

June 2007

## SIFA's Tenth Anniversary Celebration

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SIFA celebrated its Tenth Anniversary in great style at its conference in St. Louis, Missouri. The original initiative was announced at a 1997 technical summit hosted by Microsoft.

“Given the desires of educators around the globe to leverage every tool that aids them in their instruction, the need for effective management and standards-driven interoperability of school data has never been more real,” states Mitch Benson, Microsoft’s Worldwide Director of Education Solutions. “From the public’s rightful demands for transparency, visibility, and measurement of outcomes, to the near universal demand for individualization and personalization of instruction, SIFA and the SIF Specification are helping to drive

interoperability among hundreds of applications that assist schools, districts, states, and governments enable their people to more effectively teach, learn, manage, and be involved in the lives of students every day.”

“The organization has shown astounding growth by listening to education leader data needs,” said Larry Fruth, Ph.D., SIFA Executive Director. “In ten short years, SIFA has grown from seven

members to more than 570. Vendors and end users have come together via SIFA to develop an openly available ‘blueprint’ for school data interoperability; clearly it’s an idea whose time has come. The SIF Implementation Specification has rapidly become THE standard for data interoperability in the pK-12 marketplace.”

The three-day conference drew more than 135 members to St. Louis. Ron Kleinman, Chief Technical Evangelist for Sun Microsystems, gave the keynote address which looked back on SIFA’s past and explored its future directions. Patrick Plant, Director of Technology for the Anoka-Hennepin School District and a longtime SIFA member, received the SIF Fellow Award from the Association. The award was given for “his outstanding contributions to the Association and unwavering commitments to the development, promotion and use of standards.” Other longtime SIF contributors received SIF Spec-tacular awards for their outstanding service to SIF.

#### SIF Spec-tacular Awards

Doug Hamlin	Mark Reichert
Dave Guidos	Dave Moravec
Alex Jackl	Dick Robinson
Mark Ward	Ralph Iden
Judi Barnett	Ron Kleinman

The evening of May 8<sup>th</sup>, attendees were hosted to a Tenth Anniversary celebration party by Computer Power Solutions of Illinois (CPSI), a longtime SIFA member.

**Save the Date!**

The Next SIFA meeting for both End Users and Vendors will be January 16-18, 2008 in the Washington DC area.

## **SIF - SIFA Milestones 1997-2007**

June 26th and 27th, 1997  
First Official Technical Summit  
Seattle, Washington

June 1997  
SIF Implementation Specification  
was originally known as the  
K-12 Solutions Framework

Sep. 29-Oct. 3, 1998  
TLA Conference  
First invitation only demo of SIF

February 22, 1999  
SIF officially launched at  
American Association of  
School Administrators  
By Bill Gates

June 1999  
Draft SIF Implementation Specification  
version 0.9 released

June 1999  
Proof of Concept Sites  
Anoka-Hennepin, MN  
and Ballston Spa, NY  
selected

September 1999  
Software & Information Industry  
Association (SIIA)  
chosen to manage SIF

Oct. 2000  
Three additional Showcase Sites  
Ocoee Middle School in Orange County, FL  
Upper Dauphin School District, PA  
Peoria Unified School District, AZ  
added

Nov. 2001  
First SIF Developers Camp held

Feb. 2002  
FETC first SIF-hosted  
Live Zone Demonstration at FETC

May 2002  
First 'Virtual Connect-a-thon' held

June, 17, 2002  
Showcase Site program expansion  
announced at NECC in San Antonio TX  
adding ten new schools and districts

April 15, 2003  
501c3 status granted to SIF  
We became the SIF Association

April 25, 2003  
SIF Certification Program launched

June 2006  
SIFA announced  
3 International Partnerships  
Becta, UK, educational AU  
and European School Net

### **SIF Official Specification Releases**

June 27, 2000  
SIF Implementation Specification 1.0  
Aug. 31, 2001  
SIF Implementation Specification 1.0r1  
Feb. 6, 2003  
SIF Implementation Specification 1.1  
Oct. 11, 2004  
SIF Implementation Specification 1.5r1  
Oct. 18, 2007  
SIF Implementation Specification 2.0  
Oct. 18, 2007  
SIF Reporting Web Services Specification 1.0

## **SIFA and the US Department of Education**

*Your Questions Answered by Ross Santy from the  
Office of Planning Evaluation and Policy Development*

### **What were your thoughts after you have attended your first SIFA meeting?**

I was very impressed, and encouraged by the truly collaborative environment at the meeting. The software developers, state education agency representatives, and local school district technology leaders were all very focused on working together to address the challenges of moving data more effectively. It was very reassuring to me to see all the various members come together at the meeting to tackle some very real, very detailed problems around successfully moving data among agencies to ensure that it is present where and when the decision makers need it.

### **How does the Association benefit by having USED as a member?**

Over the past five years, SIFA has undergone an evolution to shift its focus and its membership beyond just the software developers and vendors who came together to create the Association. By adding strong members from State Education Agencies and local school districts, SIFA has added a great amount of input from its "end users" to the discussions. USED is another one of those key "end users." We recognize that we sit at the top end of an educational data supply chain. We depend upon the data sent to us by State Education Agencies for program management and policy analysis. In turn, those SEAs depend upon their systems and relationships with local school districts to collect the data necessary for USED reporting requirements, and for their own state-specific collections. Ensuring that the data which move across those systems, and up to USED, is of high-quality is everyone's responsibility, and an area where SIFA can, and is, playing a role. By being at the table with the other members, we hope we can make our needs and expectations clear, so that systems built by SEAs or local school districts can serve their needs, and support our requirements in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible.

### **How can the Department leverage the work of the SIF Association?**

Our *EDFacts* system depends upon the data reported up from SEAs through the Education Data Exchange Network (EDEN). The data model for that system has been developed from a foundation of the information

collections needed by K-12 program offices across USED. The items in those collections can only be reported accurately when state program leaders and information system managers work together to properly align key systems. We are currently exploring ways to use the SIFA schema and specifications to add greater clarity to the data definitions that we use in the EDEN data model. SIFA's work to create v2.0 has given USED a very useable construct for the conversations between the information system experts and the program leaders. If we can utilize that construct in our data definitions it can go a long way to ensuring the clarity and consistency of data definition necessary to prevent the faulty interpretation and misuse of the data we collect.

**What can the Association do today and tomorrow to better support the Department's activities?**

I think the Association can be most productive by staying focused on the challenges of moving high-quality data across all levels of the educational hierarchy as we continue to consolidate systems and integrate previously disparate datasets. By having the software developers at the table with the district end users, SEA system architects and USED, the Association can continue to play a critical role in surfacing and addressing both technical issues and any associated policy challenges. The states are playing a key role in identifying instances where data aren't moving from point A to point B the way we would expect. Sometimes this is due to technical limitations, and sometimes it is due to policy constraints. I encourage the entire Association membership to stay focused on identifying, addressing, and where necessary escalating these "pain points" for open discussion.

- SIFA Welcomes These New Members**
- Eutactics, Inc.
  - Scholarchip Card, LLC
  - Thinklink Assessments
  - Kamico Instructional Media, Inc.
  - ESchool Solutions
  - INCAS
  - Ramesys
  - Scholwires, Inc.
  - Angel Learning, Inc.
  - Autoskill International
  - Power Learning
  - London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (UK)
  - London Borough of Croydon (UK)
  - Software for Data Analysis, Ltd. (UK)
  - Integrated Technology Group (Jordan)
  - Bishop O'Dowd HSD
  - Columbus Public Schools
  - Indian River School District
  - Lake Havasu School District #1
  - Lexington Public Schools
  - Moreno Valley Unified School District
  - North Hopkins ISD
  - Smithtown Central School District
  - Sterling High School District
  - Whitley County Consolidated Schools

- St. Louis Meeting**  
**What's Happening with Teaching and Learning**
- A large group of end users spent much of the St. Louis meeting discussing the various processes used by each entity within the education community. These processes are aligned to the SIFA Teaching and Learning Framework and will be utilized in future business and use cases, further enabling teaching and learning in pK-12. In addition, this group discussed the creation of scenarios and a future think focusing on interoperability.
  - During the developers' camp, the various teaching and learning work groups met to discuss the current status of the 2.1 objects as well as objects that need to be developed based upon end user needs. The Assessment and Professional Development work groups and the Instructional Services task force will be introducing new objects for 2.2 that further enable interoperability for teaching and learning. In addition, the Special Programs and Grade Book groups will be introducing some new elements for 2.2.
  - Assessment will be focusing specifically on enabling item analysis and longitudinal reporting. Special Programs will be facilitating more information for career and technical education—and other programs for students. The Instructional Services task force will be adding additional metadata elements and possibly an object for tracking student work within an LMS. Grade Book is focusing on the passing of grades and assessments from an LMS or assessment system to an official grade book. Finally, Professional Development will be creating an object for registration and adding some elements to the existing professional development objects.

## **Five years from now how will the work of the Association support the USED vision for data identification, movement and utilization?**

The business and profession of education is rapidly becoming a truly data driven endeavor. Access to real-time data is only going to become more important for educators at all levels. The challenges of adapting to global markets and ensuring that all children are able to actively engage in that global community will drive change in the structures of education in the coming years. One of the keys to ensuring that this change is an effective one will be ensuring that real-time data are available to everyone.

## **Getting to Know the Forum's Data Model Task Force**

*An Interview with Vince Paredes, SIFA's Data Model Architect*

### **What is the goal of the NCES Data Model Task Force?**

The goal of the NCES Data Model Task Force is to produce a comprehensive national pk-12 data model for education information. Basically we want a model that parents, teachers, administrators, researchers and vendors can use as a reference for the kinds of information that should be contained in a particular education software system. The scope of the information for a particular software system will be constrained by the kinds of education questions the system is designed to answer.

### **How is it organized?**

This is a little complicated, but here goes. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) sponsors a Forum on Education Statistics. The members of the Forum are LEA and SEA representatives. The Forum creates task forces to accomplish well-defined tasks, usually an informative publication. The Data Model Task Force is different in that the major product will be a model – not a publication. Also, the Data Model Task Force has created six subgroups to do most of the detail work. The membership of the subgroups is not limited to Forum members. The subgroups also contain vendors, education data experts, researchers, and so on.

### **What exactly is a data model?**

That is a very good question. We have not nailed down all the details of what it means for the pk-12 data model; this will be developed over the next month or so. But we do know that we will not be building physical data models. The pk-12 data model will be one or a group of conceptual data models, probably with related logical models mixed in.

### **How are you building the model?**

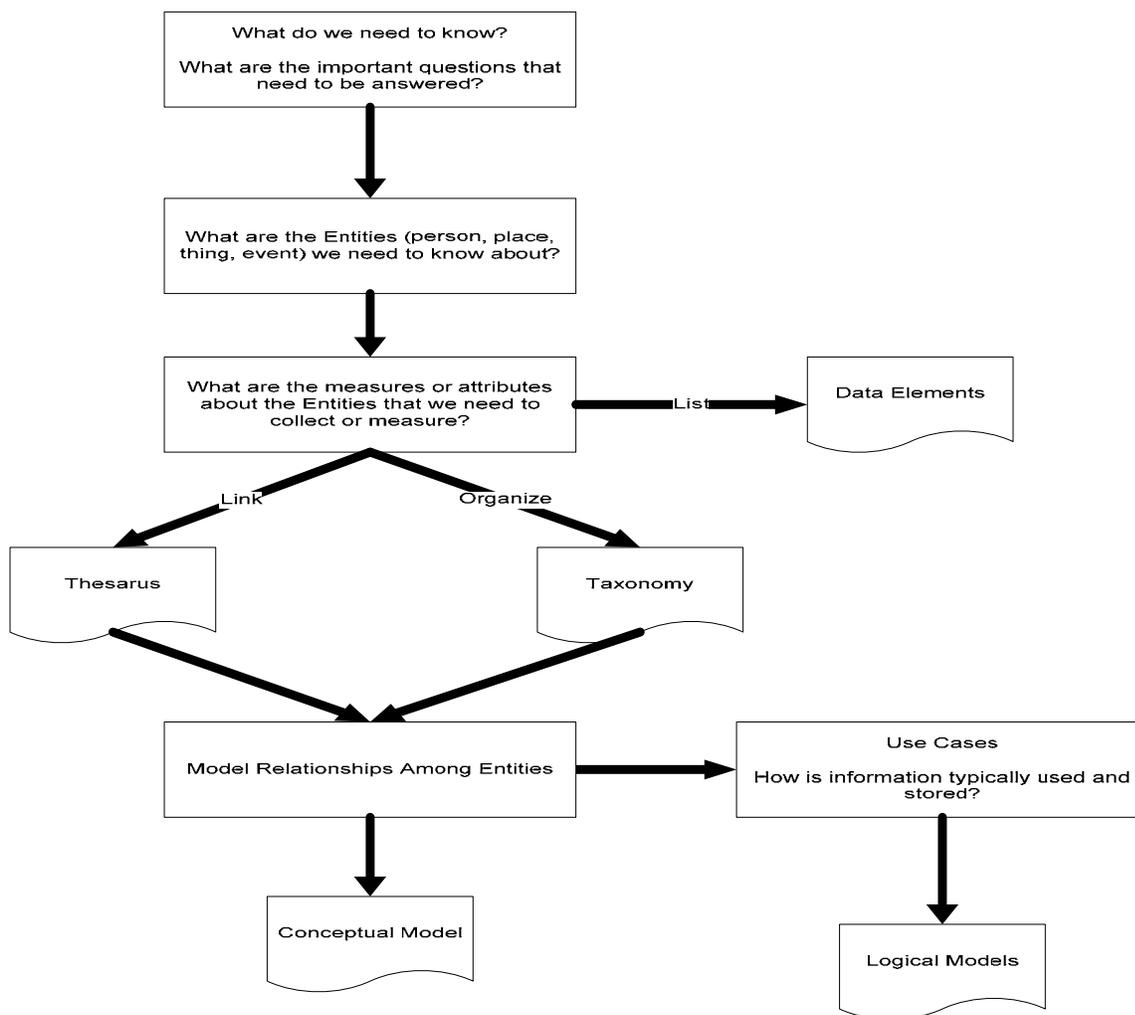
We are going through various steps in the process of building the model. First we are collecting important education questions and processes, such as: "Are our students learning as a result of instructions?" or "The process of instruction." We intend to have all of the important ones covered by the time we finish. (A diagram of the process is on page 5)

We hope to have a comprehensive data model with detail in most areas, but we know we will be continually updating, extending, and filling out the data model.

### **How does this process represent new business practices for specification development?**

This effort is closely tied to the SIF specification and development methodology. The emphasis on important education questions and processes is parallel to the use case methodology of SIF.

In a larger sense, the comprehensive pk-12 education data model will influence and be influenced by extant data models like SIF and others. This effort is a huge step forward in standardization and is being led by SIFA in our role as staff support for the project.



**How long will the project last?** The project will end in August of 2008. In all it is a two-year project.

**How can I find out what's going on?**

There is a public Forum website that you can go to get some basic information about the Task Force. [http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pk12\\_data\\_model.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/forum/pk12_data_model.asp)

**How can my organization get involved?**

The Task Force is broken up into six subgroups by process/question areas as follows:

- (1) School Formulation and Administration
- (2) Course of Study (3) Alternative and Supplemental Instruction
- (4) Teaching and Learning
- (5) Schools Improvement and Quality Management
- (6) Individual Student Tracking

Contact Alison Pruitt at [apruitt@sifinfo.org](mailto:apruitt@sifinfo.org) and let her know if you are interested in participating in a subgroup or being a reviewer.

### **Edustructures buys Memberships for Schools**

States have been buying bulk SIFA memberships for their districts for a couple of years, but Edustructures – a longtime SIFA member – recently became the first vendor member to do so. They have purchased 30 schools memberships in their bulk purchase and will use these memberships to get their school clients involved in SIFA.

“Our purpose for doing the bulk buy is that we know our customers will be more successful with SIF if they become involved in the SIF movement,” said Steve Curtis, President and CEO of Edustructures. “Access to SIFA U, meeting discounts, and the SIF community portal all enhance our clients SIF success and that in turn helps us be more successful. We want to encourage as many of our customers as we can to become members of SIFA and to actively participate, collaborate, and contribute to the evolution of SIF. To that end we are recommending memberships with each and every new proposal and plan to recommend to our existing customers that they join as soon as their contracts are up for renewal.”



### **Alaska Buys SIFA Memberships for its Districts**

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development is taking a pro-active leadership step toward achieving interoperability goals among school districts' applications. It has purchased memberships in SIFA for all 54 Alaska school districts.

“The use of data is central to making good decisions in education,” said Alaska Education Commissioner Roger Sampson. “SIFA provides a model of common definitions and standards among the school districts and the state.”

Steve Paulson who is the Information Manager for the Kodiak Island Borough School District believes that “The vast majority of school districts in this country - let alone Alaska - cannot keep up with the K-12 data demands from state and federal agencies and grant organizations. School administrators and classroom teachers are now placing additional demands on district IT departments for information that will enable them to make those data-driven decisions everyone is talking about. Adopting SIF is such an essential strategic step toward addressing these demands that districts can no longer afford not to adopt it. Becoming a SIFA member and part of the SIF Community is an obvious next step as a means to understanding and implementation.”

Alaska is the fourth state to purchase memberships in SIFA for all of its districts through a bulk-buy effort. Wyoming, Virginia and Pennsylvania have also recognized that memberships to SIFA are valuable to its districts and/or regional service providers.

SIF is a vital phase of the Alaska “Unity Project” undertaken upon the award of the Institute of Education Sciences Longitudinal Data Grants in 2006. Membership in SIFA will enhance the Unity Project by providing

### SIFA's Newest Board Member: Sean McDonough from the PA Department of Education

Sean D. McDonough is an Information Technology Specialist for the Bureau of Educational Technology at the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Sean's work at PDE includes reviewing and developing technology and education processes to help create educational technology policies for the Commonwealth. Prior to joining PDE, Sean served 11 years as the Technology Coordinator for the Milton Area School District in Milton, PA where he implemented SIF in 2002. Prior to working in Milton, Sean was an audio-visual communications instructor at West Side Area Vocational Technical School in Pringle, PA. Sean also serves as the Vice-President for the Pennsylvania Association for Educational Communications and Technology (PAECT) and is Past President of the Pennsylvania Educational Technology Expo and Conference (PETE&C). Sean holds a B.A. in Mass Communications and Government from King's College, Wilkes-Barre, PA and a M.S. in Instructional Technology from Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, PA.

each district with access to the wealth of resources contained in the SIFA community. This will help to ensure the project's success.

"Working with the department's Unity Project team to tailor and address the needs of the Alaskan districts is an essential part of the membership benefits we provide," said Laurie Collins, Project Strategist of SIFA. "This work includes scheduled visits with pilot districts for one-on-one planning sessions, comprehensive district awareness building activities, strategizing on implementation planning, district-specific video conferences, webinars and presentations, and professional development activities."

State-wide SIFA memberships will play a key in Alaska's long-term data management success. By providing the districts and the state the same opportunities to improve their data interoperability, SIFA will encourage state-wide improvement in data management, interoperability and opportunities for dialogue across Alaska.

"States agencies that have shown leadership though state bulk buys have proven this to be an invaluable resource for schools, districts and regional service agencies attempting to meet state and federal requirements for educational data reporting," said Dr. Larry Fruth, Executive Director of SIFA. "SIFA memberships allow schools from across the nation to interact with their peers,

provide keen insight on daily data-driven decision-making effective practices and promote interoperable solutions."

## SIFA International Activities

SIF-enabled applications are now providing real-time data interoperability for more than 6 million teachers, students and administrators in over 45 US states and 6 countries! While SIF was initiated in the United States, educational data management and reporting demands are being felt internationally. To address these needs, SIFA is partnering with various local government agencies to take a working and established school-specific data model and an international testing program. This will provide a framework for stakeholder governance, localizing the SIF data model and infrastructure. All of education benefits by leveraging various countries' experiences and best practices to solve data interoperability and reporting needs through the establishment of this "global SIFA community."

### United Kingdom



British Educational Communications and Technology Agency

department for

**education and skills**

creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

SIFA and Becta **recently completed** a proof of concept in the second largest city in the UK – Birmingham. This proof of concept **brought** together **9** diverse schools to move 100+ data items horizontally based on student data needs and vertically from the classroom to the Local Authority and finally to the Department for Education and Skills. Becta has also implemented a strong local governance structure made up of schools, Local Authorities, government agencies across the UK and vendors in the schools sector. In a few short months, this governance structure has allowed Becta to convene stakeholders, modify the existing SIF Data model and

begin software development with vendors supplying products to schools. Becta has announced a second proof of concept that will occur across Northern Ireland based on their school assessment data requirements.

## Australia



education.au limited



SIFA and **education.au limited** have a signed Memorandum of Understanding for this government body to be the “SIFA Face” for all Australian states. Currently there are a few SIF-focused implementations including a large implementation in the Catholic Diocese sector for horizontal data movement through schools and vertical data transport to the state governing institution. In October of 2006, a group of ICT representatives from each state were convened and now are framing a leveraging of the existing SIF Specification/Certification Program and a governance model for localization that can benefit the national conversations emerging in Australia relating to student learning accountability. A demonstration site/virtual zone, possibly with the MacQuarie University Center for Excellence, is expected over the summer.

## Africa



SIFA is working on a pilot project for Nigeria with funding from the MacArthur Foundation and through partnerships with AED and UNESCO. This project will focus on the vertical movement of data from the school to the national level, including higher education implications and usage of school data. SIFA participated in the 2006 Global Summit in Egypt where 26 countries convened via the Broader Middle East and North African (BMENA) initiative in conjunction with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and G8 nations. It is expected that new pilot activities, desired by numerous meeting participants, will be generated from these meetings in Egypt.

SIFA also is working with a consortium of players being led by Global Alliance for ICT and Development and recently testified in front of a United Nations panel on health in underdeveloped countries. There were great meetings at the UN meeting in particular in those countries that have a high number of US lead companies that have large family bases in particular African countries.

## More to Come

Interest in SIFA activities is at an all-time high. Inquiries have come from:

- India
- Brazil
- Jordan
- Malaysia
- New Zealand
- Sweden
- Singapore

**Schools Interoperability  
Framework Association**  
1090 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington DC 20005  
Phone: 202-789-4460  
Fax: 202-289-7097  
[www.sifinfo.org](http://www.sifinfo.org)

For Questions about the Newsletter or Membership,  
contact: Alison Pruitt at [APruitt@sifinfo.org](mailto:APruitt@sifinfo.org)