



Under Contract with the Ohio Department of Education

SITE REVIEW OF

**Area Cooperative Computerized Educational Service System
Instructional Technology Center**

ACCESS ITC

February 27, 2013 – March 1, 2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OPENING REMARKS 3

GOVERNANCE 3

ADMINISTRATION 4

FINANCE 5

PERSONNEL AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT 6

PHYSICAL FACILITIES..... 6

HARDWARE AND NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE 7

SOFTWARE 7

USER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT..... 8

HUMAN RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS 8

SUCCESSION AND LONG-RANGE PLANNING 8

SUPPORT TO AND COLLABORATION WITH OTHERS..... 9

CLOSING 9

11 SUGGESTIONS..... 10

ACCESS REVIEW TEAM MEMBERS 11

Opening Remarks

Members of the review team commend the current chairperson of the Area Cooperative Computerized Educational Service System (ACCESS) ITC Governing Board, the fiscal agent superintendent, and members of the General Assembly and the Governing Board for participating in this review to assess the current operations and services this Information Technology Center (ITC) provides to its member districts. The review team extends its sincere appreciation to both the ITC staff and the user school personnel who took the time to provide input. Finally, the team appreciates contributions made by the ACCESS ITC Executive Director as well as the Mahoning County Educational Service Center (MCESC) in its role as the ACCESS ITC Fiscal Agent.

Governance

ACCESS is a Council of Governments (COG) under Chapter 167 of the Ohio Revised Code. The ITC is owned and governed by its owner-member school districts. It is the responsibility of the General Assembly/Membership, and the Board of Directors (as specified in the governance documents creating the ITC), to oversee the operation of the organization, to ensure that it is performing as desired by the majority of the owner-members, and that it is funded and staffed appropriately to meet the needs of the owner-members, and to meet the laws and regulations of the State of Ohio.

While the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has limited oversight of ITCs, the owner-members must assume full responsibility for the governance, finances and operation of an ITC. It has been over five years since the ACCESS Agreement and the ACCESS Bylaws have been updated and the revisions approved. The ITC is reminded that the policies, bylaws and other official documents should be reviewed periodically by the membership and by legal counsel. It is recommended that the date of the last approved revision be added to each of these documents. These documents should clarify the intent to collaborate with and provide services to public schools, non-public schools, community schools and additional entities. In addition to this, the Board of Directors may want to give consideration to options that are available to COG organized ITCs, such as providing services to non educational entities, and/or being more autonomous in governance and management.

The most recent customer survey is indicative of the ongoing high customer satisfaction with the services provided by ACCESS. In addition to the surveys, the review team interviews with the users validated the satisfaction of the services provided by ACCESS. Users also acknowledged that there was a positive and productive relationship between ACCESS and their fiscal agent.

While some may want this review team to recommend specific actions relative to the future configuration and operations of ACCESS, that is not within its purview. It would not be prudent for this review team to be permitted to provide such counsel. We are on-site for a very short time and would not have to live with the consequences of any suggested specific actions. It is the function of this review team to provide information

and alternatives which may be useful to the owner-members in determining the destiny of the organization.

Administration

The review team also commends the Executive Director for conducting annual evaluations of the ACCESS staff. However, the review team discovered that the ACCESS Executive Director has not been annually (formally in writing) evaluated by the Board of Directors and/or its designees. Performance evaluations are valuable to both an employer and an employee. It is therefore important that the Board of Directors regularly consult with user districts regarding the performance of the Executive Director and the organization as a whole to assist the committee in performing their oversight functions.

The review team feels that the administration of ACCESS is successful in providing leadership to the organization. All groups that the team interviewed were complimentary of the Executive Director's leadership and direction. He is very aware of the administrative functions of the ITC, as well as end user needs in student, fiscal and technical service areas. He provides hands-on support by answering end user calls and help desk tickets when needed. The administration has fostered a positive, professional, and genuinely enjoyable working environment for its employees.

The review team recognizes a positive and productive relationship with the Mahoning County and Columbiana County ESCs. This relationship fosters the growth of future opportunities for stronger partnerships and shared service arrangements (such as blended learning) within the common service area.

The Ohio Administrative Code section 3301-3-07(5)(d) states that as a term of employment, "All information technology center staff whose job assignments are related to the support of technology or technology services shall engage in an ongoing program of in-service relative to their area of assignment. Each staff member shall earn a minimum of two Continuing Education Units (CEUs) per year." Written evidence that the ACCESS staff met minimum CEU requirements for FY12 was found for staff members.

The ACCESS Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) document is available on the ACCESS website. Districts are encouraged to review this document to gain a better understanding of and appreciation for the operation.

The direction of the organization must be a joint decision of the owner-members and the ACCESS staff. The owner-members are working cooperatively with the ACCESS staff to establish an ongoing vision of future activities and a mechanism for continuing support. The administration of ACCESS has demonstrated technology vision and leadership by continuing to seek new or expanded services. The review team believes that the administration of ACCESS is successful in providing leadership. The review team commends the Administration for its efforts in seeking ways to serve and support member districts in consideration of the fiscal condition of member school districts.

Finance

The review committee commends ACCESS for their commitment to fiscal management through the creation of a financial forecast. This process and plan enables ACCESS to monitor their general fund cash flow, while also helping the administrative team to be knowledgeable and proactive in monitoring spending and revenue trends.

The data presented in the financial forecast shows a general fund carryover balance in FY15, of less than 30 days of operating expenditures. Although language in the Ohio Administrative Code requiring ITCs to have “the greater of an average of thirty days expenditures from the past twelve months or anticipated expenditures for the next sixty days” no longer exists in law, the review team recommends this as a best business practice and policy for financial stability.

The financial trend analysis for this review was based upon the current year, and three years of future projections. The ACCESS forecast is indicative of a consistent declining cash reserve over the life of the forecast. Revenue shows a mildly steady decrease over the life of the forecast, while expenditures are trending upward at a much higher rate. The result shows ACCESS is consuming its cash reserves. This trend should be followed closely to ensure the financial health of the ITC. It is expected the downward trend will change after the final payment of the fiber project debt, in approximately 24 months, at which time the general fund will be more positively impacted.

Any organization experiencing downward financial trends should find ways to increase revenue, decrease expenditures, or implement a combination of both. Potential ways to increase revenue may include expanding existing services, exploring shared services, increasing fees, or providing services to new entities. Although ACCESS’s forecast demonstrates a declining reserve, the projected future balances indicate there is time to initiate creative ways to reverse the trend and rebuild a reserve for capital expense projects or other needs that may arise.

Recognizing that financial support from owner-customers contributes significantly to the financial health of the council, regular business analyses should be conducted to fully understand the financial impact to the organization.

Personnel and Staff Development

The Executive Director and ACCESS users acknowledged how fortunate the organization is to have such a dedicated and knowledgeable staff. The staff expressed how ACCESS provides them with a good work environment and many commented how they love their job. Communication from the Executive Director through the entire staff seemed excellent.

Users in all service areas commended the ACCESS support staff for being truly customer-driven. The ACCESS staff were praised for their on-going assistance and dedicated service, with many going beyond the call of duty to provide for the needs of ACCESS users. Employees are extremely dedicated and expressed a genuinely positive attitude regarding their work at the ITC.

The staff expressed concern over the user's perception of the current phone calling protocol. Any concern was alleviated during interviews with the end users. They are pleased with the current system.

The staff in the fiscal, student, and library core service areas indicated satisfaction with training received in their respective positions. They reported sufficient professional development opportunities to remain current with software releases, changes, updates, and upcoming features. Vendor-sponsored webinars, conferences, user group meetings, and tech round tables were identified as valuable sources of professional development and are utilized by the staff.

The technical staff appreciates the training received. However, they would like additional professional development activities including systems and network courses, technical conferences, formal training sessions, and networking with other technical professionals. An investment in this area would enable them to be technology leaders for their members.

Physical Facilities

ACCESS currently maintains two separate facilities in order to sustain its operations. All personnel share a building with Mahoning County ESC, while the core network infrastructure is located approximately four miles away at the Disaster Recovery Service (DRS) co-location facility.

The review team visited the co-location facility, and found it to meet or exceed all the requirements of a "hardened" data center. ACCESS's core equipment is installed in a locked and secure caged area. Security measures at DRS include enclosed and secured parking areas, 24 x 7 video surveillance systems, biometric access control, secured and locked cages per client, zone specific key cards, off-hour motion sensors, and remotely controlled access. Power to the facility is backed up by a 750kva diesel generator, and an uninterruptable power supply (UPS) system. The generator is tested on a weekly basis, under full-load. Each customer cage is powered by separate A&B conditioned

power feeds. Cooling in the facility is handled by redundant, 20 ton Liebert computer room air conditioning (CRAC) units. Fire suppression is handled by a double interlock pre-action fire prevention system typically found in data center environments.

The MCEC site is conveniently located, with adequate parking and meeting space. The co-location provides the staff with easy access to ESC personnel and helps to increase collaboration among the two entities. Several concerns were raised by staff regarding conditions at the facility, including flooding due to a leaking roof on multiple occasions and the need for proper safety and security protocols for staff, assets, and data. It is recommended that a thorough review of the security procedures and policies take place, and that actions be taken to ensure the employees have a safe and productive working environment.

Hardware and Network Infrastructure

ACCESS's network infrastructure consists of dark fiber lit with 10gb Cisco switch modules, all owned by ACCESS. ACCESS staff works in conjunction with contracted partners for maintenance and repair of the physical fiber on the poles. Owning the network puts ACCESS in a strong position to deliver any network service possible without restriction or additional bandwidth cost between the ACCESS data center and its customers, or from one customer to another. ACCESS and its members should be commended for their forethought and hard work to bring this vision to reality.

Outdated server hardware is slowly being replaced by a new blade chassis/SAN combination as ACCESS moves toward more server virtualization.

The review team confirmed there is a plan for refresh of all core network switches within the next two years. ITCs are encouraged to have pre-established equipment rotation and/or replacement schedules to assist their organizations in meeting the evolving needs of their members and planning for budgetary needs.

Software

ACCESS support staff acknowledged the remote location of the application servers at the data center, NOACSC ITC, and OECN Disaster Recovery site is not causing any issues and in fact has relieved some of their system responsibilities. Software maintenance and updates are performed in a timely manner according to industry standards. Releases are typically installed several days after released and an effort is made to notify customers a week in advance when possible. A recommendation from the user groups would be for the ACCESS Support Staff to utilize mass email messages or blasts to announce site-wide software issues as is typically done when network or system outages occur. The service status monitor helps users and staff to monitor service availability.

ACCESS and its members are commended for their use of the statewide help desk software in all service areas. Although it may seem cumbersome at times, data collected by this system is invaluable for effective management of the ITC.

User Professional Development

The review team noted that, along with routine training sessions, all service areas also provide regularly scheduled user meetings and work sessions. The users expressed sincere appreciation for the quantity and quality of professional development opportunities. Some recommended the addition of regularly scheduled open labs to allow users to plan ahead for time out of the office.

After listening to the many positive end-user comments, the team and users together arrived at some suggestions for supplementing current training opportunities with alternate methods such as pre-recorded training videos for specific software modules and web conferencing, which would allow remote attendance. Taking advantage of remote access tools to modify or improve training support services will enhance ACCESS's ability to proactively provide quality training to empower users and reduce demand for daily support.

Human Resource Recommendations

The review team noted that there are some "best practices," which the ACCESS Administration and Board may wish to consider:

As a "best practice," the review team suggests that, when a staff member retires or leaves for other employment, the opportunity be taken to review, revise, and make current the job description of that person.

The review team also suggests the ITC's legal advisor review, as soon as possible, each existing job description to make certain the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) status is correctly applied and that language is included to indicate the ITC is an equal opportunity employer.

Succession and Long-range Planning

The review team found the staff of ACCESS to be competent and very customer-centered. However, the team noted that the lack of sufficient cross training, and a formal succession plan in light of the potential loss of key personnel could have a negative impact on ACCESS's business reputation and quality of services if not addressed in the near future.

Additional cross training of staff would ensure no single staff member was indispensable, and would provide adequate user support during vacations and other absences. Cross training of staff would not only increase the quality and level of support provided to districts, but might also eventually enable more staff time to conduct user training which would empower district staff with additional knowledge, potentially

lessening the need for direct ITC support over time. This could alleviate user demand on the ACCESS staff enough to allow time for more of their own professional opportunities and growth.

Because the ACCESS staff is specialized and provides critical influence over both operations and delivery of service strategies, it seems important to consider the development of a succession plan aligned to a long-range business continuity plan. With a staff of ten employees, who have very specialized skill sets, identifying successors and transition elements is critical. As staff retire or leave for other opportunities, this plan would assure ACCESS customers continuity in delivery and quality of services.

Support to and Collaboration with Others

ACCESS takes advantage of shared service offerings from other ITCs in Student Services and Library Services areas. Data Analysis for Student Learning (DASL) and Progress Book are housed at NOACSC ITC, and Sirsi Library Automation is housed at the OECN Disaster Recovery facility. It was noted by one staff member that ACCESS is always a consumer of shared services but does not host any service offerings to other ITCs.

Closing

The review team considers overall that ACCESS is an exceptional ITC, providing quality services at an acceptable cost to their districts. It was the opinion of this review team that ACCESS is a customer-oriented organization, appropriately driven by the demands and needs of their districts. It was the general perception of the users that when users call with a problem, ACCESS staff will do whatever they can to resolve the issue. This was a consistent theme throughout the review team's visit.

It is also the review team's opinion that for the long-term sustainability of the organization, ACCESS should develop a more comprehensive succession plan, supported by a strong financial plan. Such a plan would help to ensure the quality of staff, operations, and services when staff turnover occurs or economic conditions create financial pressures on the districts or organization.

In general, the review team was very pleased by the feedback received from district staff. Comments were very positive and supportive of the organization.

11 Suggestions

In order to provide some additional “food for thought” for the organization as part of its ongoing strategic planning efforts, the Review Team provides the following concepts for review and consideration by the ITC owner-members:

1. Expand hosting facilities and services to ITC owner-customers, reducing costs for schools while increasing reliability, security, etc.
2. Expand the utilization of technology (specifically distance learning tools) to improve communication and professional development efforts for staff members of owner-member schools.
3. Collaborate with ITCs statewide to share hosting services and expenses to reduce the cost of providing specific applications to school districts.
4. Investigate the deployment of services to directly support teachers using technology to improve instructional outcomes for students.
5. Initiate a newsletter and/or other means of regular communications that would enable all users of the ITC to better understand the services and benefits being provided by the organization.
6. Consider the development of a succession plan for leadership and staffing within the organization so that untimely changes do not adversely affect the positive status of the ITC.
7. Investigate the feasibility of offering a business intelligence and data warehouse view to essential school district data to support decision-making for owner-member schools.
8. Examine the possibility of deploying horizontal Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) capabilities to food service, library automation, student transportation, emergency notification, and other applications being used by schools.
9. Survey potential owner-customers to see if providing disaster recovery, on-line (over the network) data backup, and business continuity services would be cost-effective for area school districts.
10. Look into the feasibility of providing “rent a technician,” “rent a treasurer,” and/or “rent an EMIS Coordinator” services to assist schools in receiving essential services from trained professionals shared among multiple schools.
11. Research the potential for providing secure social networking services (e.g. – texting, wiki, blog, Second Life, gaming, etc.) for interested schools.

It must be noted that implementation of any of the above concepts proposed herein will require additional financial and/or staff resources be provided.

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