Web-based System Helps Volunteers of America Meet Attendance Requirements and Demonstrate Success

COMET®
Assessments • Outcomes • Accountability

When you offer services for children from infancy through 12 years old, your challenges range from the day-to-day to the profound. But one concern runs through everything you do: Are we making a difference?

Volunteers of America of Western New York (VOA) provides many crucial services to its urban clientele. Its community support programs include an extensive child care program funded through Early Head Start, Head Start, New York State's Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program, and Monroe County, New York. On most days, 65 infants and toddlers attend the child care program, 140 children attend pre-K, and 80 school-aged children take part in after-school and other programs.

Help through technology

Perhaps nothing illustrates the day-to-day aspects of VOA's activities like the morning sign-in and afternoon sign-out of all those children. For years, VOA had used a manual process with paper books, which often resulted in lines of caregivers waiting to sign in and out each day. While it did the job, the process was not as efficient or accurate as it could have been.

The shortcomings of the process came to the fore when one of VOA's funders notified the agency that because the funder's billing process had changed, its attendance information requirements also were changing. VOA would now have to record the exact time of arrival and departure for each child. The agency's manual process would not meet the level of precision the funder was requesting.

For help with the new requirement, VOA looked to Children's Institute, a national non-profit organization with more than 50 years of experience improving children's social and emotional health. For some time, VOA had been using the COMET® System. This web-based data collection and management system is a

product of COMET® Informatics LLC that was created by Children's Institute and its technology partner, software developer SophiTEC. To meet VOA's needs, Children's Institute and SophiTEC quickly created an attendance module for the COMET® System. The attendance system collects the exact time of drop-off and pick-up of every child by scanning a bar-coded key-tag that each parent or authorized caregiver is given. The result was instant compliance with stringent funding rules with the bonus of increased efficiency.

Reported Kathleen Eastman, VOA's Vice President of Children's Services, "The COMET® System greatly reduced the time required for signing in and out." It used to take VOA staff at least 6 hours to complete monthly reports to the county; it now takes 15 to 20 minutes. In fact, VOA was so impressed with the COMET® System's attendance tracking for children that the agency eliminated its time clock and time cards for all its employees in favor of the COMET® System's key-tag system.

Said Eastman, "We've eliminated the lines to sign in every morning." Also, parents and staff like the increased confidentiality of the new system. "It has really brought us a new level of professionalism," she added.

Assessing outcomes for children

The COMET® System continues to play an important role in a profound aspect of VOA's child-services equation. According to Eastman, the organization had long wanted to find out what attending its pre-K programs meant for children's academic and social development. "We wanted to see the long-term effects on children who attended our UPK program versus children who did not," she explained. "We thought the best way to do this would be to work through the public school system to track children who had graduated from our program."

To do this, VOA turned to the Rochester City School District (RCSD), its early childhood education partner, and the Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership (RECAP). Developed 15 years ago by Children's Institute and its provider partners, RECAP is a community-wide assessment process that improves the quality of prekindergarten programs. RECAP helps assess more than 2,000 RCSD children and 170 classrooms annually, and has been replicated in other areas of New York State.

"We take it on faith that if children are doing well in third grade, they're more likely to make it later on," said Eastman. "How about how they're doing in kindergarten?"

To make that connection for its programs, VOA teachers and program directors have been using RECAP for 10 years to capture, analyze, and report data from a variety of measures and assessments. One such assessment is the nationally normed teacher-completed Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS 2.1), which assesses positive and negative aspects of a child's socio-emotional school adjustment in the areas of behavior control, task orientation, assertiveness, and peer social skills. Other measures used in RECAP collect perspectives of parents and children on their experiences, development, schools, and home environment, which all help to document the outcomes of students and programs over time.

Such information is useful to VOA in numerous ways.

- Teachers, program heads, and VOA's Board of Directors use the information to assess what is working with students and to make informed decisions on how to improve.

- Teachers have become eager users of the data. "Across the board," said Eastman, "the more information we give teachers, the more they want."

- VOA's funders use VOA's data on outcomes to determine future allocation of resources.

- The regional early childhood education community, of which VOA is a member, has cemented its working relationship, including sharing of information and best practices.

RECAP has revealed consistently strong data on several important measures of the VOA early childhood programs, including the T-CRS. Another measure showing strong results is the Child Observation Record (COR), an instrument providing assessment of young children's knowledge and abilities. "We expect, on average, 1.0 point growth on the COR subscales without intervention," Eastman said. "We have actually experienced significant growth of 1.5 points or greater." VOA's scores on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), a measure of classroom environment quality, are in the 5 to 7 range, well above the national average of 4.0 to 4.2.

The COMET® System + RECAP = Results

Two years ago, the COMET® System entered the RECAP picture. The COMET® System takes the wealth of assessment data that VOA collects and almost instantaneously converts it into meaningful information to help drive the improvement and outcomes of VOA's children, teachers, and programs.

The benefits of the COMET® System include its ability to:

- Gather, store, and organize data from assessment instruments and other measures, and offer users a choice of easily understandable reports that meet their needs from a growing library of more than 500 reports;

- Link data from various assessments, allowing VOA teachers and program directors to get a full picture of each child, from academic progress and skill levels, to social and emotional factors, and more;

- Instantly show information on individual children and programs;

- Provide immediate feedback, allowing VOA to make fully informed decisions to improve children's outcomes.

Said Eastman, "Teachers are now able to sit down at the computer and find out information quickly, which makes their jobs easier. For instance, we have to know what children have mastered so that we can move on to what they next need to learn. The COMET® System helps by telling us what's happening immediately."

According to Eastman, VOA values that Children's Institute focuses on education research. "Other systems do not fit as well with kids' needs; they're designed for the funding source," she explained. Children's Institute also can add to the COMET® System any instruments VOA requests.

Eastman gave positive reviews to both RECAP and the COMET® System: "We didn't have anything comparable in my previous organization. This kind of data collection and evaluation is such a positive thing for our children, our early education profession and our community."

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Measures used in RECAP

Child Observation Record (COR)
An observation-based instrument providing systematic assessment of young children's knowledge and abilities in all areas of development.

Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™)
An observational tool to assess classroom quality in prekindergarten through grade 3 based on teacher-student interactions in the classroom.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R)
A measure of classroom environment quality, designed to assess group programs for preschool through kindergarten.

Family Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ)
An instrument administered to caregivers of children in preschool to first grade, measuring three dimensions of family involvement: school-based involvement, home-school conferencing, and home-based involvement.

Parent-Child Rating Scale (P-CRS)
A measure that assesses children's behavioral, social and emotional functioning from a parent's perspective.

Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS 2.1)
A measure that assesses children's social and emotional development in areas including initiative, independence, and coping ability from a teacher's perspective.