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EdTec 540  
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## **Introduction**

I was hired this January as a technology consultant to a small, private K-8 school in Scripps Ranch. The school's technology director was out due to extended illness and someone was needed to take over mid year. This report will describe analysis of one of the more difficult issues I have been dealing with at this school: parents and teachers complaining about the newly deployed Edline system for posting assignments online. On my first day, I was told that Edline "wasn't working right" and needed to be fixed. Since I was unable to communicate with my predecessor, I had to educate myself about the systems and the school before I could even begin to recommend a course of action. The Mager and Pipe text "Analyzing Performance Problems" would prove extremely helpful in the weeks ahead.

I set out to read the Edline documentation and scheduled interviews with teachers from different grade levels, administrators and parents. It soon became apparent that I was dealing with a multitude of problems, and only a few of them technical. Up until this year the school was loosely organized structurally and many procedures and records were informal. The abrupt transition to the centralized Edline database served to highlight the lack of clear direction and brought differences of opinion into stark relief. I came to realize that the refrain "Edline is not working" was really code for a whole constellation of issues ranging from simple data inputting errors to larger school-wide problems of unrealistic expectations and teacher workload.

## **Vision**

At the close of the last school year a new principal was hired and the decision to "get all the teachers online" was made. Since this principal had experience with the Edline and GradeQuick products at her previous school, these systems were selected and acquired in June 2006. The plan was to deploy before the school year began in September. The principal spoke to me of her desire to "bring the school into the 21st century" since there was no computer system for grades or even attendance. Up to that point, each teacher had handwritten their report cards and even the school office records were all on paper. All teachers were now required to keep their grades in GradeQuick, a digital grade book, and upload them to Edline as progress reports for parents. This was to streamline communication and reduce teacher workload.

## **Current Situation**

The reality could not be further from the vision. Only a few of the more tech savvy middle school and specialist teachers were using the system regularly, uploading grades and assignments to the school's Edline website. As I met with them, I realized that even these successful few were also having problems but were either ignoring them or didn't

realize their importance: “Everything is working fine except I have all my students listed twice.” “Whenever I log on it tells me that twenty students are dropped and twenty are added. I just click OK.” “Sometimes I have to enter a grade in 5 times before it sticks.”

Parents of middle school students were complaining that students were listed in the wrong classes and that they could not understand any of the reports that were uploaded by the teachers. After examining the Edline system by logging in as a parent, I found a confusing array of reports – one student had 70 of them – all from different classes and with cryptic names like “Trying Again!” A parent of 3 children would literally have to click hundreds of times to find out how each child was doing in each subject area. Parents were suffering from information overload and could not follow the academic progress of their children.

The primary teachers (grades K through 2) had their own issues. It was school policy that students this age would not receive letter grades, yet the administration left it up to each teacher to implement a standards based assessment using the GradeQuick/Edline system. Teachers independently came up with their own unique methods, all incompatible. When I spoke with them, they were near mutiny and were convinced that Edline was unsuitable for lower grades. Not one had ever even attempted to post online.

In conversations with the vendor and technical support, I discovered that the school had purchased two different versions of the grade book application. One was a standalone program named GradeQuick that stored grades on the local drive, the other named GradeQuickWeb required a live network connection to Edline to enter the grades. The icons for these two versions were identical. Half the school was using the standalone and half the web based version, with a few teachers actually using both! A further impediment was that the concepts of posting and entering grades were not understood fully by the faculty. Some thought that they had to post the report to Edline to save their grades in the grade book, explaining the baffling number of reports for students.

Many teachers complained about data loss and constant disconnection. My investigations showed that the vast majority of this data loss happened while using the web version of the software. At first I suspected some configuration errors in the wireless network causing dropouts (which was the case), but after helping one teacher I noticed that she simply closed her laptop as she got up to leave. Since the web version requires a live connection and saves the data when exiting the program, I realized these teachers were erasing their grades simply by closing their laptops without first exiting the program.

Further conversations with GradeQuick technical support also revealed a known but undocumented bug: the act of uploading a progress report to Edline also disconnects GradeQuickWeb – losing the last few minutes of work!

I explored Edline further and I became aware of a tremendous amount of inaccurate data, including misspelled names, incorrect class rosters and ID numbers. When I requested a master list in order to compare and make corrections, I was told that Edline *was* the master list and no other copies of this information existed.

## **Differences Between Vision and Current Situation**

Edline as deployed is not serving the school well. Teachers are frustrated and do not trust the program after losing data. Those who do upload successfully do so either inconsistently or too often. Parents cannot get information about their children's academic progress quickly and reliably. Administrators are convinced that some teachers are just resisting change. Everyone blames the technology for the problem.

## **Factors Driving Successful Performance**

Perhaps what strikes me the most about this situation is how totally avoidable it could have been. Most if not all of these issues could have been discovered and resolved with judicious planning and a staggered deployment. In a rush to appear technologically advanced, the school imposed an unrealistic timeline. There was no definition of the problem to be solved; rather a solution was imposed without consideration for any transition. The culture of the school was not ready for a centralized data system. No pilot program was even considered. Worst of all, expectations were not enunciated clearly to all participants. How could the school succeed if it did not know what success looked like?

I have come to learn that it is all too typical of the school's administration to settle on a solution before understanding the problem. Unless the organization changes, it will continue to purchase very expensive systems that are abandoned after a year or two.

## **Recommendations**

Since this problem is so complex and encompasses so many issues, my primary recommendation to the school has been to stop and think before it purchases technology. Edline and GradeQuick are robust and valuable educational tools, but the school was not ready to adopt them with such a short deployment schedule. Since the school is already committed publicly and financially, efforts must be made to manage expectations among staff and parents while the system is brought up to speed. Data must be cleaned up, reports must be customized and conventions standardized, incorporating the suggestions of the primary faculty. Requirements of teachers must be communicated clearly, and documentation prepared. Conflicting versions of the software should be removed and bug fixes from the vendor should be installed as soon as possible.

## **Conclusions**

This entire process has left me dumbfounded as to why otherwise intelligent professionals expect complex technological systems to behave magically. If I could impart only one lesson to my employer it would be to plan! A goal of "get all the teachers online" is too vague. Technology is a tool just like any other. Buying a hammer does not make you a carpenter, or instantly build you an armoire. If you are unclear about what you are trying to achieve, investing in a database only allows you to be confused more expensively.

## Appendix

### Example of Reports for Parents

Private Reports for [redacted] (1-70 of 70 Items)			
Last Modified	Report	Location	Report Name
03/09/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">Middle School Girls PE</a>	March 9th update
03/06/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Chumash</a>	March 3 Update
03/06/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Jewish History</a>	March 3 Update
03/06/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Navi</a>	March Update
03/06/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Parsha</a>	March 6 Update
03/06/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">Middle School Girls PE</a>	PE grades March 5th
03/01/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">Middle School Girls PE</a>	March 1st update
03/01/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Math</a>	February 23, 2007 progres
02/28/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Social Studies</a>	2/28/07
02/28/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Language Arts</a>	2/28/07
02/25/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Physical Science</a>	2/23/07 Progress Report
02/24/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Art</a>	8th grade art final grades
02/23/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Reading</a>	February 23
02/23/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Parsha</a>	3rd Quarter Progress Rept
02/23/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Navi</a>	3rd Quarter Progress Rept
02/23/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Chumash</a>	3rd Quarter Progress Rept
02/23/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Jewish History</a>	3rd Quarter Progress Rept
02/23/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Language Arts</a>	Trying again! 2/23/07
02/22/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Language Arts</a>	Update:2/22/07
02/22/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Language Arts</a>	Update: 2/22/07
02/21/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Language Arts</a>	Update: 2/21/07
02/21/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Social Studies</a>	Update: 2/21/07
02/21/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Social Studies</a>	Update: 2/21/07
02/21/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Language Arts</a>	Update 2/1/07
02/13/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Parsha</a>	Feb. 13- Update
02/13/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Navi</a>	Feb. 13-Update
02/13/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Jewish History</a>	Feb. 13 Update
02/13/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Chumash</a>	Feb. 13 Update
02/12/07	<a href="#">View</a>	<a href="#">8th Grade Language Arts</a>	February 12 Update

### Confusing GradeQuick Icons

