



Accelerating the Benefits of Evidence-Based Programs

School districts must choose with care when investing scarce resources in programs designed to help students succeed. Knowing in nearly real time whether a program is working allows for more meaningful evaluation, continuous program improvement, and better outcomes for the students in the program.

One New York State school district has found this to be true, based on its experience with 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, a non-profit organization with more than 50 years of experience in improving children's social and emotional health, and its technology partner, software developer SophiTEC. They designed the COMET[®] System specifically to improve outcomes for children and for programs serving them.

The Westmoreland Central School District is part of the small rural community of Westmoreland in central New York State serving about 1,000 students. For the past several years, Westmoreland has used Children's Institute's award-winning Primary Project¹ to help a specific group of students in its K-4 elementary school. "We have interventions for children with identified learning problems, and support for children with mental health issues," said Kathy Eisele, School Social Worker. "Primary Project reaches another group entirely."

Primary Project screens children in pre-K through third grade to identify those showing early school adjustment difficulties. The program then provides intervention in the form of a school-based, trusting relationship with an adult.

Children meet weekly with a carefully selected and trained paraprofessional called a child associate in a playroom setting.

With the help of Primary Project, Westmoreland aims to reduce these students' social, emotional and school adjustment difficulties and improve their learning skills.

Westmoreland's nationally certified program is faithful to Primary Project's model, which requires data collection. For the first few years, Westmoreland collected Primary Project data about which students participated and their pre- and post-program testing. According to Eisele, the assessment procedure, using the AML-R², was paper-based, time consuming and laborious, requiring forms to be filled in and sent to Children's Institute for processing. After Children's Institute returned the reports, the district used the results primarily to determine whether it was choosing the correct students for the program.

New way to look at data Westmoreland's Primary Project program had been in place for a few years when Children's

¹Primary Project is a designated "Promising Prevention Program" by the U.S. Department of Education's Safe, Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools Expert Panel, recognized as one of five exemplary prevention programs in the nation in Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General (December 1999) and validated through New York State's Education Department as a successful program.

²The AML-R is a 12-item, quick-screening tool completed by teachers to aid in identifying children experiencing school adjustment problems. Comparison of a child's relative position across three scales—acting-out, aggressive behaviors; moody, shy, anxious behaviors; and learning difficulties—can help to identify a particular problem area and assist mental health professionals in determining an approach which may best meet a child's specific needs.

Institute told Eisele that it had developed a new way to look at program data. Eisele learned that with the COMET® System, Westmoreland could do much more with the data it collected.

Children's Institute trained Eisele to use the COMET® System, and Eisele trained four district teachers. "All teachers need to know is how to log on to the COMET® System and finalize a report," she said. Westmoreland replaced the AML-R with the Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS)⁵ as the assessment tool it uses to evaluate students' progress through Primary Project. Today, 11 teachers in kindergarten, first, and second grade have been trained to enter T-CRS data into the COMET® System. "The T-CRS really doesn't take long to fill out per child," said Eisele.

Added Mary Anne O'Connell, Westmoreland's Director of Student Support Services, "Using the COMET® System is much more efficient than filling out paper assessments; we save a lot of time." But time savings is only the tip of the iceberg, according to O'Connell.

Here are some other benefits:

- Because the COMET® System decreases the turn around time for student screening results, students can join-and benefit from-Primary Project more quickly.
- Eisele can track all screened students. She can quickly access student information maintained in the COMET® System, which can aid in, for instance, completing student referrals to the district's Committee for Special Education.
- Users of the COMET® System can organize the Primary Project data in whichever way they see fit. They can generate reports that will help monitor teachers' responses, help assess a student's level of need and demonstrate overall program impact.
- Administrators can organize the information in the COMET® System so they can see if the collected data correlates with expected Primary Project outcomes. "We're trying to make sure we've selected the right kids and intervened in the right way," Eisele said. "If we have, we expect improvement, which will show up in the reports."

Data in the COMET® System are also available for other uses. Eisele brings reports to child-study team or Committee on Special Education meetings, presenting the data as "part of a picture. We can show in a graphic way how our interventions have worked. You can really see the information, see the range in which kids fall." The COMET® System also provides information that teachers can use in student report cards or that can be sent to children's physicians if appropriate.

Furthermore, the COMET® System helps Westmoreland evaluate the progress of students over time. It's not uncommon for Eisele to review information concerning a second grader, for example, who participated in Primary Project as a kindergartener: "I can look over three years' data and see the progress or lack thereof." She also can show and review data on an entire class. Explained O'Connell, "Before the COMET® System, we were tracking over time, but it wasn't easy. And now we can show the graphs to parents, too."

Seeing The Value

Because using the COMET® System requires training, O'Connell added that a key part of the puzzle is "teachers' willingness to learn how to use the system." As the district social worker, Eisele has also invested time to learn to use the data. "I've taken the time to learn how to maximize the information we can get from the data. The COMET® System definitely makes that job easier than it was in the past, when we filled in forms and sent them away for scoring!" After some initial resistance, says O'Connell, the COMET® System is now "part of the program culture. Teachers are seeing the value of the data and of watching student growth over time." Interestingly, once teachers use the COMET® System to its full potential, they realize that the children who participate in and benefit from the program are not always those that teachers think should be part of Primary Project. "But the data prove it."

Eisele's main thought about this web-based tool: "We valued Primary Project before, but the COMET® System enables us to do more with the data we're collecting." Other benefits of the COMET® System speak directly to the overall value of Primary Project to the district. Aggregate data

⁵The T-CRS 2.1 is a quick, third-generation rating form of 32 items assessing positive and negative aspects of a child's socio-emotional school adjustment. By grouping these items into four empirically derived scales, the T-CRS 2.1 assesses task orientation, behavior control, assertiveness, and peer social skills.

are sent to the superintendent and supervisors who can share the report with the school board. With the information, said Eisele, "They can determine if Primary Project is worth the designated staff and space, as well as my time."

"It is important that we use data in making decisions to get services to our students," O'Connell said. "We hope that these services will positively impact a student's adjustment to school and, ultimately, student achievement."

Potential Ahead

Today, Westmoreland's success with Primary Project and the COMET® System has inspired other districts in the region to roll out the program. Westmoreland's program serves as a Primary Project New York State Model School, and other schools have observed the program and how it works. "Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES has been awarded Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative funding," said O'Connell. "Three more schools in our area will implement Primary Project as part of the work supported by this grant."

The future of how educators use the COMET® System, said O'Connell, will likely be "looking at kids' behavior over time. We'll have access to a complete profile of a child—his social and emotional health, attendance, health records—and how it all affects achievement." O'Connell added, "The potential of the COMET® System is yet to be discovered. It just makes sense for districts to use the COMET® System if they are using Primary Project or another effort that data can support. If you're going to do an intervention, I can't imagine why you wouldn't want to have the data."

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Learn More About Primary Project

If you know a child who appears to be having challenges in the classroom, Primary Project may be the solution.

Primary Project is a national evidence-based program that helps children in Pre-K through third grade adjust to school, gain confidence, social skills, and focus on learning.

Through play, Primary Project has 65 years of successfully using SEL to address children's school adjustment difficulties and increases their chances of success.

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