

Five Ways to Gain Efficiencies That Your District Needs Today

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Process Automation and Document Management

Over the past decade, document management — the storage, management, and tracking of electronic documents — has become standard for large and small school districts alike, as reams of paper, file cabinets, and storage rooms have been replaced by server- and cloud-based solutions to house digital records.

Process automation takes document management to the next level. It replaces time-consuming and unstructured manual processes with streamlined, automated systems to improve productivity. With process automation, your district achieves efficiencies that are not possible with document management alone, which frees up time for administrators, teachers, and staff to devote to other initiatives — like providing high quality student services.

This white paper includes:

- + *Why Your District Needs Process Automation*
- + *5 Ways Your District Should Automate Its Processes*
- + *What to Look for in a Process Automation System*

Why Your District Needs Process Automation

PRODUCTIVITY AND TIME SAVINGS

Automating the processes around digital documents makes more of an impact on your district's productivity than the initial transition to electronic records. As educators well know, many administrative functions can be cumbersome, even with digital document management. Using process automation, your district can streamline multi-step processes that often require form completion, approvals, signatures, permission to edit forms, and the need to share and access the forms later. With less time spent on these tasks, your teachers and staff have more time to focus on finding ways to better serve students.

SECURITY AND PRIVACY

[FERPA](#) (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) and [COPPA](#) (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act) are federal laws that protect the privacy and security of student records and personal information. The laws aim to prevent the use of students' personal information for commercial benefit, as well as to stop the more serious abuses of discrimination, identity theft, and other malicious or criminal acts. In 2016, California enacted the first state law on student privacy and security, [SOPIPA](#), and other states quickly followed suit. In the 2017 legislative session alone, data privacy was a focus of 93 state bills.¹

Despite the seriousness of these laws and the principles they protect, many districts may unknowingly expose their students to privacy and security risks by using free tools such as Google and Dropbox. In 2014, Google was sued for violating FERPA and exploiting student information for commercial gain, a case that forced the tech giant to change its practices.² No district wants to find itself on the wrong end of a lawsuit where children's rights have been violated. That's why it is critical for your district to have adequate process automation and document management systems in place: to ensure confidentiality, data integrity, and compliance with state and federal privacy and security laws.

COMPREHENSIVE PERMISSIONS

Strict processes for setting comprehensive permissions, and for handling changes in permissions from year to year, is an effective way to comply with privacy and security requirements. For example, classroom teachers will have access to their students' IEPs one year but may be restricted the next year as class configurations change. Free and reduced lunch status is another area where information is restricted to a limited number of administrators to respect students' privacy. Granting, managing, and updating all these permissions district-wide can be an administrative time sink at best without the right tools; at worst it can open a district up to errors, negative publicity, and lawsuits. The capacity to quickly and accurately manage permissions is a critical piece of any process automation system.

5 Ways Your District Should Automate Its Processes

1. IMPROVED SERVICES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

In the US, there are 4.6 million English Learners (EL) in K-12 schools, which represents approximately 9.4 percent of the national student population. In some states, like California, that number is as high as 22.4 percent.³ Districts must adhere to federal guidelines as well as state mandates when educating their English Learner students. In Illinois, for example, EL students who are new to a district must complete a home language survey to identify those with a language background other than English. Students then take an English proficiency exam for initial eligibility, and they test again every year to monitor their progress, reassess their skill level, and determine continued eligibility for the program. Districts must continue to follow EL students for two years after they complete the EL program.⁴

The process for EL eligibility in your district probably mirrors that of Illinois—bringing together parent completion of forms, student assessments, admittance into the program, document storage, and the setting of permissions for administrators and teachers who are tasked with EL student monitoring. This complex sequence of steps and documents presents an ideal opportunity for process automation. Having adopted a new document management and process automation technology platform, Hesperia Unified School District in San Bernardino, CA, cut the time it took to approve students' eligibility for their English Learners program from three months to two weeks. The greatest benefit of this process improvement is increased student access to much-needed services.

22%

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2. ANONYMOUS REPORTING OF BULLYING, SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE, AND OTHER THREATS TO STUDENT SAFETY

In our complex society, schools are playing an increased role in keeping students physically and emotionally safe. The challenges are daunting:

- 21 percent of students ages 12–18 reported being bullied at school,⁵ and 25 percent of public middle and high schools deal with cyber bullying issues every week.⁶
- 9 percent of schools reported a threat with a weapon during the 2015-2016 school year.⁷
- Suicide rates doubled among teen girls and increased by more than 30 percent among teen boys from 2007 to 2015.⁸

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These statistics indicate the increasing challenges in keeping students and faculty safe and healthy and show that every district needs a plan in place where students, staff, and parents can easily and reliably report concerning behavior. Online forms serve as a dedicated hotline where behavior concerns can be reported anonymously 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. With a robust process automation system, this critical information can automatically be forwarded to the right leaders, who can take immediate action to keep their students safe.

3. VOLUNTEER APPLICATIONS THAT INCLUDE CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECKS

These days, volunteering at your local school may involve rigorous vetting, with some districts requiring a multi-step volunteer application process. For example:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina requires all volunteers to complete an online registration form and a criminal background check. Unsupervised volunteers also need to complete an in-person interview and pass a reference check.⁹
- Las Cruces Public Schools in New Mexico requires all parents and community members who volunteer to complete an FBI background check and a criminal history affidavit.¹⁰

With the overall increase in security risks at schools, some districts nationwide have followed a similar pattern for vetting volunteers. Managing this multi-step process, collecting reliable data, and keeping information securely stored yet easily accessible is no easy task. Process automation enables your district to:

- Post an online volunteer application that parents or community members can complete anytime, anywhere
- Collect complete and accurate data for each applicant
- Securely store forms in an easily accessible online location
- Give designated administrators permission to retrieve forms as needed

Forms can automatically be routed to the right personnel for sign-off without manual intervention, so school secretaries are not bogged down with paperwork or approvals. Your district can be assured that you have safeguards in place to protect students, while preventing paperwork or delayed response time from dissuading potential volunteers. Volunteerism and community involvement are critical components of any vibrant school district.



A Pennsylvania law passed in the wake of the Jerry Sandusky sex abuse scandal at Penn State, requires all K-12 school visitors to be fingerprinted and undergo background checks before coming onto campus.¹¹

Many other districts nationwide are implementing similar procedures.

4. ONLINE PERMISSION FORMS

Parents are required to complete permission slips that waive district liability and allow their children to participate in field trips, team sports, and extra-curricular activities. As any parent will attest, the paper-based version of this process is challenging at every point:

- Permission slips get buried and crumpled at the bottom of the back pack.
- Often parents are unaware that they need to be signed.
- Students must remember to return signed slips to the teacher.
- Teachers feel the headache of collecting the slips.
- Missing slips can sideline students and anger parents.

Unfortunately, many schools still rely on this old-fashioned method. Other schools may have a Word or PDF file posted on the school website for parents to download, print, complete, and send in with their child — which defeats the purpose of an online system.

The online submission of permission forms is an ideal function for process automation tools. A teacher can send a group email to the parents with a link to an online form. Parents then complete the form and submit it electronically. The teacher receives an alert when the forms are submitted, and reminders can be set to automatically email parents whose forms are missing. No slips of paper, no class time lost collecting forms, and no pressure on students to remember one more thing in their already busy schedules. The forms can be stored and accessed by staff with the appropriate permissions. This streamlines the process, saves time, and frees up teachers to focus on educating students.

5. INTERNAL FORMS REQUESTS

There is a plethora of forms needed to manage district operations, such as requests for field use, room requests for PTA and Boy and Girl Scout activities, maintenance needs, A/V equipment check-outs, and transportation requests. Often these activities are done behind the scenes but require time and energy for staff to execute. With a process automation system, all these requests can follow a similar sequence as permission slips, beginning with a secure online form, combined with online scheduling, notifications, and approvals. Your district saves on administrative time, printing costs, paper, and storage.

What to Look for in a Process Automation System

You're convinced that your district needs to select and implement a process automation solution...now what? Consider these tips:

- **An all-in-one solution is the way to go.** Find a solution that pairs process automation with document management. These two components work together to bring districts in line with best practices that have been honed in the business world but are applicable to both student-facing and central office environments.
- **Privacy and security are critical.** Your district must require vendor partners to adhere to the highest level of privacy and security for safeguarding student data, both for ethical reasons and to remain compliant with federal and state laws. One indication that vendors are serious about privacy and security is that they have signed the [Student Privacy Pledge](#), representing their commitment to maintaining the highest integrity with respect to student personal information.
- **Integration with existing systems is a must.** Integration with your key district systems such as the SIS, ERP, and human resources systems will make the implementation process run even more smoothly, and an out-of-the-box solution will ease user adoption. Faculty and staff are already busy, so a streamlined solution with little training needed is ideal.
- **The technology must be cloud-based, with universal mobile access.** In our modern, mobile society, staff no longer work only in the classroom or at the district office. That means the system must be securely accessible anytime, from anywhere, by your administrators, teachers, and staff.

Education is a challenging and intensely rewarding calling. As demands on educators continue to grow, automating district processes wherever possible is a critical component to keeping up with the fast pace of every school year. Once your district has unburdened staff from the mountains of paperwork by implementing a document management solution, process automation is the next step to granting them the time to refocus on the real prize — helping students thrive.

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About K-12 Market Advisors

Marci Goldberg is the President and Founder of K-12 Market Advisors, a marketing and business strategy consulting firm for education companies. With extensive experience in management, technology, and K-12 education, Goldberg has played key leadership roles with many high-impact organizations including Scholastic, Chicago Public Schools, and Tom Snyder Productions. Goldberg has a unique combination of passion for education and strong business acumen. She continually seeks opportunities to truly make a difference in the lives of students across the country.

Goldberg holds an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Northwestern University with a Bachelor of Arts in mathematics and a Bachelor of Science in secondary education.

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