

# Quarterly Performance Review of the Arizona Education Learning and Accountability System: AELAS

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Submitted to the Arizona Department of Education by  
WestEd and CELT

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## OVERVIEW

This report documents a quarterly performance review of the Arizona Education Learning and Accountability System (AELAS) by an independent evaluator as required by *Arizona Revised Statutes* (A.R.S.) 15-249 that was conducted January 5-6, 2016. WestEd, the prime contractor, and the Center for Educational Leadership and Technology (CELТ), the subcontractor, were hired by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) to serve as that independent evaluator. This quarterly monitoring report is a follow-up to the initial performance review conducted in 2013, with a report submitted on September 9, 2013. This report follows all previous quarterly monitoring reports, updating commendations and recommendations.

ADE decided to implement a “dual system” methodology for district data submissions to address implementation delays in the AzEDS project. The critical AELAS milestone of July 1, 2015 for the changes in how districts submit information to the ADE was not going to be met due to the fact that vendor certifications for Ed-Fi were lagging and because the business rules for SAIS had not been all re-codified. The dual system option for district data submission was assessed by the WestEd/CELТ team during a site visit on May 6, 2015. The progress on the dual system option was reviewed during the September/October visit. The ADE is now in the final stages of implementing and testing this option. Initial comparisons between the SAIS and AzEDS data submission streams shows a higher number for headcount but lower numbers for ADM coming through the AzEDS data stream. The team has already identified some root-cause errors for these discrepancies and is pursuing the remedies. Much of this difference will likely be addressed by the testing and error correction, but doubtless, some differences will remain due to cleaner, more timely and accurate data through the AzEDS approach. As these differences are better understood, it may become necessary to adjust funding algorithms to avoid disruptive funding allocations to Arizona districts and schools.

The AELAS funding for 2015-16 has been reduced to include only 4 major efforts: PSO (including production services), School Finance (SAIS), AzEDS and Opt-in SSIS. This is a scaled-back scope from the original business case. The remaining 2015 and 2016 reviews were reduced in scope to address only those projects currently funded for AELAS.

## COMMENDATIONS

Commendations pertain to activities that ADE is doing especially well and are highlighted as examples of superlative performance. The WestEd/CELТ team has noted the following commendations from observations during the September/October 2015 site visit:

1. The ADE has made significant progress on the dual option approach despite resource constraints and limited access to the business owners for rules and requirements definitions. The dual process has enabled ADE to identify key discrepancies between the old and the new systems, allowing for increased accuracy of reporting.
2. The ADE continues to engage the business partners through the Education Transformation group. This enables the business partners and IT to address current and emerging needs through collaborative decision making.

3. The ADE is beginning to build a web services layer for the existing 87 application interfaces that are required for AzEDS. This approach will be a leading edge integration strategy that can be expanded in 2017 for use by the districts to obtain AzEDS data for their transactional systems, such as transportation or food services.
4. The ADE is expanding the use of AzEDS to include data from district-level assessment systems. This is a best practice example of providing data structures and services to districts for use in local decision making and instructional planning.

## FINDINGS BY RECOMMENDATIONS

The initial recommendations (11 total) from the first site visits have served as a baseline from which the WestEd/CELT team has been working for all subsequent site visits. Additional findings and recommendations have been added relative to the initial findings. Below is a synthesis of the team’s findings and recommendations from the January 2106 visit.

**1. Stay the course as envisioned in the AELAS business case.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>The dual system approach (old SAIS and new AzEDS) is close to being complete, with the most difficult components either completed or nearing completion. The API data submission process for AzEDS has been turned on for approximately 20 percent of the districts. Initial testing shows a higher headcount but lower ADM coming through the AzEDS data stream for most districts. The root causes for this are not fully understood, and a SWAT team has been initiated to identify these root causes and affect the appropriate remedies.</p>	<p>Continue the SWAT approach to identify the root causes for the discrepancies between the dual streams.</p> <p>Continue the approach to process 2014-15 SAIS data against the new business rules to understand the delta between the prior-years’ business rules processing and the current rules. This will become an important communications talking point.</p> <p>Develop an understanding for the impact and relevance that the 3<sup>rd</sup>-party SIS vendor ADM calculation might have on the credibility of the AzEDS ADM calculations.</p>

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>There are expected to be some differences between the two data streams for ADM (with AzEDS ADM calculations generally lower), once all of the testing and data corrections are complete. The identification of the discrepancies should be construed as a positive outcome of the development process, increasing the accuracy of essential data. The discrepancies are expected due to more accurate data (elimination of duplicate students), more timely data (student adds/deletes occur in real time instead of at a future reporting period) and corrections to the business rules. This may cause a significantly lower funding amount to districts when calculated from the AzEDS ADM number, and may warrant adjustments to the funding algorithms for the districts.</p>	<p>Obtain a third party, objective reviewer who is knowledgeable about school finance to assess the impact of the cleaner AzEDS data upon district funding. Use this reviewer to identify remedies to help keep districts financially whole while at the same time using the better AzEDS data to be more nuanced and targeted in the funding allocation formulas. This will provide added credibility when communicating the findings to the relevant stakeholders, including the LEAs, JLBC, and legislators.</p> <p>Engage the Data Governance Commission in understanding and establishing a change management plan for implementing the ADM changes.</p> <p>Create communications materials and FAQs to help educate and inform how the dual system process works and what the comparison between the two systems is actually telling the districts about their data.</p>
<p>There is the possibility that some districts will be particularly problematic in that they are unable or unwilling to work on data quality and may prefer to remain on the old SAIS data submission approach. The ADE may not have or want to exercise the political authority to mandate the move to AzEDS.</p>	<p>Recognize that the dual option data submission approach may need to become a longer-term solution, rather than a temporary strategy.</p> <p>Establish a data team within ADE that can be assigned to assist districts who have the most trouble cleansing their data.</p> <p>Provide data management training to district personnel to help them understand how to identify and correct systemic data errors and issues.</p>

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>During the state legislative session in 2015, the Legislature approved moving district schools from prior year funding to current year funding starting in fiscal year 2017. The change request was approved by ADOA in December 2015. This is a major change in work-scope for the rest of FY 16 and for FY 17. This will require changes to existing legacy APOR reports (APOR was previously planned to be re-written in FY16), as well as modifications to CSF and IIF reports. Additionally a Web application will be developed to supply FY17 budget worksheets to LEAs. The FY16 planned rewrite of APOR, CHAR and Budget will be moved to FY17, as will the continuation of other impacted development activities (i.e., ACE 2.0). All of this will require reallocation of existing resources as well as additional resources for School Finance and Customer Support to develop the business rules, conduct testing and develop and deliver training, communications and support to LEAs.</p>	<p>While this approach makes sense fiscally, from a change management standpoint this is not the best time to make such a move. The impact on current work is adding additional risk and change-management issues to the AzEDS and SAIS replacement projects. Not only does it delay work on ACE 2.0, but the same-year funding change coming together in time with the shift from the old SAIS to the new AzEDS data collection and the associated changes in business rules will create a great deal of uncertainty and potential confusion on the part of LEAs.</p> <p>It is incumbent on School Finance to work with ADE IT to ensure that these changes are properly managed and communicated and that the SAIS replacement efforts stay on target for FY2018.</p>
<p>The 915 process (prior year budget changes) approach has not been fleshed out yet. Key questions remain, such as how to do rollover and how to handle security to allow districts to submit changes. Time still remains before this becomes a critical issue next year but it does need to be addressed.</p>	<p>The responsibility and accountability for this process needs to be placed with the finance team. This includes pursuing re-engineering efforts to streamline the process and responsibility for communicating the new process.</p>

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>SSIS Opt-In Project:</p> <p>The SSIS conversions slowed prior to the October 2015 visit due to high volumes of support requests. The October 2015 report recommended some measures and strategies for improving the help desk functions for ADE, especially but not limited to the SIS opt-in service. While the help desk situation has improved, the ADE is still not collecting and analyzing the types of data and measures that are needed to truly run an efficient help desk.</p>	<p>Continue the efforts to re-engineer the help desk processes as recommended in the October 2015 report.</p>
<p>The current SIS opt-in pipeline has fewer planned implementations than desired, although the target of 110,000 students is still achievable. The ADE SIS opt-in team has brought onboard two individuals to specifically build the pipeline.</p>	<p>Pursue a marketing campaign to build the pipeline, with promotions, incentives and “sales calls” in the same manner that private-sector SIS vendors conduct their marketing campaigns.</p> <p>Establish an oversight board for the SIS opt-in “cost center” that includes district representatives. This board can review the services, pricing and marketing strategies for the SIS opt-in.</p>

**2. Utilize business architecture concepts, aligning department strategic plans to and across program area plans and associated execution activities and methodologies.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>No findings from this visit.</p>	

3. **Directly address the budgetary issues that pertain to AELAS, SAIS, and the SLDS that include detailed work plans, deliverables, and timelines.**

<i><b>Findings</b></i>	<i><b>Recommendations</b></i>
<p>Funding to adequately sustain the components of AELAS beyond this fiscal year seems to be in question among the legislature. Failure to adequately fund the AELAS components will result in another round of insufficiently supported systems (as with SAIS) and low customer (school district) satisfaction with ADE services.</p>	<p>Convene a working committee of local business CIOs and CEOs to review the support budget for AELAS and recommend to the legislature an adequate funding amount for ongoing AELAS support.</p> <p>Continue to brief legislators and JLBC about the potential consequences of decreased or lost funding. Help them to understand the importance of AzEDS in identifying the data discrepancies, verifying that the investment in the system heretofore has been sound.</p>
<p>Funding for further development of AELAS is limited in the 2015-16 budget. This seriously diminishes the potential return on the investments made in AELAS. The work so far has laid an excellent foundation upon which to construct additional functions and services that could benefit districts and schools.</p>	<p>Leading states and school districts across the nation are pursuing such 21<sup>st</sup> Century initiatives as blended learning, personalized learning and digital learning. Blended learning environments are taking hold in pockets of schools across the state and there are significant technologies to support such efforts. AzEDS can and should be part of that configuration and must continue to be an essential component. Leverage the AELAS components to further such a strategic vision for education in Arizona.</p>
<p>Project plans and associated timelines do not adequately capture impacts of non-IT resource constraints and implementation activities necessary for system adoption. Furthermore, accountability for meeting deliverable dates does not appear to be evenly shared between IT and the business units. This seems to be systemic trend, which has resulted in a series of missed milestone dates. That said, some delays have been unavoidable due to work processes and the need to pull staff to attend to priority issues.</p>	<p>Modify the ADE project management discipline to include the non-technology tasks required to deploy information systems. Hold all parties accountable for their milestone dates.</p>

4. **Improve and continue to develop a communication plan to diverse stakeholders.**



<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>Managing the questions and concerns that will potentially result from the new AzEDS business rules on ADM and funding will be especially important in the coming weeks.</p>	<p>Manage the 3<sup>rd</sup> party reviewer mentioned above with a joint sponsorship of highly placed ADE executives, including the CIO. However, move the point for addressing the ADM and funding questions away from IT. Establish a communications team made up of ADE leadership, finance experts, and communications specialists to address the questions from the districts. Establish a protocol for addressing questions and concerns.</p>

**5. Creation of a data governance process.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>The data governance team provides an important liaison between the ADE and the legislatively required Data Governance Commission.</p>	<p>Build upon this relationship with the Commission and use it as a sounding board and advocate for proactively addressing data-related issues, including the AzEDS data collection opportunity regarding funding.</p>
<p>The tools for identifying duplicate students have improved the state’s ability to flag these situations. However, there is not a clear process for cleaning up duplicates. This responsibility moves to the LEA to fix the duplicates at the source (the SIS). This new capability to flag and remove duplicate students may affect the ADM, although there is uncertainty as to what degree.</p>	<p>Engage the data governance process to begin to resolve this data quality issue.</p> <p>Ensure that the structure is not reliant on only the Data Privacy Officer and the Research and Evaluation Director.</p> <p>Allow the SWAT team to conduct their analyses and make the necessary modifications to business rules, while providing transparent communication to relevant stakeholders.</p>

**6. Reduce the redundancy among data collections.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>The data governance process has implemented the procedures required to properly review new data collection requests. They are working on an annual calendar that defines the timeframes for identifying and communicating new data collections.</p>	<p>Ensure that the work of the data governance process is not lost with the changes in the data governance structure.</p>

**7. Creation of a non-profit organizing structure.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>There is renewed interest in this recommendation at ADE and at the legislature, especially as funding for AELAS support and further development is in question.</p>	<p>Explore the options for a non-profit services organization that focuses on supporting and further developing the AELAS components to address the local district and school needs. Focus the mission of the organization on being self-sufficient in supporting the AELAS systems for districts while at the same time lowering district costs for such systems and services.</p> <p>Brief interested legislators, as per their requests.</p> <p>Seek support from prominent state business partners. The ADE should reach out to prominent business and community leaders for assistance in developing and implementing a sustainability plan. This plan might include the current equivalent of the Arizona Ready Education Council who participated in the WestEd/CELT initial interview process.</p>

**8. Improvement of human capacity around the use of data (e.g., data literacy).**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>Although this topic falls outside the current scope of monitoring, ADE is making progress in this area. ADE has developed a rubric of data literacy skills and is working with schools of education to integrate data literacy the preparation of teachers and administrators. This is an exemplar for other states as few states have their leading universities including courses on data use. Both the University of Arizona and Arizona State University are tackling this challenging topic.</p> <p>There are efforts within ADE to improve the capacity of program staff to understand simple statistics and measurement topics to help them understand data better. Podcasts have been developed.</p>	<p>Continue the effort to build data literacy within ADE, the LEAs, and teacher preparation programs.</p> <p>Recognize that data literacy is role-based, particularly within LEAs. Everyone who touches data needs to have at least a basic understanding of responsibly data use, data security, data quality, data use, and their role in the process. This includes staff from the school data clerks to the superintendents.</p>

**9. Attend closely to the needs of the most rural districts.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>No new findings or recommendations in this area.</p>	

**10. Development of a comprehensive long-term plan and continued outreach to stakeholders in the form of periodic needs analyses as a process by which to monitor changing needs of the stakeholder groups.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>The sustainability of AELAS during its continued development and implementation, and then beyond to maintenance of the technology, the data, and use over time is essential to the success of the project.</p>	<p>Convene a high-level group of knowledgeable stakeholders and prominent business people to advise ADE in developing and implementing a sustainability plan. This group could be led by someone like Craig Barrett and call upon the current equivalent of the Arizona Ready Education Council, which provided initial input and support.</p> <p>Continue briefing policymakers and legislators about the progress being made and the fact that AzEDS functions to identify discrepancies that SAIS has been unable to determine.</p>

**11. Engage program areas and policymakers in supporting the work of AELAS.**

<u><i>Findings</i></u>	<u><i>Recommendations</i></u>
<p>The associate superintendents are now engaged in working with IT to ensure that the technologies meet their needs and incorporate appropriate data.</p> <p>The work of the Education Transformation group facilitates this work.</p>	<p>Continue to educate the associate superintendents and other relevant high-level staff about the processes and timelines involved in working with AzEDS, including the implications of adding new data elements and the expected timeframe for implementation.</p>

## CHALLENGES

The most pressing challenges for the ADE from our visit appear to be:

1. Getting enough time from the program areas for AzEDS and the SAIS replacement for:
  - a. Testing of the new AzEDS and SAIS data flows and results;
  - b. Development of good communications and FAQs;
  - c. Providing sustained training internal to ADE and across all the LEAs; and
  - d. Establishing and executing a district response plan for customer queries and concerns when the dual district data submission systems are implemented.
2. The sustainability and continuity of commitment to the AELAS work across all levels of government in Arizona.
3. The transition to a support environment and the functioning of the Help Desk, now that there has been a transition in leadership.

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

AELAS forms a good foundation for Arizona to begin the journey into the world of sound educational decision making, data-informed instruction, and ultimately digital learning. However, without a clear vision for such a direction and funding to build upon this foundation, the momentum gained by the AELAS effort stands to be lost. Arizona has climbed into the top tier of state education departments with regard to data collection and potential for data-informed instruction supported by state systems. This progress will be quickly lost without proper vision and support. We strongly urge ADE to work with external advisors to develop and implement a sustainability plan for the technology and a training plan to build and maintain the human capacity to use the data effectively and responsibly.