ESP Solutions Group's Quality Project Management™ for Education Agencies

Business experts just don't know enough about how an education agency operates. So why should we expect business-oriented systems integrators to be the best project managers for a large-scale state education agency project? That education agencies are different from other businesses is a fact. The special blend of geography, culture, politics, divergent stakeholder groups, and technical challenges makes all education agencies unique. Successful project management within such an organization can be elusive—but far from unachievable.

One first must get away from the conventional wisdom that says we can have only two of the three components of project success: on time delivery, affordable cost, or quality. The right project management methodology will deliver all three for an education agency. In fact, that is exactly what an agency should expect. The attribute that makes QPM™ most successful for an education agency is our focus on teamwork and constant communications. We have built an exceptional group of experts with the full range of experiences required for large-scale state-level implementations. Their Extraordinary Insight™ is incorporated into our education technology focused project management methodology.

> An education agency has to adhere to federal and state policy, laws, and regulations, in contrast with the traditional business shareholder model that the national large-scale system integrators practice.

Action Research   A major characteristic of QPM is its use of Action Research to manage, triage, and immediately resolve issues. Action Research provides project teams with a continuous loop for feedback, issue resolution, and lasting process improvement. Our use of Action Research illustrates that QPM is not simply serious about managing issues. The goal of QPM and Action Research is continuous improvement. ESP's project management practitioners evaluate every aspect of our projects along the way so that any required improvements can be enacted immediately as opposed to during a later project phase.

The conventional wisdom is that large-scale technology projects fail for one or more of the following reasons.
1.   Insufficient high-level support
2.   Inadequate funding
3.   Incapable commercial software products

In fact, these are typically not reasons for failure at all. Our analysis of high-profile, failed education information system projects concluded that two factors often combine for failure.
1.   Lack of buy-in from stakeholders, especially those burdened with providing the data.
2.   Lack of interoperability of the project's components, old and new, that make up the total solution.

Buy-In   When there is insufficient buy-in by the data providers (e.g., schools and districts), it likely occurs because they are unwilling to change their processes to provide data in a new way. In *The Change Function* (Coburn, Pip, 2006), two variables work with each other to allow change to occur. The pain of staying with the current process must be greater than the costs for changing to the new process. This dynamic explains how buy-in from data providers impacts large-scale projects. For example, the schools evaluate the costs and benefits to them. They decide whether or not the new system will ease their current burden to such a great extent that the extra burden to switch over is bearable.

> All deliverables and changes to project scope must be managed with consistency, well documented, agreed upon by all involved parties, and require formal management team sign off.

In *The Tipping Point* (Gladwell, Malcolm, 2000), an innovation suddenly catches on and success is rapid from a point in time. For an education agency, that dynamic describes perfectly the buy-in point that must be achieved—if the project is voluntary. Because large-scale systems are often mandatory, waiting around for the tipping point can be disastrous. There is no tipping point in a mandatory system adoption. Consider the dynamic described in the classic *Crossing the Chasm* (Moore, Geoffrey A., 1999). Innovators and early adopters buy in and make an innovation successful. However, a large-scale, mandatory innovation can't afford to write off the laggards.

The buy-in has to be compelling for everyone within a prescribed timeframe. QPM™ specializes in achieving that buy-in before the fuse burns down.

In *If Only We Knew What We Know*, C. Jackson Grayson, Jr., the creator of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, emphasizes the importance of the tacit, unwritten knowledge that people have of how systems really work. That's what ESP's project managers and the experts that back them up bring to an education agency. Agencies don't have the time or the inclination to write down all of the processes that must be respected to achieve widespread buy-in—or even internal buy-in. Our project managers are trained to use QPM™ to discover the tacit knowledge and leverage it for success—rather than being blindsided by its reality in the midst of implementation.

> **"An agency that controls project scope - ultimately controls deliverables, timelines, and costs for the entire project."**
> **—Glynn D. Ligon, Ph.D., CEO, ESP Solutions Group, Inc.**

Interoperability   Up front, a huge risk is insufficient interoperability among the components of the solution. Each component may work fine independently, but within the ecosystem of the overall solution, they fail to work together seamlessly. In *The World is Flat* (Friedman, Thomas L., 2005), information systems operate seamlessly across the globe. Instead of being flat, the world of education vendors still looks like a Rubik's cube. Products are different colors, and as an education agency moves them around to make them all match up, the result is often that they become even more mismatched. The solution to an education agency's Rubik's cube of software applications is not to move them around on the surface but to connect them internally within the cube. Then we can map the color of each square to match whatever color we need a side to be. That's interoperability. Don't expect different vendors' products to ever change colors to comply with your needs. Instead insist that they share their contents efficiently with all other applications in your cube.

Our methodology for managing projects always focuses on an education agency's mission and goals. As such, in our projects there are three standard directives.

1. Improve the educational experiences of students to produce higher academic achievement.
2. Improve the efficiency of education agencies to support the efforts of schools.
3. Improve the quality and availability of data to support decision making (data-driven decision making, aka D3M).

> **From top to bottom, the education agency must emphasize project ownership and stakeholder buy-in of the project.**

Projects that Require ESP's QPM™ Process:

- Ed-Fi Dashboard
- Longitudinal Data System/Data Warehouse
- De-Identified Research Database
- Instructional Management System/Learning Management System
- Student Information System
- ED*Facts* Reporting System
- Early Warning System/Dashboard
- Roster Management System

TIMING

At the outset of project planning and optimally during the RFP development process are the best times to engage in the **QPM™** process, yet vendors and education agencies may leverage ESP's QPM™ management services and toolkit at various points in a project's lifecycle.

1. When Writing an RFP: ESP's IS*Insight*™ and DataSpecs® are used to detail the data scope and project requirements, and present a comprehensive visualization of data detail and relationships for an RFP. This process allows potential bidders to submit more precise and accurate proposals.
2. During Project Discovery and Scoping: As part of the initial project planning for a new contract, ESP develops the QPM™ Project Management Plan document for inclusion in the overall Project Scope and Sign-Off documents.
3. Change Management: ESP's QPM™ and Data Scope™ solutions will remediate any scope challenges that occur during project implementation.

Having a clearly composed **QPM™ Project Management Plan** document signed-off by both the contractor and the education agency provides efficiency as well as contributes to meeting timelines and gaining agreement on and acceptance of final deliverables.

> **QPM dictates teamwork and partnership across both the education agency and vendor organizations to ensure project success.**

PRICING

ESP will work with your agency at no charge to determine the best possible solution that fits within your budget.

WHY ESP?

ESP Solutions Group, Inc. is solely focused on improving the quality of education data. Our team of education experts originally pioneered the concept of "data-driven decision making" (D3M) and now partners to optimize the management of data within state and local agencies. ESP has advised school districts, all state education agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education on the practice of P20W data management. ESP is comprised of nationally recognized experts in implementing the data and technology requirements of state accountability systems, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Education Data Exchange Network (EDEN/ED*Facts*), the Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF/A4L), Ed-Fi, and the Common Education Data Standards (CEDS). ESP's collective expertise is represented in our ESP Journals and Optimal Reference Guides (downloads are available at http://www.espsolutionsgroup.com/library/). To learn more, please visit us at www.espsolutionsgroup.com.