the Boulder Valley School District.[3] "Operation-ally, we've got to run things pretty lean around here."

The district's IT team had experience with cloud technol-ogies. They didn't have as many customizations as their counterparts in Hillsborough County, but they did have other challenges.

"We have four separate unions, and each has different contract language," Sutter says. Digital transformation had to account for those requirements and many more variables.

Benefits of Multi-Tenant Cloud

Simplicity. Cloud-based ERP solutions let the districts hand off maintenance of on-premises technologies. "It removes some of the layers of complexity for the district to manage so we can focus on our real purpose of educating students," Laneau says.

Efficiency. Increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are baked into cloud architectures, improving IT staff productivity and keeping resource usage aligned with a district's needs.

"We don't know where AI will take us, but we know that it's going to help us with scalability and predictive analysis," says Pam Hendriksen, solution consultant with Infor and former general manager of payment services for a large K-12 district.[4]

Security. Hyper-scale cloud providers follow strict cybersecurity protocols and keep software patched and updated. Remote storage in the cloud also heightens physical security.

Remote staffing. "We jumped about a decade forward with mobility," Laneau says. That's because a multi-tenant cloud architecture allows any district staffer with a mobile device to securely access the ERP system. This improves the experience for remote workers and technical staff who must travel to multiple schools.

Business continuity. Backups, cutover and data redundancies are handled through Infor's partnership with Amazon Web Services and ensure data is consistently backed up and available without requiring manual intervention from IT admins. If a massive hurricane hits the Hillsborough County area, the school district has a lower risk of losing access to its systems.

Support. District administrators have quick access to people with advanced technical skills via their ERP provider. This addresses skills gaps and improves system performance.

Tips for Success

- **Set specific goals.**
  Start with a clear picture of what outcomes you will accomplish with a cloud ERP migration.

- **Communicate early and often.**
  Make sure elected officials, executives, managers and staff know what's coming and understand its value.

- **Manage change.**
  Action must accompany talk. Get staff involved in software demos and training programs.

- **Get outside help.**
  Consultants, system integrators and software vendors provide valuable guidance and subject matter expertise when you're setting requirements and assessing software platforms.

- **Ask your colleagues.**
  Contact peers in other districts to learn from them. It's important for districts and their leaders to communicate often with one another to improve their operations.

K-12 IT leaders shouldn't underestimate the scope of modernization, given that ERP applications have mission-critical roles in finance, payroll and personnel management.

"Cloud adoption is not a one-time event," Hendriksen says. "It's a journey."

1. https://webinars.govtech.com/Streamlining-Education%3A-How-Two-K-12-School-Districts-Are-Driving-Operational-Excellence--142623.html
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

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