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Abstract: The article focuses on OneRoster, a new standard released by the IMS Global Learning Consortium to create a consensus protocol for formatting and sharing class-roster and user-authentication data in Florida. Topics include how the standard can address the issue of class rostering and user authentication, the adoption of the standard at the Brevard County school system, and the SIF xPress standard from nonprofit Access 4 Learning Community. INSET: A NEW SOLUTION TO A GROWING PROBLEM?.

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New Tech Standard Aims to Ease Sharing Of Digital Roster Data

DIGITAL DIRECTIONS Tracking news and ideas in educational technology

'OneRoster' Targets Interoperability Challenge

The education technology sector is eyeing a new remedy for one of its most persistent headaches: the messy flow of class-roster and account sign-on information between schools and companies.

The hope is that all parties might coalesce around a single, open "interoperability" standard for streamlining the often-painful process of getting teachers and students set up with accounts so they can access the correct digital instructional materials. Barriers to widespread adoption of such a standard, however, have plagued the field for years.

The most likely candidate appears to be OneRoster, a new standard released last year by a Florida-based group of vendors, districts, and others known as the IMS Global Learning Consortium. The goal of OneRoster is to put forward a consensus protocol for formatting and sharing class-roster and user-authentication data.

Hypothetically, at least, such standardization could bring order to a chaotic landscape. Currently, many districts must manage custom data integrations with each of the dozens of companies providing digital content to their schools -- an often-expensive process that frequently leads to lost instructional time and poor data security.

At the moment, the most popular solution to the problem is Clever, a third-party company that charges a fee to manage the flow of roster information between tens of thousands of schools and hundreds of digital-content providers.

A common, non-proprietary standard could eliminate the need for such a middleman, proponents say.

"When integrations cost time or money that nobody has, that stops progress from being made," said Rob Abel, the CEO of IMS Global. The theory is that if we take the friction out of going digital, that helps the market develop for everyone."

Slow to Gain Traction

But OneRoster is neither the first nor the only standard to attempt to address the issue of class rostering and user authentication. Open standards, which are free and accessible to all parties, have been aimed at other data-sharing problems, but have yet to gain widespread traction in K-12 schools. And many observers of the ed-tech market suggest that outside of a few large districts and big commercial players, the technical savvy needed to make open interoperability standards effective simply might not exist.

"Over the long term, the [best] solution is adopting an open standard that works," said Douglas A. Levin, the president of EdTech Strategies, a consulting group. "But some districts will always want to have their hand held, and not every company is going to be sophisticated on this issue."

'A Simpler Life'

Florida's 73,000-student Brevard County school system is one of the districts to most aggressively embrace the new OneRoster standard.

"We've put all our content partners on notice that this is the direction we're moving in," said Matthew Frey, the district's education technology manager.

The district hopes to save time and money -- and to more quickly get students and teachers up and running on the correct software programs at the beginning of each school year.

Currently, Frey said, achieving those goals is difficult.

Each of the seven or so major publishers that Brevard County contracts with requests from the district a file or spreadsheet containing information such as usernames, grade, and subject. The structure of each of those files and the formats in which data are requested are often idiosyncratic, resulting in different files having to be created for each vendor. Updates -- when students move out of the district or change classes, for example -- present another hurdle.

And the topper, Frey said, is that many vendors levy "integration fees" on districts -- a charge that he considers arbitrary, based on comparisons done with neighboring districts.

"We're looking for a simpler life," Frey said.

So Brevard, along with an informal coalition of more than two dozen districts around the country that goes under the umbrella name FACTS (for Federated Alliance of Curriculum Technology Standards), is embracing OneRoster.

The standard was developed with the input of a number of prominent ed-tech vendors, who make up the membership of IMS Global.

Many of those companies are eager for a new solution, said Abel, the IMS Global CEO. Like districts, ed-tech providers face major interoperability headaches around class rostering and authentication, he said. One big reason is that the data they need from schools typically need to be extracted from student-information systems or learning-management systems, which can vary significantly from district to district.

OneRoster promises to help by automating the account-setup process in a consistent fashion.

The 213,000-student Houston school system, which has played a leading role in pushing publishers to adopt other interoperability standards related to the sharing of digital learning materials, is among those now embracing OneRoster.

On the vendor side, content providers including Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, student information system-maker Infinite Campus, and single-sign on software maker ClassLink are among those starting to use the standard.

"The thing about OneRoster is that it's comprehensive enough to accommodate all the disparate data required by all the publishers," said Frey of the Brevard County schools. "I'm in favor of anything that's comprehensive and unifying."

Fragmentation Persists

Many in the ed-tech field agree with that sentiment, but few seem convinced that the sector is ready to coalesce around a single class-rostering standard.

The Washington-based nonprofit Access 4 Learning Community, for example, has its own standard, dubbed SIF xPress, that aims to perform a similar function.

A 2015 white paper commissioned by the group recommended that IMS Global and Access 4 Learning "work together to develop a combined, minimum viable roster" in order to "serve the education ecosystem best."

But Abel of IMS Global was less than enthusiastic about the possibility of such collaboration, saying Access 4 Learning is "largely perceived as a failed project and organization."

Such infighting within the K-12 technical-standards community has left a fractious landscape for pub-fishers such as Discovery Education to navigate.

With digital curricular offerings that it says are in use by 40 percent of U.S. public schools across the country, Discovery must negotiate a dizzying array of roster-sharing agreements, said its vice president of customer success, Craig Halper. It's probably not realistic to expect anything different soon, he said.

"While unification around a standard is something we'd love to get to, we're going to continue to offer a broad set of options for our customers," Halper said. "Up to this point, that's really the path they've taken."

That kind of fragmentation and inconsistency is a big reason why San Francisco-based Clever has found such a huge market. Roughly 50,000 schools now rely on the company to share rostering information with their digital-content providers, said CEO Tyler Bosmeny.

Partly, that's to avoid the technical headaches that come from custom integrations, which can be particularly challenging for smaller districts with limited information-technology capacity, he said. (Bosmeny serves on the advisory board for EdWeek Market Brief, a new information service directed at K-12 companies and created by Editorial Projects in Education, the nonprofit that publishes Education Week.)

And partly, Bosmeny said, it's because the actual logistics of effectively sharing rostering information involve not just agreeing on file structures, but everything from managing encryption protocols to allowing role-based authentication for administrative users of the data.

"Regardless of what data formats your district adopts, given the sheer number of applications in use in schools today, you still need ways of managing all of that," he said. "But I love that more people are talking about interoperability. I could see us supporting this [OneRoster] standard if it gains traction in the future."

And how likely is that to happen?

Jim Flanagan, the chief learning-services officer for the International Society for Technology in Education, or ISTE, which has backed the IMS Global standards, acknowledged that it will be an uphill climb.

District technology leaders increasingly recognize that open interoperability standards for class rostering and other data-sharing purposes could quickly move the field forward, and there's a growing sense that IMS Global is the group to get behind, Flanagan said.

But while superintendents and district instructional leaders understand that the current setup too often causes pain inside schools, he said, it's a big leap to get them to understand that they can help students and teachers get relief by promoting open technical standards.

"Their role is to demand interoperability," Flanagan said. "The execution isn't simple yet, but getting the expectation out there can drive industry to accelerate implementation of a solution."

WEBINAR In a recent webinar, guests described demands for "interoperability" -- or the requirement that ed-tech vendors ensure that their data and content can "talk" with each other. View the webinar at: www.edweek.org/go/webinar/PushForInteroperability

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By Benjamin Herald

A NEW SOLUTION TO A GROWING PROBLEM?

As schools go digital they face a mounting challenge how to manage the flow of back-end data they must share with companies Some experts say that an "open" technical standard, such as the newly released OneRoster standard, might help ease the burden

* OneRoster, created by the IMS Global Learning Consortium, is one of a small handful of interoperability standards intended to make it easier for schools and third-party vendors to exchange class roster and account sign-on information.
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* The standard provides technical specifications for structuring files, organizing data fields, and accessing and securing rostering data to be transmitted between companies and schools.

* The standard is intended to replace the wide variety of proprietary and custom class roster templates requested from schools by many digital content vendors with a consistent, standardized way of sharing student name, grade, class, teacher, login, password, and other information.

* Currently, much of the work exchanging class-roster information with vendors must be done manually by district staff, or via a third party. While an open standard could help streamline that process, the impact on schools will likely depend in large part on how widely the new standard is adopted, as well as schools' and vendors' technical expertise in implementing it. BENJAMIN HEROLD
